Relationship Between Product Placements In Korean Dramas And Its Influence On Consumers Behaviour In China

Before this module, I had little understanding of what popular culture is and will define it as “Culture based on the taste of the masses”. Now, as I have a better understanding, I would like to redefine it as “Contemporary lifestyle and items that are well-known and generally accepted, cultural patterns that are widespread within a population.”

Asian Popular culture can be defined as “Media produced and consumed in Asia, and it includes attitudes, perspectives, practices accepted by the masses in Asia. Initially, I was not aware of the importance of Asian popular culture and how it could shape individuals and groups’ everyday life and contemporary society. However, I have begun to understand the importance of popular culture as I witness pop culture is where advertisers potentially make the most impact, and this affects consumer’s behaviour and purchases.

In this essay, I will be looking at the relationship between product placements in Korean dramas and its influence on consumers behaviour in China. Hallyu; the Korean Wave refers to the popularity of South Korean popular culture in Southeast Asia. The term was coined by Beijing journalists in mid-1999 as they were shocked by the overwhelming demand of Korean culture in China. The outbreak of Hallyu in China first began in 1997, when the Korean TV drama, What Is Love All About, broadcast on state-run Chinese television, CCTV, following an MBC-TV drama, Jealous, which was imported as the first popular cultural product from South Korea in 1993. There are a few reasons as to why the wave was particularly strong in China.

The diverse themes of the dramas imported attracted viewers of different generations. Historical and contemporary dramas were the two main types of Korean soap opera that were exported to China. Historical dramas such as Dae Jang Geum or The Great Jang Geum were popular in China as they are usually centered on the well-known historical figures and events. As fictional elements are commonly added to complement the unrecorded part of the history, this stimulated viewers’ interests. On the other hand, the themes of the contemporary drama vary from love and family to politics and common characteristics from the popular ones included a love triangle, career building and challenges faced at the workplace, as well as pretty scenes produced by modern filming techniques. Besides that, the younger generation is being attracted by the trendy-looking main characters in these dramas who have since become their fashion guides for the Chinese youth and young adults.

Another reason why Korean pop culture was successful in China is because it has provided alternatives to Hollywood and Japanese cultures. As Chinese society find it hard to relate to American and Japanese cultural products, which often involve violent and sexual scenes, US and Japan failed to reach a wide range of audience in China. In addition, due to the widespread of anti-American and anti-Japanese sentiments, driven by the historical memories of conflicts and colonization, there were limited positive responses towards the American and Japanese cultures. On the other hand, Korean pop culture was more familiar and approachable for the Chinese audience as it blends Western and Asian values well enough to create its own quality.

In China, the May Fourth Movement and Cultural Revolution undermined Chinese traditional culture and Confucian values that emphasize relationships. Instead, individualism manifested itself during the 20th century. However, Korea is known to be one of the most Confucian societies in the world, and they prove this point by showcasing Confucian values in the show. Therefore, some Chinese viewers commented that the Korean society depicted in these dramas seems to be “more Chinese than Chinese”.

Korean soap operas also became popular when there has been an increase in the number of Korean dramas that depict a positive representation of China. A drama called Tell Me a Lie was ranked as the most viewed drama in the two biggest video-sharing websites in China.12 Smart and rich characters used to go to the US for business trips, but, recently, China has been featured in many dramas instead. This allowed Chinese viewers to feel more connected when watching these dramas.

Another main reason for the Korean Wave is the media privatization that swept across Asia in the 1990s. When the economic crisis hit Asia, many private broadcasting firms started looking for cheap and quality alternatives such as Korean dramas over American or Japanese products. South Korea’s electronics companies such as Samsung and LG helped in popularizing Korean dramas by giving free copies to Asian broadcasting stations in the mid-1990s.13 As a result, many Chinese broadcasting companies view Korean dramas as low priced but high-quality products. As Korean television dramas become more popular in China, advertisers are riding the Korean wave by paying vast amounts for product placements in the show. According to Ginosar and Levi-Faur(2010), product placement can be understood as an advertisement practice which incorporates commercial contents such as products, service, symbols, brand names into non-commercial settings.

It is common to see the cast consuming the products and the cast’s approval in the consumption of these products will allow audiences to have more faith in the quality of the products. One case example will be “My Love from the Star”, a Korean show that was a massive hit in China. It was reported that the sales of the skin care products and lipsticks from Amorepacific, the South's largest cosmetics firm had increased 75 per cent and 400 per cent respectively, largely thanks to booming sales in China after the lead actress Jun Ji-Hyun, also known as Gianna Jun was seen using the products in the show. Also, the silver-sparkled Jimmy Choo high heels worn by her were sold out not only in China and South Korea but also in places like Dubai and London, where Chinese travellers sought them out. Similarly, a Mondo backpack by Samsonite that lead actor Kim Soo-Hyun carried over his shoulder was sold within a week.