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Representation of Gi-hun's Mindset in Emotional Behaviour in the drama series Squid Game (2021)

Muhammad Ezlan Shah Mat Dalin
ezlan.riff13@gmail.com

Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Malaysia

Zainatul Shuhaida Abdul Rahman
zainatul@uitm.edu.my

Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Malaysia

ORCID iD: 0000-0002-8899-119X
(Corresponding Author)

Arwin Ramli

arwin@iteba.ac.id

Institut Teknologi Batam (ITEBA), Indonesia

ORCID iD: 0009-0001-9409-7709

Abstract

Emotions represented in drama series play a crucial role in shaping readers' and viewers' experiences and engagement with the text. Despite extensive scholarly attention on emotional portrayals, little research explicitly addresses how specific emotional contradictions within characters influence viewer perceptions and responses. Through the drama series Squid Game (2021), among the popular Korean TV dramas, Gi-hun's mindset affecting his emotional behaviours attracts viewers, turning it into a debatable context due to the portrayals of traditional games drastically modified in ideology. To bridge this research gap, the present analysis investigates the representation of mindset influencing Gi-hun's emotional behaviour, employing the James-Lange theory of emotion, which emphasises the character's emotions, actions, and thinking style. A qualitative approach, based on systematic textual analysis and enhanced through data triangulation incorporating script analysis, directorial notes, and audience reception, was used as the method of investigation. This method enhances methodological credibility, providing deeper insights into emotional portrayals.

Keywords Emotion; Mindset; James-Lange Theory; Squid Game (2021)

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Introduction

Emotions depicted in literary works, such as drama series, play an important role in shaping readers' and viewers' experiences and engagement with the text. Emotion is necessary for keeping viewers' attention and providing a better understanding of the characters' motivations, responses, and mental states. Emotions are important in the television industry because they affect viewer engagement and content creation.

Squid Game is a Korean drama series that mixes satire and melodrama to address societal topics like poverty, capitalism, and injustice. The series is set in a dystopian future where wealthy and poor people are vastly different, and economic factors cause social differences and conflict. It also criticises capitalism and consumerism by demonstrating how money and power can corrupt people and institutions, resulting in greed, violence, exploitation, and oppression. The most notable thing depicted in Squid Game is the depiction of traditional games used as a method of violence. Viewers worldwide have directed their attention towards the drama series Squid Game, which has maintained a prominent position on the global Netflix top 10 rankings since September 24, 2021.

Although emotions depicted in drama series have been extensively studied due to their role in enhancing viewer engagement, there remains a notable lack of research specifically investigating how emotional contradictions within central characters influence audience perceptions and responses. This gap is particularly evident in popular series like Squid Game (2021), where complex characters such as Gi-hun exhibit emotionally contradictory behaviours that profoundly impact audience interpretation. Thus, this study explicitly addresses this overlooked area by utilising the James-Lange theory of emotion to explore the intricate relationship between Gi-hun's mindset and his emotional contradictions within the context of drastically modified traditional games. By doing so, this analysis not only contributes new theoretical insights into emotional representation and viewer engagement but also enriches scholarly discussions on cognitive and emotional frameworks in contemporary media narratives.

Literature Review

Emotion and Mindset

Following Mordka (2016), emotions are a complicated phenomenon that includes a variety of components such as adequate evaluation of the situation, specific elements of adaptation, behaviour, physiological changes, expressions, sentiments, and nervous system execution. As posited by Yarwood (2022), the James-Lange theory involves the utilization of cognitive appraisals to define our cognitive reflections on our emotional encounters and the stimuli that provoke them. Any alteration in perceptions, viewpoints, and understanding is manifested in cognitive appraisals. Specifically,

cognitive appraisals may encompass clarifying the eliciting event by analyzing the factors leading to emotional responses, as well as explaining other changes in components, such as the rationale behind the acceleration of the human heart rate and the motivation for evasive actions (Yarwood, 2022).

Mindset, in a similar context, plays a significant role in shaping and influencing a person's emotions, as well as behavior. As defined by Zarrinabadi and Lou (2022), a mindset, as described in numerous research, refers to an individual's beliefs regarding the malleability of their qualities, such as intelligence and abilities, which are classified as fixed or growth mindsets. Mindset also significantly impacts decision-making processes by affecting how people perceive, approach, and execute decisions. Based on Mueller, Rowe, and Zuckerman (2017), the mindset has an important role in developing survival instincts, particularly in tough settings like cancer treatment. Therefore, it is important to note that emotion and mindset can significantly influence human survival instinct (Srirang Jha & Gupta, 2021).

Contradiction of Emotional Behaviour

According to Santos et al. (2021), the contradiction of emotional behaviour refers to the experience of conflicting or opposing emotions within an individual. It can also manifest as feelings of love and hate, bravery and fear, or approval-seeking behaviour coupled with the concealment of true emotions. In a study by Saraiva et al. (2021), the contradiction in emotional behaviours can serve vital purposes such as reducing the intensity of emotions and assisting survival in difficult situations. However, they can also become less helpful or even harmful when used excessively or in specific contexts (Pachankis et al., 2022).

In a similar context, ambivalence, a type of contradictory behaviour, can be linked to underlying emotions through various mechanisms. As Yu et al. (2023) stated, ambivalence in emotional behaviour refers to conflicting feelings or attitudes toward a particular situation or individual. It involves an inner conflict that is perceived as irresolvable without any clear resolution, unlike mere indecision or uncertainty. Conversely, other studies also propose that emotional ambivalence can enhance decision-making quality by prompting individuals to consider multiple perspectives and alternatives before concluding (Yu et al., 2023). Leon (2011) states that the concept of emotional contradiction is also explored in the context of dealing with contradictory information, where individuals with different thinking styles may experience mixed emotions that mediate their ability to reconcile conflicting information.

Holistic and Analytical Thinking Style

As defined by Santos et al. (2021), a holistic thinking style comprises the ability to hold numerous views simultaneously and be aware of contradiction. Similarly, Lux et al. (2021) interpret holistic thinking as a comprehensive and interrelated approach that focuses on the entire system rather than individual components. Research by Chen, Tang, and Wu (2022) shows that individuals with a holistic thinking style are better at reconciling contradictory information compared to those with an analytical thinking style. Santos et al. (2021) also claim that this ability is further influenced by the experience of mixed emotions, which mediate the relationship between thinking style and handling contradictions. However, analytical thinking can be said to involve critical thinking skills, such as the capacity to plan solutions, produce conclusions, and generate correct answers, as agreed with Wirawan Fadly (2021), who stated that the analytical thinking style engages in higher-order thinking processes.

Analytical thinkers have a greater tendency to question and assess information, resulting in a greater susceptibility to misinformation, which is consistent with Erlich et al. (2022) remark that an analytical thinking style is defined by the ability to distinguish truth from deception. Also, individuals with strong analytical thinking skills demonstrate the ability to apply various concepts while remaining relevant to the problem at hand, which has been linked to improved decision-making, problem-solving skills, and a greater ability to distinguish between accurate and false information. In contrast, those with an analytic thinking style usually focus on objects and attributes, whereas holistic thinkers focus on the context in which objects are viewed by one another (Bui & Flicker, 2013). Essentially, holistic thinking emphasizes connection and systems thinking, while analytical thinking focuses on detailed analysis and deconstruction of elements.

Collectively, the reviewed literature on emotional contradictions, mindset theory, and analytical versus holistic thinking styles provides the conceptual foundation required for this analysis. Specifically, the James-Lange theory highlights how physiological reactions precede emotional recognition, facilitating a deeper examination of character-driven emotional contradictions as portrayed in the drama series *Squid Game* (2021). By explicitly integrating this theoretical framework, the present study aims to systematically explore the complex interplay between Gi-hun's mindset and emotional behaviours, using qualitative textual analysis enhanced by data triangulation. Thus, the study not only responds to identified theoretical gaps but also establishes a clear, coherent linkage between theoretical concepts and methodological choices guiding the subsequent analysis.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design, based on textual analysis of the drama series *Squid Game* (2021), to explore Gi-hun's emotional behaviour and the influence of his mindset. The focus of

this analysis is on Gi-hun's emotional responses in the context of traditional games, as well as the complex relationship between his actions, emotional contradictions, and overall mindset. This methodological approach is designed to minimize subjectivity and enhance the rigor and credibility of the study.

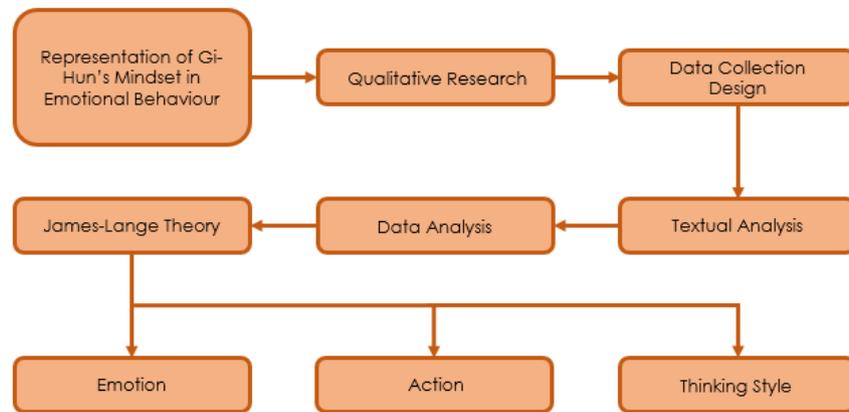


Figure 1. Theoretical Framework of this Analysis

Data Collection

The selection of specific episodes and scenes for detailed analysis was driven by clear criteria aimed at maximising narrative significance, thematic relevance, and character focus. Scenes were included if they presented pivotal moments crucial to Gi-hun's emotional development and his overall character arc, especially those explicitly displaying emotional contradictions, such as instances of fear versus courage, guilt versus survival, and compassion versus self-interest. Episodes prominently featuring the transformation of traditional, seemingly innocuous games into life-threatening scenarios were prioritised, as these directly embody the drama's core themes of survival, emotional conflict, and socio-cultural critique. This rigorous selection ensures analytical objectivity and enhances the study's methodological robustness by consistently anchoring the analysis in contextually rich, theoretically relevant scenarios.

The data collection process involves the selection of key episodes and scenes in *Squid Game*, in which Gi-hun's emotional responses and mindset are prominently portrayed. The selection criteria for these scenes are as follows:

- **Narrative significance:** The scenes should be crucial to the development of Gi-hun's character arc and demonstrate clear emotional contradictions, such as fear versus courage, guilt versus survival, and compassion versus self-interest.
- **Thematic relevance:** Scenes that align with the central themes of survival, emotional conflict, and the modification of traditional games into life-or-death situations are prioritized.

- **Character focus:** The primary focus is on Gi-hun's actions, expressions, and inner conflicts, as these provide insight into his emotional behaviour and mindset.

The units of analysis are Gi-hun's key emotional and behavioural moments throughout the series. These include his facial expressions, actions, dialogue, and inner conflict in response to the life-threatening games. By analysing these specific moments, the study aims to identify emotional contradictions and understand the psychological mechanisms underlying Gi-hun's decisions and behaviours.

Textual Analysis Process

The textual analysis process is systematic and multi-phased, designed to reduce subjectivity and increase transparency:

1. **Scene transcription:** All relevant scenes involving Gi-hun are transcribed, and key moments of emotional significance are highlighted.
2. **Coding:** The transcribed text is coded for emotional indicators, such as fear, guilt, compassion, and resignation. This coding is done manually to ensure the accuracy of emotional identification, with specific attention paid to moments of contradiction in emotional responses.
3. **Thematic Identification:** The coded emotions are grouped into themes based on their relevance to Gi-hun's mindset, such as survival, guilt, and moral conflict. Each theme is examined in relation to Gi-hun's actions to identify patterns in his emotional behaviour. This process is guided by the James-Lange theory, which asserts that bodily reactions precede emotional recognition, allowing for a deeper understanding of how emotions manifest physically before being labelled cognitively.

Data Triangulation

To strengthen the validity and reliability of the findings, the study incorporates data triangulation by integrating multiple sources:

1. **Script Analysis:** A detailed analysis of the series' script is conducted to assess how the language and dialogue contribute to the development of Gi-hun's emotional responses and mindset. This provides additional context and clarification on the emotional trajectory of the character.
2. **Directorial Notes:** Insights from the director, producers, and cast interviews are considered to understand the intended emotional impact of key scenes and to confirm the accuracy of the interpretation of Gi-hun's emotional behaviour.
3. **Audience Reception:** Audience reviews and social media discussions are analysed to gather external interpretations of Gi-hun's character and emotional responses. This helps contextualize

the emotional portrayal within the larger cultural and societal discourse, offering a more comprehensive understanding of how viewers engage with Gi-hun's emotional behaviour.

The combination of textual analysis and data triangulation enhances the study's rigor by reducing potential bias and increasing methodological transparency. By analysing both the script and audience reception, the study benefits from multiple perspectives, ensuring a well-rounded understanding of Gi-hun's emotional behaviour. The detailed coding and thematic identification process further reduces subjectivity, providing clear, reliable insights into the character's mindset and emotional contradictions.

This qualitative research design is particularly suited for exploring the complex emotional dynamics of Gi-hun's character, as it allows for an in-depth examination of both his internal conflicts and the socio-political context of the drama. The integration of multiple data sources ensures the study's findings are valid, transparent, and well-supported, providing a comprehensive analysis of emotional behaviour within *Squid Game*.

Findings and Discussion

Traditional Game as an Eliciting Event

The ideology surrounding traditional games is commonly perceived as joyful and devoid of any elements related to violence that may lead to unfavourable outcomes. Similarly, traditional games, such as the Korean game illustrated in *Squid Game*, were intended to promote friendship, cooperation, and a healthy competitive spirit among individuals. Though the incorporation of violence and death into this traditional game through the portrayal in the drama series raises questions regarding its impact on players' emotions, particularly evident in the emotional responses of the main character, Gi-hun, challenging the original essence of the traditional game that has undergone substantial modification.

Red Light, Green Light Game

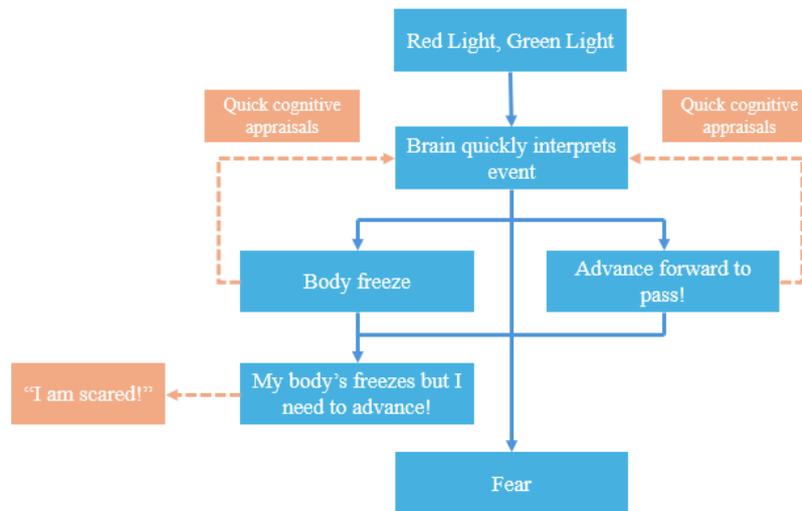


Figure 2. The Red Light, Green Light Game is an Eliciting Event based on Yarwood's (2020) Graphical Representation

Sugar Honeycomb Game

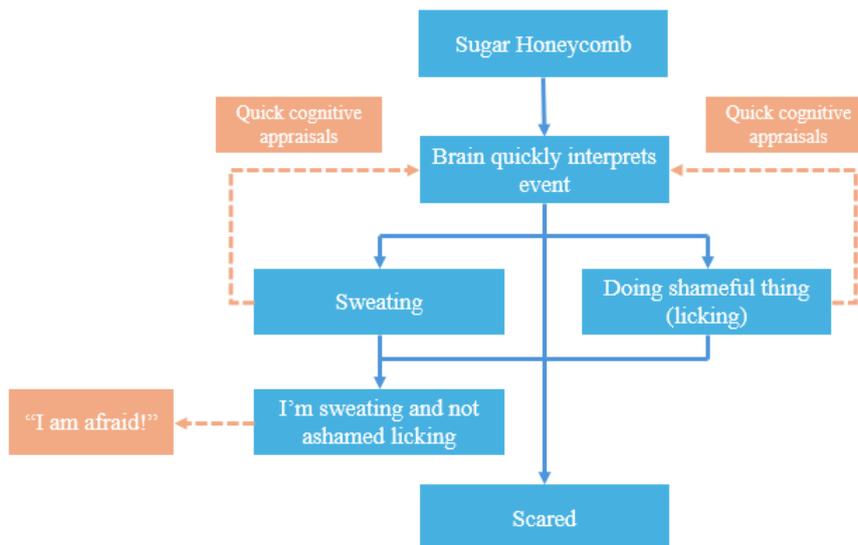


Figure 3. Sugar Honeycomb Game Event using Yarwood's Graphical Representation

The sugar honeycombs were the second game, also known as Seoltang Ppopgi, Dalgona, or Ppopgi in Korea. At the start of the game, Gi-hun realizes that he is going to face difficulties as he chooses the umbrella-shaped sugar honeycomb, the hardest shape for the game. Reiterate that all players were only given with a small needle as a tool and sugar honeycomb is so brittle that it is easy to crack or break. As he played the game, Gi-hun can be seen to be very anxious and worried as he needed to carefully carve out the umbrella shape while being aware of the timer before it went off. His worries become greater as he hears a gunshot being released indicating other players were eliminated and also hears the announcement of other players passing the game, making him sweat in anxiety. At the last minute, Gi-

hun gets an idea of how to carve the shape easier which is to lick the honeycomb to soften the sugar honeycomb to make it easier to carve. From there, many players followed his method including Il-nam. After successfully carving the shape, he stared into the sugar honeycomb with tears in his eyes, implying that he had survived the game and saved his own life. Even though Gi-hun was under a lot of pressure, he remained calm and chose to focus on the game by doing his best to carve out the shape. The contradiction of emotional behaviour displayed by Gi-hun illustrates that even under stressful circumstances, a person needs to keep cool and think about the best method to overcome anything to survive.

Tug of War Game

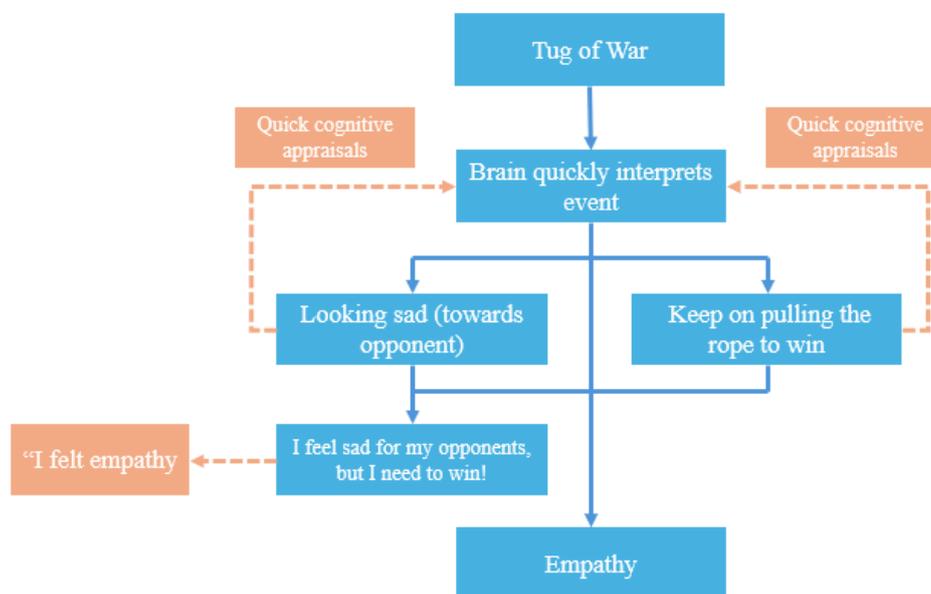


Figure 4. Tug of War Game Event based on Yarwood Graphical Representation

This game tests Gi-hun's compassion and empathetic value. As shown in Figure 3, Gi-hun's facial expression shifts from being determined to win the game to feeling bad for his opponent because he knows if they win, the opposite side will lose, eventually leading to their death. However, despite knowing what would happen, Gi-hun and his team members had to keep pulling the rope to secure their victory and ensure their survivability to pass the next game. Commonly, tug of war involves a strong competitive and fighting spirit, but obviously with the most positive mindset in the mean of winning the game through the team's cooperation and not resulting in a scenario that would involve violence that leads to harm and injury or even worse, death. But through this game, Gi-hun and his teammates played the game with the mindset of needing to win not because of to regain the spirit of the game's original ideology but rather, purely to survive to the next game with whatever method needed to win. This game's idea of instilling a strong competitive spirit was drastically modified to include fighting for one's own life while, ironically, keeping the importance of cooperation and teamwork.

Marbles Game

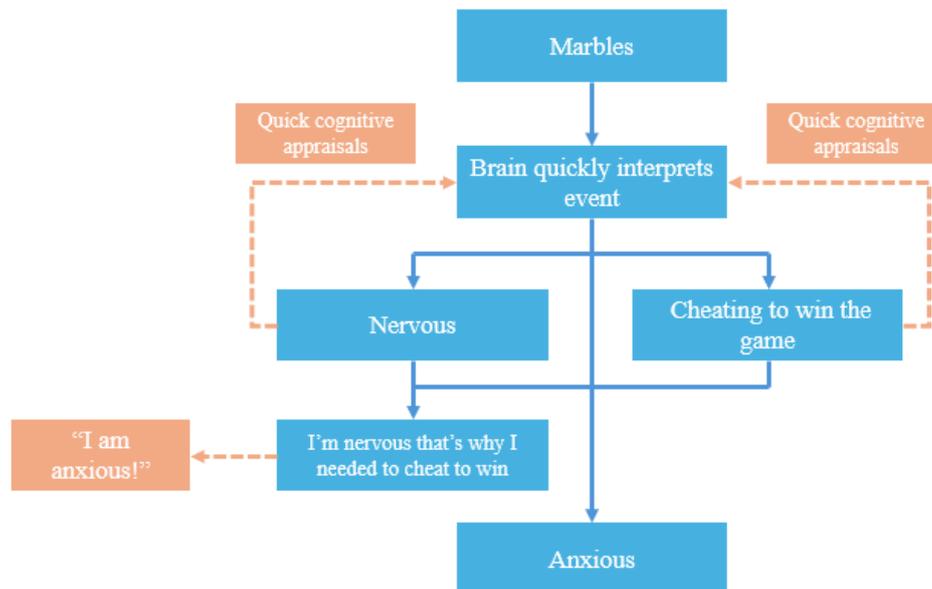


Figure 5. Marbles Game Event based on Yarwood's Graphical Representation

In this game, Gi-hun partnered with Il-nam. After both of them had played the game, Gi-hun was left with only one marble and had to predict if Il-nam's marbles in his hand were odd or even. Gi-hun guesses odd, and Il-nam reveals that his marbles are even. Gi-hun was anxious but Il-nam asked what his guess was as he suddenly became forgetful. Realizing this, Gi-hun decided to use it to his advantage and told him that he was saying even. Il-team accepted his loss without hesitation and willingly handed over his marble to Gi-hun, and Gi-hun did the same, tricking Il-nam to win. However, based on his facial expression and behaviour, Gi-hun does not want to cheat and prefers to play it fairly, as he appears to be very reluctant and even guilty, though he is now in charge of the game and can easily win. In the end, Il-nam stated that he had one marble left and knew Gi-hun had been tricking him, making Gi-hun even more regretful and speechless because he realized he had made a mistake. However, Il-nam handed Gi-hun his last marble since he recognized Gi-hun as one of his Gganbu buddies. Gi-hun then walks out of the room feeling terrible and depressed, even though he won the game and succeeded in advancing to the next game. The contradiction that occurred demonstrates how Gi-hun, although having the capacity to manage everything, including potentially winning the game with ease, nevertheless bears guilt and is aware of what is right and wrong even in an awful situation.

Glass Stepping Stone

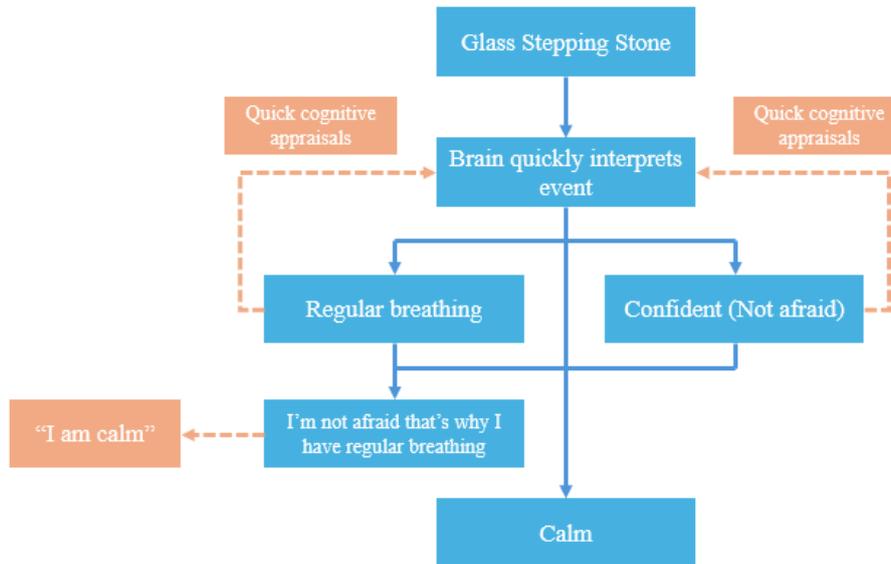


Figure 6. Glass Stepping Stone Game Event based on Yarwood Graphical Representation

The game's goal was for players to successfully cross the bridges by jumping across the tempered glass and avoiding the standard glass under a 16-minute time limit. When the time limit had ended, all glass panels exploded, eliminating any players who remained on the bridges. This is the only game in which Gi-hun appears to regain calmness, as well as can be observed to retain it throughout the game. This could be because he wore a vest with the last digit number, number 17, making him the to be the last player. This provides the benefit of not having to waste time under the intense pressure of having to estimate if the glass stepping stone is tempered or normal. In a comparable vein being the final player allows him to avoid risking his own life by predicting the glass step without any indication or hint. As a result, his calmness contrasts with other players who wore vests with smaller digit numbers and were the first to lead the game, as they had to predict and stop the glass in utter dread and desperation while racing against the time limit.

Squid Game

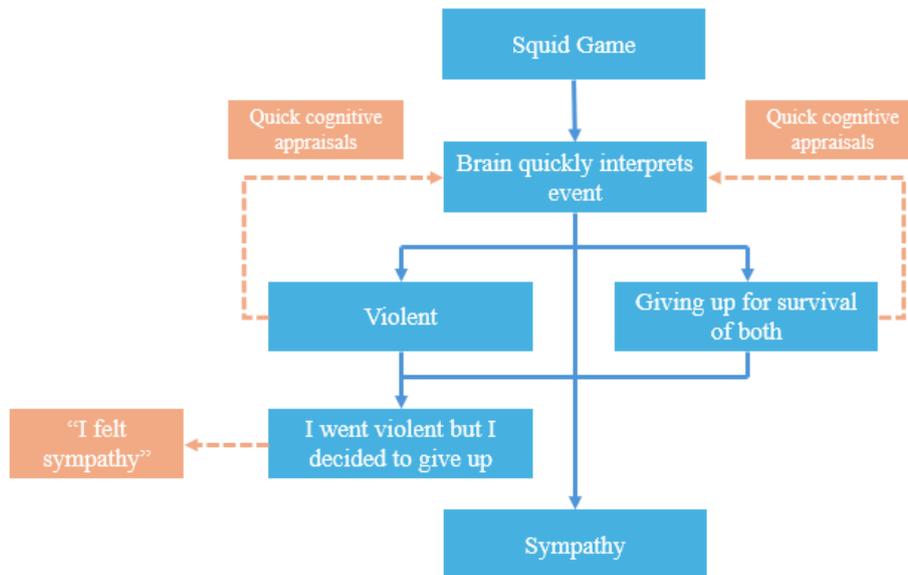


Figure 7. Squid Game Event based on Yarwood Graphical Representation

Before commencing this game, Gi-hun became enraged at Sang-woo for killing Sae-byeok. As a result, Gi-hun appears to be taking his attacking position literally. After battling and struggling, Sang-woo assumed Gi-hun was going to kill him by stabbing him with a knife, but Gi-hun stabbed the ground beside Sang-woo's face instead leaving him to walk to the squid head location. Sang-woo believed he was going to lose and be eliminated, but Gi-hun paused at the edge of the squid head and decided to give up. Hearing that, Sang-woo became devastated and stabbed himself in the neck, requesting Gi-hun to look for his mother as he expressed regret for what he had done. Gi-hun is taken aback by Sang-woo's actions since Gi-hun himself was willing to give up the prize in favour of both parties' survival but Sang-woo believes that Gi-hun should win the prize money and utilize it for larger goals, such as aiding his mother. Gi-hun did not spend his money after the squid game, apart from withdrawing one thousand Won to ensure the legality of the sum he had. In general, a person is happy if they have a lot of money and want to spend it in various ways to buy or pay for various things. However, in the case of Gi-hun, he does not spend the money he gets even after winning it for a year, instead living his life in sorrow with a sense of loss due to his guilt and the story behind how he obtained the money. This depicts his attitude of feeling bad for all the players who were murdered merely to obtain the prize money but, in the end, he is to one who gets to earn the prize money.

After winning the last game and receiving his prize money, Gi-hun is observed behaving as if he is losing hope in his own life and has disassociated from his community for a year. This important scene demonstrates to viewers how a wealthy person can be seen living in a highly melancholy state, driven by sad emotions despite having the ability to accomplish anything because he is already rich.

Then he receives an invitation card from Il-nam, which, following their meeting, triggers Gi-hun to make emotional and behavioural changes. This is worth exploring since it connects his past occurrences to his current everyday living routine, which influences his emotional behaviour.

Meeting Alive Il-nam

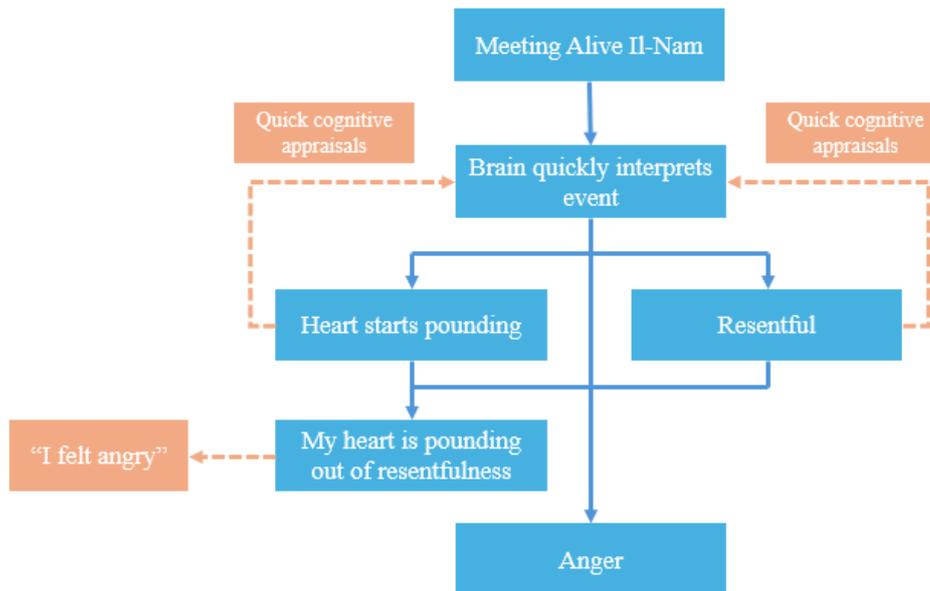


Figure 8. Il-names Meeting Event based on Yarwood Graphical Representation

Il-nam, who is revealed to be the game master, aims to recreate happy memories through the Squid Game, using traditional games as a method of entertainment that reminds him of his childhood in which, Il-nam also became part of the player up until the sixth game; marbles game. Thanks to Gi-hun's kindness, Il-nam gets to relive those joyful moments from his past as a kid playing the traditional game because, despite his wealth, Il-nam feels empty and for that very reason, he creates the game to fulfil his desires. Upon Il-nam's justification, Gi-hun, who had been experiencing anhedonia episodes as he refused to spend his prize money, became resentful and angry because he believed Il-nam was using all of the unfortunate players, including him, to his advantage and using his reasoning as an excuse.

Consequently, Il-nam was the main cause of the deaths of all players who played the game. As their conversation proceeds, Gi-hun is aware Il-nam is dying as a result of a brain tumour, but he does not express sympathy for the dying Il-nam, probably because he believes Il-nam deserves it. Gi-hun simply walked away after Il-nam died with his eyes open, leaving Il-nam alone until his frontman appeared to close his eyes. After the meeting, Gi-hun now understands what he needs to do. He took the first step to change his hairstyle and colour, indicating that he is now changing and moving forward from what had happened in the past. He also began to take responsibility for his friends' wishes, such as Sae-byeok's wish for Gi-hun to care for her little brother and Sang-woo's wish for Gi-hun to look for

his mother. Consequently, the weight of guilt and sorrow that once burdened Gi-hun has been lifted, instilling in him a renewed vivacity for life.

To offer a comprehensive overview of the findings, the six games showcased in the analysis, including the encounter between Il-nam and Gi-hun, portray a spectrum of behavioural and physical transformations triggered by traditional game events that illustrate Gi-hun's thinking style influenced by both his emotional and mindset, which can be both observed and examined. Subsequently, his emotional responses reveal internal inconsistencies or contradictions wherein his mindset reflects diverse emotional manifestations impacting his behaviour, unveiling a holistic analytical thinking style that consistently prioritizes survivability. As a result, the contradicting emotional reactions exemplify how individuals, particularly Gi-hun, determine optimal strategies to ensure survival amidst threats or potential threats, by disregarding and repressing emotions to avert failure, or, in the context of the Squid Game, death. This aligns with the James-Lange theory, asserting that emotions precede bodily reactions, with Yarwood (2022) elucidating that individuals typically discern physiological and behavioural changes before recognizing and labelling their emotions based on self-examination.

Conclusion

Viewers worldwide have directed their attention towards the drama series Squid Game, which has maintained a prominent position on the global Netflix top 10 rankings since September 24, 2021. Among the well-received Korean TV dramas, Gi-Hun's character in the series has captivated audiences and sparked discussions, particularly regarding the portrayal of his mindset and its influence on his emotional responses. Consequently, an analysis of emotional responses was conducted employing the James-Lange theory to dissect Gi-Hun's cognitive processes and their impact on his conduct, as depicted by contemporary drama producers. To comprehensively comprehend the essence of emotions and their repercussions on an individual's existence, further exploration and study are imperative.

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Authors' Bio

Muhammad Ezlan Shah Mat Dalin is a Degree Student in Screenwriting at the College of Creative Arts, Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM), Shah Alam. He recently graduated with the Diploma of Landscape Architecture and is utilizing his knowledge from his past studies in Screenwriting, which he finds to be very helpful and essential. Since joining UiTM and being exposed to research, he has grown fond of the studies of emotions and behaviour, which regard using films or screening medium as his analysis material. He is currently serving as an intern at Creative Stew SDN BHD.

Zainatul Shuhaida Abdul Rahman is a Senior Lecturer at the College of Creative Arts, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Shah Alam. She holds a PhD in Media Management and has served as a Visiting Scholar at the Institute of ASEAN and African Studies, Lomonosov Moscow State University, as well as at Guangdong University of Finance in China. Since joining UiTM, her research has focused on cultural studies, media management, and youth engagement. In addition to her academic work, Dr Zainatul is actively involved in producing cultural events and theatre productions, contributing to both academic and creative fields.

Arwin Ramli is a Lecturer in Visual Communication Design at Institut Teknologi Batam (ITEBA), Indonesia. He recently earned his Master's in Cultural and Creative Industry from Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), where his research focused on the intersection of cultural preservation and documentary filmmaking. He holds a Bachelor's in Applied Communication Studies in Broadcasting from Sekolah Tinggi Multi-Media (STMM) in Yogyakarta. Arwin has professional experience as a Video Specialist for the Spice Routes Program under the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of Indonesia. He has actively participated in numerous cultural initiatives, including representing Indonesia in the Indonesia-Korea Youth Exchange Program (IKYEP) 2021. His creative practice spans documentary films, short narratives, and digital media content, strongly emphasising heritage and social impact.