

THE APPEAL OF K-DRAMAS: MEDIA MOTIVATIONS AND MENTAL WELL-BEING AMONG MALAYSIAN MILLENNIALS

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Abstract. In recent years, the global popularity of Korean dramas (K-Dramas) has surged, particularly among Malaysian millennials. While considerable attention has been given to the cultural influence of the Korean Wave, scholarly research has paid limited attention to how K-Drama consumption may relate to psychological well-being. This conceptual paper seeks to explore the motivations behind K-Drama consumption among millennials and how these motivations may influence their perceived mental well-being. Drawing on the Uses and Gratifications Theory and media psychology perspectives, this study proposes a conceptual framework that connects consumption patterns with emotional needs, identity formation, and well-being outcomes. The paper identifies key motivations such as escapism, emotional catharsis, parasocial interaction, and cultural affinity as central drivers of engagement. It also examines how these elements align with mental health dimensions such as emotional regulation, connectedness, and self-reflection. By synthesising relevant literature and offering a theoretical model, this study provides a foundation for future empirical research. It further highlights the potential role of entertainment media in fostering positive mental health practices among millennials. This paper contributes to the growing body of media and well-being studies and opens new dialogues for researchers, educators, and policymakers concerned with millennials' mental health and cultural media consumption.

Keywords: *K-drama, millennials, media motivations, mental well-being, conceptual framework, uses and gratifications*

Introduction

Korean dramas, or K-Dramas, have rapidly evolved from regional entertainment to a global cultural phenomenon, captivating audiences far beyond South Korea's borders. Malaysian millennials may relate to K-Drama narratives due to shared cultural values regarding family and collectivism, while simultaneously addressing disparities through subtitled content. The popularity of Korean dramas in Malaysia, despite linguistic disparities, highlights the global appeal of topics such as lifestyle, morals, and family, which profoundly resonate with viewers (Ariffin et al., 2023). This phenomenon is not exclusive to Korean dramas but is indicative of a wider trend in Malaysian media consumption, wherein content that harmonizes realism and escapism captivates audiences. The triumph of Korean dramas in Malaysia is due to deliberate production decisions that resonate with the cultural and emotional aspirations of the Malaysian audience, within the wider media environment in the region. K-Dramas foster emotional expressivity and reflection, based on multiple studies showing increased emotional openness and self-reflection among viewers (Fatima and Kewalramani, 2024; Gokhale and Valolickel, 2024; Gammon, 2023; Rastati, 2022). In 2025, Malaysian millennials, typically classified as individuals born from 1981 to 1996, will be aged between 29 and 44 years (Abd Majid et al., 2019). This age range is derived from statistics.gov. which

utilizes notable social, economic, and political events to delineate generational boundaries. The mental well-being of Malaysian millennials is increasingly concerning, as data indicates elevated levels of sadness, anxiety, and stress within this group (Wong et al., 2022). Most studies examining the impact of K-Dramas on everyday life and mental well-being have focused on youth, adolescents, and college or university students. Scholars have investigated the factors that lead to the extensive adoption of Hallyu content by Malaysian viewers, especially those in the youth and urban demographics (Ariffin et al., 2023; Khalid and Wok, 2020). However, there is a lack of research specifically addressing millennials in Malaysia.

This conceptual study aims to explore millennials' perspectives on K-Dramas, particularly as this age group constitutes 53.4% of the population. Furthermore, Deloitte's 2023 Gen Z and Millennial Survey highlights millennials' concerns about the future, particularly regarding personal finances, climate change, and mental health. While most studies on millennials focus on topics such as work-life balance, financial stability, family values, and work performance, there is a noticeable gap in research exploring K-Dramas' impact on Malaysian millennials. The Millennials, characterized by their technological adeptness, diversity, and value-driven outlook, are a transformative generation with profound societal implications. Understanding their behaviors, is essential for addressing contemporary social challenges and capitalizing on their strengths to drive progress, and it is the worthiness of researching millennials, especially since they have the potential in shaping the policy of any country (Mohamad Saleh et al., 2024; Mohd Noor et al., 2022; Abd Majid et al., 2019). Malaysian millennials are increasingly turning to the Internet and social media for information, especially in environments where traditional media is influenced by the state. Trust in the medium is crucial: those who trust digital media are more likely to use it for political information and show greater openness to dissent, while trust in traditional media correlates with more positive views of the status quo and less inclination to protest (Gainous et al., 2019).

For Malaysian millennials in particular, K-Dramas offer not only entertainment but also a sense of emotional connection, cultural curiosity, and even therapeutic escape (Arviani et al., 2021; Ariffin et al., 2018). These dynamics underscore the importance of examining the motivations behind K-Drama consumption and its implications for mental well-being in a Malaysian context. Rather than serving solely as a means of escaping reality, K-Dramas provide audiences with narratives that help them reflect on and navigate their own lives in more authentic and meaningful ways (Ye, 2023; Rastati, 2022). Media consumption in Malaysia has swiftly transitioned from traditional platforms such as television and newspapers to digital and social media, largely attributable to high internet and mobile penetration rates, which now surpass 97% and 130% respectively, facilitating immediate, mobile-centric access to news and entertainment (Dzulkaflly and Soo, 2024; Yang, 2023). This phenomena also showed media consumption in Malaysia has rapidly shifted. Malaysian Millennials predominantly engage with media through smartphones, using social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok for entertainment and news consumption. They possess digital proficiency, use these platforms to discover items and interact with influencers, and are influenced by information that resonates with their values, including wellness and longevity (Maskun et al., 2025; Mohamad Saleh et al., 2024). Their significant digital engagement encompasses online buying, emphasizing e-commerce, and they utilize social media to remain informed and connected. Daily

engagement exceeds 2.5 hours on social media sites, predominantly facilitated by millennials utilizing smartphones. Primary consumption motivators encompass social contact, education, and entertainment, but news consumption on social media is prevalent yet accompanied by skepticism, prompting some individuals to pursue traditional media for reliability (Maskun et al., 2025; Mohamad Saleh et al., 2024). Not only that, Malaysian consumers are expending an average of US\$19 monthly on streaming subscriptions, aligning with the regional average and exceeding expenditure in neighboring countries such as Japan (US\$12), the Philippines and Indonesia (US\$15), and Thailand (US\$18). This financial capacity reflects future intentions, as respondents express a desire to enhance their memberships within the next 12 months to platforms such as Netflix (31%), YouTube Premium (23%), and Amazon Prime Video (21%). YouTube continues to be the preeminent platform in Malaysia, with 96% of users utilizing it. Fifty percent of Malaysians are subscribed to YouTube Kids, indicating significant co-viewing with children. Regional platforms like as iQIYI and Viu rank among the top five most-subscribed services in the country, demonstrating a robust demand for Asian content in conjunction with global offers like Netflix.

K-dramas' "hook" comes from their mixed aesthetics, romantic innocence, and use of foreign language. These elements work together to make a unique media product that brings together multiracial Malaysian youth and changes the way they consume media from being based on ethnicity to being more united (Jin, 2023; Locher and Messerli, 2020; Lee, 2018). Most studies look at how culture affects people and how they feel about K-dramas, but few directly look at how watching K-dramas affects the mental health of Malaysian millennials (Alada, 2023; Estoque, 2022; Ta Park et al., 2021). Social media is a big part of the Korean Wave (Hallyu), which includes K-dramas, because it helps fan groups and cultural exchange. K-dramas have a bigger impact on Malaysian millennials' culture and daily life because of this process of mediatization. This makes Korean cultural goods even more important in the lives of millennials (Hisham, 2024).

Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) framework

The consumption of K-Dramas by millennials is motivated by various factors, including entertainment, cultural curiosity, social connection, and escapism, which can exert both beneficial and detrimental effects on perceived mental well-being. The UGT asserts that individuals deliberately choose media to satisfy particular psychological and social needs, including escapism, identity development, and social interaction. The UGT, which was developed in the 1940s, posits that audiences are active, rather than inert, consumers of media, utilizing it to satisfy specific personal needs and desires for gratification. Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch significantly advanced the theory in the 1970s by extending it to investigate the actual gratifications derived from media use, following the initial studies in the 1940s, such as those conducted by Lazarsfeld and Stanton, which concentrated on the reasons why individuals consume media (Sichach, 2024; Ruggiero, 2000). Emerging in the 1940s, UGT transitioned from the analysis of radio audiences to include all media types, covering digital and social media. The approach has evolved to accommodate new media contexts, incorporating elements such as interaction and personalization (Sichach, 2024; Ruggiero, 2000). Media users are active participants who intentionally select media to satisfy various requirements. This framework is extensively used to understand why millennials are drawn to specific media, such as K-dramas, and how these motivations relate to their mental well-being.

This study utilizes Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) to frame K-Drama consumption as a media selection that addresses particular audience needs. UGT asserts that individuals deliberately choose media to fulfil goals, including amusement, social connection, or identity exploration (Sichach, 2024; Ruggiero, 2000). The UGT, as summarized by Sichach (2024) and Ruggiero (2000), categorized the sorts of needs into cognitive, emotive, personal, social, and stress release. In the realm of K-Dramas, these objectives are expressed through escapism, emotional catharsis, parasocial engagement, and cultural affinity. Research reveals that Malaysian Millennials allocate an average of 8.5 hours daily to digital devices, with 60% experiencing challenges in detaching from screens (Maskun et al., 2025). The excessive utilization of digital platforms has been associated with mental weariness, anxiety, disrupted sleep, and an imbalance between work and life (Maskun et al., 2025; Bhatiasavi, 2024).

Figure 1 illustrates that these incentives influence media selection and exposure to K-Dramas, subsequently resulting in attained gratifications such as enjoyment, emotional release, or social belonging. This study extends the original UGT cycle by incorporating perspectives from media psychology, suggesting that frequent exposure fulfils immediate demands while also having broader effects, including enhanced mental well-being, identity development, and a sense of belonging. Media consumers deliberately choose content to satisfy psychological and social requirements, which is supported by decades of empirical research across media types and cultures (Bhatiasavi, 2024; Sichach, 2024; Athwal et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2012; Ruggiero, 2000). The framework notably includes contextual moderators like as culture, personality, technological access, and social norms, which affect the sensation of gratification and the progression of results. Malaysian millennials may relate to K-Drama narratives because of common cultural values regarding family and collectivism, while simultaneously addressing disparities through subtitled content. Cultural and social norms significantly shape consumers' motivations and the benefits derived from media and technology. Collectivist societies, such as Malaysia, prioritize socializing and group norms, hence enhancing the significance of social gratifications and subjective norms in technology adoption and sustained usage. Conversely, individualistic cultures emphasize information acquisition and personal benefit (Zhao et al., 2021; Munakata et al., 2020). This conceptual model enhances Uses and Gratifications Theory by linking media motives and consuming behaviors to psychological consequences, establishing a foundation for examining the impact of K-Drama viewing on the mental health and well-being of Malaysian millennials. Gratifications, including social engagement, knowledge acquisition, entertainment, and technological allure, directly affect satisfaction, emotional investment, and sustained usage. These interactions are influenced by habits, subjective norms, and personal values, and are affected by culture and individual variances (Kopplin, 2023; Osei-Frimpong et al., 2022; Hossain, 2019; Gogan et al., 2018; Gan and Li, 2018).

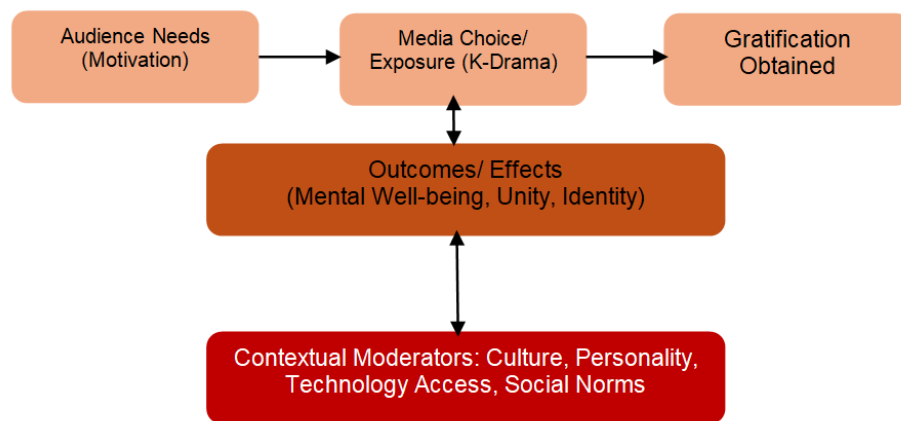


Figure 1. Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) framework, adapted to KDrama and mental well-being.

The aforementioned framework delineates two primary motivational factors: Media Motivations and the allure of stories and characters in K-Drama, effectively assisting millennials in enhancing their mental well-being. Based on *Figure 2*, Malaysians are drawn to K-Dramas for reasons including escapism, social identity, emotional coping, and cultural curiosity, with additional motivations such as compelling storytelling, relatable values, and admiration for Korean culture. The main motivations for watching K-Dramas are as an Escapism and Emotional Coping, where Malaysians often watch K-Dramas as a form of escapism, seeking relief from daily stress and emotional challenges. The engaging storylines and relatable characters provide a temporary escape and help viewers manage their emotions (Rastati, 2022; Arviani et al., 2021; Ariffin et al., 2018). K-Dramas foster a sense of community and social identity among Malaysian viewers. Watching and discussing these dramas with peers or within fandoms strengthens social bonds and creates shared experiences, especially among youth (Hisham, 2024; Yuslinda et al., 2024; Locher and Messerli, 2020). Watching K-Dramas also leads to curiosity about Korean culture is a significant motivator. Many Malaysians are interested in learning about Korean traditions, language, food, and lifestyle through dramas, which are seen as both entertaining and educational (Ariffin et al., 2023; 2018; Cho, 2010). The cultural proximity between Korean and Malaysian values also makes these dramas more accessible and emotionally resonant (Jin, 2023; Lee et al., 2020; Ariffin et al., 2018).

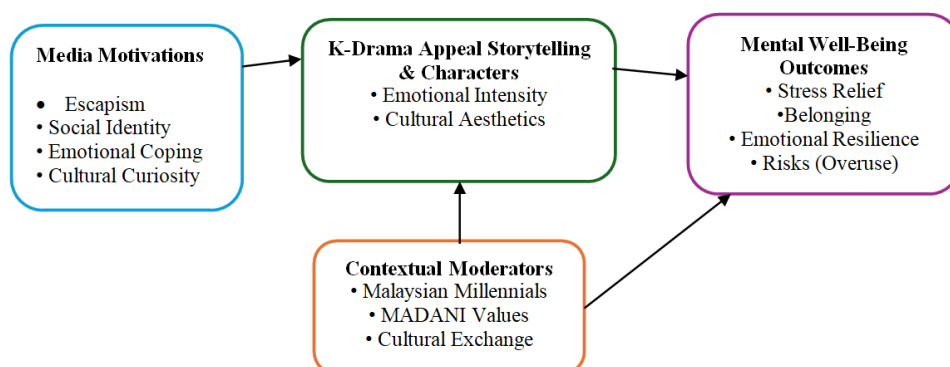


Figure 2. Conceptual framework: Understanding the appeal of K-Dramas media motivations and mental well-being among Malaysian millennials.

Compelling storytelling, high production values, and attractive actors enhance the appeal of K-Dramas. However, Malaysian audiences often prioritize meaningful plots and relatable themes such as family values, love, and respect for elders over physical appearance alone (Tan et al., 2024; Ariffin et al., 2018). This is the bridge between motivations and outcomes. It shows that the appeal of K-Dramas explains why people keep watching. K-Dramas can exert both beneficial and detrimental influences on viewers' mental health, encompassing stress alleviation, heightened emotional expressiveness, a sense of community connection, as well as potential concerns such as addiction and psychological anguish. Watching K-Dramas provides relaxation and emotional enjoyment, helping viewers unwind and manage daily stress (Linadi and Haryati, 2025; Ta Park et al., 2021). Fans often experience a sense of community and shared identity, especially through online and offline fan groups, which can foster social support and reduce feelings of isolation (Ta Park et al., 2021; Ju, 2020). K-Dramas can inspire viewers, offer coping strategies, and increase emotional expressivity, which is linked to better psychological well-being and improved social interactions (Fatima and Kewalramani, 2024; Ta Park et al., 2021; Ju, 2020). Some K-Dramas explicitly address mental health topics, helping to reduce stigma, encourage help-seeking, and improve knowledge about mental health issues and resources (Linadi and Haryati, 2025; Ta Park et al., 2021; 2019). *Table 1* explains that this conceptual study modifies the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) to examine K-Drama consumption among Malaysian millennials. The customization acknowledges that although UGT generally elucidates how individuals deliberately choose media to fulfil particular requirements, the motivations and consequences of media use are influenced by cultural contexts and audience experiences.

Table 1. Adapted framework (K-Drama & mental well-being).

Aspect	Classic UGT (Katz et al., 1974)	Adapted Framework (K-Drama & Mental Well-being)
Core Idea	Audiences actively select media to satisfy specific needs.	Malaysian millennials choose K-Dramas for needs linked to cultural relevance, escapism, and emotional resonance.
Main Components	1. Needs (cognitive, affective, social, escapism) 2. Media use 3. Gratifications obtained	1. K-Drama Appeal (escapism & realism) 2. Mental Well-being outcomes 3. Contextual Moderators (culture, social norms, generational traits)
Process	Needs → Media Use → Gratifications → Reinforcement	Contextual Moderators influence how K-Drama Appeal translates into Mental Well-being benefits.
Outcome	Satisfaction of needs and media dependency.	Improved sense of belonging, emotional regulation, and alignment with MADANI values (unity, compassion, well-being).
Application	Broad media studies, early TV/radio consumption.	Specific to K-Drama consumption in Malaysia, it emphasizing cultural identity and psychological impact.

Motivations/Needs of the Audience: This study identifies escapism, emotional release, social connection, and cultural curiosity as the major motivators of K-Drama consumption. These motivations illustrate the audience's aspiration to momentarily escape daily stressors, attain emotional catharsis, sustain or enhance social connections, and investigate the cross-cultural experiences of Malaysian millennials. K-Drama audiences often pursue an escape from quotidian concerns and seek emotional catharsis. The immersive storytelling, romantic motifs, and intensified emotional tales allow listeners to momentarily disengage from reality and derive enjoyment from the characters' experiences and relationships (Chandra, 2022; Ju, 2020). This escape is particularly evident during heightened stress periods, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, when K-Dramas functioned as both entertainment and a means of alleviating stress

(Bhatti et al., 2022; Chandra, 2022). Utilization of Media: K-Drama consumption is characterized by active engagement, including regular viewing, genre preferences, and substantial interaction within fan communities and on social media. These actions underscore the interactive and community characteristics of contemporary media consumption (Bonny-Noach et al., 2024). Fans are typically clear about their genre and narrative preferences, though most display moderate diversity in their choices. Those with broader preferences tend to seek out more information and engage more actively with related content (Tsai et al., 2022). The K-Drama fandom facilitates cultural interaction, impacting impressions of Korean culture and shaping the identities and worldviews of fans, particularly in transnational contexts, while the language and sense of belonging allow the utilization of fandom-specific lexicon reinforces community ties and fosters a sense of connectedness, especially for international fans. Digital platforms (e.g., Viki, Twitter/X, blogs) facilitate fan interaction via comments, forums, and collaborative endeavors such as fan-subtitling. These interactions cultivate a sense of belonging and collective identity, frequently employing specific language and code-mixing distinctive to the fanbase (Le, 2024; Locher and Messerli, 2020). These activities will enable fans to engage in collective sense-making through real-time commentary, discussions of cultural themes, and negotiations of character and storyline interpretations. This interactive layer converts individual observation into a collective, cross-cultural experience (Locher and Messerli, 2020; Lee, 2018). Acquired Gratifications. Viewers derive many gratifications from consuming K-Dramas. These encompass amusement and relaxation, emotional fulfillment (empathy, catharsis, joy), social connectivity (peer bonding and fanbase solidarity), and cultural education (values, lifestyle, inspiration). The gratifications encompass not just personal pleasure but also extend to interpersonal and cultural spheres, rendering the experience multidimensional. Ultimately, these rewards foster improved mental well-being. They specifically facilitate stress alleviation, enhance mood management, and cultivate emotional resilience. K-Drama consumption may enhance social cohesion by cultivating shared cultural references and collective participation within peer groups, in addition to individual benefits.

Results and Discussion

K-Dramas encourage audience reflection and help viewers navigate real life by fostering emotional expressivity, self-construction, and a deeper appreciation of everyday experiences. K-Dramas adeptly depict quotidian existence, interpersonal connections, and individual development, encouraging audiences to acknowledge and appreciate the "truth, goodness, and beauty" in their own lives. This aestheticization prompts listeners to contemplate overlooked subtleties and appreciate real-life experiences more profoundly (Ye, 2023). The plots and characters frequently function as reflections, enabling viewers to navigate their own emotions and experiences through the perspective of the drama (Gokhale and Valolickel, 2024). Exposure to K-Dramas correlates with heightened emotional expressivity, particularly in young people. Viewers exhibit increased emotional openness and are more inclined to investigate and articulate their feelings, essential for psychological well-being and social engagement (Fatima and Kewalramani, 2024). During stressful periods, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, K-Dramas have also functioned as a form of cinematherapy, helping audiences particularly women manage anxiety and stress, and providing a sense of relief

and escapism (Rastati, 2022). Research regularly demonstrates that K-Dramas facilitate audience introspection, enhance emotional expression, and assist in addressing real-world difficulties through realistic storytelling, emotional involvement, and exemplars of human development. The aforementioned argument demonstrates that K-Dramas assist audiences in addressing real-life concerns. The data demonstrates that K-Drama serves as a medium for therapeutic benefits and personal development; however, certain conclusions are context-dependent (Grantham and Dunnell, 2024; Gammon, 2023; Rastati, 2022). K-Dramas offer both mental health benefits such as stress relief, emotional growth, and improved mental health literacy and risks, especially when viewing becomes excessive. Moderation and mindful engagement are key to maximizing positive outcomes and minimizing potential harms.

Conclusion

K-Dramas encourage audience reflection and help viewers navigate real life by fostering emotional expressivity, self-construction, and a deeper appreciation of everyday experiences (Gokhale and Valolickel, 2024; Gammon, 2023). K-Dramas adeptly depict quotidian existence, interpersonal connections, and individual development, encouraging audiences to acknowledge and appreciate the “truth, goodness, and beauty” in their own lives. This aestheticization prompts viewers to contemplate overlooked subtleties and appreciate real-life experiences more profoundly. The plots and characters frequently function as reflections, enabling viewers to navigate their own emotions and experiences through the perspective of the drama (Gokhale and Valolickel, 2024). K-Dramas help younger viewers connect with their emotions. Research shows that watching these dramas encourages people to be more open and articulate about how they feel, which is vital for mental health (Fatima and Kewalramani, 2024). During stressful periods, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, K-Dramas have also functioned as a form of cinematherapy by helping audiences, especially women, manage their anxiety and escape daily pressures (Rastati, 2022).

This study demonstrates that K-Dramas transcend mere entertainment, acting as a powerful medium of psychological reflection, emotional growth, and real-world problem-solving (Gokhale and Valolickel, 2024; Gammon, 2023; Rastati, 2022). By portraying interpersonal connections and individual development, K-Dramas encourage viewers to find “truth, goodness and beauty” in their own lives, fostering a deeper appreciation for overlooked shades of reality. By aestheticizing daily life, K-Dramas prompt viewers to appreciate everyday subtleties more profoundly while serving as narrative mirrors that help audiences navigate their own complex experiences (Gokhale and Valolickel, 2024). Ultimately, during the heightened pressure of COVID-19 pandemic, these dramas function as a powerful form of cinematherapy, providing crucial stress relief, anxiety management and a healthy psychological escape for viewers especially women (Rastati, 2022). In conclusion, research consistently demonstrates that K-Dramas facilitate audience introspection, enhance emotional expression, and assist in addressing real-world difficulties through realistic storytelling, emotional involvement, and known in human development (Fatima and Kewalramani, 2024; Gokhale and Valolickel, 2024; Gammon, 2023; Rastati, 2022). The argument demonstrates that K-Dramas assist audiences in addressing real-life concerns. The data demonstrates that K-Drama serves as a medium for therapeutic benefits and personal development; however, certain conclusions are context-dependent (Grantham and Dunnell, 2024; Gammon,

2023; Rastati, 2022). K-Dramas offer both mental health benefits, such as stress relief, emotional growth, and improved mental health literacy, and risks, especially when viewing becomes excessive (Linadi and Haryati, 2025; Bonny-Noach et al., 2024; Fatima and Kewalramani, 2024; Rastati, 2022). Moderation and mindful engagement are key to maximizing positive outcomes and minimizing potential harms (Bonny-Noach et al., 2024).

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Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involve with any parties in this research study.

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