International Journal of Communication 17(2023), 6934–6951 1932–8036/20230005

Netflix Korea and Platform Creativity

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This article examines how creativity is regarded as a significant corporate asset to Netflix's rise as a dominant global streaming platform. Using Netflix Korea as an empirical case study, the article problematizes the institutionalization of Netflix creativity to construct the streaming platform as a peculiar cultural space for creativity and lure ethnic content creators while capitalizing on the particularities of Korean television production norms and practices. Drawing on critical media industry studies and analysis of journalistic interviews with Hwang Dong-hyuk, the creator of the global hit series *Squid Game*, this article examines the politics shaping Netflix creativity in terms of authorial value, labor, and intellectual property. The article moves away from a Western-centric study of creativity rooted in romanticism, inspiration, and neoliberalism to explore how creativity as a resource to Netflix shapes the interactions between the Korean television industry and the subjectivities of Korean creative laborers.

Keywords: Netflix, Squid Game*, creativity, platform, Korean television*

The global popularity and success of the Netflix original series *Squid Game* (Kim & Hwang, 2021) cemented the transnational cultural power of Korean media and popular culture. Many journalists and scholars have credited how the South Korean government has played a central role in the globalization of Korean popular culture through its development of infrastructures, financial investments, and cultural policies, undermining the significant roles that creative laborers and global audiences have played in it (Jin, 2021b). Additionally, many critics have discussed the transnational appeal of *Squid Game* (Kim & Hwang, 2021) because of its critique of neoliberal capitalism and social class inequities that resonate universally with the global audience. For example, Hess (2021) of *Vogue* writes, "It's not just the high-octane excitement that has made *Squid Game* such an international sensation but the universal themes it explores—specifically its implicit critique of capitalism and exploration of class anxiety" (para. 7). While these issues are worthy of analysis, this article directs attention to the creative laborers who have contributed to the globalization of Korean media and popular culture. Compared with other creative laborers, Hwang Dong-hyuk has received the most visibility in the Western media through interviews because of the global hit *Squid Game* (Kim & Hwang, 2021) on Netflix. Therefore, Hwang offers an interesting case study to examine not only the politics of creativity but also how Korean creative laborers navigate and practice creativity within both the restrictive and liberating boundaries of Netflix in terms of authorial value, labor, and intellectual property.

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Date submitted: 2022-10-27

Creativity and Media Industries

While creativity has been the subject of many scholarly inquiries, there is limited research devoted to the examination of creativity in East Asia, specifically in Korea. As Alacovska and Gill (2019) note, "Creative labour studies are notoriously centred on Euro-American metropolitan 'creative hubs' and hence the creative worker they theorize is frequently white, middle-class, male, and urban" (p. 196). Additionally, instead of understanding creativity from either a top-down or bottom-up perspective, this article analyzes it as a dialectical process between institutions and creative laborers that must also be situated within the particularities of national cultural industries, including the state, production culture, and labor subjectivities. In doing so, the article problematizes the romanticized industry lore of Netflix as a peculiar cultural space for creative experimentation that lures creative talents from different national markets, further forcing them to depend on the platform to distribute their content globally.

The concept of creativity has been studied in many different disciplines. In social sciences, creativity is defined as "the intentional combination of symbols, ideas, or objects in a way that is unexpected for a given audience" (Wohl, 2022, p. 2). In other words, "creativity involves perceived newness, although newness does not necessarily need to improve upon previous products" (Wohl, 2022, p. 2). Christopherson (2008) explains that creative work "places a premium on self-expression, but is also attributable to a conception of creative work as individual enterprise" (p. 74). She adds, "The individual is at the heart of the creative career—as self-expressive entrepreneur—and the model posits a dualism between work that engages self-expression and creative skills, and humdrum work, which is driven by economic motives" (Christopherson, 2008, p. 74). Additionally, the words creativity and innovation are often used interchangeably, but as Wohl (2022) notes, what distinguishes creativity from innovation is that the former is a process while the latter is the by-product of that process.

Moreover, creativity is understood as "some transcendental, emancipatory force" (Banks, 2007, p. 71). Creativity also speaks to a cultural process in which creative laborers negotiate the boundaries between artistic freedom and commercialism. In television studies, the theorization of creativity has often been limited to above-the-line workers, especially producers and writers, with the exception of a few studies (Mayer, 2011). Television has also been characterized as a producer's medium while the boundaries of TV labor are becoming more nebulous with the emergence of the concept of the showrunner, who assumes multiple roles and responsibilities. More importantly, creativity has been discussed "as an individual resistance to industrial or organizational constraints" (Mayer, 2011, p. 63). In other words, above-the-line workers, such as directors, writers, and showrunners, have been analyzed in terms of how they negotiate industrial structures to create hit programs and popular genres and to underscore television as a producer's medium (Mayer, 2011). Also, according to Mayer (2011), in television production, creativity often translates into legal authorial rights that certain individuals hold as creators of television content. Hence, despite the collective nature of television production, the industry has claimed creativity in the form of individual authorship for branding, marketing, and institutional purposes. But as Caldwell (2008) writes, "Widespread labor creativity makes personal creativity largely an illusion—yet personal creativity nevertheless remains an important illusion in workforce and trade discourses" (p. 234).

Moreover, the logic that creativity emanates from autonomy is further inflected in the tension between artistic endeavor and commercialism. Political economists have long claimed that media conglomerations and commercialism have hindered artists from producing original and creative work. According to McChesney (2004), better content is produced when creative talent has more influence over content via media corporations. But more importantly, while analyses of creativity have often been confined to individuals who constitute the new creative class, such as designers, artists, and filmmakers, "creativity also becomes the most desirable corporate asset" (Banks, 2007, p. 70). In other words, according to Banks (2007), "creativity has become a critical element for ensuring successful management and effective corporate growth" (p. 70), engendering the institutional discourse of "creative fetish" as a new emerging economic ethos driving creative industries. That is, creativity must not be solely understood through the lens of individuals but also in terms of how they are firmly embedded in a corporation's management styles and practices.

Additionally, as Lotz (2017) has demonstrated in her work, creativity does not only stem from individuals but also is a by-product of industrial changes. For example, in her examination of U.S. cable television and creative textual possibilities, Lotz (2017) argues that while the broadcast paradigm has limited innovations in terms of television aesthetics, the introduction and proliferation of cable channels introduced a new set of industrial norms, which she describes as the cable paradigm. This resulted in the production of shorter episodes (10–13 per season), young professionals who were willing to experiment with new narratives and genres to improve their resumes, and precarious labor conditions in which creators were paid by episode, which allowed for textual innovations and possibilities on cable television. In other words, the creative talents' responses to a different set of industrial conditions prompted them to expand their creative boundaries. In a similar vein, the particularities of the Korean television production practices and norms interact with Korean creative laborers' aspirations to materialize their ideas into cultural commodities not feasible in the local market; thus, they imagine and desire to work with Netflix as a platform to materialize their creativity, which would further enable them to gain exposure of their work in the global media market. Thus, for Netflix, creativity is defined and understood as

> a contested *political and social process*, one where conflicts of interest and struggles for recognition are intrinsic and where the management of creativity is judged inseparable from the wider politics of labour and the structural contexts within which firms now operate. (Banks, 2007, p. 72; emphasis in original)

However, despite the growing scholarship on platforms in media industry studies, the topic of creativity has not generated much critical inquiry in the context of East Asia, including South Korea. Even though critical media industry studies is a growing disciplinary area, film industry historian Schatz (2014) notes the lack of scholarly attention to creativity when he explains that media industry studies have focused more on the questions of ownership and control. Even if studies of creativity do exist, in the Western tradition, creativity in media industries has often been analyzed through the lens of inspirationist and romantic myths (Andersen, 2022). Furthermore, as Lin (2019) argues, studies of creativity have been confined to Western neoliberal perspectives, failing to consider the multiplicities of sociopolitical conditions across the globe.

In his study of creative labor in East Asia, Fung (2016) problematizes the assumption "that being creative is natural when technology and capital are in place" (p. 201). He further highlights how different sociopolitical contexts in which creative industries and laborers operate produce different notions of creativity (Fung, 2016). More recent studies of creativity in East Asian cultural industries have illuminated the state's role in governing the creative subjectivities of artists and cultural practitioners (Kim, 2018). According to de Kloet, Lin, and Chow (2020), "The conflation of arts with economic discourse 'overrides important public good arguments for state support of culture, subsuming the cultural sector and cultural objectivities within an economic agenda to which it is ill-suited'" (p. 348). That is, the study of creativity stemming from different geopolitical contexts points to how subjectivities of creativity oscillate among the porous boundaries of freedom, autonomy, and politics that traverse the logic of marketization and capitalism. Therefore, as creativity operates differently in non-Western contexts, more critical studies that synthesize empirical analyses and theorization must be undertaken to understand creativity from different national perspectives.

Particularly, in the context of Korea, as Jin (2021a) astutely observes, cultural creators have contributed significantly to the production of popular culture for the global media market while also shaping trends in *Hallyu* as they develop new forms of local culture. In addition to these valuable existing studies, I am interested in how the introduction of Netflix into the Korean media market institutionalizes the discourse of creativity as a commodified attribute credited to its unique organized logic and structure as a platform that disrupts the existing local traditional production culture. In doing so, I illustrate how the institutionalization of Netflix creativity is closely interconnected with the streaming platform's endeavors to capitalize on the firmly established norms and practices of the national television production industry to continue to expand its library of original content and distinguish itself from other competitors in the platform era.

Netflix Korea and Creativity as a Corporate Asset

As of 2021, South Korea had approximately 5.14 million Netflix subscribers (Frater, 2021). Additionally, 4.8% of content library titles on Netflix are from Korea (Lotz, 2022). Most recently, in 2021, Netflix announced that it would invest nearly $500 million in developing Korean content (Brzeski, 2021). While Netflix actively promotes its corporate culture grounded in freedom, independence, and autonomy, it heavily depends on local independent production companies to create its original content. In the case of *Squid Game* (Kim & Hwang, 2021), the content was made by a small independent local production company, Siren Pictures, which is owned by Kim Ji-yeon, and had previously produced Hwang Dong-hyuk's film *The Fortress* (Hwang, 2017). Despite its classification as a Netflix original, the creativity of the content is also shaped by the creative laborers who are firmly embedded in the norms and practices of local production culture within the Korean television industry, in which a small number of creative laborers bear the huge burden of creating hit content.

Moreover, the emergence of labor subjectivities of Korean creative laborers is also in response to the shifts in the industrial and labor conditions of the local TV industry. Under the state's neoliberal market reform, the Korean broadcasting industry underwent several key changes, including the passage of what was known as the "compulsory television programming outsourcing policy" in 1991 (Kim, 2014, p. 565). Similar to the Fyn-Syn (financial syndication) rules that were implemented in the United States to regulate the monopolistic power

of legacy networks and increase competition, the Korean policy required network stations to broadcast a certain number of programs produced by independent companies to create more competition, which would translate into better quality programs (Kim, 2014). As a result, terrestrial broadcast networks turned toward independent companies to produce programs, including Korean TV dramas.

In addition, the passage of the policy led to the growth of independent production companies from 115 in 1998 to 551 in 2005 (Kim, 2014). More specifically, independent production companies not only "expanded the size and scope of their content production" but also led to the proliferation of both small and large independent production houses in charge of TV drama production since the mid-2000s (Ju, 2017). As of today, there are hundreds of small independent production companies, such as AStory, Samhwa Pictures, and Studio Santa Claus, that Netflix collaborates with to create original content.[1] The ramifications of the new policy were not only seen in the organized logic structuring the operations of the media industry but also in terms of labor conditions. It not only resulted in the increasing numbers of freelancers but also undermined the value of apprenticeships that have long shaped the labor hierarchies of the Korean broadcasting industry. As Kim (2014) explains, these industrial changes also contributed to the subjectivities of Korean creative laborers, who sought precarious job opportunities to pursue new labor subjectivities connected to affective pleasure. The emergence of new labor subjectivities in the form of creative passion and freedom were the primary reasons that enabled these young cultural laborers to endure precarious job conditions, given that historically Korean corporations have restricted the individual freedom of workers due to hierarchical and disciplined relationships within the patriarchal corporate management structures (Kim, 2014).

Nonetheless, the growing number of independent production companies also had its drawbacks. Given the saturated and competitive television market, independent producers struggled financially to sustain their operations as they had to pitch their ideas for new dramas to get selected for broadcast on a network. It also revealed the specificities of the Korean national TV production culture in which a proposal consisting of a synopsis and a script for the first episode of a drama was usually submitted to get the channel to air the drama (Oh, 2014). As Oh (2014) notes, "Independent producers cannot shoot more than two or three episodes before broadcasting without the guarantee of a channel" (p. 2144). These independent producers usually received payment from a channel only after the entire series had been aired, meaning that they had to secure additional funding sources to finance the production of TV dramas (Oh, 2018). Within these established industrial conditions, the entry of global streaming platforms into the Korean market further led to a decline in advertising revenues and a reduction in the number of TV dramas broadcast on terrestrial TV channels by 25% to 30% in 2021 (Park, Kim, & Lee, 2022).

The shooting of TV dramas also reflected the tight schedule in which creative laborers operated. For example, the production of terrestrial Korean TV drama entails the process of "last-minute live filming" or what Oh (2018) characterizes as "whole live production" (p. 51), which has not only been a standard practice in the Korean TV industry but also in which the shooting of a drama is usually done only a few days in advance or on the same day as the airdate (Oh, 2014). In addition, Korean production practices rely on what is called *jjokdaebon* or hasty script, where "extremely short sections of the script arrive on set, barely

[1] Studio Dragon is another major television production company and a subsidiary of the conglomerate CJ Entertainment.

meeting the live-shoot schedule" (Oh, 2018, p. 52). Oh argues that "many hit dramas suffered from lamentably poor endings because of hasty scripting and rushed shooting" (Oh, 2018, p. 52). These firmly established TV production norms force writers to make last-minute modifications to the dramas' storylines and characters in response to the viewers' reactions and further boost ratings.

While this tight production schedule appears not to provide much room for creative experimentation, such a production practice is internalized by creators as one of the primary factors contributing to the cultural power of K-dramas. For instance, on the "Creating Korean TV Drama" panel, as part of the workshop titled Korean Waves: Korean Popular Culture in East and the World held at Columbia University in 2007, Yi Seung-yeol, a prominent TV director in the 1990s whose hits include the miniseries *Jealousy* (B. Lee, 1992), *Pilot* (B. Lee, 1993), and *Advocate* (E. Lee, 1998), not only detailed the precarious conditions of the Korean drama industry but also more interestingly spoke about how he believes that this precarity as the norm is what drives the power of K-dramas. Even though Yi did not allude explicitly to creativity, his response illuminates how the firmly embedded television production culture instills and shapes the subjectivities of creative laborers (Yi, 2007). Or, in the words of Chumley (2016), creativity like a skill is not only "a psychological faculty embedded in an individual human mind-body," but also "imagined not as a routinized form of knowledge, but as a quality of mind: an essentially unconscious, unlimited power" (p. 8).

However, the conception of creativity among Korean creative laborers would undergo changes with the growing impact of the Korean wave on the government and media industries. First, the emergence of large entertainment agencies, such as SM and YG, not only invested significant resources and capital in the production of K-pop talent but also enabled the cross migration of idols from the music to the film and TV industries, as witnessed by a growing number of K-pop band members appearing on K-dramas and reality TV shows. Second, the entry of U.S.-based streaming platforms such as Netflix and Disney+ in the domestic market has led to the rise of Korean streaming platforms such as Wavve and Tving as local broadcasting and cable networks collaborate with the telecommunications industry to compete in the saturated market. The rise of both foreign and domestic platforms also has increased the demand for exclusive content, prompting content creators to adapt popular webtoons into films and TV series in which creativity encompasses multiple production approaches to digital media from their inception (Jin, 2023). And more recently, during the COVID-19 pandemic, binge-watching contributed greatly to the global consumption of Korean content, especially hits such as *Crash Landing on You* (Um, Jang, Lee, & Kang, 2019–2020) and *Squid Game* (Kim & Hwang, 2021). These industrial changes shaping the Korean media industry speak to the central role that storytelling plays in expanding the boundaries and conception of creativity.

Amid these changes, the absence of consistent and clearly defined regulatory policies governing digital media has also shaped the lore around platform creativity. For instance, when Netflix was launched as a foreign streaming platform in Korea in 2016, it was classified as a value-added common carrier under the Telecommunications Business Act, which made it more difficult for the Korean government to impose content-related regulatory measures. However, in 2019, Netflix was reclassified as an Internet-distributed television provider, which meant that it would be regulated under the broadcast laws. However, since Netflix does not provide live linear channel streaming, it is not susceptible to regulatory measures involving cross-ownership, ratings, or access terms (Noh, 2020). Therefore, the porous regulatory boundary informing the

regulation of Netflix illustrates not only the challenges of governing digital media but also how creativity is closely intertwined with legal rights in the form of contracts and intellectual property that entertainers and content creators hold in the platform era.

Moreover, the conception of creativity that emerged with the globalization of Korean popular culture also reshaped Korean creative laborers' understanding of the self within the conflicting relations between the government and creativity in the media industry (Kim, 2018). The global popularity of Korean popular culture has led cultural creators to conceive creativity differently. They believed that the government should not intervene in the process of cultural production, further underscoring the significant role that local mentalities and cultural identities play in the production of content (Jin, 2021a). Coinciding with these shifts in the creative subjectivity of Korean content creators, the TV drama industry also experienced changes in its production system in 2016, when a growing number of TV dramas, such as *Descendants of the Sun* (Bae, 2016) and *Signal* (C. Lee, 2016), decided to shoot all the episodes before their broadcast, moving away from the tight production schedule that had been the long staple of TV production culture (Jie, 2022).

Despite the complex power relations among the state, the industry, and labor shaping the subjectivity of creativity among Korean creative laborers, the introduction of Netflix to Korea further brought disruptions to the industry and instilled the lore of platform creativity. In contrast to the terrestrial TV networks, Netflix defines and conceives creativity through its data analytics, thus enabling the global streaming platform to engage in a different TV production business model than legacy and cable television channels in the United States. Traditionally, the production of new TV series for legacy and cable networks has relied on the production of a pilot episode based on a writer or producer's conceptual idea for a TV series. Then the pilot episode is test screened for feedback. Afterward, the network decides whether to go ahead and order trial episodes. Therefore, the pilot episode is a significant piece of work to gain initial insight into audience response. The production of a pilot episode costs roughly between $5 and $6 million, and it is estimated that the TV industry spends $800 on failed pilots (Smith & Telang, 2016). And even if a proposed series receives funding to produce a pilot episode, this is no guarantee for the show's creator, suggesting that "the network is still in complete control" (Smith & Telang, 2016, p. 5). However, as Wyatt (2021) notes, "Market research of television pilots should not be seen as a way to understand viewer preferences in a global sense" (p. 531).

On the contrary, since Netflix capitalizes on data metrics that give them a better understanding of their subscribers' tastes and preferences, it avoids the need to have a pilot episode produced before deciding to proceed with the production of the series. In other words, Netflix grants "a new level of creative freedom for writers (from on-demand content that can meet the needs of a specific audience)" (Smith & Telang, 2016, p. 11). Also, "[u]nlike studios, it lets its talent do its work without a lot of notes or advice. When projects are completed, it uses its data to match them with viewers who will mostly likely enjoy them" (Dreier, 2018, para. 4). This unique way of institutionalizing creativity further commodifies it as a corporate attribute to attract global creative talent to the platform.

Furthermore, the establishment of Netflix's regional office in Seoul, Korea, meant that its corporate culture would also be manifested in how it conducts the development of its original content. Hence, creativity often affiliated with individual creative talent is becoming more institutionalized, especially in the context of

Netflix, where it provides fantasies and illusions of creative autonomy and freedom to Korean creative laborers while capitalizing on them as a corporate asset. For instance, in explaining the success of *Squid Game* (Kim & Hwang, 2021), instead of acknowledging the creativity of Hwang as the creator, Executive Chairman Reed Hastings stated, "The success of 'Squid Game' is a testament to 'the system that Ted [Sarandos] built,' aka content development operations in dozens of countries around the world" (Littleton, 2021, para. 4). On a similar note, Sarandos, co-chief executive officer, also praised the South Korean team for "creating a great environment for 'Squid Game' producers to make a great show", attributing the source of its creativity to the corporate culture that Netflix had instilled in the Korean team than to the actual creative laborers involved in the production of content (Littleton, 2021, para. 4). What differentiates Netflix from legacy networks is that it illustrates "how corporate-friendly forms of creativity are discursively constructed and practically reproduced in different workplace contexts, through manipulation of the self and its aspirations and the 'informal' control of the workplace environment" (Banks, 2007, p. 70). That is, Netflix's self-theorization of creativity is internalized across all of its operating divisions as an important facet of its organizational culture.

This self-reflexivity and self-theorization of freedom and autonomy with Netflix as a distinctive corporate attribute further reinforces the organizational culture that Netflix actively circulates and promotes. In the book *No Rules Rules: Netflix and the Culture of Reinvention*, Hastings and Meyer (2020) provide a detailed overview of the uniqueness of Netflix culture to its global success and innovation. The book defines Netflix's corporate culture as follows: "Netflix is different. We have a culture where No Rules Rules" (Hastings & Meyer, 2020, p. 3). While the slogan "No Rules" suggests the absence of boundaries that further impede creativity and innovation, it also speaks to how Netflix promotes an inclusive culture described as follows: "If you want to encourage innovation, you should develop an environment where people feel safe to dream, speak up, and take risks. The safer the atmosphere, the more innovation you will have" (Hastings & Meyer, 2020, p. 16). While these descriptions are more applicable to its corporate culture involving its employees, it also indicates how its own conception of creativity shapes the decision process that Netflix engages in its development and production of original content. Many writers and directors who choose to work with Netflix instead of local TV networks often laud how Netflix does not inhibit their creativity. For example, Kim Seong-hun, director of the first season of the hit Netflix original series *Kingdom* (S. Lee, 2019), stated, "*Kingdom* presents the opportunity to work on longform television at its most ambitious and on a truly cinematic scale because of the unparalleled creative freedom that Netflix as a global internet television network provides" (H. W. Lee, 2017, para. 4). In her discussion of how Netflix aims to fill the gap between creative freedom and creators, Minyoung Kim, vice president of Content for Asia Pacific at Netflix, stated,

> Our audience can control what they watch, so that gives us freedom to give creative freedom to our creators. By giving that creative freedom to our creators, we can talk about the things that cannot be told in the traditional system. (Malig, 2020, para. 7)

However, despite how Netflix shapes its conception of creativity detached from the traditional system, it is the firmly established production norms, practices, and labor conditions of the national (Korean) television industry that it exploits to construct a social imaginary of the platform as a unique cultural space for creative diversity. In acquiring the licensing of international content, Netflix conducts market analysis in each territory to establish its prices. Netflix calculates licensing costs of new content based on the analyses

of its viewers' data of similar titles, which are then used to calculate the estimated hours of viewing to establish a cost per hour viewed. This example illustrates how Netflix capitalizes on the lack of clearly defined legal policies shaping the governance of digital content and media. For example, Netflix could offer as little as US$300 for a two-year nonexclusive license of a film that does not even pay for the encoding costs (US$800–US$1,200). In the words of Linda Nelson, co-founder of Indie Rights, "Netflix pay is horrible for independent films with no names in them" (Baldridge, 2016, para. 8).

Additionally, Netflix actively collaborates with local production companies to commission and acquire Korean titles. For example, in 2019, Netflix reached an agreement with the Korean production company Studio Dragon, which is responsible for producing hit TV series such as *Guardian: The Lonely and Great God* (Yoon, 2016–2017) and *Crash Landing on You* (Um et al., 2019–2020), and the cable network JTBC to develop 20 series for a period of three years starting in 2020. Additionally, the agreement gave Netflix the exclusive rights to distribute JTBC's prime-time TV dramas globally to more than 190 countries ("JTBC-Netflix Ink Multi-Year Deal," 2019). And a year before this agreement, in 2017, Netflix and JTBC had already come to an exclusive distribution agreement where the streaming platform would acquire international licensing rights to JTBC's library consisting of approximately 600 hours of scripted and unscripted TV programs. While this agreement was confined to the areas of licensing and distribution, the new agreement in 2019 paved the way for JTBC and Netflix to coproduce and develop TV series that fit the brand identity of the streaming platform as a global TV network and possibly appeal to the global audience.

Netflix's conglomerate status is not too apparent because it reworks some of the traditional business models of conglomeration such as vertical integration. Davis (2023) explains how vertical integration operates somewhat differently for Netflix. Unlike other conglomerates that emerged from mergers and acquisitions, Netflix controls the production, distribution, and exhibition of its content because of its unique affordances as a global streaming platform. One of the ways it engages in vertical integration is through in-house content production and distribution through Netflix originals. As Davis (2023) notes,

> The popularity of the first crop of "Originals" in 2013 presents an inchoate form of Netflix's model for expansion: releasing programs with high in-house production costs leveraged by substantial debt leads to high subscription numbers and higher levels of investment. (p. 1150)

Netflix also relies on partnerships with established and new local talents to produce original content for the platform. Similar to their strategies in Korea, in Mexico, Netflix began to collaborate with big and well-established players in the Mexican media industry such as Argos, Gato Grande, and Endemol Shine Boomdog while slowly moving toward more collaborations with smaller players such as Morena Films and Perro Azul, and other independent producers. Diego Ávalos, vice president of Original International Content for Latin America and Spain, described transparency and honesty as well as freedom and responsibility as the main attributes of Netflix in terms of how it manages relationships with the creative community (Dalben, Straubhaar, & Santillana, 2021). These statements affirm that for Netflix, creativity is firmly embedded in the organization and, more importantly, internalized among all sectors of its employees. Yet this institutionalization of creativity is masked under Netflix's advocacy for creative freedom while disguising how it exploits new and independent producers, writers, and directors who need distribution outlets to

showcase their work. For example, it has been reported that U.S.-based platforms, including Netflix, are paying lower salaries, licenses, and investments, and taking advantage of the already vulnerable and undercapitalized local production sectors in Mexico and Canada, which would accept those conditions as "'it is better than nothing' or 'better than we had'" (Muñoz Larroa, 2022, p. 290). Independent producers based in Mexico compared the local production for Netflix with a *maquila* (manufacturing plant with tariff-free benefits) business model. That is, Netflix exploits the existing talents and infrastructures already present in different national media industries without any concerns about developing production and funding structures for local productions to thrive and sustain themselves (Muñoz Larroa, 2022). Netflix is further drawn to Mexico because there is a larger pool of talent that has already established an international presence, which includes such figures as Alfonso Cuarón, Salma Hayek, and Diego Luna (Tillman, 2019).

On the contrary, Netflix capitalizes on the ambiguity of labor union bargaining regulations in the Korean television industry, which continue to exploit precarious labor conditions. These conditions of the Korean film and television industry are well documented, for instance, when it was reported that Lee Han-bit, an assistant producer for the cable channel tvN committed suicide after completing the production of the K-drama *Drinking Solo* (Choi, 2016). He not only worked 55 days straight with only two days of rest in between but also felt guilty that he had asked his employees to work 20-hour days (S. H. Lee, 2018). As a result, in 2018, the South Korean Labor Standards Act was amended to limit an employee's maximum work hours from 68 to 52 hours. While Boon Joon-ho was lauded for complying with the revised labor law when he was filming *Parasite* (Bong, 2019), it is uncertain how the TV industry is complying with the new rule (Park, 2019). There is still an absence of firmly established rules concerning collective bargaining efforts despite the presence of trade unions associated with terrestrial TV networks because a lot of actual shooting takes place outside the broadcasting stations and is organized by independent production companies (Oh, 2013). It is this loophole that Netflix capitalizes on as a global streaming platform, striking "a regulatory sweet spot between legislative protections," which benefits the company (Gillespie, 2010, p. 348). More specifically, this exploitation of labor conditions within national TV production culture is subsumed under the industry lore of Netflix creativity as a dominant platform in the global media market.

Hwang Dong-hyuk and the Politics of Netflix Creativity

In addition to the specificities of Korean TV production culture that contribute to the institutionalization and commodification of Netflix as a corporate attribute, the case study of Hwang as the most well-known Korean content creator illuminates the politics of Netflix creativity as it relates to the question of authorial value. The concept of authorship emerging in film theory often alludes to the notion that filmmakers as creators have autonomy, thus possessing creative control of the production process. But as Caldwell (2008) points out, "Films that ceded control over to studios seldom achieved canonical status" (p. 198). While authorship is determined based on the level of control, "a systematic struggle over control still very much determines authorship, in some ways evoking the studio era" (Caldwell, 2008, p. 199). In the case of Netflix, the platform does not reinsert the logic of authorial value in its conception of creativity to brand its original series. Instead, it institutionalizes the discourse of authorial value where Netflix is the ultimate creator that grants creative freedom to creative laborers in return for intellectual property rights, which translates into the diversification of content and genres.

In an interview with the *Guardian* after the global success of *Squid Game* (Kim & Hwang, 2021), Hwang Dong-hyuk stated, "But I do have enough. I have enough to put food on the table. And it's not like Netflix is paying me a bonus. Netflix paid me according to the original contract" (Jeffries, 2021, para. 2). Hwang's response speaks to what is characterized as "new intellectual property rights negotiations" (García Leiva, Albornoz, & Gómez, 2021, p. 2), which is one of the disrupting agents in the creative market. Therefore, Netflix testifies to how "intellectual property rights are now exclusively defined as corporate rights" (Caldwell, 2008, p. 209).

Hence, creative laborers do not have rights and power over the intellectual property of their creative content that has been transferred to Netflix. For example, in a more in-depth interview conducted with Hong Seok-Kyeong, a professor of communication, in conjunction with the academic conference titled "Is Netflix Riding the Korean Wave or Vice Versa" held at Seoul National University in 2022, Hwang states how streaming platforms, including Netflix, are capitalizing on intellectual property rights. It speaks to the pressure creators face to produce work that garners metric visibility. Furthermore, the growing significance of platform metrics underscores how they "trigger anxieties over the perceived loss of creative autonomy," further making "the tension between metrification and creative acute" (Poell, Nieborg, & Duffy, 2022, p. 146). When Hwang was asked about the status of seasons 2 and 3 of *Squid Game* (Kim & Hwang, 2021) during the interview, he answered, "Since Netflix owns IP, even if the negotiation with me doesn't go well, they can hire another director and create seasons 2 and 3. I think all platforms are in a sensitive conflict relationship with creators regarding copyright issues" (Hwang, 2022, 26:00–26:21).

Hwang's response challenges the expected public perception that he had made huge financial gains from the global success of *Squid Game* (Kim & Hwang, 2021). It also speaks to the complexity of measuring or even quantifying the success of a Netflix series, unlike television series or films that are based on audience metrics, including ratings and box office receipts. In the case of Netflix, there are no transparent data available to measure how many subscribers actually watched a TV series or film on the platform. More specifically, it points to how the acquisition of intellectual property rights becomes a central issue in the platformization of media content as it is becoming harder to determine whether content creators are receiving a fair share of compensation for their creative work. While the term contract, as suggested in the interview, ensures the rights of workers so that their labor is not exploited, it also speaks to how the lack of transparency of data afforded by Netflix enables the streaming platform to capitalize on ethnic labor from different national markets under the guise of "uncompromised creativity" in the form of diversity and creative autonomy (Park et al., 2022). Unlike TV series that can be syndicated and provide additional revenues to the creator, the fact that Netflix acquires its intellectual property rights gives it more freedom to do whatever it wants with the content that it has acquired. This intertwinement between creativity and intellectual property is becoming more relevant with the emergence of digital platforms, further underscoring the fact that even though Netflix is seen as a haven of creative fantasy, it is also "controlling at least some of the conditions under which creative content is produced" (Burgess & Green, 2008, p. 1) in a legal sense, redefining the conceptualization of creativity as legal authorities that institutions rather than individuals hold.

Despite the politics shaping Netflix creativity, the platform has successfully instilled it as an attractive organizational attribute, which is possible because of its distinctive corporate culture. Hence, in the interview with Hong, when Hwang was asked about working with Netflix, he acknowledged that Netflix

grants more freedom as there are fewer restrictions in terms of time, format, and content. He adds, "I was relatively free to say whatever I want to say. That was the biggest difference" (Hwang, 2022, 23:30–23:43). However, Hwang also points out how creativity rooted in freedom and flexibility could also create a fantasy and undermine the fact that Netflix is a profit-driven media entity that is invested in generating revenues (Hwang, 2022). His response speaks to how the boundaries of creativity vary based on the name recognitionand value of the creative talent.

In a different interview with the *Hollywood Reporter*, Hwang alluded to how Netflix embodies the continuities of the same production norms and practices that have been firmly embedded in the Korean TV industry. Hwang stated,

> Yeah, I mean, as you said, this was a nine-episode series and I was the only one who was writing the scripts and directing the whole thing, so it was a really physically, mentally, emotionally challenging task. And the story doesn't exactly have the simplest concept, so as we were going along, new ideas were coming to me, or I would see flaws that I felt needed to be corrected, so I was, in fact, revising the script as I was filming the whole series. (Brzeski, 2021, para. 23)

On the one hand, Hwang's statement illuminates the issue of authorial value in which he not only undertakes all the responsibilities of writing and directing the TV series as the sole "creator" without any intervention from Netflix, further affirming the platform as a unique cultural space to express his creativity. On the other hand, it also illustrates the precarious labor conditions in which Hwang assumed all the burden to create the storyline; and more importantly, even though the statement reinforces that Netflix does not disrupt the traditional system as it successfully promotes, it also points to how the platform benefits from the same production system involving a set of "social rules, customs, and norms" to strengthen the industry lore of Netflix creativity (Kim, 2018, p. 88). More interestingly, it speaks to how Korean content creators negotiate with and respond to the specific social, political, and industrial conditions informing the local media industry, which truly enables them to enact creativity in the form of cultural specificity. Then, we can move away from universal notions of creativity to fully consider the specificities in the theorization of creativity beyond a Western-centric framework. This enables us to also consider the affective dimensions of labor that move beyond self-expression, self-actualization, and passionate work to include exhaustion, frustration, or unpleasant feelings that are an essential part of creative practices.

Conclusion

While the collaboration between Netflix and Korean cultural laborers has led to the diversification of Korean content in terms of genres and storytelling, this article has illustrated the specificities of Korean creativity that move beyond the mere question of influence to investigate how Netflix institutionalizes and commodifies Korean creative labor. It also speaks to how Netflix commodifies creativity as a peculiar attribute that is an integral part of its platform culture, which is further promoted as a creative cultural space for content creators. More recently, it was reported that Netflix has added a section titled "Artistic Expression" to the company's internal culture statement. The revised memo states explicitly that employees may need to work on content that they "perceive as harmful," further stating that if this is too difficult for

them, "Netflix may not be the best place for you." Another section added to the statement was "Representation Matters," underscoring how Netflix aims to not only capitalize on diversity as an essential part of its corporate culture but also make an explicit correlation between creative freedom and diversity of its content (Limbong, 2022). These Netflix initiatives illustrate how provocativeness and diversity are added as additional layers to its conception of creativity as the company struggles to continue to transform its business model. More specifically, it indicates how the global streaming giant desires to monetize ethnic labor in exchange for intellectual property.

The desire of Netflix to institutionalize creativity as an essential corporate asset to lure creative talent to the platform illustrates how it simultaneously commodifies and benefits from it. Also, the power relations informing Netflix creativity and Korean content creators prompt us to move beyond a Western-centric analysis of creativity to examine how local production cultures, labor conditions, and subjectivities of television industry workers interact to shape the discourse of creativity beyond the mere influences of marketization and capitalism. Therefore, this article aims to fill an important gap in the study of platform creativity in East Asia as little attention has been paid to it despite its increasing significance amid the continuities and changes in the media industry with the introduction of streaming platforms. Future scholarly studies devoted to the politics of creativity governing East Asian media industries should consider the critical role that creative impulses and subjectivities of humans play in the globalization of Korean media and popular culture in the platform era.

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