

## Reshaping Hallyu: Global Reception of South Korean Content on Netflix

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This study analyzes how Netflix, an emerging global subscription video on demand (SVOD) service, affects the global reception of South Korean content. In-depth interviews were conducted with 32 viewers of various ages, genders, and nationalities (Brazil, France, Japan, and the United States) who consumed Korean content through Netflix. The findings suggest that Korean content is expanding beyond fandom culture and into global media culture. This is due to the technological affordances that increase the possibility of Korean content being more universally received by the global audience, as well as Korean Netflix Originals creating new values, such as diversity and sincerity, that cater to the new generation. Furthermore, this study compares the audience who first encountered Korean content through Netflix with established Korean content consumers. By recontextualizing the findings within the changing discourses on the interplay between Hallyu and Netflix, this study provides a new perspective on the notion of Hallyu.

*Keywords: Netflix, Hallyu, Korean drama, recommender system, Netflix Original effect*

After starting off as a mail-based rental business for American consumers in 1997, Netflix launched a subscription-based video on demand (VOD) streaming service in 2007, which is now available in more than 190 countries worldwide. As of 2022, approximately 223 million users around the world enjoy global VOD services across a wide variety of genres and languages. Netflix has developed into a new type of video service provider by releasing content based on a different logic from the existing media environment, and through its diversification of Netflix Originals and content-producing countries.

The preceding discussion on Netflix has mainly focused on Netflix's industrial growth, technological progress, and production policies; however, research on audience experience is still in its early stages. This study is a full-fledged audience study that investigates how a new cultural platform circulates local content on a global scale through the case of South Korean (hereafter, Korean) content on Netflix. Various Korean content including *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021), have topped daily charts on Netflix in diverse regions, hinting

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at a significant change in global cultural flow. Discussing the social implications of this new cultural flow, this study brings Hallyu, a phenomenon of transnational popularity of Korean popular culture, and its audience to the forefront of discussion on global streaming services.

Since launching its service in Korea in January 2016, Netflix has actively serviced Korean content, proving Korea to be the content powerhouse of East Asia through Hallyu. In 2019, Netflix started to release Netflix Korean Originals. After *Kingdom* (Lee, 2019), a zombie thriller series set in the 17th century, debuted on Netflix, it garnered global attention. Subsequently, several other series, such as *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021) and *All of Us Are Dead* (Park, Hahm, & Sohn, 2022), have topped daily and monthly rankings on Netflix worldwide, showing the commercial viability of Korean content. Although preceding trendy romantic Korean dramas have captivated Hallyu fans around the world, and critically acclaimed movies directed by filmmakers, such as Joon-ho Bong and Chan-wook Park, have been popular in Western audiences, reception of these contents has more or less been confined to fandom or expert community. However, the recent success of Korean content on Netflix reveals an unprecedented aspect of the global reception of Korean popular culture that calls for a revisit of the notion of Hallyu.

This study analyzes how Netflix reshapes the global reception of Korean content, exploring how Netflix users consume Korean content. In-depth interviews were conducted with 32 viewers of various ages, genders, and nationalities (Brazil, France, Japan, and the United States) who consumed Korean content through Netflix. Interviews were conducted from July to August 2020, before the release of *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021), which had an extraordinary influence on the global promotion of Korean content. In other words, this study focuses on the mediating role of Netflix as a new platform for Korean content, without the interference of the exceptional success of *Squid Game* and its other successors. Drawing upon the interview data, we investigate what technological affordances and content features of Netflix bring changes to the viewing experiences of Korean content viewers. Additionally, we compare the experiences of viewers who encountered Korean content for the first time through Netflix with those of established Korean content consumers or Hallyu fans who have enjoyed Korean content through different channels before subscribing to Netflix. By recontextualizing the findings within the changing discourses on the interplay between Hallyu and Netflix, this study aims to comprehend what kind of agency Netflix will develop in the global spread of Korean content in the future.

### **Looking Into Hallyu in the New Media Environment**

#### ***Netflix Signaling New Content-consuming Behavior***

A wide array of research has examined how subscription-based VOD services have drastically transformed the landscape of content-viewing experiences. With differentiated streaming features from preceding media devices or platforms, SVOD services encourage new viewing behaviors. The two most frequently addressed streaming features pertaining to changes in viewers' experiences are the recommender system and bingeability.

A recommender system is an important tool for mediating users' preferences. Netflix's recommender system uses a content-based recommendation approach by filtering content based on

viewers' likes, dislikes, and viewing time. Another mechanism is collaborative filtering, which is a method of making automatic predictions based on tastes within a pool of users. Altogether, Netflix recommends what viewers potentially like based on their viewing histories and what other viewers of similar tastes prefer. The data Netflix obtains through its services allows it to accumulate information about users' viewing habits. Cox (2018) describes this flow as the continual interaction of two logics: invisual and televisable. As we interact with the televisable form, which is the interface of Netflix or the screen that we see, our interaction is processed as invisual data, which subsequently prefigures the televisable forms. Through the "mutual domestication" of users and recommendation algorithms (Siles, Espinoza-Rojas, Naranjo, & Tristán, 2019), Netflix steers users toward content that they are likely to enjoy, keeping them continuously immersed in this personalized consumption. Furthermore, as the algorithm does not necessarily tether to the nation state, the global audience can be segmented based on taste, which loosens nationalistic ties and reinforces the transnationality of cultural flow (Burroughs, 2019; Lee, 2022).

Binge watching is not only an important factor in Netflix's marketing strategy but also a new regime of watching (Grandinetti, 2017; Matrix, 2014; Pilipets, 2019; Steiner, 2017). Netflix's strategy to incentivize viewers to maintain their subscriptions through marathon watching has been strengthened and played out in various promotional ways (Lizardi, 2018). In terms of audience practice, binge watching is understood as fan behavior, as it requires deliberate and focused attention to a certain text. However, it can also be associated with nonfan behavior, especially with the rise of the VOD market (Jenner, 2017). Unlike the explicit participation of fans' binge watching, binge watching as implicit participation is "channeled by design, by means of easy-to-use interfaces, and the automation of user activity processes" (Schäfer, 2011, p. 51). Most Netflix content release an entire season at once so that users can watch without commercial interruptions. This all-at-once release strategy can channel the audience into marathon viewing, thus transforming binge watching into mainstream rather than fan behavior. Viewers are warming up to this new temporality created by Netflix, rather than being confined to the temporality of traditional televisual flow based on a regular content release schedule (Grandinetti, 2017).

Providing binge-worthy content is another noticeable strategy. Netflix has expanded beyond its original business model of VOD rental services and now produces high-quality, commercially successful original content. Netflix Originals are fueling the discourse of "quality TV" or "quality stream" (Burroughs, 2019; Park, Jang, & Hong, 2021). Jenner (2016) carefully suggests the notion of TV<sup>IV</sup> that goes beyond TV<sup>III</sup>, marked by technological advances and programming strategies corresponding to the digital media environment. Signaling the qualitative turn of the media consumption landscape, Netflix has released more than 2,400 Netflix Originals from 2013 to 2021 (Moore, 2021), and Korean content has been marked out for global success. Building on preceding research that has highlighted changes in viewers' experiences caused by Netflix, this study considers the success of Korean content on Netflix not merely as a market success but delves into its implications for global content-consuming experience.

### ***Changing Hallyu in the Era of Streaming Services***

Hallyu's development is closely related to transformations in the media environment. The global consumption of Korean content in its early stages relied on the transportation of videocassettes, and the reception of Korean content was mostly confined to Korean diasporas or some Asian countries. After the

seminal success of Korean content in East Asian countries, the demand for Korean content in the Asian region exploded. As of the late 2000s, digital media started to actively mediate Korean content to global audiences in diverse regions. Hallyu fans have been able to revel in Korean content through various video-sharing and streaming platforms, such as Viki, DramaFever, and YouTube, and to build an international fan community via different social media. YouTube, in particular, has become an essential channel through which Korean content can reach global audiences and fans, surpassing preceding online fan communities. Consequently, fandom-based reception of Korean content has grown significantly worldwide. Accordingly, numerous Hallyu studies have contextualized and interpreted Hallyu in the changing media environment, paying particular attention to digital media that supports cultural flow (e.g., Hong, 2013; Jin, 2018; Jin & Yoon, 2016).

The global success of *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021) marked a distinct watershed moment of Hallyu in Netflix. *Squid Game* is recognized for helping new audiences to be exposed to other Korean content and paving the way for other recent successes. Consequently, scholars have started to address *Squid Game* not only as an individual text that embeds textual or industrial implications to be interpreted, but more importantly as a case that is symptomatic of transformation in transnational perception and reception of Korean popular culture driven by global streaming services. Since the Netflix co-production system differs from the Korean domestic production system throughout the pre-production to distribution stage, Netflix is regarded as both an opportunity and a threat to the Korean content industry (Jung et al., 2022; Yoo, 2021). Although there seems to be no agreed-upon evaluation of the Netflix effect, producers may find wider accessibility to a global audience through global VOD platforms.

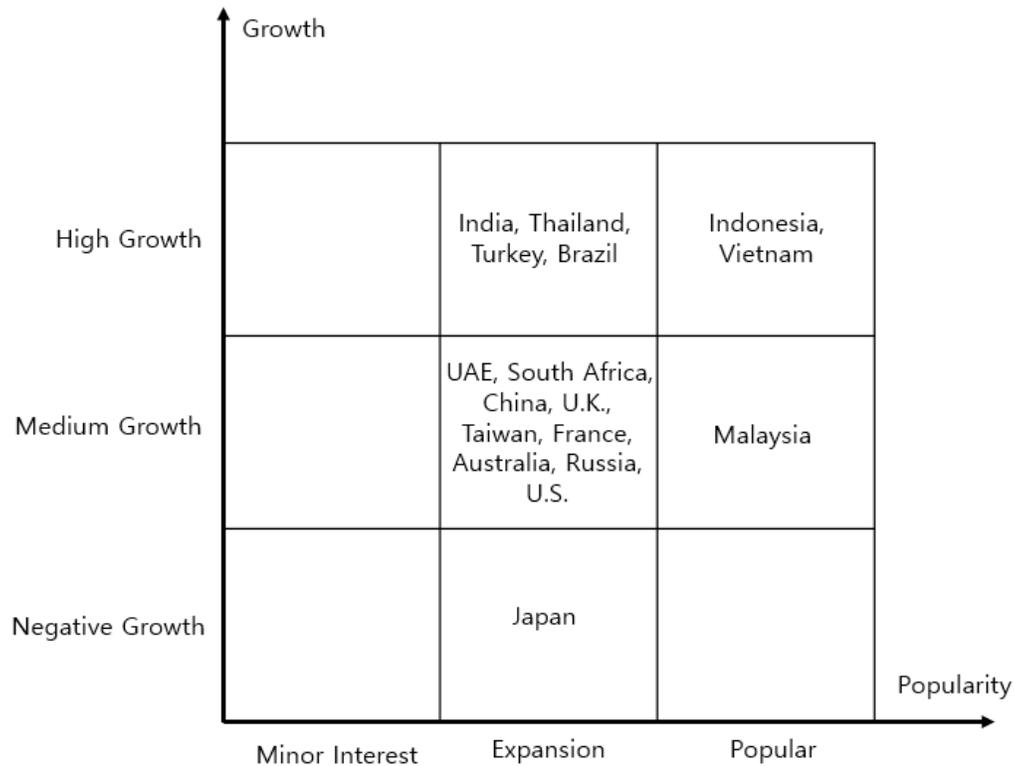
Such a phenomenon reveals the contra-flow of the transnational TV market, where U.S. and UK shows are still prominent as mainstream content (Ju, 2020; Molen, 2014). The growing number of global audiences in different regions now sees opportunities to consume diverse transnational TV shows of non-Western origin. In this process, while transnational fandom emerges and strengthens, as manifested by transnational K-pop fandom in the global music market, nonfan audiences seeking fresh content also emerge. Since there are growing numbers of global audiences who consume Korean content without engaging in fandom, Hallyu studies that have mainly focused on fan practices need to broaden their research scope.

To address this need, we pose the following questions that guide our inquiry: First, what changes does the new media environment driven by Netflix bring to the Korean content-viewing experience? In particular, what changes do the technological affordances of Netflix and Korean Netflix Original series bring to the Korean content-viewing experience? Additionally, what is the difference between the experience of the new viewership of Korean content and that of established Korean content viewers? Finally, what implications can we draw from the new Korean content-viewing practices driven by Netflix?

### **Research Method**

This study aims to examine new Korean content-viewing practices in the age of Netflix. The countries included in this study were selected based on certain standards. First, we attempted to include different countries in terms of the growth stage of Hallyu. Based on the Hallyu index, presented in Figure 1,

we selected four countries: Brazil from the high-growth group, France and the United States from the medium-growth group, and Japan from the negative-growth group.<sup>2</sup>



**Figure 1. Hallyu Index (Korean Foundation for International Cultural Exchange, 2020, p. 20).**

A total of 32 males and females in their 10s to 60s—eight from each country—were recruited for the in-depth interviews. Interviewees were selected based on the results of a preliminary survey conducted in each country, using the following screening criteria: they must have watched at least one episode of Korean content on Netflix in a recent month and must have watched at least two Korean content on Netflix. Also, in each country, three to five users who first encountered Korean content on Netflix were included to compare their experiences with those of others who had already experienced Korean content before subscribing to Netflix. To examine the differences in Hallyu content consumption on Netflix versus other

<sup>2</sup> We selected four countries as representative cases to demonstrate global audience's experience, not to conduct comparative analysis. Thus, this article does not provide contextual understanding of Korean content reception in each country. Comparing different contexts of Korean content viewing experiences, such as media consumption and production environment, media policy, cultural sensitivity, diversity, and the relationship with Korean culture in each country, would be another meaningful task.

SVOD services, we included some users who experienced Korean content through other SVOD services. We included more female interviewees, given the preceding observation that there were more female Hallyu fans than males (Kwak, 2019; Yang, 2012). Detailed information about the interviewees is presented in Table 1. To anonymize the interviewees, we assigned a pseudonym to each interviewee.

**Table 1. List of Interviewees.**

	Brazil	France	Japan	USA
Female	Ana (15)	Isabelle (18)	Mei (18)	Emily (18)
	Maria (20)	Nicole (27)	Yui (24)	Jennifer (25)
	Francisca (30)	Anne (30)	Hina (31)	Sarah (31)
	Juliana (42)	Sophie (45)	Sakura (47)	Jessica (46)
	Fernanda (54)	Monique (55)	Riko (50)	Mary (55)
	Vanessa (61)	Sylvie (58)	Sachiko (56)	Nancy (60)
Male	Antonio (33)	Jean (22)	Haruto (36)	John (35)
	Pedro (40)	Michel (36)	Yuto (64)	Robert (39)

*Note.* The figures in parentheses indicate the age of the interviewees.

The semistructured, in-depth interview was conducted through Zoom from July to August 2020, with the help of a translator and a native moderator.<sup>3</sup> Each interview lasted two hours, and all interviews were video-recorded and transcribed verbatim. We also requested that the interviewees keep track of their media use for a week before the interview. In the media diary we provided for the interviewees, they were asked to input, in 30-minute intervals, the content they consumed, and the platform and device they used to consume the content. They were also asked to attach three screenshots from their Netflix main pages on the first and last days of media diaries—the Continue Watching list, Trending Now list, and Top 10 list—to see if their viewing histories made any significant difference.

### **Netflix Affordances of Watching Korean Content**

Netflix's streaming features, such as content-based recommendation algorithms, archive access, ease of conversing devices, and provision of viewing history, serve as technological affordances for both the new viewership of Korean content and established Korean content viewers.

<sup>3</sup> The interview questions were divided into four sections: "platform" section asking interviewees about their general experience with Netflix and how they use the features it offers; "Netflix Korean content" section asking specific experiences of Korean content they watched on Netflix; "Hallyu content" section, which includes general questions about Korean content viewing experience, and "Korea experience" section asking their personal experience or impression of Korea. The number of questions varied from 60 to 90 depending on the interviewees' experiences. The interview session was mainly conducted by professional native moderators from each country to avoid the awkward atmosphere where interviewees face foreign researchers, or miscommunication due to cultural differences. However, researchers sometimes intervened during the interviews to ask additional questions or to request further clarification on the interviewees' answers.

### ***Encountering Korean Content Through Netflix***

Most of the interviewees who first encountered Korean content through Netflix were influenced by the recommender system. Netflix shows a different main page for each individual user: A title is displayed on a big screen at the top, and the currently viewed titles are displayed in the “Continue Watching” section. Below those are the rows of titles displayed under various topics—for example, Top 10 in the relevant country, Trending Now, Award Winning, Netflix Originals, Masterpiece, and New Titles. Netflix displays a total of 40 personalized rows, with each row containing 75 titles (Gomez-Uribe & Hunt, 2015). Some interviewees described finding and selecting Korean content from the recommended list shown on the main page during their first encounter with it.

I check the Netflix rankings quite often. I started watching *It’s Okay to Not Be Okay* because it was listed on the Top 10 list. I have watched 8 episodes so far and will probably watch all of them. I am enjoying the show. (Yui, a 24-year-old Japanese woman)

I watched *Train to Busan* because it was recommended to me. I had heard that the film was good a few months prior to that, but I did not pay much attention back then. But it appeared on Netflix’s list of recommendations, so I decided to watch it. (John, 35-year-old American man)

Netflix’s content-based filtering algorithms provide users who may not actively seek Korean content with the opportunity to stumble upon Korean content in various ways. Korean content can appear on their main page after watching content with similar genres or stories. It can also be included in a content list after the user has searched for a certain title. For example, Emily, an 18-year-old American girl, said that she came across *Boys over Flowers* (Kim, 2009), a Korean TV series produced in 2009 and considered classic Hallyu content, while searching for *To All the Boys I’ve Loved Before* (Levin, Kaplan, Cash, & Johnson, 2018), an American film that was a big hit as a Netflix Original at the time. This was how she watched *Boys over Flowers*, and this experience led her to watch more Korean romantic dramas. Also, a Brazilian interviewee in her forties said that her longstanding interest in the horror genre led her to watch the Korean TV series. After watching a Japanese horror film,<sup>4</sup> Netflix recommended her *Black* (Kim & Song, 2017), a thriller TV series that features the story of a grim reaper who investigates murders, and she enjoyed it. This first encounter with Korean content led her to discover several more Korean TV series that feature fantasy or spiritual elements, which eventually led to her watching *Crash Landing on You* (Um, 2019), the latest hit Korean romantic TV series at the time.

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<sup>4</sup> She was mistaking that Japanese film for a Korean horror film. Many interviewees who are unfamiliar with Hallyu often confound Korean content with other Northeast Asian content. This echoes preceding research that argue Netflix’s algorithm weakens nationalistic ties by segmenting audiences based on their tastes (Burroughs, 2019; Lee, 2022). This is suggestive in some other points. This demonstrates a typical way of non-Asians encountering Korean content: Those who initially have consumed Japanese popular culture happen to be introduced to Korean content, sometimes mistaking it for Japanese content (Hong, 2013). On the other hand, it implies a racial lumping of the global audience. Does the prevalence of racial lumping affect viewers’ inability or unwillingness to identify the national origin of Netflix shows? Does Netflix’s algorithm promote racial lumping? These are the additional questions to be examined.

What is noticeable among this viewership is that they do not necessarily gravitate toward recent releases. Unlike experienced viewers, who seek the latest content, new viewers watch titles without considering the release years because they lack the background knowledge to discern the latest content. Other factors, including genre and story, matter much more to them when selecting content. This has led to older content becoming popular in other countries years after its release. For instance, Vanessa, a Brazilian interviewee in her sixties, watched *Heaven's Garden* (Kim, 2011) and *Immortal Classic* (Kim, 2012), soap opera-style TV serials released more than 10 years ago. While Hallyu in non-Asian countries is imagined as a phenomenon specific to younger generations, Vanessa's case reveals another aspect of the global consumption of Korean content. Furthermore, while the Top 10 list or the Trending Now list of Netflix promotes current trends, the content-based recommendation system allows viewers to discover content across different time periods and regions.

In addition, the "Autoplay Next Episode" function, which promotes binge-watching practice, contributes to sustaining the interest of Korean content newcomers once they encounter it. Most interviewees considered binge watching a common practice on the platform, and they enjoyed watching multiple episodes of Korean dramas once. Moreover, other than a couple of Japanese viewers who said that Korean dramas were too long to binge watch, most interviewees from different countries expressed that Korean dramas' storylines, which often ended on cliffhangers, induced them to continue watching. Overall, Netflix's technological affordances and Korean dramas' content features work together to facilitate a marathon viewing experience for its users.

### ***Broadening and Deepening Korean Content Watching Experience***

Interviewees who had been watching Korean content through other channels expressed a preference for Netflix due to its high-quality viewing experience. Specifically, many interviewees pointed out that Netflix's subtitles were a factor that differentiated it from other platforms and SVOD services. Stability of subtitle provision, reliability of translations provided by professionals, and consistent translations were all important factors that encouraged these interviewees to choose Netflix for watching Korean content.

Because Viki is created by fans and since the fans don't understand all the dialogues, only 95% of episodes have subtitles. There are things that you start to understand after watching dramas for a long time, and sometimes there are moments when you think that the translations on Viki seem incorrect. But on Netflix, most of the dialogues are translated correctly and subtitles are also easier to read. (Jennifer, 25-year-old American woman)

When it comes to Viki, the translation can vary between seasons, and even between episodes. But this is not an issue with Netflix. You can always expect the same style of translations. Subtitles on Netflix are way more consistent and regular because they are translated by professional translators. They are reliable. (Nicole, 27-year-old French woman)

In addition to high-quality subtitles, other streaming features, such as accessibility, bingeability, and the recommender system, encourage established Korean content viewers to explore an even wider variety of Korean content. Viewers can access and binge-watch old dramas, converse with the devices if

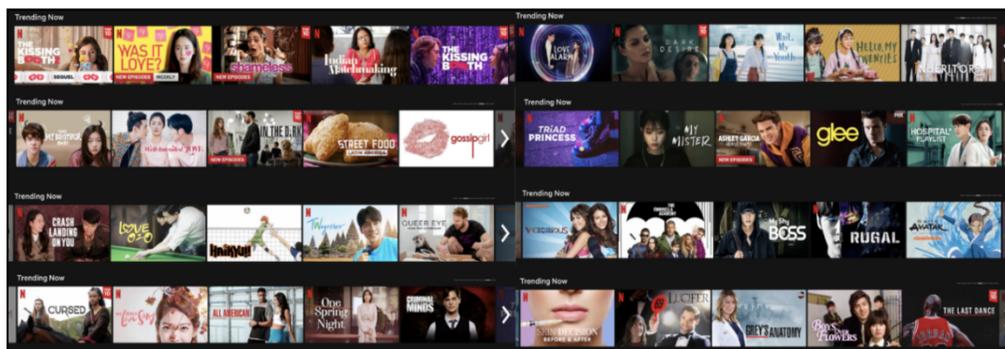
necessary, and easily check where they left off last time via viewing history. As a result, viewers find it more convenient to enjoy their content through Netflix than the preceding platforms they used to watch them.

In particular, recommendation algorithms provide established Korean content viewers with the opportunity to experience an even wider variety of Korean content. The interviewees in our study were exposed to Korean titles that they had not seen on other existing platforms through Netflix's recommendation system. Although these titles had been neglected because they did not exactly match their tastes, Netflix's constant recommendations eventually led them to watch these shows. Although it is hard to say that the recommendation system always works efficiently for all Netflix users, we found that all of our interviewees were conscious of the feature and would search for recommendations if not following or satisfied with it. Furthermore, most interviewees could name the Korean content that they had watched on the recommendation list. These established Korean content viewers seemed to be more easily motivated to follow the recommendation, since they were more open to the Korean content experience.

*It's Okay to Not Be Okay* is the most recent drama that I watched. When I first saw the title, I thought it was a melodrama. But Netflix recommended that title all the time, so I ended up watching it and it was so good. [. . .] If this drama had only been available on Viki, I wouldn't have given it a chance. (Jennifer, 25-year-old American woman)

I had never heard of *The Legend of the Blue Sea*, but it was recommended to me. I decided to watch it, and I am glad that I did. I was not very interested in romance genre, so I had not watched many, but I enjoyed watching this one. (Sakura, 47-year-old Japanese woman)

Jennifer's media diary screenshots reveal the recommending effect of Netflix's algorithm. As shown in Figures 2, Jennifer's home screen on the first day of her media diary contained 11 Korean content. After six days, a screenshot of her last media diary (Figure 3) showed that 15 new Korean content had been added to her Trending Now list. As Cox (2018) explained, the invisible data that had been input for six days by Jennifer created a change in the televisable form of her home screen layout, catering to her taste and enabling her to broaden the scope of her Korean content experience. This mutual domestication (Siles et al., 2019) between Netflix and Jennifer strengthens Jennifer's identity as a heavy consumer of Korean content or Hallyu fan.



**Figure 2. Trending Now List of Jennifer on Day 1 (personal communication, August 5, 2020).**



(Lee, 2019) and *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021), Netflix has an exclusive license to distribute various Korean TV series aired in primetime. During the interview periods, *Crash Landing on You* (Um, 2019), *Itaewon Class* (Jo, 2020), and *It's Okay to Not Be Okay* (So, 2020), among others, were being distributed as Netflix Original series in numerous countries and were gaining global popularity. These shows are not Netflix Originals in a narrow sense. However, they are distributed without any distinction from true Netflix Originals, and as a result, audiences perceive them to be Korean Netflix Originals. This study focuses on the *audience reception* of the content and regards the viewing of this content as a Korean Netflix Original viewing experience, despite the fact that these shows are not true Netflix Originals. Most of the interviewees watched or were watching more than one of these Korean Netflix Originals and described them as distinguished content for some reason. Although Netflix is known to have a strict quality control system and to demonstrate a movement that promotes diversity (Smith et al., 2021), this does not mean that all the Netflix Originals are high-quality content. However, for Netflix users who consider the Original series as go-to content, Korean Netflix Originals are deemed reliable. This phenomenon, in which Korean Netflix Originals are expected to bring more satisfaction and are actually experienced as decent content, can be labeled the Netflix Original effect.<sup>5</sup>

### ***"I Watched It Because It Was a Netflix Original"***

For viewers who are not particularly interested in Korean content, *Kingdom* (Lee, 2019) and *Extracurricular* (Yoon, 2020), among others, are first perceived as *Netflix Originals* rather than as *Korean content*. Since they lack any special interest or knowledge in Korean popular culture, it is the Netflix Original mark that plays a critical role in their decision to watch these shows. Since Netflix users equate Netflix Originals with high-quality content, this allows them to choose and watch Korean content as noted by Sylvie, a 58-year-old French woman: "I watched it [*Kingdom*] because it appeared that Netflix co-produced it." As global SVOD services, including Netflix, segment their audiences based on taste rather than nationality (Lee, 2022), they lower the entry barrier for foreign viewers who may not be familiar with Korean content or Korea. With the trust built through multiple experiences with Netflix Originals, viewers are less hesitant to try out foreign content if they are marked as Netflix Original.

In terms of the Netflix Original effect, Japan stands out not only because it has been more actively engaged in the popular culture exchange with Korea than other countries but also because it is the only country where the popularity of Hallyu is decreasing. Since Japanese audiences are more familiar with Korean popular culture than those from other countries, the power of Netflix Originals to lower the entry barrier to Korean content was expected to be less significant. However, Korean Netflix Originals are enticing new Japanese viewers by challenging the public perception of Korean content. During the interview, we found many cases where Japanese interviewees who were not opportune to properly watch Korean TV series formed a particular image or stereotype due to their indirect exposure to Korean TV series. *Winter Sonata* (Kim, 2002), a Korean melodramatic TV series that was a phenomenal hit and ignited Hallyu in Japan, still greatly influences the

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<sup>5</sup> We use the term "effect" not as a technical term for quantitative approaches, but rather to refer to the impact of a factor on a phenomenon of interest. We coined this term inspired by the title of the book *The Netflix Effect: Technology and Entertainment in the 21st Century*, edited by McDonald and Smith-Rowsey (2016), which explores Netflix's transformative role and its impact on media production and consumption.

impression of Korean content in Japan, and many feel-good romantic comedies that came after *Winter Sonata* shaped the notion of Hallyu content among the Japanese audience (Hong, 2010; Jung, 2017). However, Korean content provided as Netflix Originals attracts new viewers by breaking the bias about previous Korean dramas.

I used to think that Korean dramas always had happy endings, but I learned that there are also dark stories. [ . . . ] Japanese who aren't familiar with Korean dramas might assume that Hallyu dramas are only about romance. I will try to convince them that they are not just about romance. (Haruto, 36-year-old Japanese man)

With the increasing opportunities to be exposed to various genres and narratives of Korean content provided by Netflix, Japanese audiences and journalism distinguish between *Hallyu drama* and *Korean drama*. The former refers to preceding romcom genres, while the latter embraces various genres of current Korean dramas that often deal with more serious social issues beyond romance and are mostly distributed by nascent broadcasting stations, production companies, and Netflix (Park et al., 2021).

In terms of gender, Netflix seems to be attracting male viewers by dispelling the bias that Korean dramas are romances enjoyed by young female fans. A prominent example of this is *Kingdom* (Lee, 2019), a zombie thriller. Most of the male interviewees who were unfamiliar with Korean content mentioned *Kingdom* as their first Korean content experience. While *Kingdom* provides universal genre fun, it simultaneously offers exotic pleasure by describing 17th-century Korea. It also delivers a critical message on society by addressing moral and political decay. Thus, *Kingdom* easily caters to male viewers who may be reluctant to watch the romance genre.

As such, the Netflix Original mark allows Korean content to reach a wider audience by reducing the emphasis on nationality. Our findings indicate that viewers who do not identify as fans prioritize factors such as quality, entertainment value, and popularity over country of origin. Just as the discussion of content consumption is replete with fandom studies approaches, leaving casual consumption of content with less attention (Gray, 2021), Hallyu studies have also primarily concentrated on fandom culture, limiting Hallyu to a fandom-based subculture. However, Hallyu now needs to be discussed as a wider phenomenon of reception, beyond a fandom culture or manic subculture.

### ***New Sensitivity of Korean Netflix Originals***

*Itaewon Class* (Jo, 2020), which featured diverse characters in terms of race and gender, was praised by interviewees from all four countries for showing a new aspect of Korean content. By demonstrating diversity and inclusion, which are increasingly perceived as important values and ethics, the series was able to appeal to foreign audiences.

Korean dramas produced by Netflix differs from those produced by Korean broadcasting stations. Netflix dramas are intended for global audiences. For example, *Itaewon Class* features transgender and black. This would not have been the case if the drama was produced by a Korean broadcasting company. [ . . . ] It was refreshing because previous Hallyu dramas rarely featured black or foreign characters. (Maria, 20-year-old Brazilian woman)

When watching Korean dramas, it often seems like only Koreans live in their country and they do not get along with foreigners or people of other ethnicities, even though this is not true. However, *Itaewon Class* covers various taboos, and also includes an African Korean character. [. . .] I found this drama refreshing because it features main characters who are an ex-con, a transgender, an African Korean, and there was a character who was mentally unstable. These characters are different from the typical ones we have seen so far in Korean dramas. (Antonio, 33-year-old Brazilian man)

As can be inferred from the quotes above, established Korean content viewership pays attention to the new cultural sensitivity of Korean Netflix Originals. While even Korean content fans do not distinguish the true Korean Netflix Originals and internationally Netflix-exclusive content produced by Korean studios, there is a growing perception among them that Korean Netflix Originals offer new cultural sensitivity since they are targeting global audiences. In fact, the qualitative evolution of Korean content in the past decade is largely due to new initiatives of nascent cable channels, the growth of new production studios and technologies, and the development of storytelling capabilities. While Netflix Originals have certainly contributed to this evolution, they are not the sole cause. Nonetheless, Netflix provides another significant momentum for Korean content to reach out to a wider audience and tickle their fancy. For viewers who do not necessarily distinguish between true Netflix Originals and Originals in a broader sense, this improvement in Korean content may be perceived as a change driven by the new platform. Netflix, as an investor and commissioner, guarantees a higher budget and less regulation of production and, as a content provider, facilitates distribution through high-quality streaming services and the ease of global access. By leveraging Netflix as a new platform for targeting a global audience, the Korean content industry seems to be agonizing over more creative and multiculturally sensitive content (Y. Cho, 2022).

Netflix Originals and Netflix exclusive content, such as *Itaewon Class* (Jo, 2020), *Extracurricular* (Yoon, 2020), and *It's Okay to Not Be Okay* (So, 2020), have sparked a new discourse on Korean content among viewers. These shows portray a sensitive or dark side of Korean society by featuring characters, topics, and emotions that were not previously shown in Korean content. Viewers who, through previous Korean content, experienced the fantasy world where glamorous characters unfolded their romantic narratives have explored negotiated cultural readings discussing real versus dramatic Korea (Ju, 2020). They now experience aspects of Korea that they have always wanted to know or the harsh realities of Korea through Netflix content.

*It's Okay to Not Be Okay* covers a lot of issues related to our daily lives. It employs a psychological approach in some parts and addresses topics that are relevant worldwide. [. . .] It is very impressive because I have never seen Hallyu content about disorders or mental problems. Previous dramas that I watched always seemed perfect. Watching this drama shattered my illusion of perfection. (Francisca, 30-year-old Brazilian woman)

I know that the suicide rate in Korean society is high. When watching *Love Alarm* or *It's Okay to Not Be Okay*, it appears that mental health is also an issue in Korean society. [. . .] I've been watching Korean dramas for a long time now, and I have noticed that an increasing number of them address the topic of mental health or the pressure that students face. (Jennifer, 25-year-old American woman)

The remarks quoted above imply the reason why other recent Korean content, such as *Parasite* (Kwak, Moon, Jang, & Bong, 2019) and *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021), have been winning recognition around the world. Allegorizing the common malaise of capitalist societies, such as poverty, class tensions, and inequality, the message of these content can be played out in multiple social contexts and appeal to global audiences. After watching *Extracurricular* (Yoon, 2020), a Netflix Original series that addresses teen crime, a 40-year-old Brazilian viewer named Pedro stated how he could relate to this content: "I realized that there is always a desire to take advantage of others not only in Brazil, but on the other side of the world." With fewer regulations and more budgets than Korean broadcasting, Netflix serves as a platform to distribute content of various genres that include violent and sexual scenes (Jung et al., 2022). This is a Netflix Original effect, where relatable narratives and messages are conveyed differently from the preceding *Hallyu dramas*, which were strong in the romance genre.

In addition, watching Korean content can foster cultural sensitivity among non-Asian interviewees. Previous discussions on the cultural-political implications of the non-Western and non-White aspects of Hallyu have mostly focused on fandom engagement (e.g., M. Cho, 2022; Hong, 2013; Hübinette, 2012). Extending this phenomenon, Netflix offers the possibility of exposing Korea to a global audience beyond its fan community. Despite the increased discrimination against Asians during the COVID-19 pandemic, a statement by a 30-year-old French woman named Ann demonstrates a positive change in her perception of Korea after she accidentally watched Korean content during the lockdown.

I used to have no interest in Asia, nor was I a fan of it. I never found their food to be particularly good and never had much interest in their culture. When I thought of Asia, China and Japan were the only countries that came to mind. Korea was not on my list. I also did not have a good image of Asian tourists. When I told my friends that I had started watching Korean dramas, they were like, "what happened?" Anyway, I accidentally started watching Korean dramas through Netflix. [ . . . ] I also planned a trip to Korea, persuading my friends who had discriminated against Asians to come along. (Anne, 30-year-old French woman)

Altogether, Korean Netflix Originals and foreign viewers are in a synergetic relationship through which new cultural-political sensitivity can be cultivated. While some Hallyu content has recently faced criticism for cultural insensitivity due to racist or nationalist representation (Ainslie, 2016; Kim, 2021; Park, 2022), the global production and streaming system provides an opportunity for the Korean content industry to become aware of and consider cultural sensitivity.

### **Conclusions: Implications of Netflix Hallyu and Suggestions for Further Research**

This study sets out to analyze the changes Netflix brings to the global reception of Korean content by exploring Korean content-viewing experiences in Brazil, France, Japan, and the United States. Based on our findings, we can draw several implications regarding changes in the global reception of Korean content. While existing Hallyu has been discussed as a celebrity-focused and fandom-based phenomenon, Korean content is now being consumed by a broader audience according to their personal tastes. As shown in many interviewees' cases, Netflix plays the role of a cultural mediator based on its recommender system, exposing users to a diverse range of Korean content transcending space, time, and genre. Its users encounter and

enjoy Korean content as one of many high-quality global contents without necessarily identifying themselves as Hallyu fans. Even audiences who have never been interested in Korea before can enjoy watching *Kingdom* (Lee, 2019) as a well-made zombie thriller. Audiences who have held prejudices against Korean content can come across different storytelling and genres through Netflix Originals. Occasionally, these experiences lead to more inquisitiveness into Korea. Thus, the current Hallyu seems to be entering a new phase where it is not seen as a peculiar regional phenomenon or fandom-based subculture but as a broader transnational cultural flow.

Korean Netflix Originals are attracting a wider audience by showcasing different values, such as diversity and inclusion, compared with preceding Korean dramas. This suggests a new direction for future Korean content. Recent Korean titles that have won recognition around the world, including *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021) and *Parasite* (Kwak et al., 2019), mostly illuminate the common malaise of contemporary societies, such as inequality, gender conflicts, and racism. BTS could appeal to younger generations around the world through lyrics that urge people to love themselves and cheer them up during the global crisis (Hong, 2020). In this respect, the Korean content industry is now tasked with satisfying new sensitivities that are burgeoning around the world. By orienting toward diversity, sincerity, and authenticity, Korean content needs to deliver a message that can be played out in multiple social contexts and appeal to global audiences.

To fully comprehend the evolving and broadening meaning of Hallyu in the age of global streaming platforms, considerably more work is needed. Further studies need to turn their attention to the audience produced by algorithms. This study relied on interviews and media diaries to grasp the influence of Netflix as a global cultural platform and its recommender system, but more data-based approaches are required to understand the algorithms of audience making. Although technological knowledge on content-based recommendations and collaborative filtering systems has accumulated, their cultural impact has not been sufficiently discussed yet. For example, why are some titles more prominent than others (Bideau, Tallec, & Hong, 2022) and what cultural implications does this phenomenon carry? Building upon these questions, further discussion should explicate whether algorithmic work contributes to cultural imperialism or cultural pluralism. Specifically, this article has not paid sufficient attention to the potential risk of platform imperialism. As a data-driven and commercial-oriented digital platform that could potentially create or reinforce the existing asymmetrical relationships around the globe (Jin, 2015), Netflix's role as a global mediator demands close attention. Through advanced algorithm studies, a more critical and de-imperialized understanding of Netflix should be achieved.

In addition, as mentioned above, a distinction between *Hallyu drama* and *Korean drama* has appeared. This implies that the global reception of each drama must be different. For example, while *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021) has been an enormous hit, *Hometown Cha-cha-cha* (Jo, 2021), which shows immensely different characteristics from *Squid Game*, also ranked very high in global viewership on Netflix dethroning *Squid Game* very quickly in some countries. Featuring a romance and slices of life in a small seaside village while respecting the conventions of traditional Korean TV dramas, this drama has become one of Netflix's most watched non-English television shows (Shaw & Saito, 2022). Is the audience of *Hometown Cha-cha-cha* the same as that of *Squid Game*? If not, what differences can we discuss in terms of content features, viewing experiences, and cultural sensitivities between these two different aspects of Netflix Hallyu?

Further studies regarding the transformation of the media industry triggered by global SVOD platforms would be worthwhile. With the dizzying growth of Netflix in Korea, the Hallyu industry must have gone through various changes to survive and leverage the rapidly evolving market. Moreover, the emergence of other platforms that co-produce and distribute Korean Original Series or Korea-related content, such as Disney Plus and Apple TV, complicates the Korean content industry. Therefore, it would be beneficial to deeply discuss the transformations in storytelling, cultural and political sensitivity, systems of production, distribution, and quality control, as well as the question of intellectual property to understand the shifting tides of Hallyu in the age of global SVOD.

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