

THE INFLUENCE OF KOREAN REALITY SHOWS ON TOURISM TRENDS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: FOCUSING ON VIETNAM AND THAILAND

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Abstract: Screen culture is increasingly shaping tourist behaviour worldwide, yet the role of Korean reality shows in generating outbound travel interest towards Southeast Asia is still not fully studied. This research addresses that gap by examining how selected episodes of Korean reality shows filmed in Vietnam and Thailand influence the online information seeking behaviour of South Korean viewers. Applying nowcasting framework, the research analyzed Naver Trends search index data collected 60-day period centred on broadcast dates and compared them with official monthly tourist arrival data from both destination countries. Paired t-tests applied to 234 destination and cuisine related keywords extracted from 28 episodes confirmed a statistically significant post-broadcast increase in search activity for 72.22 % of selected keywords. Sa Pa (Vietnam) recorded the largest increase following the broadcast of an episode of *New Journey to the West* (Season 4). Despite these strong search interests, official tourist arrival data rarely reflected a comparable immediate increase, the finding attributed to the structural time lag between information search and actual travel decision, curiosity-driven versus intentional search behaviour, and external environmental factors such as cost and safety awareness. The study concludes that nowcasting using search engines provides a practical, real-time view for evaluating destination awareness, and offers actionable recommendations for Destination Marketing Organisations (DMOs) and travel agencies who seek to take advantages of the increase in media-inducing interest.

Keyword: Korean wave, Korean reality shows, film-induced tourism, tourism trends, nowcasting, Southeast Asia

Introduction

Popular culture has been an effective tool to promote tourist destinations and the wide spread of the Korean Wave has been considered a significant global cultural phenomenon (Shim (2008); Jin (2018)). Korean dramas, music, and variety shows have attracted a large amount of worldwide audiences, and their impact on South Korea's economy, especially in the tourism sector, is distinctively described (Martinroll, 2021). However, the focus of previous empirical work has concentrated mostly on television dramas, leaving the potential of unscripted Korean reality shows in enhancing tourism largely unexplored.

Korean reality shows are rapidly gaining large domestic viewers and growing international viewership through streaming platforms, and South Asian countries are increasingly selected as filming locations for these shows (Choi, 2023). Among Southeast Asian countries, Vietnam and Thailand are favoured as both filming locations and as top destinations for South Korean outbound visitors, with approximate records of 3.5 million and 1.7 million South Korean tourist arrivals respectively in 2023 (Do (2024); Nationthailand (2024)). By exploring whether the exposure to reality shows translates

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into measurable destination interest, direct implications for tourism policy therefore can be carried out.

The aims of this research are to achieve two main objectives, which are to identify the immediate effect of Korean reality shows' broadcasts on Korean viewers' online search interest towards tourist destinations in Vietnam and Thailand; and to provide practical recommendations in improving tourism for tourism stakeholders in both countries. Three research questions developed from these objectives are: (1) Do Korean reality shows filmed in Southeast Asian countries influence viewers' intention to visit those destinations? (2) Does increasing search activity for a destination create a meaningful measurement of travel intention? (3) What strategic lessons can Vietnam and Thailand learn from these phenomena to strengthen destination promotion?

The study employs nowcasting as the main research method. Search queries from Naver Trends, a South Korea's dominant search engine, serve as the primary data source, supported by monthly arrival statistics from the tourism ministries of Vietnam and Thailand. By cross-referencing these two data sources, the study does not only examine how media generates interest, but it also explores the gap between digital curiosity and actual travel behavior.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 The Korean Wave (Hallyu)

Hallyu is referred as the global popularization of Korean popular culture across a variety of formats including films, music, fashion, and broadcasting ((Jang, 2011)). The Korean Wave first major diffusion into Asia through television dramas in the late 1990s such as *What is Love All About?* (1997) and *Winter Sonata* (2002), later broadened by the global success of K-Pop and K-movies (Jin, 2018). The Korean Foundation (2024) estimated that there were 224.97 million Hallyu community members worldwide in 2023, with Asia and Oceania accounting for 66.3% of that total. Within Southeast Asian region, Thailand had the largest Hallyu community members with 19.51 million people, while Vietnam ranked third with 12.1 million members, highlighting the response of both markets to South Korean cultural products, including the localized adaptations of Korean reality shows.

The significant growth of Hallyu communities in these two countries provides an important background for this study. Since the development of the new Hallyu phase, which largely focuses on social media contents including unscripted television shows, Southeast Asia has been a top selection for filming locations and the popularity of Korean reality shows has also been increasing among domestic viewers. These reality shows' ability to shape travel destination perceptions among potential tourists dedicated hints for empirical studies.

2.2 The Development and Characteristics of Korean Reality Shows

Global media attention to Korean reality shows is rapidly increasing, especially when international streaming providers actively competing to offer more Korean reality formats (Choi, 2023). However, before Korean producers started to incorporate their own cultural sensibilities into hybrid genres, Korean television programs developed through the 1990s under the strong influence of Japanese variety shows (Jung, 2019). The emergence of the "real-variety" show, which is a format combining game shows, talk shows, and documentary films, marked a distinctive shift to the development of

Korean reality shows. MBC's *Infinite Challenge* (2005) is widely regarded as the symbol in this period, which drew viewers' attention with a format that focused on celebrities and unscripted situations that created amusement (Jung, 2019). The following successful cases, including KBS' *1 Night 2 Days* (2007) and SBS' *Family Outing* (2008), quickly dominated the primetime on screens.

The distinguishing features of Korean real-variety shows made up of a mostly unscripted format, a reliance on celebrities to gain viewerships, and a focus on making viewers laugh through unpredicted events (Jung, 2019). These contribute to the showcase of authentic local environments, culinary experiences, and cultural uniqueness in Korean reality shows, rather than common scripted dramas. The increase in global popularity of Korean reality shows means that they now can reach a large number of international viewers who might never have experienced these unique scenery, cuisines and featured activities. The aforementioned aspects are particularly relevant for tourism research, especially film-induced tourism.

2.3 Film-Induced Tourism and Tourist Destination Image

The research on tourism has long recognised that featured destinations in cinema, video and television can motivate passive viewers to become actual travellers. Film-induced tourism refers to tourists traveling to destinations featured on screen. This includes everything from intentional trips to movie sets to unplanned visits driven by casual curiosity (Busby and Klug (2001); Macionis (2004)). Movies and television have been proved to increase viewers' intention to visit a destination more effectively than traditional tourism marketing efforts (Irimiás (2017); Law et al. (2007)). This is explained by the characteristics of films and television, which are more credible and less biased than printed materials (Kirillova et al., 2018). This theory acts as a foundation for the research by helping with the exploration of how reality shows create measurable changes in online search behavior of viewers and how they affect Korean tourists' trends in visiting Southeast Asia.

Destination image is defined as a comprehensive impression, knowledge, prejudices, imaginations and emotive thoughts of a person towards a specific destination (Kim et al. (2018); Iwashita (2008)). Films and television have proved to be effective tools for commercialization, which can potentially reach millions of viewers who might not be familiar with traditional tourism products (Hudson et al. (2010); Li et al. (2016)). Cohen (1986) stated that although films could generate positive or negative destination images, they had the potential to enhance tourism if they were utilized properly (Hudson et al., 2010). Media's influence on the travel decision-making process is well-researched, with consumers acquiring information from various sources that shape their destination choices. Several research have proved that media influenced the travel decision with consumers collecting information from various sources to make their destination choices (Gong and Tung (2016); Sohn and Youn (2016)). Within the five stages of decision making process (Kotler & Armstrong, 2011), this exposure indicates the information search stage, which viewers are stimulated by the content presentation on screen and begin searching for further knowledge about the featured destination. This phenomenon can be observed by search query data. For Korean reality shows, the casual and unscripted storytelling format can easily create a more appealing presentation of the destinations than scripted drama as the viewers encountered destinations as a genuine experience rather than as convenient narrative backgrounds.

2.4 Nowcasting in Tourism

Traditional tourism data monitoring usually encounters difficulties since it typically takes months for the official statistics to be published (Gunter and Önder (2014); Minora et al. (2023)). Therefore, nowcasting was introduced to solve this problem. Nowcasting refers to a forecasting technique which focuses more on the present, immediate past, or near future, and it addresses the aforementioned limitation by providing timely digital data, especially search query volumes, to describe visitor mobility and tourist intentions (Antolini and Grassini (2018); Ting and Hsiao (2022)). Pioneering work by (Choi & Varian, 2012) demonstrated that Google Trends data could act as a leading indicator for a wide range of research fields, and it has driven numerous studies to use the technique for tourism and other phenomena predictions. Although web search data only represents a small percentage of the tourist population, its high frequency makes it a more valuable source for nowcasting than traditional indicators (Ting & Hsiao, 2022).

For this study, Naver Trends is a more preferable alternative to Google Trends as Naver dominates the market share among South Korean internet users, and the language inputting in the search query is Korean. Naver Trends' index ranges from 0 to 100, where 100 represents peak search intensity within the selected time period, enabling relative comparisons across keywords and time periods without individual level identification, which makes it a more effective measurement of viewers' responses.

2.5 Hypotheses

Based on the theoretical arguments above, the research proposes the following hypotheses:

H1: The broadcast of Korean reality show episodes filmed in Southeast Asia will be associated with a statistically significant and immediate increase in South Korean viewers' online search interest for the featured destinations.

H2: An increase in post-broadcast online search activity for specific destinations will reflect a positive, measurable correspondence with following travel intentions toward those destinations.

3. Methodology

3.1 Show and Episode Selection

Three Korean reality programmes filmed in Southeast Asian countries were selected, which are: *Running Man*, *New Journey to the West* (Season 4), and *Battle Trip* (Seasons 1 and 2). A purposive sampling approach was applied to identify episodes displaying specific contents filmed in Vietnam or Thailand. In total, 28 episodes were selected in which 18 episodes were set in Vietnam and 10 episodes were set in Thailand, with broadcast dates from January 2017 to July 2023. This different shows and years selection provide a broader view which makes the analysis more generalizable than just observing one single show.

3.2 Search Query Data Collection

For each of the 28 episodes, a set of Korean language keywords was collected by watching all of the episodes and identifying all named destinations, food items, and activity venues mentioned in each episode. The final keyword list included 234 terms, distributed across tourist attractions, local cuisine,

and general location description. Search volume data were collected from Naver Trends for a 60-day period centred on each episode's broadcast date (30 days before and 30 days after), which showed the daily search scores for every keywords and episodes.

3.3 Tourist Arrival Data

Monthly data of South Korean tourist arrivals to Vietnam and Thailand were collected from the official databases of each country's Ministry of Tourism for the periods corresponding to the chosen episodes. These monthly tourist arrival data were aligned with the episode broadcast date to enable comparison between search volumes and arrivals. However, because search data was collected daily while tourist arrival data was only collected monthly, the timing did not match perfectly, which limits the precision of direct correlation analysis.

3.4 Analytical Procedures

Search interest after the broadcast period was quantified as the percentage change in mean daily index values between the 30-day before and after the broadcast dates. To test statistical significance, one-tailed paired t-tests were applied to each keyword's search volumes before and after the broadcast, with the significance value set at $p < 0.05$. Episodes were then ranked by the significance of their accumulated search volume increase to compare the shows and destination level impacts. The search increases will be compared to corresponding tourist arrival data to evaluate the correlation. However, it is acknowledged that a more precise causal analysis would require longer time series and econometric analysis.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Overview of the Episodes

Table 1 summarises the selected episodes, their broadcast dates, featured attractions, and ratings. Table 2 presents the keyword count per show. Battle Trip Season 1 contributed the largest portion of keywords (124 of 234) since the show has the most chosen episodes and its format is all about exploring tourist destinations.

Table 1. Key episodes selected for analysis (representative sample)

Show	Ep.	Broadcast	Key Attractions	Rating	Country
Running Man	392	18/03/2018	Asiatique, Bangkok Night Market	9.2	Thailand
NJTW S4	1	13/06/2017	Bun Cha Obama Restaurant	3.3	Vietnam
NJTW S4	7	25/07/2017	Sa Pa Clay House, Sa Pa terraced fields	3.5	Vietnam
NJTW S4	10	15/08/2017	Fansipan Mountain	5.1	Vietnam
Battle Trip S1	98	07/07/2018	Phu Quoc Mud Spa, Vinpearl Safari, Truong Dong Night Market, Phu Quoc Sunset Beach Bar	4.2	Vietnam

Battle Trip S1	85	31/03/2018	St. Joseph's Cathedral, Trang An	6.4	Vietnam
Battle Trip S2	33	24/06/2023	Erawan Falls, Erawan National Park, White Temple	1.9	Thailand
Battle Trip S2	20	25/03/2023	Da Lat Train Station, Lang Biang Mountain, Datanla Falls, Da Lat Night Market	2.2	Vietnam

Note: NJTW = New Journey to the West; S = Season; Ep. = Episode.

Table 2. Episode and keyword distribution by programme

Show name	Episodes	Keywords
Running Man	1	4
New Journey to the West (Season 4)	9	44
Battle Trip (Season 1)	12	124
Battle Trip (Season 2)	6	62
Total	28	234

4.2 Keywords search analysis by Korean reality shows

The nowcasting model consistently demonstrated a positive correlation between the broadcast of Korean reality shows and immediate increases in online search volumes.



Figure 1: Daily Search Interest for Bangkok, Thailand in relation to *Running Man* episode 392's broadcast

For *Running Man* Episode 392 (Bangkok, Thailand), Figure 1 illustrates a notable increase in online search activity, with the highest search volume for most keywords occurring on the broadcast date (March 18, 2018). “**볶음**(Fried insects)” saw a sharp 56% increase, while “**ต้มยำกุ้ง**(Tom Yum Kung)” increased by 11%. However, “**Asiatique**” saw a 40.7% decrease, suggesting varying impacts based on the showcase of content.

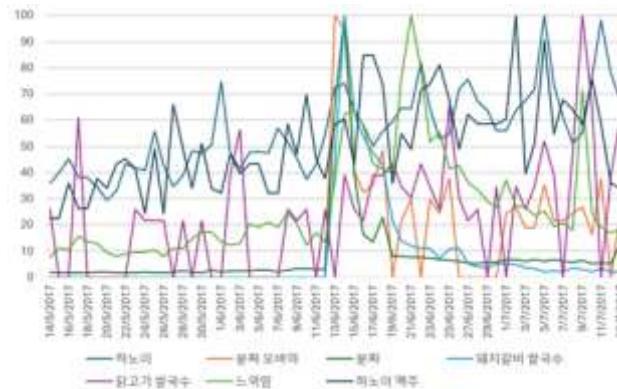


Figure 2: Daily Search Interest for Ha Noi, Vietnam in relation to *New Journey to the West* (season 4) episode 1's broadcast



Figure 3: Daily Search Interest for Sa Pa, Vietnam in relation to *New Journey to the West* (season 4) episode 7's broadcast

New Journey to the West (season 4) episodes showed significant increases. For example, episode 1 in Hanoi resulted in a 123.4% increase in overall search volume (Figure 2), and episode 7 in Sa Pa saw an exceptional 233.8% increase (Figure 3). This highlights the strong appeal of natural beauty and authentic local culture.

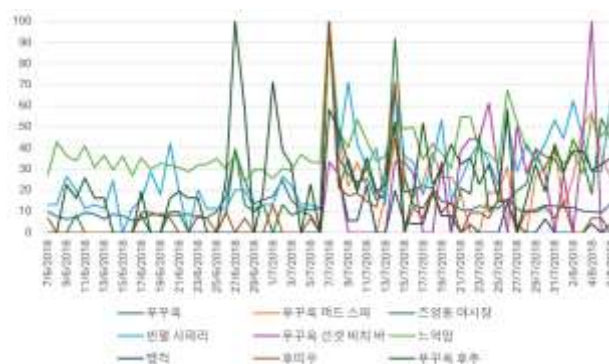


Figure 4: Daily Search Interest for Phu Quoc, Vietnam in relation to *Battle Trip* (season 1) episode 98's broadcast

Battle Trip in Vietnam and Thailand showed consistent increases. Phu Quoc (Vietnam, season 1, episode 98) demonstrated an exceptional 155% increase (Figure 4), highlighting viewers' willingness to explore newer destinations. During the post COVID-19 period (Season 2), viewers' interest remained stable, stimulated by new locations or experiences rather than already popular sites.

4.3 Statistical Testing of Search Trend Changes

Table 3 reports combined t-test outcomes. Of the 234 keywords tested, 169 (72.22%) showed a statistically significant increase after the broadcast at the $p < 0.05$ value, and 111 of those reached $p < 0.001$. These results offer a strong support for the first hypothesis that broadcast events are reliably associated with immediate peaks in destination related search activity. The effect does not happen to all observed episodes with 27.78% of keywords showing no significant change, which suggests that the way a destination is showcased on screen creates viewers' responses. Destinations that looked visually attractive or personally relatable received bigger attention than those were mentioned in passing.

Table 3. Summary of paired t-test results across all 234 keywords

Metric	Result
Total keywords tested	234
Keywords with significant increase ($p < 0.05$)	169 (72.22%)
Keywords with no significant change ($p \geq 0.05$)	65 (27.78%)
Keywords with $p < 0.001$	111

4.3 Comparison of reality shows' popularity

Table 4 presents the top episodes ranked by peak increase in search volumes. Episodes filmed in Vietnam dominated the top places of the ranking with nine of the ten highest ranked episodes featuring Vietnamese destinations, with *New Journey to the West* Season 4 accounting for seven of those nine. Sa Pa emerged as the standout destination as it increased by 2,260.01% in search volume

before the broadcast of episode 10 of the show. The episode's scenes at Fansipan Mountain and the surrounding rice terraces landscape appear to have stimulated exceptional viewers' curiosity, because the destination was relatively new to the South Korean at the time of broadcast. Phu Quoc (*Battle Trip* Season 1, Episode 98) recorded a 155.01% in search volume increase, further confirming that episodes featuring lesser-known Vietnamese destinations can create a massive increase in viewers' interest.

On the other hand, episodes filmed in Thailand recorded a more moderate but consistent increase, mostly in lesser-known destinations such as Chiang Rai, Kanchanaburi, and Pai rather than Bangkok. This pattern may reflect the existing familiarity of Thai famous tourist attractions among South Korean viewers before these shows broadcast, making the viewers' responses in search activity less significant than those towards Vietnam. A noticeable case is *Running Man* Episode 392. Despite its high rating of 9.2, it recorded a net negative search change of -9.11%, which indicates that the popularity of the show does not always turn into online interest for the featured destinations and that showcasing of content likely matters more.

Table 4. Top 10 episodes ranked by peak post-broadcast search-volume increase

Rank	Show name	Ep.	Destination	Peak Increase
1	NJTW Season 4	10	Sa Pa, Vietnam	2260.01%
2	NJTW Season 4	7	Sa Pa, Vietnam	233.75%
3	NJTW Season 4	3	Cat Ba Island, Vietnam	166.95%
4	Battle Trip Season 1	98	Phu Quoc, Vietnam	155.01%
5	NJTW Season 4	2	Ha Noi, Vietnam	124.14%
6	NJTW Season 4	1	Ha Noi, Vietnam	123.37%
7	NJTW Season 4	4	Cat Ba Island, Vietnam	114.84%
8	Battle Trip Season 2	33	Chiang Rai and Kanchanaburi, Thailand	94.84%
9	NJTW Season 4	9	Sa Pa, Vietnam	64.19%
10	Battle Trip Season 2	20	Da Lat, Vietnam	62.59%

4.4 The Gap Between Search Interest and Actual Arrivals

Comparisons between Naver Trends increases and monthly arrival data consistently revealed a disconnect. A 55.64% search peak for Bangkok related keywords following *Battle Trip* Season 1 Episode 34 in January 2017 was accompanied by a 6.3% decrease in South Korean tourist arrivals to Thailand the following month. Similarly, the significant search volume increased by *New Journey to the West* Season 4 episodes corresponded to a slight increase in tourist arrivals in the relevant monthly data. These contrasts can be interpreted through three combined factors:

First, online information search occupies an early stage in travel decision-making (Kotler and Armstrong (2011); Woodside and Lysonski (1989)): search activity is a sign of primary interest, not confirmed actions. An international visit to Southeast Asia requires a complete travel plan including

budgeting, leave approval, flight and accommodation reservations, which creates a time lag between the initial spark of interest and actual travel.

Second, a meaningful contribution of search queries likely reflects entertainment oriented curiosity rather than genuine travel planning (Juvan & Dolnicar, 2014). Viewers may look up an unfamiliar dish or beach out of interest in the show rather than as a step toward booking a trip. The conversion rate from search to booking depends on multiple aspects along the consuming channels, and the available data cannot distinguish motivated tourists from casual browsers.

Third, structural barriers including travel cost, exchange rate fluctuations, visa complexity, and destination safety awareness limit the conversion of interest into actual travel, particularly in the short term (Ritchie and Jiang (2019); Sönmez (1998)). These external factors are independent from media exposure and can limit the tourist arrival even when viewers' interest in featured destinations is high. Taken together, these mechanisms explain why the second hypothesis is only partially supported. Even though the search interest after the broadcast does correspond positively to awareness of travelling and early stage of intention, it does not reliably predict the temporary tourist arrival growth.

A further methodological consideration concerns the difference between daily search volumes and monthly arrival data. Even if a broadcast did indicate bookings within days, those trips would actually happen the following months and potentially be affected by seasonal and structural variation in tourist flows. More timely booking or flight search data would be required to precisely construct the model of lag effects in media-induced travel behavior.

5. Conclusions and Limitations

5.1 Conclusions

This study provides empirical confirmation that Korean reality show broadcasts create rapid, statistically significant increases in South Korean viewers' online search engagement with featured Southeast Asian destinations. Episodes filmed in Vietnam, especially those from *New Journey to the West* Season 4, created the strongest effects, suggesting that unique and breathtaking scenes are important factors creating curiosity for the destination. However, the distinctive difference between search increases and tourist arrival data indicates that overwhelmed online search activity does not directly translate into immediate tourism flows. Film-induced interest happens only in the early stage of the decision making process, and its conversion into actual travel involves planning time, limitation of resources, and external environmental conditions.

Moreover, the study validates nowcasting using data from Naver Trends as a sensitive and timely tool for capturing destination awareness effects. Its ability to detect peaks in search activities within 30 days after the broadcast period is proved to be more effective than the traditional method of collecting official statistics so that studies can offer tourism practitioners an early signal for timely effective marketing campaigns.

5.2 Practical Implications

For Tourism Boards and Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) in Vietnam and Thailand: the findings suggest that DMOs should strategically monitor the broadcast schedule of popular Korean

reality shows and develop targeted online campaigns on South Korean major social media sites within the first two weeks after the broadcast of an episode. Collaborating with production houses for content production could enhance connection with the destinations, ensuring that feature media sites are accompanied by direct links to promote national brandings as well as to encourage viewers' visit to the country by introducing the tour package information and booking platforms.

For travel agencies targeting the South Korean outbound tourism market: it is advisable to track the broadcast schedules and prepare tour packages with the theme of newly featured destinations on shows. The evidence of lesser-known tourist destinations in Vietnam such as Sa Pa, Phu Quoc, Da Lat creating unexpectedly large search increases suggests that differentiation in strategies might be more effective than focusing on promoting only popular places like Bangkok or Hanoi.

For Korean media and production companies: the data provide a commercial motivation for tourism partnership agreements. Including QR codes for specific destinations, hashtag campaigns, or booking links from collaborating brands within the content of the episodes or social media posts could improve the conversion rate of viewers' online interest into actual bookings and therefore, both production houses and host country tourism can gain more benefits.

5.3 Limitations and Future Research

Although this research contributes to the research methodology in tourism, it still has several limitations. The study's reliance solely on online search data from Naver Trends cannot capture viewers' interest expressed through social media or streaming platforms. Moreover, the sample size only includes three reality shows and two countries which limits the observation on the impact of Korean reality shows on Southeast Asian tourism.

Future studies with larger sample size and more diverse observations including other reality shows, filming countries, and content genres, would strengthen the external validity of the nowcasting approach. In addition, future research could also gain more insights by incorporating flight search and accommodation booking data to the model for a full investigation from search to actual travel, and by applying sentimental analysis of viewers' comments to identify the differences between behaviors formed by curiosity and intention. Moreover, further research can use more advanced econometric models that consider lag effects and other complex variables to have a fuller picture of the influence. Content coding of episodes which captures variables such as celebrity presence, destination framing, etc. would enable researchers to identify which specific production features can mostly predict the significance of search increases.

Declaration of Interest Statement

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interests.

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