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Gotta Love the (K)Drama:
The Impact of Western Streaming Platforms on the K-Drama Industry

In less than a decade, the K-drama genre has skyrocketed from a regional industry centered in East Asia to a worldwide phenomenon. Whether in the form of melodramatic romances, historical dramas, or more recently, apocalyptic and action-oriented series, the genre provides an attractive and nuanced blend of Korean culture and entertainment. This attraction has elevated K-dramas influence within the socio-cultural realm, driving their significance as one of the primary drivers behind the development of the Hallyu wave, the emergence of Korean influence that continues to manifest globally even in the present day. However, though we often think of this movement as one-directional — Korea acting upon the Western and international realm — current analysis of K-drama's popularity reveals shifts in this dynamic, particularly adjacent to the relationship between the Eastern and Western spheres. Although K-dramas were first popularized as a symbol of Korea's expanding soft power on the global stage, the emergence of Western conglomerates in the digital age and their investment in the genre has provided a strong counter-balance to this media influence; the development of streaming platforms has fundamentally altered the K-drama landscape, transforming the way in which the genre is characterized, produced, and experienced both internationally and in its Korean homeland.

An analysis of the genre as it operates in the modern media landscape first requires an understanding of K-drama's historicized rise to fame. If its name serves as any indication, the K-drama genre is a hallmark of the Korean entertainment industry; what's interesting, however, is that unlike other subsections within the world of television, the category we know as the K-drama has no concrete defining characteristics beyond being "a television series in the Korean language originating in South Korea."¹ Indeed, even in the origination of the modern Korean drama — which occurred around the 1950s — the corpus of media was extremely diverse; the show that is widely recognized as the first televised drama piece in South Korea was an interpretation of an Irish play called *Heaven's Gate*, and those that emerged from its popularity in the years following ranged from the romance drama *Love and Ambition* to the comedic detective show *Chief Detective* to *Eyes of Dawn*, a mix of historical drama, romance, and action.² In this sense, even from the very beginning, the definition of what qualifies as a K-drama has been relatively vague, each show tangentially intersecting with a multitude of different genres — a phenomenon Koreans might call, "bibimbap." In this context, the term refers not to the food, but the quality of the K-drama in its representation of "a little bit of everything," and thus how it reflects key Korean values of "balance, community, and adaptability."³

¹ Dasgupta, Sohini. "Korean drama". Encyclopedia Britannica, 4 Jun. 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/art/Korean-drama>.

² Ibid.

³ "Bibimbap: Korea's Bowl of Harmony." *Korean Gourmet Hunters: Chasing Korea's Authentic Flavors*, 26 Oct. 2025, <https://koreangourmethunters.com/bibimbap-koreas-bowl-of-harmony/>.

Despite this content-related ambiguity, however, there are certain hallmarks of the category that bear mentioning. Notably, the genre's acceleration in popularity is implicitly linked to the emergence of modern technology. *Heaven's Gate* was broadcast on South Korea's first television station HLKZ-TV, and the development of broadcasting companies in Korea in the 1960s and 1970s — particularly with those like Korean Broadcasting System (KBS), Munhwa Broadcasting Company (MBC), and Tongyang Broadcasting Company (TBC) — resulted in greater production of television dramas — and greater viewership as the electronic companies like Samsung and Goldstar propelled the domestic manufacturing boom of the 1970s, making television sets more widely available within Korean homes.⁴ Like the original shows, the vast majority of K-dramas in the genre's industry relied upon broadcasting networks as a means of reaching the local populace. Given the bandwidth of the national network studios, episodes were thus usually aired twice a week during fixed time slots; the usual show, unlike today's long-running series, was generally comprised of 12 to 24 episodes.

These developments — both in technology and in the production environment — in conjunction with one another laid the groundwork for the development of classic K-drama viewership culture. Contextualized within this media environment built on limited but standardized broadcasting schedules and located within the family home, it comes as no surprise that the foundation of classic K-drama viewing culture was grounded in community; similar to the effect of the television in other nations, including the United States, televisions became a locus of kinship and interpersonal connection. Viewers synchronized their schedules to align with the episode releases; families and loved ones gathered around the television to watch the drama's new episode in real-time. In their shared consumption of the same K-dramas — and united further by these communal settings and scheduled watch times — families across the nation “participated in a shared national culture and conversation.”⁵ K-dramas became a source of nationally-shared references, interest, and thus were made instrumental in a crystallizing sense of national identity and pop culture.

Although K-dramas had no stringent loyalty to the framework of any particular genre of television, there were other similarities between the shows that extended beyond media environment. Popular shows like *Crash Landing on You*, *Extraordinary Attorney Woo*, and *Twenty-Five Twenty-One* often featured melodrama, an element of romance and certain themes and tropes. In contemporary dramas, those tropes often manifest in the form of character behavior; male love interests tend to give their female counter parts piggybacks, the “wrist grab” is a cornerstone of prime romantic tension. Many of these dramas, particularly those of the earlier era of television, were commonly produced on low budgets, a very distinct contrast to higher-production ventures released by popular international streaming platforms today. For Korean audiences, however, the enjoyment and the drive behind watching these shows wasn't in production but in the human connection; not only could they watch the shows beside friends and family, but the shows themselves, regardless of the genre and low-budget and melodramatic as they often were, always centralized their roots in human and cultural connection. Though

⁴ Dasgupta, Sohini. "Korean drama". Encyclopedia Britannica, 4 Jun. 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/art/Korean-drama>.

⁵ “Divider or Unifier? How Television Shapes Culture and Society.” *Georgetown University*, 3 June 2026, <https://www.georgetown.edu/news/television-society-culture-impact/>.

Sandglass (1995) is ostensibly about the violent political transition period between the 1970s and 1980s, the final interaction between Kang Woo-suk and Park Tae-soo after Woo-suk is forced to prosecute his friend marks the transcendent nature of friendship and found family over ideological and social divides.⁶ In *Jealousy* (1992), within the central romance plotline of the story, Ha-kyung and Young-ho's phone calls, ranging from the lighter, playful and rom-com-esque calls from earlier in the series to the tense ones as their friendship begins to strain, make tangible the intimate, emotional, and long-standing nature of their relationship across the years.⁷

It was this universality that was perhaps most influential in the expansion of K-dramas beyond the domestic circuit. From a theoretical standpoint, this impact is closely informed by the theory of the attraction of cultural proximity which articulates "that the cultural products most relevant to a local culture—either its own or from nearby or similar cultures—would be most popular."⁸ In shows like *What Is Love?* (1991), Chinese audiences resonated with the "clash between old and new" represented in the shifting family cultures and values surrounding the main couple, a mirror to the Confucian family values tantamount in Chinese culture.⁹ *Winter Sonata* (2002) became a smash hit in Japan both because of "its classic depiction of enduring love" and because of its confrontation with familiar themes of filial piety and nostalgic romanticism.¹⁰ Interestingly, this phenomenon reflects a counter to the idea of cultural imperialism; in the popularity of programs that represented adjacent cultures — similar enough for relatability, foreign enough to provide a sense of novelty — K-dramas weren't being propelled into the East Asian sphere by Western influence; they were functioning as mirrors to one another, deepening a sense of mutual solidarity and interest within the region.

The expansion of the Hallyu wave, propelled by K-dramas, into the international media markets does not abide by this same cultural-proximity philosophy; instead of operating on such a culturally specific level — the sameness between East Asian cultures — international attraction relied on — and even in the contemporary era, continues to draw from — the more generalized principle: a simultaneity of familiarity and novelty. The creation of genre hybridity, a combination of universal frameworks and local specificity, provided a way for K-dramas to attract new audiences through its differentiation from pre-existing Western media while also retaining the cultural connection and central humanity of the genre. While for East Asian audiences, the cultural elements infused into the K-dramas they watched served as the source of familiarity, for international audiences, that dynamic was inverted; familiarity was instead constructed through the use of both Westernized genre frameworks and the implicitly human quality of the genre. For many international viewers, the cultural elements introduce a new cultural perspective; the language was unfamiliar and required focused concentration to read the

⁶ *Sandglass*, episode 24, SBS, 16 Feb. 1995.

⁷ *Jealousy*, episode 4, MBC, 9 Jun. 1992.; *Jealousy*, episode 11, MBC, 6 Jul. 1992.

⁸ Straubhaar, Joe. "Global, Regional, Transnational, Translocal." *Media Industries Journal*, vol. 1, no. 3, Jan. 2015. DOI.org (Crossref), <https://doi.org/10.3998/mij.15031809.0001.309>.

⁹ Yun Sukjin. "K-Drama's Global Ascent." [Monthly KOREA] *Hallyu-Binger of Success*, 3 Sept. 2020, <https://www.korea.net/NewsFocus/Culture/view?articleId=189370>.

¹⁰ Lee, Jonghoon. "*Winter Sonata*" *Dreams: The Influence of the Korean Wave on Japanese Society*. 2010, http://purl.flvc.org/fsu/fd/FSU_migr_etd-3156. Florida State University.

subtitles, a barrier to many.¹¹ In order to balance that foreignness which in some ways, acted as a boundary for Western viewers, K-dramas draw from the hybridity of the genre, “employ[ing] genres already familiar to American audiences, such as action/thriller, fantasy, romance, and romantic comedy.”¹² Using the framework of these “familiar genre codes...offer American viewers multiple points of reference, enabling them to navigate the story effectively despite language and cultural differences.”¹³ Yet even beyond the genre hybridity, what is perhaps the most important attractive and universalizing quality of K-dramas comes from the attraction to and the familiarity of the human experience; regardless of the subgenres that the dramas operate in, K-dramas are fundamentally grounded in the human. Whether it’s depicting class stratification in *All of Us Are Dead* or cutthroat academic environments like in *Sky Castle*, the struggles being represented simultaneously occupy a critically Korean historical and socio-cultural lens — workplace struggles, class division, and social mobility were all central preoccupations in the wake of the IMF crisis, and academic hyper-competition in South Korea continues to impact student mental health — while also remaining extremely universal.

That human universality isn’t just limited to the thematic through-lines represented in K-dramas, however; the very same focus of human connection that was central to the emergence of K-dramas in South Korea also provided the vehicle for its international appeal. Whereas American media often operates within the tropes of the genre, the hybridization of K-dramas disallows that approach, instead, grounding themselves in their characters; it’s this “ability of K-dramas to evoke a wide range of emotions, a trait less common in other foreign dramas,” the exploration of their human qualities — including, “the presentation of love, loyalty, and sacrifice within families” — and by proxy, the elevated emotional impact of the show on its viewers that accelerated its popularity.¹⁴ As one K-drama fan stated, “good dramas are more than just entertainment—they explore our humanity.”¹⁵ This strategy — a combination of cultural foreignness and humanistic familiarity — functions as an interesting and extremely effective way of striking a balance between Eastern and Western exchange. Koreans are able to benefit from international exposure and an expansion of soft power through the Hallyu wave without having to sacrifice their cultural identity for the sake of this globalization. In the meanwhile, through the experience of watching K-dramas, international communities are thus able to anchor themselves in the relationships depicted in the shows, the genre tropes that overlap with their own media, and at the same time, gain greater insight into a culture and society other than their own. The product, therefore, is a genre that reduces the barrier to open-mindedness and acts as a mediator in this establishment of cultural exchange through media-based dialogue.

While these principles provide a fundamental understanding of the mechanism that has driven K-dramas popularity — and by proxy, visibility of Korean culture — onto the global stage, recent developments in the entertainment media landscape have produced a marked shift in K-drama industry. The most central of these developments has been the emergence of Western

¹¹ Jones, Kayla. *Why Does the U.S. Love K-Dramas? The Effect of K-Dramas on Public Perception of South Korea*.

¹² Park, Chang Sup. *Creating a New South Korean Style Beyond Hybridity: An Analysis of Why South Korean Dramas Appeal to Americans*.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Personal communication, June 14, 2022. qtd. in Park, Chang Sup. *Creating a New South Korean Style Beyond Hybridity: An Analysis of Why South Korean Dramas Appeal to Americans*.

media streaming companies; in the contemporary era, these conglomerates have assumed the role that national broadcasting networks on the domestic front as primary distributors of K-dramas across the globe. Where before, K-dramas were only accessible through cable networks — users had to subscribe to certain channels in order to watch them as they were released, and often with a delay — today, with the widespread availability of streaming services, that number has reached the hundreds of millions, including an estimated 60 million viewers from Indonesia alone, 50 million viewers in India; in 2022, 60 percent of Netflix’s 221 million subscribers reported watching at least one K-drama, and given Netflix’s investment announcement of a \$2.5 billion investment in production of K-dramas, that popularity only grew (fig. 1).¹⁶ In 2022, 60 percent of Netflix’s 221 million subscribers reported watching at least one K-drama.¹⁷ In 2025, media content tracker Ampere released an analysis titled “Korean shows are the most popular non-U.S. content on Netflix,” explaining that so-called K-content is “now consistently among the most widely exported and consumed content globally,” with viewing hours of Korean content taking up “8 to 9 percent of the global whole.”¹⁸ Paired with the fast-paced engagement promoted by the development of social media, these statistics reflect the extent to which the era of digitalization and the development of large media distributors like Netflix have expanded the sphere of influence exerted by K-dramas; what this phenomenon has also initiated, however, is a fundamental alteration in the way that K-drama is written and consumed.

One of the most evident ways in which the influence of Western organizations manifests in the K-drama realm is in the storytelling content of the shows themselves. Streaming services provide a fundamentally different release model than the broadcasting strategy characteristic of classic K-dramas. The vast majority of classic K-dramas have a runtime of 60-75 minutes per episode, and given that episodes aired twice a week on a regularly scheduled basis, the final one or two minutes of the episodes were not only required to serve as “the climax of each episode but also the focal point for viewers to stick around until the next episode.”¹⁹ However, now, “program creators don’t need to push this traditional norm as they simultaneously produce and release content on Netflix and domestic channels,” and since Netflix episodes tend to run for around 45 minutes each, this form no longer becomes viable: “in contrast to the majority of Korean dramas, each episode of Netflix’s original dramas ends abruptly.”²⁰ This trend is represented in a number of episodes throughout *Squid Game*, including the pilot episode, “Red Light, Green Light.” Throughout the episode, audiences are presented with a high-stakes, climactic progression of events, culminating in the deadly red light, green light game; however, rather than ending the episode by setting the stage for the next game, by conducting a plot-

¹⁶ Chung, Steve. “K-Culture Is Here to Stay.” *Foreign Policy*, 31 May 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/05/31/korean-pop-culture-global-influence-united-states-parasite/>; Seasia Stats. “10 International Countries that love K-Dramas the Most in 2026.” *Facebook*, 11 July 2026, <https://www.facebook.com/seastats/posts/k-dramas-continue-to-captivate-global-audiences-in-2026-with-the-philippines-ran/1065764865795364/>; *Korean Content Faces Critical 2026 as Netflix’s Investment Cycle Enters Final Year*. 9 Dec. 2025, <https://www.koreajoongangdaily.com/entertainment/korean-content-faces-critical-2026-as-netflixs-investment-cycle-enters-final-year/12451723>.

¹⁷ Chung, Steve. “K-Culture Is Here to Stay.” *Foreign Policy*, 31 May 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/05/31/korean-pop-culture-global-influence-united-states-parasite/>.

¹⁸ Yoon So-Yeon. “Korean Dramas, Films Are the Most Popular Non-U.S. Content Globally, Study Finds.” *Korea JoongAng Daily*, 16 Apr. 2025, <https://www.koreajoongangdaily.com/entertainment/korean-dramas-films-are-the-most-popular-non-us-content-globally-study-finds/12445557>.

¹⁹ Jin, Dal Yong. *Netflix’s Effect on the Local Cultural Industries*. 2026.

²⁰ Ibid.

motivating reveal or in a ground-breaking line of dialogue, the pilot's ending is much more anti-climactic. Indeed, for the last few minutes, no dialogue is spoken at all; the camera simply zooms out to an image of the island the game is located on as the roof of the stadium closes over the players (fig. 2).²¹ Through this cinematic choice, we as audience members register the isolation and scale of the game in a way that evokes curiosity given the number of answered questions that remain as to the nature of the competition; the effect, however, is significantly damper and less emotionally resonant as it is in other K-dramas, where a flash point of dialogue or a significant and sudden event — the protagonist's trips and her love interest catches her in his arms — marks the end of the episode.

Squid Game also, different from traditional K-dramas, was produced across multiple seasons and with a different number of episodes. Where within a Korean broadcasting context, dramas are usually 16 episodes or 20 episodes long, Netflix's original series — like *Kingdom* and *All of Us Are Dead* — only consist of around 6–12 episodes, making them more conducive to the production of further seasons as opposed to the classic Korean K-dramas which do not extend their shows into multi-season storylines. This design aligns distinctly with a Western capitalist market where the goal has shifted from originality and the creation of new storylines to the continuation of pre-existing ones in accordance with audience reception; the thought process of these larger companies seems to be extremely profit-oriented and risk-averse: if the first season of a show made money, easier to keep people subscribed and engaged if they cater to an existing and leech off the storyline until its popularity dies out than to produce a new show with no guaranteed success.²²

Notably, these changes in show formatting and streaming design coincide with differences in viewership culture. Whereas “previously, local terrestrial and cable channels produced dramas that ran two episodes per week for two-three months,” Netflix, with its shorter episodes, often releases all of them at once “so that viewers can watch them back-to-back at any time without waiting for the next episode.”²³ This in effect, has produced a binge-watching culture on the global scale; there is no need to craft storylines on an episodic basis if the assumption is that viewers are almost guaranteed to continue watching. What's interesting too about this phenomenon is that this change in the release model hasn't just been isolated to K-dramas released by Western-ruled media corporations; “many local cultural firms now produce drama series and release them at the same time, as can be seen in *Squid Game* and *Hellbound*.”²⁴ The ramifications of this binge-watching culture — both on international K-drama audiences and now, as we are noting in this inverse impact on South Korea — are significant in its marked divergence from the environment produced under the broadcasting model. As noted previously, airing K-dramas via cable and network broadcasting were fundamental to the creation of a community culture. The binge-watching behaviors and large-scale accessibility enabled by Western streaming companies provides a new barrier to interpersonal connection through K-drama media. Full-season releases and auto-play capabilities that are characteristic of large scale international streaming platforms enable binge-watching in a way that very much caters to solo

²¹ “Red Light, Green Light.” *Squid Game*, season 1, episode 1, Netflix, 17 Sept. 2021.

²² Alex Lee. “Why Netflix Keeps Canceling Shows After Just 2 Seasons.” *WIRED*, 23 Sept. 2020, <https://www.wired.com/story/why-netflix-keeps-canceling-shows-after-just-2-seasons/>.

²³ Jin, Dal Yong. *Cultural Production of Hallyu in the Digital Platform Era: Industry Perspectives*. University of Michigan Press, 2025. *Project MUSE*, <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/138613>.

²⁴ *Ibid*.

lifestyles and individual schedules; interestingly, in a 2022 survey conducted amongst 19,000 individuals, solo binge viewing is most common in Asia, “with at least 69% of respondents in China, South Korea, and Singapore saying they binge watch alone.”²⁵ With this swivel towards a more individualistic watching style, audiences are deprived of the community-oriented ecology that so grounded the classic K-drama environment and was essential in the emergence of global fandom; while fandom nevertheless continues to exist in relation to K-dramas, connection occurs less because of a community setting intrinsic to the watching experience than the global interconnectivity derived from technology and social platforms. Just as K-dramas are watched alone, the in-person bonding experience of coincident reactions — gasping at the same plot twist, screeching with joy when the main leads touch pinkies for the first time — is lost, and with it, an essential human element of the original K-drama viewing experience.

While the K-drama industry was relatively diverse to begin with, reliant as it is on genre diversification and large media conglomerates for Western appeal and international outreach, the K-drama genre as a whole has begun increasingly integrating Western genre frameworks. Most of the K-dramas that originally propelled the Hallyu wave and thus became popular overseas — *What Is Love?*, *Winter Sonata*, and *Star in My Heart*, to name a few — were characterized as romantic comedies, relatable, universal, yet still capable of infusing Korean cultural identity. However, Netflix’s investment and interest in the inter-genre sphere, particularly because it’s oriented towards Western and North American audience interests including thriller, zombie, and stand-up comedy — notably, “the three most viewed Korean Netflix Originals commonly share dark themes such as class strife, revenge, death, and judgment” — has propelled Korean creators to develop more shows within these genres, a move that is described as “unprecedented,” pushing “local creators to go beyond the boundaries of traditional cultural content offerings.”²⁶ This movement hints at an interesting dynamic between the Western-owned corporation and the Korean production industry; on one hand, “Netflix’s success is being driven by its catalog of content” yet on the other hand, key to the expansiveness of that catalog is the “development of original Korean content, something local artists find appealing.”²⁷ Given this shift even in production trends, “it can be argued that Netflix helps shape a new K-drama identity.”²⁸

The progression of *Squid Game* within the Korean purview is a product of the experimentation from this exact diversification movement. *Squid Game* as a K-drama marks an implicit overlap between the Western genre tropes and Korean cultural practice; the death game features in the show operates within the framework of traditional Korean children’s games yet the format, though interesting, does not become the central component of the drama as it might have in a Western show; the development of each character is nuanced, insightfully crafted, and distinctly human. Across the entire first season of *Squid Game*, though much of the story is of course, driven by the high-stakes of each game in the competition, we as viewers also bear witness to Seong Gi-Hun’s powerful arc as a main character; in the span of nine episodes, we watch as he goes from selfish and nihilistic — breaking his promise to his daughter to stop

²⁵ Alice Truong. “You’re Not Alone: Binge Watching Is a Solo Activity for Most People.” *Quartz*, 21 July 2022, <https://qz.com/460587/youre-not-alone-binge-watching-is-a-solo-activity-for-most-people>.

²⁶ Jin, Dal Yong. “Netflix’s Effect on the Local Cultural Industries.” *Cultural Production of Hallyu in the Digital Platform Era: Industry Perspectives*, University of Michigan Press, 2025.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

smoking and gambling his mother's hard-earned money on horse races — to a central moral anchor. When encountering the Tug of War challenge, Gi-Hun coordinates with Sang-woo to conduct a gamble — taking three steps forward — leading his team, ragtag though they are, to victory and establishing his role as leader and strategist.²⁹ While he returns to his selfish ways by exploiting Il-nam's dementia in the marble game, the realization that Oh Il-nam knew his strategy all along and still hands him the last marble so that he might win, sparks a realization of the cruelty and selfishness necessary for human survival, crystallizing his transformation from happy-go-lucky to disillusionment, guilt-stricken, and enraged (fig. 3).³⁰ Gi-Hun's choice to dye his hair red serves as a visual representation of his inner anger and a radical departure from his old, passive, innocent self (fig. 4).³¹ This humanistic touch, however, is juxtaposed alongside thriller-like suspense, capitalistic themes, and characters' subjection to graphic violence — all very reflective of Western genre practices which tend to favor violence and action as a means of audience attraction. Prior to the release of *Squid Game*, death game content similar to what is portrayed in the show was restricted in Korea, deemed “too violent to show to children and youth.”³² With the success of the drama, however, production of similarly violent shows have accelerated significantly: as one source writes, accounting for this change in approach, “it is no doubt that Netflix's influence on the subjects and genres is prominent.”³³

From a theoretical standpoint, this imposition of Netflix's Western influence over Korean content poses an interesting question about how to characterize this trans-national dynamic. Originally, K-dramas regional expansion into East Asian countries during the early Hallyu wave very much operated according to Straubhaar's theory of cultural proximity — relatability of cultural practices drove interest in the content itself — a philosophy proposed as a counter argument to Schiller's theory of cultural imperialism. Schiller's theory, in contrast to Straubhaar's, questions the role of agency and power within the relationship; specifically, he argued that whether through economic, political, or media influence, a more dominant country could work to impose their cultural practices, values, or customs over another as a means to shape the lifestyle of the less dominant one.³⁴ This perspective is essential to consider, particularly given the power differential that exists between Netflix — the much sought-after and extremely influential distributor — and local Korean producers: “Since many cultural creators in non-Western countries desperately want to work with Netflix, these creators have no choice but to develop cultural content that Netflix prefers, while passively accommodating Netflix's business norms.”³⁵ Indeed, even beyond Netflix's impact on the format and substance portrayed in their popular K-dramas, the emergence of Netflix as a primary distributor of the K-drama genre has also challenged the landscape of the media industry on a domestic level — both to local Korean production companies and the cultivation of a Korean national image. With the dominance that Netflix has shown within the media industry, “it is not dicey to claim that Korea

²⁹ “Stick to the Team.” *Squid Game*, season 1, episode 4, Netflix, 17 Sept. 2021.

³⁰ “Gganbu.” *Squid Game*, season 1, episode 6, Netflix, 17 Sept. 2021.

³¹ “One Lucky Day.” *Squid Game*, season 1, episode 9, Netflix, 17 Sept. 2021.

³² Jin, Dal Yong. “Netflix's Effect on the Local Cultural Industries.” *Cultural Production of Hallyu in the Digital Platform Era: Industry Perspectives*, University of Michigan Press, 2025.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ “Cultural Imperialism – Definition and Explanation.” *The Oxford Review*, 2026, <https://oxford-review.com/the-oxford-review-dei-diversity-equity-and-inclusion-dictionary/cultural-imperialism-definition-and-explanation/#>.

³⁵ Jin, Dal Yong. *Cultural Production of Hallyu in the Digital Platform Era: Industry Perspectives*. University of Michigan Press, 2025. *Project MUSE*, <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/138613>.

has been losing its ground to hold national production norms in terms of genre specifications” enforced by Western models.³⁶ Especially now, with Netflix’s role in delivering content via digital platforms and their presence in other online communities, their reach is much broader than any local television network, forcing content producers to “establish cooperation with OTT service platforms to offer their products to a much broader spectrum of audiences or customers interested in multi-screen consumption of cultural content.”³⁷

In one sense, this aspect of influence is not nearly as all-encompassing or holistic in its impact as articulated in the cultural imperialist theory; in another sense, however, the role that Netflix assumes as a mediator within the media sphere does assume a level of, if not cultural imperialism, than platform imperialism; it can simultaneously serve as “the largest multilingual, multinational commissioner of original scripted screen content the world has ever seen” while also aligning with the four standards “presented under the rubric of platform imperialism, reflecting contemporary transnational flow of cultural content: 1) a shift from an explicitly distribution-oriented business model to a vertically integrated business model; 2) the transnationalization of production to scale up its capacities; 3) attempts to leverage both the international financial system and the transnational nature of its production; and 4) dependence on big data to fuel its business model and create its algorithmic process of user engagement.”³⁸

The ways in which this control has manifested — some of which have been addressed tangentially in earlier sections of this paper — also bear weight in relation to Korean national image. Since both subjects and genres of K-dramas have been deeply influenced by Netflix, who commissions many of them and thus requires them to abide by their requests and standards, many more shows — *Squid Game* included — now contain more sexual and violent content, in keeping with Western appeal; this leads to an avalanche effect in which other shows, including those in the Korean sphere, are inclined to produce shows portraying violence as a means of “keeping up” with the ever-shifting media trends. Some individuals worry of the impact that this Western-led power may have on international perception of Korean image, especially since K-dramas, as a predominant form of media for which Korea is known, inform the perspective of international viewers/opinion through culturalization. This raises further questions, not only of the autonomy of K-drama production companies but of the problematic dictation of an East Asian country’s national image by a Western corporation; if viewers perceive K-dramas as wholly representative of the ideals, values, and practices present in Korean reality, how does it impact international Korean image? On one hand, it risks shaping the genre into something that becomes less about truthfully and accurately informing about Korean culture than about earning money through attraction and curiosity. On the other, this is the exact interrogation that the idea of soft power operates within. Thus, even when operating within Westernized standards, K-drama producers still find ways to integrate elements that reflect Korean culture, continuing to fuel curiosity, and by proxy, draw K-drama viewers into the Korean cultural orbit.

As we assess the arc of the K-drama industry — its emergence, popularization, and current status in the contemporary age — it’s easy to define the category solely in relation to the Hallyu wave, enabling a characterization that considers K-dramas within as a westward directed

³⁶ Jin, Dal Yong. “Netflix’s Effect on the Local Cultural Industries.” *Cultural Production of Hallyu in the Digital Platform Era: Industry Perspectives*, University of Michigan Press, 2025.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Cunningham & Scarlata qtd. in *ibid.*; Ibid.

form of media exchange. This paper has explored the numerous ways in which that framework must be reevaluated in light of new streaming designs, authorities, and technological changes in the media market. From changes in release strategies altering storytelling techniques and the increased modification of content in accordance with popular Western genres to the impact of this Western shift on local production companies, this paper reveals a critical necessity for future analyses of Western and Eastern socio-cultural phenomena: historical movements cannot be evaluated in a vacuum; particularly within an advanced technological age where communities increasingly interact in novel ways, philosophies on transnational dynamics must be altered to accommodate changing contexts.

FIGURES



(fig. 1) Infographic showing top 10 international countries in which K-dramas are most popular from Seasia Stats, 11 July 2026, <https://www.facebook.com/seastats/posts/k-dramas-continue-to-captivate-global-audiences-in-2026-with-the-philippines-ran/1065764865795364/>



(fig. 2) Final scene of *Squid Game* season 1, episode 1, *Squid Game* (created by Hwang Dong-hyuk, 2021), 00:59:52.



(fig. 3) Scene in which Oh Il-nam lets Seong Gi-Hun win at marbles in season 1, episode 6 of *Squid Game*. *Squid Game* (created by Hwang Dong-hyuk, 2021), 00:52.45.



(fig. 4) Image of Seong Gi-Hun after he dyes his hair red in the season finale of *Squid Game*. *Squid Game* (created by Hwang Dong-hyuk, 2021), 00:43:10.

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