

Viki as a Social Network Platform: A Space for Old-school K-drama Fans

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Abstract

Objectives Korean drama fans created a space to communicate with each other by using various social media features provided by Viki. This paper sheds light on those features considering them as an important factor for Viki to survive in the growing OTT market. The main purpose of this paper is to analyze Viki's social media networking features and reveal its functions and importance for fans.

Methods In this paper, various elements of Viki as a social media platform were analyzed mainly based on the results of previous studies. In addition, I used topics and comments that were written by fans and posted on Viki's "Discussion" page to find out what kind of contents Viki's users aim to watch and shed light on the difference between Viki and other OTT platforms.

Conclusions Countless other cases, not limited to Korean drama fans, explain why someone may join a particular group of fans. Overall, these cases indicate that the sense of connectedness, shared feelings and memories, and shared language are one of the main reasons that bring different people together under one fandom. Unlike other OTT platforms, Viki provides specific contents for old-school Korean drama fans whom they have accurate taste about what kind of K-dramas they want to watch, and it also provides various communication features that allow fans to form a community inside the website. This paper concludes that these two factors are the reason why Viki retains so many users.

Keywords Viki, Social Media Platform, Korean Drama Fan, Fandom, Fan Community, Netflix, OTT Platform

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Contents

1. Introduction
 2. Contents That Suit Fans' Tastes
 3. Networking and Global Community
 - 3.1. Fans' Translation
 - 3.2. Watch Parties and On-time Comment Section
 - 3.3. Discussions Page
 5. Discussion and Conclusion
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1. Introduction

Netflix has been able to bring a significant number of new Korean drama fans. Other OTT platforms also are making efforts to produce their own Korean content and bring more subscribers to their channels. One such site is Rakuten Viki. Viki is a well-known drama and movies OTT service website. However, Viki is one of the first OTT to provide content dedicated to fans of Asian dramas in general and Korean dramas in particular. The platform started early as 2008, however, it launched its services in 2011. From its inception, Viki adopted a vision to limit the dominance of English content, and “introduce a translation platform privileging non-English texts” (Henthorn, (2019). Viki specializes only in East Asian content, therefore it offers content from South Korea, Japan, China(Mainland), Thailand, and Taiwan. This includes dramas, movies, and

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entertainment programs. Since it does not offer content from other countries, it is easy to conclude that the main users of Viki's service log into the website and its application to watch East Asian content.

With the ever-increasing number of media platforms emerging every day and the successful production of their own content, and with Korean platforms like Wavve entering the Market outside of South Korea in countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Cambodia, Viki may lose its uniqueness with East Asian content. However, Viki still maintains specific features, that makes it competitive in a steadily expanding market. Viki is described by industry professionals and researchers as a social media as well as media sharing platform. Viki has been always committed to its original vision of providing a diverse Asian contents away from the dominance of Western contents. Therefore, I find that Viki, after more than 10 years, as an OTT platform, still presents contents of similar genres. Furthermore, Viki gave fans all around the world a space to share their experience watching K-dramas. This space ranges from a space for fans' translations, spaces to share opinions on drama, and spaces to discuss various topics such as different cultures and languages etc., which leads to a certain faithfulness from the users which share the platform.

In this paper, I will discuss the main reasons why fans of Korean dramas, especially old-school drama fans who have been fond of Korean drama for decades, may resort to Viki instead of other OTT platforms. This research assumes that Viki depends on two main factors in attracting its steady users, namely maintaining the genre of the artworks presented to suit the taste of old-school Korean drama fans, and the second factor is the social networking services provided by the site that help users to network with each other. In this paper I shall focus on understanding the nature of Viki as a social network service, and a favorable platform for 'old-school' Korean drama's fans.

2. Contents that suit fans' tastes

Before the huge popularity of Netflix as a platform for its original Korean dramas,

which started with the success of the zombie drama “Kingdom”, followed later by more notably drama “The Squid Game”, we used to see K-drama and K-pop fans sharing various jokes about how they were the only ones who are attracted to K-dramas. Dramas such as ‘Sad Love Story,’ ‘I’m sorry I love you,’ ‘My name is Kim Sam-soon,’ and others that were aired in the early and mid-2000s are the pillars that the global Korean drama’s fan dome; where this fan dome has been built on. As to say, Korean drama fan dome is built on romantic comedies and melodramas. The group of fans formed at that time can be called ‘Old School Korean Drama’ Fan’; that can be defined as the ‘group that generally tends towards romantic comedies and melodramas’.

If we look at the distinction of categories within Viki, we will find that there are dozens of types, but we note that the distinction appearing on the main page (after clicking on the Categories field) show the language of the content at the beginning, which are respectively Korean, Mainland China, Japan, Taiwan, Thailand, and others. The genres begin with "Romantic Comedy", "Costume & Period", "Romance", "Crime & Mystery", "Thriller & Suspense", etc. And in the last division we find “New & Coming soon”, “Paid Content”, “Watch free”, “Watch Parties”, and “Fan Collections”. The distinction does not follow an alphabetical order and it can be assumed that it is based on the most popular genres.

Here it is worth noting the collections made by fan groups; are other than the aforementioned categories, there is a separate distinction divided into "Viki Picks" and "Fan Collections". The “Fan Collections” are significantly more popular than the “Viki Picks”. These collections mainly represent a specific theme and at the same time, it can be considered a page made by a fan. Page creators urge other fans to communicate with them with comments, whether on what should be added to the collection or on how to improve the group in general, and some of them also ask their followers to nominate a drama that they have not watched before. There are more than 2000 collections that fans have made and shared with other drama fans. Most of the creators of the collection provide details of the reasons for their choices and what links the dramas included in the group to each other. The collections mostly revolve around romantic genres, a specific actor/actress, a certain period, school, or office environment

with catchy titles as we can notice in the collections with the largest number of followers such as “°Comedy Romance ° Vol1”, “ Insanely Hot Guys”, “♡《Dramas with BEST Kpop Idols》♡”, “SKINSHIP”, and others.

In addition to the general description of the collection, the creator adds a brief or detailed description of each program and series that s/he added to the collection. This description is not a summary of the story but rather an evaluation of the drama with a comment on why it is worth watching. Some collections’ creators associate their Viki account with their Instagram account.

3. Networking and global community

There are many reasons for someone watching content that is culturally and linguistically different from the environment in which they grew up in. This is similar to the case of international fans of Korean and Asian dramas. Even though some of them may have never visited any of those countries or have had direct communication with their people. The admiration of a specific cultural content develops into the desire to join a social group assembled by the love of the same type. Many fans are subscribing to this collective community in order to get more actual contact with what they are watching.

3.1. Fans’ translation

Fan translation of Viki is covered in many research papers. Many experts in the field describe it as highly professional and differentiate it from fan translations on any of the other sites. Not only that, the professionalism of fan subtitles on Viki is far superior even to paid subtitles on other video streaming platforms. To reach such a degree of professionalism, contributing to Viki as a translator or a segmenter has gone from being a hobby to an unpaid profession (Henthorn, 2019).

On the outside, the group of translators and segmenters looks strict. The Group is

obligated to deal according to the hierarchical system within it. A new participant must obtain training from Senior Translators before beginning to participate in translating a work. The work starts from the top, a project manager assigns which drama is going to be translated and after that how the work will be divided among other translators according to the length of their experience in translation and the number of works they have translated. This hierarchical system also extends to include the right to choose to work on translating the most popular series. In other words, a novice contributors must work on less popular works before s/he have access to works that obtain more views. This internal hierarchical culture of fan gathering for translation and segmentation professionals closely resembles East Asian culture that urges respect for seniors and work hard. A large number of the participants of this fans' community are Koreans abroad, which may be the reason for spreading and consolidating such a culture within the group, but it seems that this culture arouses the love of fans as it brings them closer to the country they get to know through the drama, although there are many complaints that can be obviously seen in the "Discussions" section or through comments rejecting such culture.

3.2. Watch parties and On-time comment section

Any user of Viki can enjoy group watching of a program or series directly from the site. This can be planned in advance; a user announces a specific time for a “watch party” on the “discussion” page, where as many as possible who want to watch together can know the time in advance. Any user also can directly start a "Watch Party", within 24 hours after creating it. In the "Watch Party," you can specify whether you want this viewing to be between family and friends only by sharing the private link through well-known social media such as "Instagram", “Facebook”, and others. This feature includes a Live Chat where Watch Party participants can write comments about the drama or have a discussion about it in real-time.

The idea of timed commenting - another feature of Viki -is somehow similar to the Watch Party. The user comments on what s/he is watching at the same moment of

watching, and another user can see these comments while watching the program at the same point and time that the commentator placed it. These Comments that have been posted long years ago can be reviewed as if it is written at the same time as another user is watching the same program. This feature allows users to express their opinion about a specific part, including ongoing dialogue, directing, acting style, even what the actor/actress is wearing, the location of the scene, and so on. Other users get the information shared by commenters. Comments come in different forms; some come in the form of emotional participation and some come in the form of information sharing. Emotional participation is like commenting on the viewer waiting and anticipating events, laughing at some point, or crying because of a specific scene. Usually most of the comments may be limited to emoticons without any linguistic expressions (Messerli & Locher, 2021). But such expressions allow other viewers an opportunity for collective sympathy not only with the knowledge that there are people who watch and love watching the same type of drama but with the idea that the same feelings were aroused in someone from a different social, cultural, and age background, which allow the users to be even more connected out of the limited frame of the time and space.

It is also useful to note that these features are similar to the function of meta-comments, a technique many translators use to clarify certain cultural concepts related to specific scenes(Locher, 2020). Viki translators or any other professional paid translators may not use meta-comments so that s/he can convey the text without the translator's own interpretation. However, These two additional features - On-time comment section and Watch parties - can play the role of meta-comments. Meaning, these features help to inform the viewer about the cultural background embedded in the work, and at the same time, making these features available to only those who want them allows other users who may be bothered by the existence of such meta-comments to watch without any interruption.

3.3. Discussions

The “discussion” is a page that can be accessed after clicking on "Community". It takes you to a separate space from the viewing screen. This section is intended for active users for broader communication within the fandom. The bulk of the community section is devoted to translators and segmenters. The platform initially provides an "info hub" which is a page to introduce how and types of contributions on Viki, and there is the "Project Finder", through which you can find out about current translation projects and participate in them. There are also "Perks" which offer prizes that contributors may receive.

The part concerned here is the “discussion”. The discussion part is an intriguing concept, as it moves the users of the watching platform, from a narrow and limited framework of communication centered around drama and related matters, to a broader one in which all topics are discussed freely. The user can start a discussion topic and express his/her opinion regarding it, or just express his /her desire to hear other people's opinions and experiences around a topic. Anyone who is interested in the topic under discussion gathers in these small forums. This includes general topics such as fashion, cosmetics, social topics, topics about music and celebrities, as well as critical topics about drama and translation, watch party requests, and topics distinguished by language. Published topics and posts may include more detailed tags such as cultural, psychological, historical, and requesting information. One such topic is a question about the possibility of renting a car with an international driving license on Jeju Island.

Users also share information about the cultures of their countries on various topics, including a topic titled "Cultural fun/interesting facts" in which the creator urged other users to share the most unusual or funny traditions of their country. The “discussion”'s topics also extend to "real world events and meetups". This category includes discussions of real events, whether they are events on a social or individual scale. This includes topics such as "helpful info for our Ukrainian friends". The participants in this thread showed their sympathy for users from Ukraine in the aftermath of the recent tense situation. Many of them showed their will to help any of the Ukrainian users

if they move to their country. In addition to that, some creators may ask other users for emotional support, in a thread called "Pray for me pt2", the creator of the post asked Viki's users to pray for him in the wake of his loss of two family members. There are also specific topics of complaints about Viki's management or from the translation project managers and bullying acts.

Among the most viewed and shared discussion topics by Viki's users that should be noted is "Squid Game - Love it or hate it?" (ajumma2, 2021). This topic was submitted by a user named "ajumma2", a user of the site since 2013 and a member of a "Trust Level", she/he has published 10 topics and more than 800 posts. This topic has received 1.9K views, 176 comments, and over 500 hearts. It is through the comments that we can understand the fundamental difference between what Viki users as 'old school Korean drama fans' want to watch and what users of other platforms (specifically Netflix here) seek to watch. The following are some of the comments on the topic in which its creator expressed his/her objection to the end of the series and some illogical ideas about its content:

Community trust

Well, Since you didn't love it I have another reason not to watch it. 1st, it's not my kind of show anyway and 2 - you didn't like it either.

Avoiding Dark genre: Non-violent, less thriller

(---) I haven't watched it, because it's probably too brutal... yeah, it's a no for me (---)

I started watching, but it was too brutal to watch that I couldn't keep watching till the end. Some scenes were too hard for me to stomach; so I dropped it.(---)

I didn't like it either but not because it wasn't a good series but because that is not my genre.i prefer romance and and comedy and the ancient series. This was to dark for my taste.

*Squid Game - never considered it, as I said violence is not my main theme.
(---)*

It is way too brutal to my taste. I tried to watch Parasite once. Even that movie was too hard for me to watch.

Me too I thought it would be fun to see, but my brain got woof after every episode. I felt like I was in depression after the last episode. My mood went down. I didn't feel anything.(---)

I was shocked when you mentioned you watched SQUID GAME 'till the end. I think the first episode was for me so hard to watch: that I know most ppl would drop it right there.

DID watch it fully

Btw, SQUID GAME: HATE IT!

Fixed genre lovers: Rom-Com

When I read the description for this drama, I knew immediately I would not be watching it. I was shocked when I saw that it was #1 in the US the day it was released. (---)

(---) I'll just go back to my usual light comedy, rom-com, historical and/or inspirational type of dramas. (Creator's comment)

I prefer to watch a show that I know is all fictional than movies that reflect reality (---)

In my opinion it gets more views from Netflix binge-watchers that wanna watch anything that is trending these days. To be honest I'm not the big fan of a brutal shows too. I've lost interest in them ever since I stepped into the bright sight of romantic k-dramas. Anyways, it's just too much out there, to please the average Netflix viewer. And not really the typical kdrama fan.(---)

(---) Viki had a movie long time ago "A Million" and it was a survival chase for the money bag, watched by the rich... like "Rat Race" movie, but this one wasn't bloody! When it comes to survival, probably some animalistic traits will kick in...Therefore, I'm not fond of it, using/killing humans as entertainment produc t... I find it almost dangerous... folks might become even more desensitized...

Good for K-Drama popularity around the world

It's definitely not my cup, but I'm OK with whatever popularises Kdrama.

It's generating a lot of buzz, which can only be a good thing for the future of Kdrama and Korean cinematography in general.

Most of the comments confirm the type of series that Viki users prefer to watch. As we can see in the comments, commentators directly point out that the type of series that is characterized by having violence or a dark side, is not favorable to them and that this type of series is intended for Netflix viewers more than the fans of Korean dramas. Some have pointed out directly that they prefer the old-fashioned genre of Korean dramas centered around romantic comedies and historicals with its bright side. Another noteworthy comment is the first comment in which the commentator points out that the post creator's dislike of the series is another reason for him not to watch it. This shows that constant communication - for a such user well-known for his/her posts and comments - builds close relationships within the group. In the last set of comments, as can be seen, the fans of K-drama, although they did not like the series, and which they considered far from what old-school k-drama fans would like, expressed their appreciation for such series that bring more popularity to K-drama.¹

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Viki lacks some technical advantages as an application compared to the more popular OTT platforms. Viki application cannot switch to a smaller screen while using more than one screen at the same time, nor does it provide the feature of “watch on the

¹ In addition to the above-mentioned, Viki also communicates actively with K-drama and K-pop fans through the celebrity news website "Soompi." Soompi is part of the Rakuten Viki family. Viki promotes the series shown on the platform through Soompi. This is a great partnership that serves both K-drama and K-pop fans. Soompi puts a direct link to the Viki page of the series, and Soompi is also accessible through Viki.

way” - a feature on Netflix that allows users to download episodes to watch when there is no internet connection. In addition, despite its attempts to produce its original drama, Viki has not been very successful in this compared to the success of the other major platforms. Therefore, some of the content may be uploaded to the website a full day after it has been aired on Korean TV. However, such demerits are compensated by the various merits that Viki offers to its users to communicate with each other in the form of a "fandom", providing them with a space for social networking without actual communication between individuals with similar interests.

What Viki provides as a social media platform, is different from other social media services, such as Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, and others. Those services provide a space that exposes more of the users' private life. While on the contrary, what Viki offers differs as it brings to the users a space that does not include much exposure to their private life, and it is extremely difficult to be known unless the user reveals it himself. What the users share on Viki is not a subject of communication between friends and family. In other words, the user is absolutely certain that what s/he shares on Viki will be for K-drama fans in particular without risking that someone might infringe on his own taste in choosing what to watch. As it is mentioned before, this is an important factor for fans of Korean dramas before the new era that Netflix and other OTT platforms have recently brought in with its production of original Korean content that some old-school K-drama fans think is somewhat "Western".

The benefits of networking among fans have been discussed in many previous studies, for example, Chang and Park discuss how the ARMY as a fandom, benefits BTS fans by allowing them to communicate with each other (Chang & Park, 2018). The two researchers established their paper on the basis of Maffesoli's theory of the new form of the "tribe", and they point out that fans get both intimacy and social communication without actual meetings. One of the dimensions of the benefits that have been discussed is the "transnational locality." Fans get traits from the culture - Korean in this case - from their favorite idol as well as the idols themselves obtain mixed global cultural traits to produce a musical mold that is Korean-based and at the same time can be identified by people globally.

What Viki represents as a social media platform is also discussed in another paper, Messerli and Locher focused on the timed comment feature of Viki. Based on the analysis presented in the paper, we can build a general assumption that the functions of the Viki features are divided into two major functions, the first is sharing feelings and the second is sharing information. Through the various features of Viki mentioned here, fans communicate in order to express their feelings about the drama such as "waiting for the drama", "anticipating events", and "showing love to the actor/actress". This function allows users to be connected to each other, by knowing that what they feel while watching something might be also felt by another user watching the same content. With regard to information sharing, users of the features of the Viki share wide-ranging information that includes simple information such as the name of the actors/actresses and the works they had a role in before, costumes and cosmetics brands, as well as the names of shooting places, and other detailed information related to culture and society. One such example is a user's comment that all Korean males are required to serve in the military for two years. The function of sharing information expands even more in the space allocated outside the site as mentioned on the "Discussion" page. Since it is a separate forum, users start extensive critical discussions about drama and its translation as well as discussing other issues such as how to learn languages, travel, facts about history, animal and plant breeding, books, and also some psychological tips to reach more happiness. Countless other cases, not limited to Korean drama fans, explain why someone joins a particular group of fans. Overall, these cases indicate that the sense of connectedness shared feelings and memories, and also shared language are one of the main reasons that bring different people together under one fandom.

To conclude, Viki adheres to a certain type of series, presented to a group that has long been accustomed to Korean and East Asian dramas. Viki has an old-school fandom that has built within the site an established community, that is constantly striving to attract new members and expands. Viki's survival in the expanding market lies in the competitive advantage that it has and that differentiates it from any of the existing platforms, which is its features as a social networking platform.

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소셜 미디어 플랫폼으로서의 비키: 오래된 한국 드라마 팬들을 위한 공간

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한국어 요약

연구 목적 한국 드라마 팬들이 비키가 제공한 다양한 소셜 미디어 기능들을 이용함으로써 서로 공감하고 소통하는 공간을 만들었다. 본고는 이러한 기능을 조명하고 비키가 성장하는 OTT 시장에서 살아남을 수 있는 중요한 요소로 주목했다. 본고의 주요 목적은 이러한 기능을 분석하고 팬들에게 어떤 역할을 하고 있는지를 밝히는 작업이다.

연구 방법 본고에서는 주로 선행 연구의 결과를 바탕으로 소셜 미디어 플랫폼으로서의 비키의 각종 요소들을 분석했다. 이외에도 비키의 '토론' (Discussion) 페이지에 게재된 팬들의 글과 댓글을 분석하여 여기서 소위 오래된 한국 드라마 팬 (Old-school K-drama fan)의 취향을 알아보고 비키와 다른 OTT 플랫폼의 차별성을 조명했다.

결론 한국 드라마 팬들뿐만 아니라 다른 많은 사례들은 소속감, 공유된 감정과 기억, 그리고 공유된 언어까지 수많은 사람들이 한 팬덤 아래 모이게 된 주요 원인이 된다. 비키는 다른 OTT 플랫폼과 달리 정확한 취향을 가진 오래된 한국 드라마 팬들을 위해 특정한 콘텐츠를 제공하고 그들을 위해서 하나의 공동체를 구성하기 위해서 다양한 소통 기능을 제공해 주었다. 본고는 이 두 가지 요소가 비키가 여전히 많은 이용자들을 유지하고 있는 원인이라고 결론지었다.

핵심어 비키, 소셜 미디어 플랫폼, 한국 드라마 팬, 팬덤, 팬 공동체, 넷플릭스, 오티티 플랫폼

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