



‘Isn’t It a Bit Rough?’ – Vietnamese Audience Reception of Wrist-grabbing in Korean Television Dramas, Feminist Consciousness, and Fantasy

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Abstract

Over the past two decades, Korean television drama (K-drama), which stands at the forefront of the Korean Wave, the popularisation of South Korean pop culture worldwide, has raised controversy over male characters’ sexist and patriarchal behaviours. At the centre of such controversy is the trope of wrist-grabbing, characterised by a man’s attempt to grasp a woman’s wrist to drag her to another place and force a conversation. Previous studies about international fans have revealed strong disapproving reactions, especially from feminist-identified viewers. This article on Vietnamese audience reception showed variations: some enjoyed wrist-grabbing, some condemned the act, while others exhibited ambivalence. These varied responses expose many influencing factors: Confucian-inflected patriarchal values, feminist discourses, lived experiences, and suspension of disbelief in media consumption. This analysis of the audience readings of fiction reveals some truth about gender politics in Vietnam, including a certain level of patriarchal celebration and weak feminist consciousness. The article contributes to contemporary Vietnamese studies, gender studies, research of the Korean Wave, and media audience research.

Keywords Vietnam · Korean wave · K-drama · Wrist-grabbing · Patriarchy · Gender · Feminist consciousness

Introduction

Sam Soon is sitting with her ex-boyfriend at a hotel bar. Jin Hun, her boss, suddenly appears. Casting the ex-boyfriend aside, Jin Hun takes her wrist, forcefully dragging her along into the gentlemen’s restroom. Despite her continuous yelling and

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struggling, Jin Hun remains silent and resolutely holds onto her wrist. When they are finally inside the restroom, he pauses to gaze at her and suddenly, gives her a passionate kiss.

For many fans of the popular Korean television drama *My Lovely Sam Soon* (2005), this is a memorable scene marking the beginning of a comical romance between Sam Soon and Jin Hun, the female and male lead, after a period of emotional confusion. This scene shows two male gestures common in romantic South Korean television dramas (K-drama), now a globally recognised genre (Kim, 2021): wrist-grabbing, often paired with wrist-dragging (the act of taking someone's wrist and dragging them to another place) and forced kissing. Schulze (2013) identifies wrist-grabbing as one of the tropes that occur in what she called K-dramaland – a phantasmatic zone which regular viewers are used to, with rules of its own. Wrist-grabbing takes place following a period of conflict, often a misunderstanding between male and female characters who share feelings for each other but may not acknowledge the attraction. The emotional tension that builds toward wrist-grabbing serves to legitimise this act as an attempt to resolve conflict. Most scenes involve the display of a man's physical strength as well as his authoritarianism and determination. Within this fantasy, the portrayal of wrist-grabbing is not meant to put a man's character into question because as the male lead, this man tends to be unconditionally devoted to his love interest and usually exhibits kindness to her. This behaviour is instead encoded to emphasise the man's uncontainable passion for the woman and his determination in pursuing this passion, which contributes to "the thrill of the chase" (Kenasri & Sadasri, 2021, p. 202). Nevertheless, scholars such as Lee (2020) and Kenasri and Sadasri (2021) warn of the practical danger of the trope, arguing that it romanticises intimate partner violence. Lee (2020, p. 179) calls wrist-grabbing "abuse" and describes how a Western female fan shrugged off being wrist-grabbed by a Korean man in real life because of her impression of warm-hearted men in K-dramas. Kenasri and Sadasri (2021) view wrist-grabbing and forced kissing as displaying aggression, coercion, and a controlling behaviour, which constitute intimate partner violence as defined by the World Health Organisation (2012). Among international audiences, this trope is controversial, with some tolerating it while others exhibiting a dislike due to its violation of feminist values (Schulze, 2013; Hook, 2016).

This article discusses Vietnamese audience reception of wrist-grabbing in K-dramas, which have become popular in Vietnam as part of Korean Wave – the popularisation of mass culture from South Korea (hereafter Korea) worldwide, also known as *Hallyu* (Kim, 2021). Since the late 1990s, K-dramas have consistently featured in the cultural menu of Vietnamese people due to a number of reasons, among which are their depictions of the glamour associated with Korea's highly developed cityscapes and characters' modern lifestyles and their reflection of elements of the cultural proximity which Korea shared with Vietnam despite the two countries' economic gap (Gammon, 2021). These similarities lie in the two countries' enduring Confucian ideologies, strong social emphasis on family values, and normative views of romance that tend towards conservatism (Gammon, 2021). This article examines the responses of fourteen Vietnamese viewers – including men and women, to scenes of wrist-grabbing. My analysis of their varying reactions, including approving attitudes, disapproving sentiments, and contradictory responses, reveals some truth about gender

politics in Vietnam, including a certain level of patriarchal celebration and the growing, but nascent feminist consciousness. They expose the influences of three primary factors: an interplay between deeply rooted Confucian patriarchal values and feminist discourses; lived experiences, including friendships or romantic relationships; and the participants' understanding of wrist-grabbing within its context of fantasy. All these factors played a role, illustrating that various influences join to shape audience reception of media texts. My discussion does not focus on participants' class as there is no consistent logic that reveals class as a factor in responses. Some middle-class participants liked wrist-grabbing and some with working-class backgrounds disapproved. While family backgrounds and social statuses vary, all participants are college-educated urban dwellers. Before discussing the theoretical and methodological approaches and then the audience reactions, I present first some background about the genre of K-drama and gender politics in Vietnam.

K-drama's Uncomfortable Relationship with Feminism and International Fans' Reception of Wrist-grabbing

Since the 2000s, K-drama, alongside Korean pop music (K-pop), has been at the forefront of Korean Wave, fostering the popularity of anything Korean across Asia and now worldwide (Kim, 2021). Although these dramas are progressively diverse in genre and format due to the multiplication of channels in Korea and growing investment from streaming platforms (Ju, 2017), my article focuses on romantic K-dramas. These are usually prime-time mini-series that broadcast two episodes a week, entail high costs and feature *Hallyu* stars. K-dramas are often much shorter than Western soap operas but seen as a form of soap opera due to their melodramatic content and popularity among women. It is important to note that, while Korean and international audiences of K-dramas generally view them as an escapist genre with exaggerated phantasmatic elements, they also appreciate the genre for its "emotional realism" – its depictions of mundane emotions such as the feelings of hope, joy, disappointment, resentment, and sadness, which emerge from everyday human relationships (Chan & Wang, 2011; Baldacchino and Park, 2020; Gammon, 2021). This emotional realism, as Ang (1985) argues, is a unique quality that soap operas offer despite the fact that they generally fail to accurately capture reality in their tendency to construct a more glamorous world and portray an improbable series of extraordinary and dramatic events.

K-drama bears an uncomfortable relationship with feminism due to its emphasis on romance as central to women's lives and tendency to portray men as dominating women financially and professionally (Lee & Park, 2015).¹ This uneasy interaction echoes the long-standing debate regarding soap operas' perceived incompatibility with feminism, which protests patriarchal structures (Ang, 1985). Many international fans view K-drama as anti-feminist (Hook, 2016) or frown upon its patriarchal elements (Yang, 2008; Espiritu, 2011; Schulze, 2013). Changes in global and local gen-

¹ According to Lee and Park's (2015) analysis of 100 popular Korean dramas broadcast between 2003 and 2012, most dramas feature major male characters as wealthier and better educated than their female counterparts.

der politics, however, have resulted in gradual changes in gender relations in these dramas. Recent titles show women as more assertive and ambitious and increasingly feature queer characters, gaining greater appeal to feminist-identified audiences. Men in many dramas now exhibit soft masculinities (Gammon, 2022a), manifested by a willing to show emotions and gentle gestures towards women. Considering such on-going dynamics, this article does not argue for the idea of K-drama as an anti-feminist genre but rather focuses on the controversial trope of wrist-grabbing.

So far, two studies have discussed wrist-grabbing in K-dramas from female audiences' perspectives, albeit not in depth because it is not the focus of their research. Schulze (2013) reveals that international female fans online, despite their enjoyment of the dramas, criticised K-dramas' tendency to romanticise wrist-grabbing, which they view as a form of abuse. The fans emphasised the lack of the woman's consent, the man's dominance over the woman, and demonstrated a feminist awareness that would not allow them to tolerate the sight. Despite their disapproval, some fans suggested reading the scene within K-dramaland context or even Korean culture, which they considered different from their own. Hook (2016), who explores how twenty-one feminist and non-feminist American women interpret K-dramas, shows mixed responses: half of the feminist-identified participants and one non-feminist participants were against wrist-grabbing, while the rest raised no complaints. According to Hook, the feminist participants attributed their intolerance to feminist awareness and condemned wrist-grabbing as violating gender equality discourse. Hook does not articulate how other participants responded to wrist-grabbing but indicates that some were hesitant to judge male character's sexist behaviours due to their awareness of cultural differences between the US and Korea.

This study advances the literature regarding wrist-grabbing by placing it at the centre of discussion, with a focus on Vietnamese audience reception. Due to the prevalence of this scenario in K-dramas, all participants understood wrist-grabbing as an attempt to solve a conflict. Despite this shared understanding, not all accepted the scene, and the extent of their acceptance, as will be shown, was influenced by traditional gender ideals, exposure to feminist discourses, lived experiences, and immersion in romantic fantasies. For an understanding of the socio-cultural contexts that helps explain the participants' responses, I now present background of gender politics in Vietnam.

Gender Politics in Vietnam

As in Korea culture (Y. Kim & S. Kim, 2020), Confucianism has exerted a strong hold on Vietnamese culture over its history. Under the local patriarchal framework, men are expected to continue the patrilineal line and assume the role of *trụ cột gia đình* ("pillar of the family," or financial backbone), or "head of the household" (Rydström & Drummond, 2004; Nguyen & Simkin, 2017). They are presumed to be their family's breadwinners and decision-makers and exhibit self-determination and technical, managerial, and leadership skills (Tran, 2004). By contrast, women are expected to be their family's main caregiver (Luong, 2003; Drummond, 2004) and "keeper of morality" (Nguyen & Harris, 2009). Business and affairs external to the household are traditionally viewed as masculine space, whereas the home remains

chiefly women's province (Werner, 2009; Schafer, 2010). Although men and women are assigned complementary roles, men's external activities tend to enjoy greater prestige than women's domestic work (Soucy, 2001).

Other important factors such as colonialism, communism, and modernisation have helped shape and reshape gender politics. The 1986 *Đổi Mới* (Reform) policy, a milestone of Vietnam's modernisation, marked a transition from central planning under the state's strict management to a "socialist-oriented market economy." This transformation has fostered Vietnam's integration into global networks (Forbes et al., 1991; Werner, 2009) and a more flexible social life, especially in cities (Nguyen, 2007; Martin, 2013). Since *Đổi Mới*, the Communist government has made attempts to get rid of "feudal values" dictating women's unconditional submission to men and endorse women's participation in the political system and labour force (Pettus, 2003). Rapid economic growth, rising consumerism, and exposure to global media have helped further modernise local gender relations (Chowdhury et al., 2018). People today frequently negotiate both traditional and modern values in daily lives (Nguyen, 2003; Tran, 2015).

Contemporary gender politics are in flux. On the one hand, gender equality is accepted in principle, with laws prohibiting concubinage and forced marriage and state campaigns encouraging women's participation in the government (Pettus, 2003). More women are encouraged to pursue higher education and professional ambitions (Nguyen, 2004; Earl, 2014; Maheshwari & Nayak, 2020), even though they generally earn less than men and are less likely to hold leadership positions (Chowdhury et al., 2018; Vu et al., 2019; Phan, 2020). Traditional expectations for women to be chaste and submissive have been relaxed, with greater acceptance of premarital sex and divorce, especially in cities (Nguyen, 2005; Martin, 2013; Tran, 2015; Bergenfeld et al., 2022b). On the other hand, expectations of certain Confucian-influenced practices of gender roles persist (Soucy, 2001; Tran, 2004; Bergstedt, 2016). Contemporary men are still pressured to fulfil the roles of their family's "provider" and "protector" (Nguyen & Harris, 2009; La, 2012; Nguyen & Simkin, 2017). The local Institute for Social Development Studies (ISDS)'s recent survey with over 2,500 people finds that men are still pressured to appear "strong" and be the financial backbone, although younger and urban Vietnamese hold more flexible views of gender roles (ISDS, 2020).

An evident sign of tenacious male dominance is the prevalence of men's engagement in extramarital sex and their sexual coercion and harassment of women (Khuat, 2004; Phan, 2008; La, 2012; Nguyen et al., 2016). These practices are condoned by parts of society because of the idea that men are born sexually virile and cannot control their sexual desires (Khuat, 2004; La, 2012; Bergenfeld et al., 2022a). Women's hesitance to discuss sex due to ideas of chastity is linked to men's normalisation of sexual coercion (Lewis et al., 2022; Bergenfeld et al., 2022b) and there is a tendency to blame female victims of rape (ISDS, 2020; Bergenfeld et al., 2022a; Nguyễn, 2022). Marital sexual violence may not be taken seriously because many view forced sex as acceptable in marriage and think that satisfying the husband's sexual needs is a wife's duty (La, 2012; Kwiatkowski, 2019). Local civil society has lamented the lack of legal enforcement against sexual harassment and assaults (Tatarski, 2020; Vu, 2021).

In recent years, Western feminism has helped change views on gender-related matters, albeit slowly. The global #MeToo movement has influenced popular opinion, especially among those in cities, as it raised awareness of sexual harassment, sexual assault, and the notion of consent, which remain relatively novel in Vietnam.² #MeToo has encouraged victims of sexual violence to share their experiences and condemn predators. While the movement has helped raise some awareness, it has not made a prominent impact like the more vehement #MeToo responses in Korea and Japan. Women who experience sexual harassment and assault are often discouraged from speaking up and reporting to authorities, and the voices of vocal ones have been quickly stifled (Taft, 2018; Tatarski, 2020; Vu, 2021; Nguyễn, 2022). A 2019 study surveying nearly 6,000 women across Vietnam reveals that half of those who had experienced physical and/or sexual violence by a partner did not tell anyone, over 90 per cent did not seek help, and less than 10 per cent contacted authorities (MOLISA, GSO and UNFPA, 2020).

Methodological and Theoretical Approaches

The data in this article was collected in mid-2019 for a broader project about Vietnamese audience reception of masculinities in K-dramas (Gammon, 2021, 2022b). It involves fourteen Vietnamese viewers' responses³ to images of wrist-grabbing from six K-dramas: *Lovers in Paris* (2004), *Boys Over Flowers* (2009), *Secret Garden* (2010), *Heartstrings* (2011), *Lie to Me* (2011), and *A Gentleman's Dignity* (2012). The respondents are college-educated men and women in their 20s and 30s who lived in Hanoi, Vietnam's capital and second-most populated city, at the time. They held different occupations and come from diverse geographical and social backgrounds, encompassing both the working and middle classes. Eleven presented themselves as heterosexual while three identified as queer.

Ethics approval for the project (application ID: 0000026887) was granted by Victoria University of Wellington's Human Ethics Committee. I use pseudonyms and do not disclose identifiable details. I conducted interviews in Vietnamese and translated selected excerpts myself. Adopting Hollway and Jefferson's free association narrative interview (FANI) method, I encouraged participants to talk freely about what came to their minds and met most twice, each time for two hours. I connected salient features of participants' personal lives with their viewing experiences to understand patterns of gendered desire and identification. As FANI prioritises feelings over intellectual responses, I asked "how do you feel about this scene [of wrist-grabbing]" instead of "what do you think?". However, perhaps due to the character of this scene, some participants still gave critical readings. According to Harper (2002, p. 13), "images

² In local media, these terms are often translated literally from English into Vietnamese. The phrase *quấy rối tình dục* (sexual harassment) is believed to appear in Vietnamese discourses thanks to Westernisation in the late 1990s (Khuat, 2004).

³ I interviewed 16 participants for the project but had to exclude the data from two participants due to their irrelevancy to this discussion. A participant contextualised wrist-grabbing as a man's attempt to save a woman from danger and lauded it. While this situation may happen, it is not what happens in the dramas whose photos were displayed and not the scenario I wish to discuss here.

evoke deeper elements of human consciousness than do words,” thus inviting complex feelings and memories and extending possibilities of empirical research.

The use of photos spares me the labour of explaining the situation and the risk of revealing my own attitude about wrist-grabbing. Although I did not reveal personal opinions and resolved to remain non-judgmental, my position, i.e., how I was “located” by the participants, inevitably played some role in their responses. Being a Vietnamese in her early 30s means I grew up in a similar culture and the age gaps between me and them are inconsiderable, giving me an advantage. Yet, my position as a Western-affiliated female researcher caused some male respondents to become defensive, probably because they assumed I hold feminist views and therefore would not approve of wrist-grabbing. Acknowledging research as a mutual space co-produced by the interviewer and interviewee (Manohar et al., 2017), I shall engage with this issue of researcher positionality in the [Findings](#) section. My interpretive method is influenced by Hollway and Jefferson’s (2000) psychoanalytic interpretive model, which examines participants’ narratives for omissions, repetitions, and contradictions, and Riessman’s (1993) narrative analytical instructions stressing interviewees’ word use, narrative style, and voice tone.

For simplification, I categorise the responses into three groups: (1) favourable readings, or the readings presumably encoded by screenwriters – which involve acceptance and excitement, (2) oppositional readings, and (3) negotiated interpretations. This categorisation borrows Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding model (1996) but should only be understood as an attempt to reveal audience reception on a surface level to aid more nuanced analysis. My discussion shall show that the complexity of some participants’ responses cannot be fully captured by this simple categorisation. For more background, I shall relate some participants’ responses to their overall gender views demonstrated throughout our encounters.

My discussion helps reveal the participants’ views of the power dynamics in heterosexual relationships and the presence of feminist consciousness, characterised by the questioning of sexist behaviours and awareness of patriarchal realities in society (Bartky, 1975; hooks, 2000; Fischer & Good, 2004; Kelland, 2016). Feminist consciousness provides women with a cognitive tool to make sense of experiences of gendered discrimination and injustice, and helps them resist patriarchal forces (hooks, 2000; Fischer & Good, 2004). While many scholars such as Bartky (1975) and Fischer and Good (2004) see feminist consciousness as confined to women, I would argue that men too can demonstrate feminist consciousness when they question the power imbalance in gender relations, as a participant in this study shows. Signs of feminist consciousness in some participants reveal how Western feminism has penetrated society and helped shape Vietnamese people’s gender views alongside the nagging grip of patriarchy. This discussion is delivered with caution, nevertheless, as some participants’ disapproval of wrist-grabbing seems tempered by the location of wrist-grabbing in the context of fantasy rather than real life.

Findings

Half of the participants showed favourable readings encoded by scriptwriters: they accepted wrist-grabbing and/or enjoyed it. The rest showed disapproval or mixed reactions. I shall take turn to discuss each of these categories. In certain cases, I present both my questions and the participant's responses to reveal the discursive contexts.

Favourable Reception or Acceptance

Some participants celebrated wrist-grabbing for its manifestation of masculine power and strength, which reveals how they observed norms that expect men to lead and show determination. Hà, aged 34 (at the time of the interviews), a married woman, commented:

Hà: I like this! [in enthusiastic tone] It shows manliness, a man taking control, it's like I/we (*mình*) are being led. In situations like this, when [I/we] waver, they drag me/us (*mình*) to a particular direction. It clearly shows resoluteness, as they don't allow a choice, and it must be that way.

Interviewer: So you think it's an act of imposition?

Hà: Yes, imposition, imposition is necessary, 'cause like I said, women tend to wander off, while one needs to be resolute.

Hà's response to wrist-grabbing was consistent with her overall gender views. According to Hà, most men would make better decision-makers and leaders than women because they are wiser, more determined, and decisive. This view reflects an internalisation of traditional gender role assignments that privilege men (Truong, 2009; Nguyen, 2012; Jardine, 2019; Vu et al., 2019). Hà also prefers men to play the role of an initiator and leader in a heterosexual relationship. Note her use of the pronoun/object *mình*, which can be translated as either me or us (or "us women"), or both. The word *mình* is often used in Vietnamese to describe one's own feelings but also a desire to make the listener(s) identify with one, as it connotes "you/us" as well (Sidnell & Shohet, 2013). It seemed Hà imagined herself in the female character's position and wanted to involve me in her imagination of this situation.

Tài, 32, a middle-class Hanoian also said he enjoyed the sight:

Tài: I think they show resoluteness and strength, like the man being the leaning pole, the anchor, the one leading the woman. I feel...I don't know why but I really like these images [in affirmative tone]. Some people may think of this as a bit violent, a bit patriarchal or something... But I like it. I think it's ok really. Because I feel... when two people are having an argument, if the other person is stubborn and not listening, then one needs to just drag [them] along.

Interviewer: So you'd do the same if it were you?

Tài: Yeah, I think it's ok really.

Tài stressed that wrist-grabbing reflected determination and strength, stereotypically “masculine” qualities and envisioned the man as the one leading a relationship. This response is consistent with his overall view of ideal masculinity, which involves self-mastery, resoluteness, and responsibility. While Tài was straightforward in stating his enjoyment, he showed defensiveness and an implicit desire to make me agree with him. His statement, “I think it’s ok really,” mentioned twice, betrays an effort to defend his enjoyment, as he seemed aware of feminist visions in society, while he wanted to be seen as a relatively progressive well-educated man (he voiced his general advocacy for gender equality). The Vietnamese original version of “I think it is ok really” – *mình thấy ok mà* – shows his defensiveness more clearly because of the word *mà*, an attitudinal particle placed at the end of a sentence to convince the listener of something (Do-Hurinville & Dao, 2019). There is no exact English equivalent for this word, but *mà* can be roughly translated as “really”, or “right?” (as in “it is ok, right?”). I shall return to Tài’s defensiveness when I discuss Huy, who showed similar defensiveness in the next section.

Hà and Tài shared an ideal of men being strong and being the leader/protector. While showing favourable responses, they also revealed their awareness of the display of masculine power and domination in wrist-grabbing. Some participants, however, did not think of power relations at all. Vinh, a 37-year-old man, saw wrist-grabbing as “very romantic,” i.e., a display of intimacy:

These scenes are very romantic. But in Vietnam, if you’re on the streets and you do this wrist-grabbing in such a romantic way, people will say you’re crazy.

Viewing wrist-grabbing as too romantic, Vinh deemed such behaviour inapplicable to the Vietnamese contexts. He also compared the wrist-grab to kissing in public, which may be frowned upon in Vietnam due to public disapproval of display of intimacy (Charton & Boudreau, 2017).

Nga, a 27-year-old woman, provided a similar reading. Nga said she did not particularly like wrist-grabbing, and preferred scenes of lovers cuddling, implying that she viewed the sight as a display of intimacy. Regrettably, the conversation switched to another topic abruptly afterwards, and I was unable to probe why she did not enjoy the sight.⁴

Toàn, 23, a university student who overall showed relatively egalitarian gender views, interpreted the scene as a display of passion and did not acknowledge the power display:

Toàn: I really like these images, sometimes one really need to drag [someone] along. Telling them to just come along does not evoke any emotions at all. Only dragging would evoke emotions and your heart would be beating. Even just holding one another’s hand and walking together like normal is not enjoyable. There must be strong emotions involved.

⁴ While Nga said she did not particularly like the sight, there was no evidence that Nga did not enjoy it because of a moral judgment of the man’s behaviour, so I place her response in the “acceptance” section for simplification.

Interviewer: You mean passion?

Toàn: Yes.

Interviewer: Can you elaborate on your feelings?

Toàn: My feelings are... I don't know how to explain, but this action is just irreplaceable, one just has to do the dragging.

Interviewer: What do you feel about those male characters [who do the dragging]?

Toàn: I feel good. But it also depends on the actors. It's a familiar trope everyone knows. Too familiar, nothing new. So the acting is what matters.

Toàn read wrist-grabbing as an exciting act of intimacy, which fits the producers' purpose of creating drama and emotions. Vinh, Nga, and Toàn all showed their receptiveness to the message encoded – that wrist-grabbing means a display of passion. It is worth noting that Vinh and Toàn showed relatively progressive views of gender roles throughout interviews. For example, they said it was okay if a husband is not a primary breadwinner in his family and they supported women's desire to advance professionally.

A few saw wrist-grabbing as an act of reconciliation. Kim (25, single woman) showed her strong identification with wrist-grabbing for this reason:

Kim: In these situations, when two people have an argument, when they have some conflict, the man is always the one who takes the initiative. Like, when I become hot-tempered or I don't express [dissatisfaction], the man is always the one who drags [me] along. He wouldn't say anything, just quietly drag me along, so that we can deal with the matter later. I like this. Instead of arguing and then parting ways, one person tries to reconcile the relationship by any means.

Interviewer: Okay... so you see it as an act of reconciling, and place it in the drama contexts?

Kim: Even in my previous relationships.

Interviewer: Can you elaborate?

Kim: With a friend or my crush. Instead of just leaving, I want him to actively pull me back to talk. Like I just want to punch, to kick [him], and argue, and leave, but he's always the one who pulls me back.

Echoing Tàì's and Hà's responses, Kim's approval of wrist-grabbing reflects a traditional expectation of men to assume an active role in relationships with women. However, Kim did not stress her preference for male domination and rather described wrist-grabbing as evidence of a woman's importance to a man. For her, wrist-grabbing reflects a man's intention to assuage a woman and mend a relationship. She also connected this sight with her lived experience. Her mention of "a friend or my crush" means she viewed the act as desirable in a relationship in which the woman cares for the man. She directly placed herself in the position of the female characters, demonstrating identification. Kim is not alone in this interpretation of wrist-grabbing as a reconciling attempt, as the next section will show through a description of Ninh's reading.

Negotiated and Mixed Responses

Văn (24, single male), an articulate participant who self-identifies as queer, elaborated:

This gave me mixed feelings. I like it because it shows (the man's) determination, but dislike it because it shows that the man holds greater power than the woman and the man can do whatever he wants, showing his patriarchal tendency.

Văn acknowledged his awareness of #Metoo and "consent" caused him to question this act, making him the only participant who directly mentioned the movement and "consent." This is a major excerpt of his response (incoherencies are omitted):

I think if the man doesn't wear a suit but rather, a T-shirt and shorts, I wouldn't feel this way [enjoying the scene]. These scenes show a man very well-dressed, or at least in pretty formal attire. It creates a romantic atmosphere. Romantic like...(pause)...like those men in suits are very powerful, and powerful men know what they want, the way they show their resoluteness is pleasurable. I feel the scenes then become more beautiful, more poetic, because of those suits. [omitted texts] Whereas the women wear those casual clothes... I think they [drama producers] deliberately arranged all this. Because if they [the women] wore a ball gown... They ought to look a bit casual... Then naturally we'll feel that the scenes no longer show patriarchy, we only see their determination. Suddenly we feel that this person must love this person a lot, and they must be very much in love, hence such determination. It's like legitimising the wrist-drag. (Pauses reflexively) I think if the man acts like this, if the man's wish is not obeyed, it's likely that the man will hit the woman. Because the man is more powerful. Yet because they wear those suits, I feel like they must be very much in love with me/us (*minh*) to drag me/us (*minh*) along like this.

Văn showed similar signs of identification as Hà, through his use of *minh* (me/us). Văn viewed the dressing up of the male characters as a strategy to romanticise and legitimise the men's behaviour. The man's fancy suits denote their bodily, financial, and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1984) and indeed, K-drama male leads usually enjoy successful careers and privileged social positions. In many dramas, the male lead is the female lead's boss and in a position to order her around and save her from trouble. This asymmetric difference in status between the man and the woman supposedly makes the man's act authentic, as he shows his overwhelming attention to a woman of lower status. Văn seemed to imply that, if the man is powerful and attractive, and the woman is interested in him, then audiences may tolerate his forceful wrist-grabbing. Văn's mention of the possibility that the man will hit the woman when he is not obeyed, nevertheless, demonstrates what he considered a dark side to the appeal of male domination.

Huy, 31 years old, said he did not particularly enjoy the sight but accepted it. He showed a similar defensive attitude echoing Tãi in the previous section:

Huy: I feel... If, for example a boy slaps a girl, I'd dislike it, but this sight, I find it normal. This usually happens when the girl is perhaps upset, and the boy is like I don't care, he just needs to drag her along, a no-nonsense attitude. I don't think there's any problem. I think there's nothing wrong.

Interviewer: Right, I didn't say it was wrong.

Huy: If he hits her for example, then it's wrong.

While saying that wrist-grabbing is "normal," Huy paradoxically showed that it might not be that normal when he kept defending the act. Despite such denial, he immediately brought up the image of a man slapping a woman, which is apparent physical violence. In response to his defensive attitude, I replied with "I didn't say it was wrong" to reassure him of my non-judgemental stance. Amusingly, later in our second interview, he casually said (without me bringing up the topic), "that sight, isn't it [wrist-grabbing] a bit rough (*thô bạo*)?". Such statement reveals he was not comfortable with his initial acceptance, and after some reflection, realised wrist-grabbing may be violent.

Tài's response in the previous section and Huy's reaction demonstrate that they were aware of possible oppositional readings. While their approval of this behaviour shows the influence of patriarchal values tolerating men's domineering tendencies, their subconscious need to defend such behaviour reveals they were also affected by feminist discourses that emphasise consent and mutual respect in relationships. My position as a researcher doing a PhD on masculinities in Korean pop culture and my affiliation with a Western university may have caused them to see me as a feminist (even though I did not discuss my gender views) and become defensive.

Ninh (26, single man) offered his critical comment:

Ninh: Those scenes show that Korean men always actively lead a situation, as when someone has something to say, to alleviate the anger, needs to drag that person along. He needs to take the lead. In English, they call it 'break the ice,' to break the tension. Standing at one place may lead to a bigger fight, better to just drag [the other person] along to another place where the landscape is more beautiful, and the man must be active in this situation.

Interviewer: You think so?

Ninh: These two people [referring to two characters in one photo] seem displeased with one another. If they let go of one another, they won't be able to reach an agreement, so one needs to drag the other along first. The act of walking will distract them and assuage their anger. Only then their minds will become open enough to listen to each other.

Interviewer: So you see this as an act of reconciliation?

Ninh: Yes exactly, it's being active and trying to reconcile.

Interviewer: Anything else?

Ninh: That was the positive side. The negative side is...this looks a bit aggressive (*cục súc*), exposing Korean personality. You must admit that Korean people are really hot-tempered.

Interviewer: Anything else?

Ninh: That's all I can think of for now.

Interviewer: You mean the purpose is good, but the means is...

Ninh: Exactly, the means looks a bit bad, but the person doesn't really mean it. There're just contradictions between actions and thoughts. Someone who understands will accept, but someone who doesn't will just see it as an authoritarian behaviour.

Like Kim in the previous section, Ninh read wrist-grabbing as a reconciling attempt, without indicating feelings of identification. He acknowledged an element of violence but for him, the purpose legitimises the act: a resort to violence can be justified if done to serve ultimate peace. Ninh read wrist-grabbing within K-dramaland context and also within the context of the Korean culture (the way he assumed it to be). This reference to Korean culture has also been cited by viewers in Schulze (2013) and Hook's (2016) studies, who consider K-drama a fantasy space simultaneously independent of life yet still inspired by it (thus reflecting Koreanness to some extent).

Minh, 25, single woman, also read wrist-grabbing within K-dramaland context. She approved of the act in one context yet showed her disapproval in another. Minh enjoyed the scene in *Gentleman's Dignity*, in which the woman seems happy with being dragged along by a man whom she has been pursuing for a romantic relationship for a long time; yet, she disapproved of the behaviour in *Boys Over Flowers*, where the lack of consent is clear and the physical violence is palpable.

I find it interesting really. This situation is interesting. But some situations show excessive violence, such as this violent asshole (laugh) [pointing at the character Goo Jun Pyo in *Boys over Flowers* who drags his arranged fiancé, whom he's not in love with, along]. But this scene is very interesting, in *Gentleman's Dignity*, this is the decisive moment where he takes the initiative to hold onto this relationship. I really like this scenario. But the other scene with this asshole [Goo Jun Pyo] dragging this girl clearly shows how impolite he is. I mean, we need to place it in context, to determine whether the act is right or not.

Minh read the behaviour by the level of physical violence. She approved of the act in *Gentleman's Dignity*, where the man took the woman's hand in a calm and non-violent manner (even though he did not explain himself or ask for the woman's permission), and the woman shows implicit consent by letting him lead without complaints. Yet, she condemned the other wrist-grabber who is clearly violent.

Oppositional Readings

Some frowned upon wrist-grabbing and showed visions that lean towards gender equality. Lam, 26, a single man, implied that it showed a lack of respect.

Personally I find these images...They show too much possessiveness. Many of the cases...I noticed that when the man dragged the woman along, the woman looked unwilling. Respect is very important between people, whether they're lovers or not.

Without explicitly mentioning “consent,” Lam implied the lack of consent by pointing out that “the woman looked unwilling.” He also voiced his advocacy of a power balance in relationships by highlighting the importance of mutual respect.

Hạnh, 26, a single woman who showed an egalitarian view of gender relations, held the same opinion as Lam:

Hạnh: I find it slightly imposing. Like when I don’t obey, or I don’t agree to go along, they drag [me] along.

Interviewer: So how do you feel?

Hạnh: I find it funny, I wonder why the woman doesn’t resist in any way other than asking “what are you doing” and just let the man drag her along.

Interviewer: Anything else?

Hạnh: I don’t like it, ‘cause it is a sign of imposition.

Interviewer: Yeah?

Hạnh: Even though they may drag [the woman] along so that they can have a conversation or show affectionate gestures, I don’t like this.

Hạnh questioned the woman’s submission, echoing feminist female viewers’ laments about women’s lack of agency in K-dramas in Yang’s (2008) and Schulze (2013) studies. Their complaints about female characters’ acquiescent attitudes reveals dissatisfaction with traditional femininity characterised by the lack of an autonomous attitude.

Thanh, 31, married woman, showed similar sentiments while sharing a change in her view as a young woman to current view as a mature married one:

When I was young, I found this act manly. Cool and manly, a bit imposing but it makes the woman feel overpowered. But now I find it rude. I get more difficult as I get older. Dragging [someone] along when she’s talking or doing something, it’s so rude. (Some pause) Rude. The women look miserable behind. It’s like the guys look so cool, the women look displeased but actually like it. When I was young, I watched and thought he did it for my sake, because he likes me, he becomes jealous, so he doesn’t want me to talk to someone else. Now I view this as impolite behaviour.

Thanh placed herself in the characters’ position (“he did it for my sake”) and juxtaposed a mature perspective with a young woman’s perspective, which she believed would read the scene favourably. When stating that the women “actually liked it,” however, Thanh showed a reading encoded by the scriptwriter: that the women have feelings for the men and might not really hate being wrist-grabbed. Thanh read the scene from prior knowledge of the trope as she mentioned how the man was driven by jealousy. While Thanh called the act “rude,” she tempered her disapproval by pointing out that she had become more “difficult” as she got older and recalling K-dramaland context.

Vy, a 30-year-old married woman, also criticised wrist-grabbing:

What's obvious is imposition, they want to drag [the women] along because they're inherently patriarchal (*gia trưởng*), they want to solve a problem, they wouldn't pay attention to the women's reactions, her attitude, [they] just drag her along.

Vy condemned male characters' wrist-grabbing because of their disregard for the women's feelings. Vy revealed elsewhere that having a relationship with a man who tried to impose his views on her and ignored her feelings in the past made her form a negative impression of men who show clear signs of patriarchy. Vy's response and Kim's in the approval section demonstrate that lived experiences can be closely linked to the experience of identification or disidentification with imaginary scenarios. Kim seemed to have had good relationship(s) with the man/men she mentioned (who tried to reconcile a conflict), while Vy offered a negative reading after an unsatisfying relationship. Asked whether she viewed wrist-grabbing the same way before this relationship, Vy said she then found it normal. Vy's and Kim's responses demonstrate how viewers bring their own lived experiences as "other cultural resources" to their readings of media texts (Tomlinson, 1991, p. 61). Vy's situation echoes how change in one's life events and worldview may correspond with change in how one reads popular culture (Strelitz, 2008).

Discussion and Concluding Remarks

This study recalls many reception studies that show audience reception as polysemous. For Vietnamese audiences, wrist-grabbing can be a problem-solving and reconciling attempt, a romantic gesture, or an imposing behaviour. Those varied responses and an alternative reading (ref. footnote 4) illuminate how in media consumption, 'meanings and messages are not simply "transmitted," they are always produced' (Storey, 2010, p. 11). The participants' responses reveal various influencing factors including traditional gender ideals, feminist discourses, lived experiences, and an understanding of K-drama fantasy. Some participants' negotiated responses indicate their efforts to balance a traditional and modern self (Nguyen, 2003; Tran, 2015). This case illustrates Storey's argument that "the text-reader encounter does not occur in a moment isolated from other discourses, but always in a field of many discourses, some in harmony with the text, some which are in contradiction with it" (Storey, 2010, p. 16).

Most responses, including disapprovals, indicate weak feminist consciousness, even though the influence of Western feminism and resistance to patriarchy is present. Opponents of wrist-grabbing used negative words to describe the wrist-grabber such as *sở hữu* (possessive), *gia trưởng* (patriarchal), *áp đặt* (imposing), *thô lỗ* (rude), *bất lịch sự* (impolite), *thô bạo* (rough), *cục súc* (aggressive), *bạo lực* (violent) and referenced to attempts to inflict pain such as slapping and hitting, acknowledging the power imbalance and violence. These participants highlighted the importance of mutual respect in heterosexual relationships, manifesting an appreciation of equal gender relations in which the man does not attempt to dominate the woman and sees her as an equal partner who must have her say. Most, however, did not straightfor-

wardly describe wrist-grabbing as abuse, nor did they refer to #metoo or the concept of “consent” that are relevant to this situation. Vãn was the only informant who referred to #metoo and consent. While participants show overall oppositions to apparent pain-inflicting physical violence, they also indicate some willingness to compromise with a certain extent of violence exercised for the sake of passion or reconciliation. Some did not even bring up the power imbalance present in wrist-grabbing scenes. Approvals of wrist-grabbing, in particular, reflect a celebration of patriarchy, marked by their enjoyment of men’s domination (over women) and display of traditionally “masculine” behaviour such as taking the lead in a heterosexual relationship and resolute attempts to solve a problem (even at the expense of women’s discomfort). This advocacy for traditional masculinity remains prevalent in Vietnamese society, as previous literature has indicated.

This nascent feminist consciousness reveals the difference between my participants and the Western female viewers in Schulze’s (2013) and Hook’s (2016) studies, who exhibited strong criticism and referenced to feminist discourses. According to Kelland (2016), one sign of feminist awareness is the ability to use appropriate language to describe experiences of inequality, which manifests an awareness of unfair gender structures. My participants’ tempered responses reflect a common social view of intimate partner violence in Vietnam: controlling behaviours are only regarded as violent if they cause visible injury to a victim, and intimate partner violence can be trivialised or even dismissed. Conflict between romantic partners can be seen as a private matter rather than social problem. Such weak feminist consciousness is consistent with the scholarship regarding intimate partner violence and rape, which explains why #metoo has not grown into a strong movement in Vietnam: the public are not opposed to male dominance, and even celebrate it.

Making a case for weak feminist consciousness among participants, this study hopes to reveal some truth of the gender politics in contemporary Vietnam: that the influence of Western discourse regarding gendered power imbalance and the importance of gender equality is present, but not particularly strong, and that traditional ideals of gender roles persist. While this study offers important implications for the lack of resistance to gender-based violence and patriarchy that remains in Vietnam, it should not necessarily be read as a reliable reflection of the participants’ overall gender views, which can be complicated and conflicting. As indicated in the Findings, some participants who demonstrated acceptance of wrist-grabbing showed relatively egalitarian views in other contexts, when discussing real-life situations. They might support women’s wish to advance in her career or taking the initiative in love or approve of men’s showing vulnerable emotions. Some participants’ acceptance of wrist-grabbing in K-dramas does not necessarily mean they will accept it in real life, such as if they saw a woman obviously protesting while being wrist-dragged by a man. Consuming romantic soap operas sometimes entails suspension of moral judgment because of their characteristic elements of exaggeration, simplification, and melodrama. While I acknowledge ideological consciousness as a factor, I choose not to limit my analysis of media audience reception to purely a battle of ideological resistance, a tendency which scholars such as Ang (1985) and Briggs (2010) argue against. Ang (1985) has warned of “the danger of an overpoliticizing of pleasure” that she observed in research on women’s relationships to soap operas, which are

generally viewed by feminists as preserving the patriarchal status quo rather than fostering change for women. She argues that escapist fantasies like soap operas serve as sites of play and that the enjoyment of this genre should therefore not be determined as inherently “progressive” or “conservative” (Ang, 1985, p. 135). I suggest that political implications are worth considering, yet with caution. For example, viewers may enjoy physical violence in action movies, but it does not necessarily mean they advocate violence. My analysis demonstrates that, while ideological consciousness plays a role, unconscious and irrationally emotional factors such as suspension of disbelief also matter in audience readings.

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Declarations

Conflict of Interest I declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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