

Duality of K-Content in the Era of Netflix: An Investigation of Korean “Netflix Original” Characteristics

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Through a comprehensive quantitative analysis of all non-U.S. Netflix Originals from 2015 to 2021, this study examines whether Korean content carries distinct characteristics compared with those of other countries. The findings reveal a predominance of dark K-dramas and a duality to Korean Netflix Original programming, characterized by high viewership and a lack of genre diversity. Netflix’s persistent focus on a limited set of genres can be both advantageous and restrictive, potentially fostering a unique K-drama brand or hindering the exploration of diverse genres. Therefore, this study recommends emphasizing platform studies and a political-economic framework in future research on the Korean Wave to better understand the evolving K-drama landscape, ensure continued growth and diversity of Korean content, and address challenges and opportunities posed by dominant platforms like Netflix.

Keywords: Netflix international content strategy, K-drama, Korean Wave

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The sensational popularity of South Korean (hereafter Korean) content recently reached its apex with *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021–present), Netflix’s most successful series launch yet, which has reached 111 million fans worldwide (Netflix, 2021). The dystopian drama series is the latest in a diverse pipeline of Korean Netflix Original content, which began with Director Bong Joon Ho’s *Okja* (Bong, 2017), and now includes more than 80 titles, such as *D.P.* (Ban & Han, 2021–present) and *Space Sweepers* (Jo, 2021). After unveiling plans to spend \$500 million on Korean movies and TV shows in 2021 alone (Shaw & Zhao, 2021), Netflix’s growing focus on original content has been evaluated as a strategic reaction to growing competition from mega-media conglomerates such as Disney, Comcast, and AT&T, which have jumped into the online streaming space and withhold exclusive rights of popular content for their platforms (Lovely, 2020). With competition from domestic streaming services that have a strong foothold in their respective countries, as well as existing U.S.-based streaming services such as Hulu, Apple TV, and Amazon Prime, Netflix is committed to creating its own exclusive content as opposed to negotiating expensive deals for rights with other content holders (Khandelwal, 2020).

Netflix has continued an aggressive expansion into international markets with the aim of creating local content that will simultaneously attract new local subscribers and capture viewers worldwide. In a move away from the model of Hollywood exporting most hit international movies and TV shows, Netflix has disrupted the global mediascape by investing in programming and production companies in other countries, which are in turn introduced to global audiences (Rodriguez, 2022). Despite its global foothold and significant influence, there has been a lack of research dedicated to uncovering Netflix’s international Original content strategy. This may be in part because Netflix is notably protective of its data; because subscription video-on-demand platforms have no obligation to report their viewing metrics, researchers who once relied on box office revenues or audience viewership numbers are facing new challenges (McKenzie, Crosby, & Shin, 2022). Through an analysis of all non-U.S. Netflix Originals from 2015 to 2021, this study aims to identify key trends and examine whether Korean content carries distinct characteristics compared with those of other countries. As Netflix’s growing investments continue to shape the future of K-content, this study fills a dearth of academic scholarship at the nexus of K-content developments and global streaming platforms.

Netflix’s Global Expansion and Personal Curation Strategy

Netflix has grown from its launch in 1997 as a mail-order DVD website into a subscription-based, over-the-top (OTT) streaming platform and production company with more than 222 million subscribers worldwide in over 190 countries (Hern, 2022). Upon solidifying its domestic presence, Netflix expanded globally through a three-step strategy. First, Netflix targeted markets that shared similar geography, language, and culture to the United States, such as Canada, to minimize foreign challenges (Brennan, 2018). Netflix then extended its services to 43 countries in Europe and Latin America with a particular focus on localization and building partnerships (Onyusheva & Baker, 2021). Based on viewer behavior data from these markets, Netflix entered the remaining markets, including Asia, armed with the knowledge of audiences’ preferred content and marketing strategies (Brennan, 2018).

A cornerstone of Netflix’s success has been its sophisticated personal curation and content recommendation algorithm. Although Netflix has not disclosed details of its algorithm’s mechanisms, the company has consistently emphasized its commitment to learning exactly what the company’s users want

to see (Shelley, 2016). Large teams are trained by Netflix to watch content and tag them with metadata on a detailed scalar system across a diverse range of variables such as degree of romanticness, sexually suggestive content, social acceptability of lead characters, and even plot conclusiveness (Madrigal, 2014). Furthermore, Netflix divides its global subscribers into one of 2,000 "taste clusters" based on their viewing patterns (Meyer, 2020). The data are combined to create personalized content recommendations pushed to the top of each user's homepage, which 75% of users choose from; Netflix revealed that the high efficacy of personalized suggestions is directly linked to increased subscriber retention (Amatriain & Basilico, 2012). Because Netflix's business model relies on monthly fees from subscriptions, they are motivated to use their arsenal of viewing data and hypersegmented genre data to personalize the Netflix experience and keep subscribers coming back.

Aside from catering to local viewers by optimizing algorithms and creating strategic alliances with local telecommunication and content production companies, an essential element of Netflix's strategy has been its original programming, referred to by the company as "Netflix Original" content. Netflix's first commissioned Netflix Original was *House of Cards* (Fincher et al., 2013–2018) in 2011, and the company has since continued to negotiate contracts with production companies and creators worldwide for exclusive content. An emphasis on growing Netflix Originals continues as major media and tech conglomerates such as Disney, Apple, HBO, and Peacock join the competitive OTT landscape with their own rich libraries of content (Divakaran, 2022). This international subcontracting and outsourcing model is a dramatic shift away from a previous era in which Hollywood internally produced and exported TV shows and films. The vice president of international Originals at Netflix has made it clear that their aim is to attract new international audiences while also appealing to American viewers; the most popular contents in countries such as Korea, Japan, Thailand, Turkey, United Kingdom, and Sweden were local Netflix Originals, and 45% of the Netflix library in the United States comprises foreign Netflix Originals (Alsan, 2021). Netflix's chief content officer has also shared the "secret formula" for international catalogs, describing it as a mix of 15–20% local content and 80–85% Hollywood and other international content (Lobato, 2019). Netflix continues to push its U.S. content to the world while drawing in international audiences. Series hits both domestically and worldwide, such as Spain's *Money Heist* (Pina, Martinez, Colmenar, Lobato, & Manubens, 2017–2021) and France's *Lupin* (Degeorges, Franck, & Jaubert, 2021–present), contributed to a subscriber growth of 98 million between 2019 and 2020, or a 33% year-over-year growth. However, Korea's *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021–present) has been lauded as the most successful example of Netflix's strategy to invest in local content to capture domestic markets, facilitate entry into new markets, and attract viewers worldwide (Stangarone, 2022).

K-Dramas in the Era of Netflix

K-dramas have had a decades-long history before the emergence of global streaming platforms. Scholars attribute the beginning of the Korean Wave to an unprecedented attraction to Korean dramas from East and Southeast Asian countries in the late 1990s when Korean terrestrial TV stations began to export their popular dramas such as *What Is Love All About* (Choi, 1991–1992), *Star in My Heart* (Lee & Lee, 1997), *Autumn Fairy Tale* (Yoon, 2000), and *Winter Sonata* (Yoon, 2002) to overseas markets (Kim, 2015). These successful titles built the foundation for future romance-themed melodrama conventions, stabilizing terrestrial networks' production formula of Korean Wave stars and a romantic storyline (Noh, 2022b). "Pure

love” and traditional family values were the most prominent themes in K-dramas through the early 2000s (Lee & Ju, 2010). Following the wave of melodramas, romantic comedies such as *Lovers in Paris* (Lee, 2004), *Full House* (Kim, 2004), and *My Name Is Kim Sam Soon* (Kim, 2005) reached high popularity both domestically and in international markets. Despite a shift from domestic terrestrial broadcasters pioneering the development and distribution of K-dramas to new international investors, genres of the most popular K-dramas remained similar. *My Love From the Star* (Moon, 2013–2014) and *Descendant of the Sun* (Bae, 2016), which both star Hallyu celebrities as the main characters, were licensed to the Chinese online video platform iQiyi. The former is a romantic comedy featuring fantasy elements, and the latter is a melodrama between a special forces officer and a surgeon (Park, 2016). As production of K-dramas was expanded to cable and nonterrestrial networks in the late 2000s, edgier K-dramas with progressive female characters or nonformulaic storylines began to emerge. Despite the numerous changes in K-drama production and distribution, the biggest hits revolved around themes of romance—that was, until Netflix began K-drama productions.

Netflix and K-dramas have become inseparable concepts due to the streaming giant’s significant influence on the Korean drama industry, investing \$700 million from 2015 to 2020 to build production facilities and expand its collection of Korean content (Choudhury, 2021). As of 2020, Korea has the largest number of Netflix co-commissions in the world (Lotz, 2020), and the company has announced plans to keep pace with the aggressive investments of rival platforms in the Korean market, no less than its \$463 million investment in 2021 alone (Dong, 2022). Noh (2022b) argues that a combination of terrestrial broadcasters’ long lineage of romance-themed K-dramas and the infusion of Netflix capital for enhanced production values created the formula for “romantic blockbusters.” With unmatched capital and strategies, Netflix acts as both an investor enabling the production of a wider variety of content and a powerful force threatening Korea’s drama production landscape. On the one hand, scholars have raised issues of governance and power; Netflix’s investment in local production studios relegates the studios to a mere subcontracting role because they are divorced from any success of their own shows and become increasingly dependent upon Netflix’s investments and business strategies (Kim, 2022; Noh, 2022a; Park, Kim, & Lee, 2023). On the other hand, Netflix minimizes risk for local productions and provides abundant creative freedom to creators against the backdrop of a volatile media landscape and conservative investors (Roig, Clares-Gavilán, & Sánchez-Navarro, 2021). Multiple directors and producers have attested to Netflix’s willingness to provide creative freedom, pushing genre boundaries to new heights while renewing tried-and-true formulas (An, 2022).

Aside from *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021–present), which remains Netflix’s most-viewed show by a wide margin (Clark, 2022), K-drama’s prominence on the platform is evidenced by its presentation as a genre alongside Action, Romance, and Comedy, further broken down into detailed categories such as “K-drama for beginners” and “Most bingeable Korean television.” Despite the rapid growth of K-dramas and an expansion of genres, production patterns, and distribution practices, there has been a lack of academic scholarship on the latest K-drama developments. With the rise of OTT services, Lobato (2019) raises the following question: “What is to be gained from studying TV under the rubric of new media?” (p. 30). As an extension, this study poses the question: What are the unique properties of globally distributed Korean Netflix Originals and their implications?

Method

This research aims to identify Netflix Original's content strategy and further examines Korean Netflix Original content characteristics. Research questions include the following:

RQ1: What are the key time-series trends of Netflix Original content?

RQ2: What are the key distribution traits of Netflix Original content's genre and adjective keywords?

RQ3: Does Korean Netflix Original content have any significant or differentiating characteristics compared with Netflix Original content of other countries?

Data Collection and Selection Criteria

The total list of Netflix Originals was compiled by four researchers from June 2021 to January 2022. The data period begins in 2015, when Netflix produced its first non-U.S. Original shows, until the end of 2021; a total of 906 non-U.S. Netflix Original titles were collected and used for analysis. U.S. Netflix Original content was not collected because the aim of this study was to investigate Netflix's international Original content strategy. Because Netflix Inc. does not provide a comprehensive list of Netflix Original titles, researchers used online databases (*IMDB, Wikipedia, Namu Wiki*), independent fan sites and blogs (*What's on Netflix*), and keyword news searches to compile a preliminary list.

A Netflix Original refers to any film or show that has been "commissioned, produced, and distributed by Netflix" and has not been made to appear on a channel other than Netflix (Robinson, 2018, para. 3); once a Netflix Original was identified in the online search, researchers verified that the content was indeed Netflix Original programming by checking for the following criteria: (1) Have an "N Series" or "N Film" logo above the title on the title page, (2) contain the phrase "A Netflix Original Film" or "A Netflix Original Series" inside the content, usually appearing within beginning credits, and (3) contain a "Netflix Original" logo on the content's promotional poster. Researchers further conducted a cross-check of keyword news searches to verify that each content was a part of Netflix Original programming.

Once a list of all verified Netflix Original titles was compiled, researchers accessed each one of 906 Netflix Original contents and their respective title pages on the Netflix platform to collect the following data variables: title, language, country, release year, running time or episodes, genre keywords, and "This Content Is" keywords (henceforth referred to as adjective keywords). As depicted in Figure 1, genre and adjective keywords were found on the right side of each content's title page (e.g., Genres: Sci-Fi TV, Teen TV Shows, TV Horror; This show is: Ominous, Scary). Though a total of 154 genre keywords were collected and identified, researchers removed genre keywords that held country characteristics (e.g., Argentinian, German TV Show, Italian Movies) from the data set to avoid redundancy, because each content's country information was also recorded. Following this removal, a total of 99 genre keywords remained and were used for analysis. Country information was recorded as the country mentioned in genre keywords; however, when a genre keyword with a country characteristic was unavailable, the information was retrieved from an online movie database search. The language was recorded as each content's "original" audio language, which could be found by accessing each content and clicking on the audio options tab.



Figure 1. Sample Netflix title page used for data collection (Netflix, n.d.).

Aside from Netflix Originals' content details, audience viewing metrics were collected from *top10.netflix.com*, a website operated by Netflix that provides a list of top-10 content that amassed the most weekly hours viewed across the world. Researchers downloaded weekly viewing data from June 28, 2021, to the end of 2021 and calculated a sum of total viewing hours for all non-U.S. Netflix Original content that appeared in the weekly top-10 list. Three rounds of cross-validation were performed by researchers to identify and fix duplicate data, typos, blanks, and miscoding errors before proceeding with data analysis. A sample of the final data sheet is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Sample of Final Data Sheet.

No.	Content Title	Country	Continent	Release Date	Genre Keyword	Adjective Keyword	Total Hours Viewed (Second Half of 2021)
1	<i>1994</i>	Mexico	America	2019	Docuseries Crime TV Shows True Crime Documentaries Political Documentaries	Provocative Investigative Emotional	n/a
2	<i>7 Prisoners</i>	Brazil	America	2021	Dramas Social Issue Dramas	Ominous Dark	19,260,000

Data Analysis

Three statistical methodologies were conducted to perform this study. First, descriptive statistics and cross-frequency statistics using SPSS 20 were used to analyze the time-series trends of Netflix Original content on both regional and country levels. Cross-analysis between country and genre keywords, country, and adjective keywords was further executed to identify keyword distribution traits by country. Second, to cluster the dimensions of genre keyword structure, Quantification method III was executed using the open-source statistical software, R. The key aim of Quantification III is to explore data structures and analyze response patterns consisting of qualitative data types and categorical forms; quantifying individual data observations by assigning values to them maximizes the correlation coefficients (Huh, 1998).² Third, to visualize the dispersion and distribution of the data network, a two-mode social network analysis was conducted using NetMiner. This method is employed to analyze interactions between nodes, degrees, links, and directions in a network structure (Huh, 2010). Lastly, the Herfindahl-Hirschman index (HHI)³ was used as a concentration index to evaluate the degree to which the distribution of adjective keywords was concentrated or diversified.

Findings

Growing Significance of Korean Netflix Originals

The total number of Netflix Original content has been steadily growing from 2015 to 2021 (Figure 2). There was a sharp increase in the quantity of content, from 41 in 2017 to 145 in 2018, followed by a steep incline from 2018 onward. By continent, Europe and Asia were the leading markets of Netflix original content. Europe made up 42.2% of Netflix Original content, followed by Asia with 31.8% (Figure 3). France ranked first place among a total of 48 countries, with 80 Netflix Originals (Table 2).

Among 48 countries, Korea ranked tenth with 39 Netflix Originals. The top 10 countries with the most Netflix Originals titles were France, Spain, India, Japan, Mexico, Brazil, the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, and Korea. Korea had the third highest number of Netflix Originals in the Asian region, behind India and Japan, followed by Taiwan and Turkey. Korea's steady year-to-year increase in the quantity of Netflix Originals was particularly noteworthy: 1 in 2017, 5 in 2018, 6 in 2019, 8 in 2020, and 19 in 2021. This steady production increase during the data period demonstrates how Netflix has increased its investments

² To maximize $\text{corr}(x, y)$ of Quantification III (Huh, 1998, pp. 62–63):

$$\begin{aligned} & \max x' F y / N \\ & x, y \\ & \text{subject to} \quad 1r'Dr x / N = 0, \quad 1c'Dc y / N = 0, \\ & \quad \quad \quad x' Dr x / N = 1, \quad y' Dc y / N = 1 \\ & G \equiv Dr^{-1/2} F Dc^{-1/2} \\ & G = U Dq V' \\ & rxc \quad rxc \quad cxc \quad cxc \end{aligned}$$

³ The HHI is calculated by squaring adjective keywords' share of each country and finding the sum of the resulting numbers (U.S. Department of Justice & Federal Trade Commission, 2010)

in Korea and serves as evidence that Netflix sees Korea as an important production site. Netflix Korea's vice president of content revealed that the company would continue investments in Korea in the foreseeable future to combat the platform's aggressive rivals, adding that it has no plans to cut back from its \$460 million investment in 2021 (Yeo, 2022).

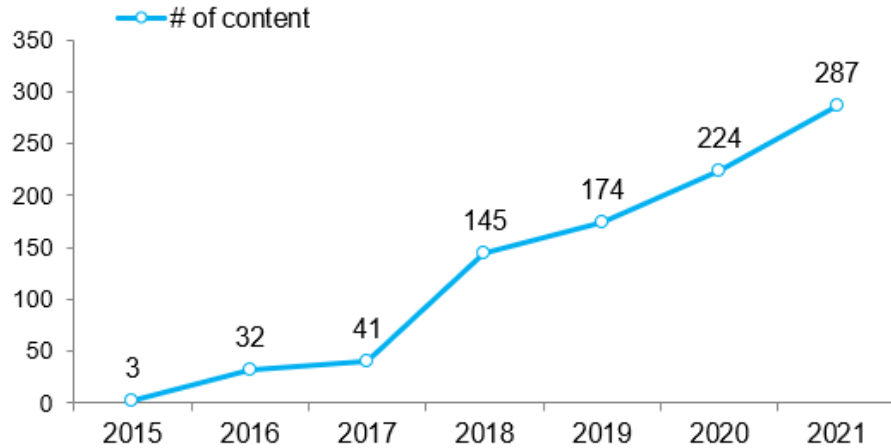


Figure 2. Yearly trend of the total number of non-U.S. Netflix Original content (2015–2021).

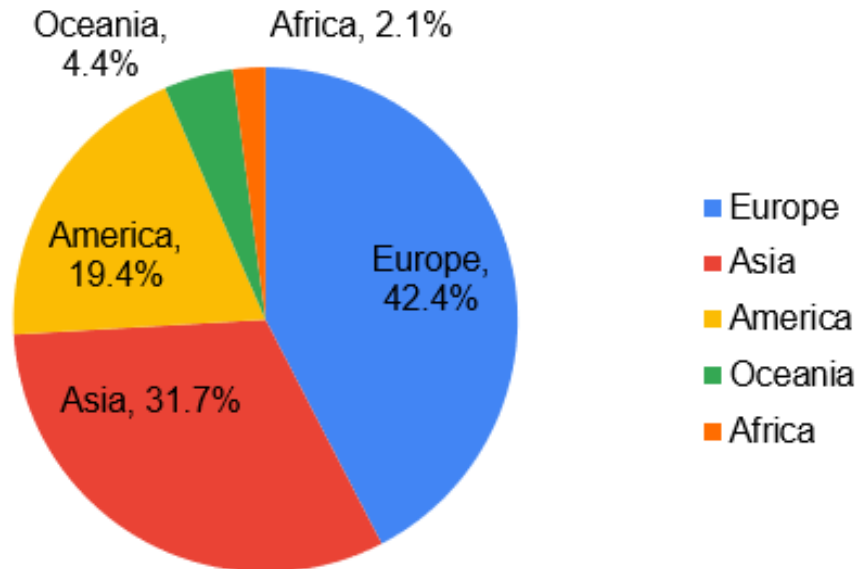


Figure 3. Composition of non-U.S. Netflix Original content by continent (2015–2021)*.

*Note. America refers to the Americas and not U.S. Netflix Originals.

Table 2. Number of Non-U.S. Netflix Original Contents by Country (2015–2021).

No	Country	Continent	No. of Contents	No.	Country	Continent	No. of Contents
1	France	Europe	80	26	Denmark	Europe	10
2	Spain	Europe	77	27	Nigeria	Africa	7
3	India	Asia	71	28	United States	America	5
4	Japan	Asia	70	29	Israel	Asia	4
5	Brazil	America	55	30	Singapore	Asia	4
6	Mexico	America	55	31	Russia	Asia	4
7	United Kingdom	Europe	52	32	Ireland	Europe	3
8	Germany	Europe	44	33	Iceland	Europe	3
9	Italy	Europe	42	34	New Zealand	Oceania	3
10	Korea	Asia	39	35	Jordan	Asia	2
11	Australia	Oceania	37	36	Georgia	Asia	2
12	Canada	America	35	37	Egypt	Africa	2
13	Taiwan	Asia	21	38	Finland	Europe	2
14	Turkey	Asia	20	39	Hong Kong	Asia	2
15	Poland	Europe	19	40	Austria	Europe	1
16	Indonesia	Asia	18	41	Peru	America	1
17	Thailand	Asia	16	42	UAE	Asia	1
18	Colombia	America	13	43	Portugal	Europe	1
19	Sweden	Europe	13	44	Ukraine	Europe	1
20	Norway	Europe	12	45	Uruguay	America	1
21	Netherland	Europe	12	46	Luxembourg	Europe	1
22	Philippines	Asia	11	47	Saudi Arabia	Asia	1
23	Belgium	Europe	11	48	Lebanon	Asia	1
24	Argentina	America	11	Total			906
25	South Africa	Africa	10				

Netflix's Korean Original Programming: Dominantly "K-Drama" and "Dark"

All genre and adjective keywords of Netflix Originals from 2015 to 2021 were collected and analyzed, through which a total of 99 genre keywords and 29 adjective keywords were found (Tables 3 and 4). We argue through these findings that Netflix is utilizing a data-driven keyword hypersegmentation strategy, which supports Netflix's aim to cater to every subscriber's specific tastes and ultimately increase their bottom line. Genres and adjectives have served as useful tools for systemically delineating similarities and differences while enhancing efficiency on both ends of production and reception (Mittell, 2004). However, classifying TV programs into genres has proven to be increasingly problematic due to the hybrid nature of content and resulting overlapping categorizations (Hendrickx, Raats, Ranaivoson, & Opgenhaffen, 2019). Netflix's solution to this challenge is creating as many categorizations as possible, the diversity of which is paired with viewing data to curate surprisingly specific suggestions to users such as "Emotional Fight-the-System Documentaries" or "Period Pieces About Royalty Based on Real Life" (Madrigal, 2014).

Table 3. Complete List of Non-U.S. Netflix Original Genre Keywords.

No.	Genre Keyword	No.	Genre Keyword	No.	Genre Keyword
1	TV Dramas	34	Sci-Fi TV	67	K-Dramas Based on Webtoon
2	Comedies	35	Movies Based on Real Life	68	Mystery & Thriller Anime
3	Crime TV Shows	36	Competition Reality TV	69	Anime Based on Books
4	TV Thrillers	37	TV Horror	70	Education for Kids
5	Dramas	38	Family Watch Together TV	71	Science & Nature TV
6	TV Comedies	39	Independent Movies	72	Science & Nature Docs
7	TV Shows Based on Books	40	Lifestyle	73	Home & Garden Reality TV
8	TV Mysteries	41	Teen Movies	74	Kids Music
9	Romantic Movies	42	True Crime Documentaries	75	Romance Anime
10	Teen TV Shows	43	Sci-Fi Movies	76	Nature & Ecology Documentaries
11	Reality TV	44	Family Movies	77	Talk Shows
12	Stand-Up Comedy	45	Romantic TV Comedies	78	Anime Based on a Video Game
13	Thriller Movies	46	K-Dramas	79	Spy Movies
14	Romantic Comedies	47	Biographical Documentaries	80	Martial Arts Movies
15	Social Issue Dramas	48	Food & Travel TV	81	Steamy Romantic Movies
16	Docuseries	49	TV Action & Adventure	82	Documentaries
17	Romantic TV Dramas	50	Children & Family Movies	83	Military Documentaries
18	Movies Based on Books	51	TV Cartoons	84	Musicals
19	Action & Adventure	52	LGBTQ Movies	85	Horror Anime
20	Sci-Fi & Fantasy Anime	53	Sitcoms	86	Variety TV
21	Documentary Films	54	Mysteries	87	Travel & Adventure Documentaries
22	Action Anime	55	Wedding & Romance Reality TV	88	Quirky Romance
23	Horror Movies	56	Drama Anime	89	Movie Based on Real Life
24	Social Issue TV Dramas	57	Military Movies	90	Sports Anime
25	Anime Series	58	Historical Documentaries	91	Teen Movies Dramas
26	TV Shows Based on Manga	59	Shounen Anime	92	Family TV Shows
27	Period Pieces	60	Anime Movies	93	Reality TV Shows
28	Fantasy TV Shows	61	Nollywood	94	True Crime
29	Social & Cultural Docs	62	Hip-Hop	95	Courtroom Movies
30	Kids' TV	63	TV Shows Based on Comics	96	Concerts
31	Political TV Shows	64	Courtroom TV Shows	97	Medical TV Shows
32	Music & Musicals	65	Political Documentaries	98	Comedy Blockbusters
33	Bollywood Movies	66	School Anime	99	Anime Based on Light Novels

Table 4. Complete List of Non-U.S. Netflix Original Adjective Keywords.

No.	Adjective Keyword	No.	Adjective Keyword	No.	Adjective Keyword
1	Emotional	11	Ominous	21	Sentimental
2	Suspenseful	12	Quirky	22	Violent
3	Dark	13	Witty	23	Absurd
4	Romantic	14	Inspiring	24	Steamy
5	Exciting	15	Goofy	25	Healing
6	Intimate	16	Chilling	26	Mind-Bending
7	Heartfelt	17	Investigative	27	Adrenaline Rush
8	Feel-Good	18	Offbeat	28	Swoonworthy
9	Understated	19	Raunchy	29	Controversial
10	Scary	20	Provocative		

The very existence of 99 genre keywords and a separate adjective keyword category is a distinguishing characteristic that Netflix has compared to other streaming services. Other streaming platforms provide few to no keywords, which are often much less segmented and general in nature. As examples, Apple TV+ presents only the genre keyword "drama" to describe *Pachinko* (Hugh et al., 2022–present), and Amazon Prime's *Four More Shots, Please!* (Nandy & Nandy, 2019–present) presents the genre keywords comedy, international, drama, and romance, which are much broader than those provided by Netflix.

Furthermore, the separate existence of adjective keywords serves as an additional control parameter that provides extra details that genre keywords cannot. For example, though a piece of Netflix content may be categorized as crime or drama, adjective keywords such as dark, suspenseful, and ominous further parse out the nuanced feelings associated with each content. Netflix's vice president of product of innovation describes every piece of information associated with a content item as part of a "mountain of data at our disposal" (Barrett, 2016, para. 9). This data, combined with factors such as customer viewing data and search history, enables the creation of highly personalized content suggestions for each user. The strong engagement resulting from these recommendations is directly linked to subscriber retention and increased revenue (Madrigal, 2014).

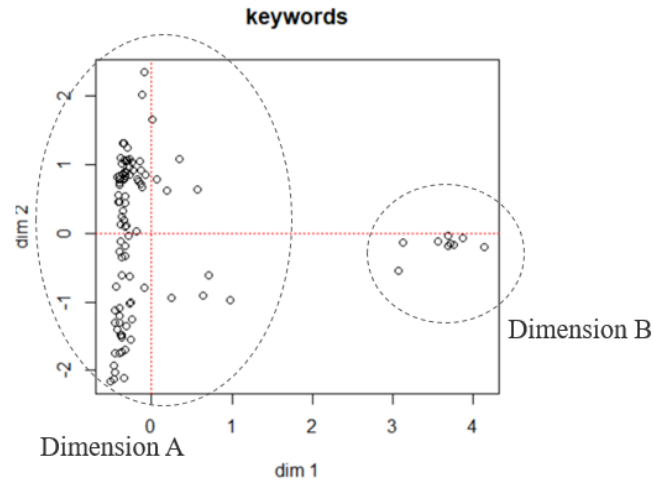


Figure 4. Two dimensions of genre keywords from non-U.S. Netflix Original contents.

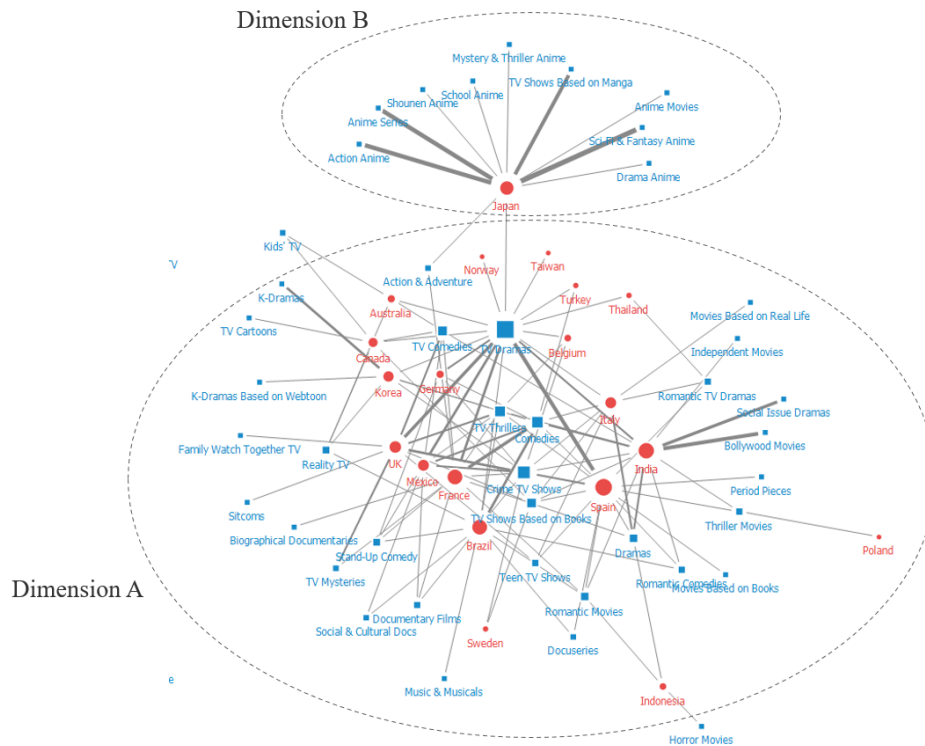


Figure 5. A detailed network of genre keywords for Dimensions A and B of non-U.S. Netflix Originals.

Genre keyword patterns were plotted and clustered into two dimensions (Figure 4), and a detailed plot labeling of the type of genre keywords and countries that constructed Dimension A and Dimension B are illustrated in Figure 5. Genre keywords and countries from Netflix Original content were scattered, plotted, and linked. Countries are presented in the form of red circular nodes, and genre keywords are presented in the form of blue square nodes. Each node's size represents its prominence in the network, and the degree of thickness of lines represents the strength of the relationship between two nodes. Countries that comprise the central community Dimension A are France, Spain, India, Mexico, Brazil, the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, and Korea. Genres that comprise the central community Dimension A are TV Dramas, Comedies, Crime TV Shows, TV Thrillers, Drama, TV Comedies, TV Shows based on Books, TV Mysteries, Romantic Movies, and Teen TV Shows.

Dimension A illustrates a scattered network pattern in which the nodes are scattered and form a network shape without standout characteristics. This scattered and nested network shape is a visualization and further proof of Netflix's hypersegmentation of genre keywords, because it is formed due to the various hypersegmented genre keywords and their distribution across all countries. It is further interesting to note that Dimension B is peripheral, heterogeneous, and independently established by a singular country, Japan. The cohesiveness of Japan's genre keywords has formed a subnetwork category. Upon a closer look, this subnetwork consists of anime-related subnetworks created by Japan's unique array of anime-related keywords. As seen in Table 6, Japan's genre keywords are a unique departure from those of other countries in Dimension A, consisting mainly of Sci-Fi and Fantasy (45.7%), Action Anime (44.3%), Anime Series (40.0%), TV Shows Based on Manga (38.6%), Drama Anime (14.3%), and Shounen Anime (12.9%). Therefore, Japanese Netflix Originals' strong presence of anime content and various anime-related genre keywords form a separate dimension.

Table 5. Top 15 Genre Keyword List Crossed With Top 10 Countries of Dimension A and Dimension B.

		Top countries in Dimension A																		Dimension B		
Total	France		Spain		India		Mexico		Brazil		United Kingdom		Germany		Italy		Korea		Japan			
	Genre	%	Genre	%	Genre	%	Genre	%	Genre	%	Genre	%	Genre	%	Genre	%	Genre	%	Genre	%	Genre	%
1	TV Dramas	23.2% (210)	Comedies	23.8% (19)	TV Dramas	28.6% (22)	Bolly-wood Movies	32.4% (23)	TV Dramas	27.3% (15)	Comedies	30.9% (17)	TV Dramas	40.4% (21)	TV Dramas	31.8% (14)	Dramas	26.2% (11)	K-Dramas	41.0% (16)	Sci-Fi & Fantasy Anime	45.7% (32)
2	Comedies	15.0% (136)	TV Dramas	18.8% (15)	Crime TV Shows	16.9% (13)	Social Issue Dramas	25.4% (18)	Comedies	20.0% (11)	TV Dramas	14.5% (8)	Crime TV Shows	32.7% (17)	Crime TV Shows	20.5% (9)	TV Dramas	21.4% (9)	TV Dramas	25.6% (10)	Action Anime	44.3% (31)
3	Crime TV Shows	14.8% (134)	Crime TV Shows	12.5% (10)	TV Thrillers	13.0% (10)	Dramas	19.7% (14)	Crime TV Shows	18.2% (10)	Crime TV Shows	14.5% (8)	TV Thrillers	23.1% (12)	Comedies	18.2% (8)	Comedies	14.3% (6)	Comedies	17.9% (7)	Anime Series	40.0% (28)
4	TV Thrillers	11.8% (107)	TV Thrillers	11.3% (9)	Comedies	11.8% (10)	TV Dramas	15.5% (11)	TV Comedies	18.2% (10)	Reality TV	12.7% (7)	TV Comedies	23.1% (12)	Stand-Up Comedy	11.4% (5)	Romantic TV Dramas	14.3% (6)	TV Thrillers	17.9% (7)	TV Shows Based on Manga	38.6% (27)
5	Dramas	10.0% (91)	TV Comedies	11.3% (9)	Teen TV Shows	11.7% (9)	Comedies	15.5% (11)	Social & Cultural Docs	14.5% (8)	Docuseries	12.7% (7)	TV Mysteries	23.1% (12)	TV Thrillers	9.1% (4)	Crime TV Shows	11.9% (5)	Crime TV Shows	12.8% (5)	Drama Anime	14.3% (10)
6	TV Comedies	8.6% (78)	Dramas	10.0% (8)	Thriller Movies	10.4% (8)	TV Thrillers	14.1% (10)	Stand-Up Comedy	12.7% (7)	TV Thrillers	10.9% (6)	TV Shows Based on Books	15.4% (8)	Dramas	9.1% (4)	TV Shows Based on Books	11.9% (5)	Reality TV	12.8% (5)	Shounen Anime	12.9% (9)
7	TV Shows Based on Books	7.2% (65)	Documentary Films	10.0% (8)	Dramas	9.1% (7)	Romantic Movies	12.7% (9)	Documentary Films	12.7% (7)	Stand-Up Comedy	10.9% (6)	Teen TV Shows	13.5% (7)	TV Shows Based on Books	9.1% (4)	Teen TV Shows	11.9% (5)	K-Dramas Based on Webtoon	12.8% (5)	Anime Movies	11.4% (8)
8	TV Mysteries	6.5% (59)	Action & Adventure	8.8% (7)	TV Shows Based on Books	9.1% (7)	Romantic Comedies	12.7% (9)	TV Thrillers	9.1% (5)	Music & Musicals	10.9% (6)	Sitcoms	13.5% (7)	Thriller Movies	9.1% (4)	Movies Based on Real Life	11.9% (5)	TV Comedies	10.3% (4)	TV Dramas	7.1% (5)
9	Romantic Movies	6.5% (59)	TV Mysteries	7.5% (6)	Romantic Movies	9.1% (7)	Crime TV Shows	8.5% (6)	Dramas	7.3% (4)	Romantic Movies	9.1% (5)	Family Watch Together TV	9.6% (5)	Social Issue Dramas	9.1% (4)	TV Comedies	9.5% (4)	Stand-Up Comedy	10.3% (4)	Action & Adventure	7.1% (5)
10	Teen TV Shows	6.3% (57)	Stand-Up Comedy	7.5% (6)	Romantic TV Dramas	9.1% (7)	TV Shows Based on Books	8.5% (6)	Docuseries	7.3% (4)	Romantic Comedies	9.1% (5)	Romantic TV Dramas	7.7% (4)	Docuseries	9.1% (4)	Romantic Movies	9.5% (4)	TV Mysteries	7.7% (3)	School Anime	7.1% (5)
Total Genre Frequency		2,277	181	185	181	129	143	135	113	95	118	224										
Total # of Contents		906	80	77	71	55	55	52	44	42	39	40										
Total (%)		251.3%	226.3%	240.3%	254.9%	234.5%	260.0%	259.6%	256.8%	226.2%	302.6%	320.0%										

Note. Unit: % of genre within non-U.S. Netflix Original contents (number of contents).

Top 10 in order of number of contents (48 total); Top 15 in order of frequency of genre keywords (99 total).

Total percentage can exceed 100.0% due to duplicated count of genre keywords because one piece of content can be assigned multiple genre keywords.

Table 6. Top 15 Distribution of Adjective Keyword List of Dimension A and Dimension B.

		Top countries in Dimension A										Dimension B										
		France		Spain		India		Mexico		Brazil		United Kingdom		Germany		Italy		Korea		Japan		
Total		Adjective Keywords	%	Adjective Keywords	%	Adjective Keywords	%	Adjective Keywords	%	Adjective Keywords	%	Adjective Keywords	%	Adjective Keywords	%	Adjective Keywords	%	Adjective Keywords	%	Adjective Keywords	%	
1	Emotional	19.1% (173)	Suspenseful	13.8% (11)	Emotional	32.5% (25)	Romantic	23.9% (17)	Emotional	16.4% (9)	Intimate	16.4% (9)	Suspenseful	26.9% (14)	Suspenseful	25.0% (11)	Romantic	26.2% (11)	Dark	20.5% (8)	Exciting	44.3% (31)
2	Suspenseful	17.8% (161)	Witty	13.8% (11)	Suspenseful	18.2% (14)	Understated	21.1% (15)	Sentimental	12.7% (7)	Emotional	14.5% (8)	Ominous	17.3% (9)	Emotional	20.5% (9)	Emotional	23.8% (10)	Suspenseful	17.9% (7)	Suspenseful	14.3% (10)
3	Dark	12.8% (116)	Emotional	12.5% (10)	Romantic	16.9% (13)	Dark	19.7% (14)	Dark	10.9% (6)	Romantic	14.5% (8)	Emotional	15.4% (8)	Understated	11.4% (5)	Intimate	14.3% (6)	Exciting	15.4% (6)	Heartfelt	12.9% (9)
4	Romantic	12.8% (116)	Dark	11.3% (9)	Exciting	10.4% (8)	Emotional	15.5% (11)	Intimate	10.9% (6)	Heartfelt	14.5% (8)	Witty	13.5% (7)	Dark	9.1% (4)	Heartfelt	14.3% (6)	Romantic	12.8% (5)	Emotional	10.0% (7)
5	Exciting	12.4% (112)	Romantic	11.3% (9)	Intimate	10.4% (8)	Heartfelt	14.1% (10)	Steamy	10.9% (6)	Goofy	14.5% (8)	Dark	11.5% (6)	Intimate	9.1% (4)	Understated	11.9% (5)	Scary	10.3% (4)	Dark	10.0% (7)
6	Intimate	9.6% (87)	Intimate	11.3% (9)	Investigative	9.1% (7)	Intimate	11.3% (8)	Suspenseful	9.1% (5)	Provocative	14.5% (8)	Intimate	11.5% (6)	Investigative	9.1% (4)	Dark	9.5% (4)	Healing	10.3% (4)	Intimate	7.1% (5)
7	Heartfelt	9.1% (82)	Inspiring	11.3% (9)	Dark	7.8% (6)	Quirky	11.3% (8)	Investigative	9.1% (5)	Feel-Good	12.7% (7)	Romantic	9.6% (5)	Romantic	6.8% (3)	Feel-Good	7.1% (3)	Heartfelt	7.7% (3)	Violent	7.1% (5)
8	Feel-Good	7.0% (63)	Exciting	10.0% (8)	Heartfelt	7.8% (6)	Offbeat	11.3% (8)	Exciting	7.3% (4)	Inspiring	12.7% (7)	Quirky	9.6% (5)	Scary	6.8% (3)	Scary	7.1% (3)	Violent	7.7% (3)	Feel-Good	4.3% (3)
9	Understated	7.0% (63)	Understated	10.0% (8)	Feel-Good	6.5% (5)	Feel-Good	9.9% (7)	Goofy	7.3% (4)	Suspenseful	9.1% (5)	Exciting	5.8% (3)	Ominous	6.8% (3)	Inspiring	7.1% (3)	Emotional	5.1% (2)	Offbeat	4.3% (3)
10	Scary	5.7% (52)	Feel-Good	8.8% (7)	Understated	6.5% (5)	Scary	7.0% (5)	Provocative	7.3% (4)	Investigative	9.1% (5)	Heartfelt	5.8% (3)	Witty	6.8% (3)	Suspenseful	4.8% (2)	Intimate	5.1% (2)	Absurd	4.3% (3)
Total Genre Frequency		1,554	136	134	124	84	105	85	76	72	61	102										
Total Contents		905	80	77	71	55	55	52	44	42	39	40										
Total (%)		171.7%	170.0%	174.0%	174.6%	152.7%	190.9%	163.5%	172.7%	171.4%	156.4%	145.7%										

Note. Unit: % of adjective keywords within non-U.S. Netflix Original contents (number of contents). Total percentage can exceed 100.0% due to duplicated count of adjective keywords because one piece of content can be assigned multiple adjective keywords.

As seen in Table 5, a top-10 country-level analysis of Dimension A identified genres such as Comedies, Dramas, and Crime TV shows as the most highly ranked across France, Spain, Mexico, Brazil, the United Kingdom, and Germany, with the exception of India and Korea. In India, Bollywood Movies took the top spot (32.4%), followed by Social Issue Dramas (25.4%). In Korea, K-Drama was ranked highest, making up 41.0% of genre keywords, followed by TV Dramas (25.6%), Comedies (17.9%), and TV Thrillers (17.9%).

Notably, K-Drama had one of the highest percentages of the top-ranking genre keyword across all countries. "K-dramas" is a default search keyword on Netflix due to the prominence of Korean television shows; furthermore, K-drama is considered a genre alongside action, anime, comedy, and romance (Park, 2023). A separate category of 29 adjective keywords also serves as an additional control parameter to convey the nuanced feelings of a piece of content and support Netflix's hypersegmentation strategy. The frequency of adjective keywords was distributed in unique ways across different countries; U.K. content was mostly Suspenseful (25.0%) and Ominous (17.3%), and Italy's content was Romantic (26.2%) and Emotional (20.5%) (Table 6). For Korea, the adjective keyword Dark ranked first with 20.0%, followed by Suspenseful (17.5%), Exciting (15.0%), and Romantic (12.5%).

As the highest percentage of genre and adjective keywords for Korean Netflix Originals are "K-Drama" and "Dark," respectively, a key finding of this study is that Netflix's Korean original programming is predominantly made up of dark K-dramas. The three most viewed Korean Netflix Originals commonly share dark themes such as class strife, revenge, death, and judgment; therefore, it can be argued that Netflix helps shape a new K-drama identity, because these dark K-dramas are a significant departure from the history of successful romantic genres.

Korean Netflix Originals: High Viewership and Limited Diversity

This study discovered two noteworthy findings from the collection of total viewed hours and adjective diversity of Korean Netflix Originals. First, Korean content's total hours of viewership on Netflix peaked in the second half of 2021, ranking first among all countries with 2,746 million hours, followed by a huge gap; Spain was in second place with 1,179 million hours. Upon closer look, the main contributors of Korean Netflix Originals' high viewership were *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021–present) (2,245 million hours), *My Name* (Yoon, 2021) (194 million hours), and *Hellbound* (Byun & Kim, 2021–present) (143 million hours). These data reveal that a small handful of content is responsible for Korea's unusually high viewership.

Table 7. Total Hours Viewed and Adjective Diversity Index (HHI).*

Country	Hours Viewed in Second Half of 2021	Order	Adjective Keyword Diversity Index (HHI) in Second Half of 2021		No. of Netflix Original Contents in Second Half of 2021
Korea	2,746,300,000	1	1,719	Moderately concentrated	8
Spain	1,178,900,000	2	1,006	Average	6
Mexico	444,220,000	3	1,150	Average	6
France	294,960,000	4	1,243	Average	10
Brazil	246,710,000	5	1,250	Average	10
Japan	176,420,000	6	4,200	Highly concentrated	8
Italy	91,990,000	7	2,099	Highly concentrated	5
India	80,590,000	8	1,531	Moderately concentrated	7
Germany	69,760,000	9	1,111	Average	6
United Kingdom	41,670,000	10	3,333	Highly concentrated	2

Note. Countries not officially published in top 10 Netflix hours viewed in second half of 2021: Taiwan, Colombia, Philippines, Belgium, Argentina, South Africa, Nigeria, Israel, Singapore, Iceland, New Zealand, Jordan, Georgia, Egypt, Finland, Hong Kong, Austria, Peru, UAE, Portugal, Ukraine, Uruguay, Luxembourg, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon.

*HHI (Herfindahl-Hirschman Index): 1,000: diversified; 1,000–1,800: average to moderately concentrated; greater than 1,800: highly concentrated.

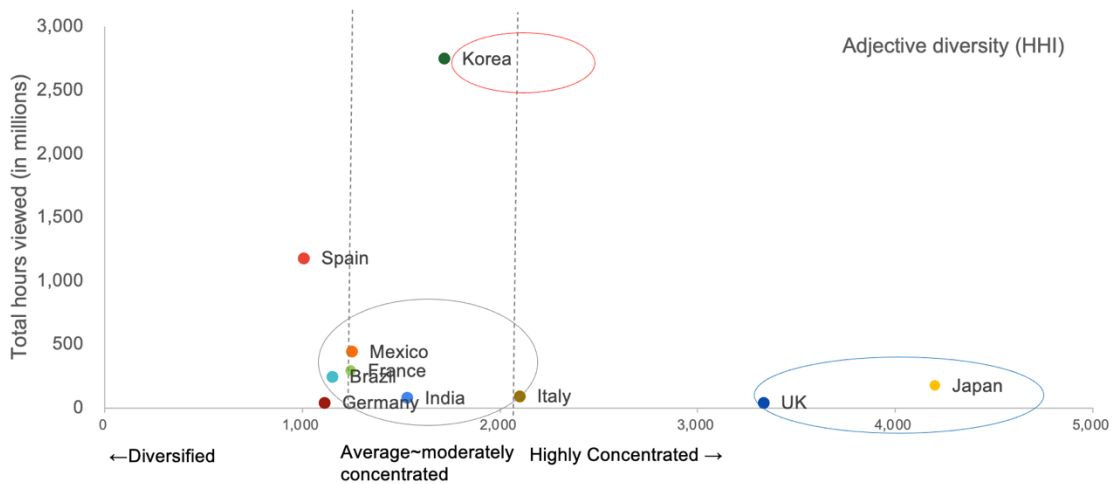


Figure 6. Total hours viewed and adjective diversity index (HHI).

Second, the HHI concentration index revealed a diversity index score of 1,719 (Table 7). This indicates that Korean Netflix Original’s adjective keywords are moderately concentrated in a few keywords and not diversified, which is due to a high concentration of the adjective keywords dark, suspenseful, and violent. Figure 6 displays the relationship between the total hours of Netflix Originals viewed and the

diversity index of adjective keywords. Korea's positioning is a significant departure from countries with an average (Spain, Mexico, France, Brazil) and high concentration (Japan, United Kingdom).

Conclusion

Although previous studies of the Korean Wave have examined the rise of K-pop through online video platforms and social media, there has been a lack of literature dedicated to K-dramas, particularly in relation to the emergence of global OTT platforms. As both a content-producing global studio and a streaming platform, Netflix holds a significant influence in the investment and distribution of Korean content and allows international audiences to access them readily. By analyzing all Korean Netflix Originals' genre keywords, adjective keywords, and viewership metrics, this study has delved into the intricate dynamics of Netflix and Korean content, as well as its theoretical implications for future studies of the Korean Wave.

First, this study suggests that Netflix is utilizing the K-drama brand as an effective marketing tool: 41% of Korean Netflix Originals were assigned the keyword "K-Drama"; one of the highest percentages of genre keywords across all countries. Netflix has fully leaned into the branding and power of K-Dramas, asserting the global streaming service's commitment to increasing its pipeline of Korean Netflix Originals (Frater, 2021). As Netflix rides the Korean Wave and K-dramas ride Netflix's global distribution framework, a win-win situation is created in which the K-drama industry finds a breakthrough with Netflix, and Netflix seizes the windfall profits generated by Korean Originals. Because more than 60% of Netflix subscribers worldwide watched Korean content in 2022, and three of Netflix's most-ever-watched shows are from Korea, Netflix has announced its largest ever slate of 34 titles in 2023 (Toh, 2023). Netflix's vice president of Korean content further noted that Korean series and films had been regularly featured in global top-10 lists in more than 90 countries, affirming that "Netflix will continue to be the ultimate destination for compelling, diverse, and must-watch Korean storytelling" (Netflix, 2023, para. 4). Therefore, the prominence of the K-drama keyword underscores Netflix's commitment to riding on the K-drama brand's success.

Second, this study defines Korean Netflix Originals' key attribute as a "duality." This duality refers to the contrast between Korean Netflix Originals' taking the top spot in total viewership and an HHI diversity index that reveals Korea's adjective keywords are moderately concentrated and lack diversity. Korea's high viewership is a result of *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021–present), *My Name* (Yoon, 2021), and *Hellbound* (Byun & Kim, 2021–present), which are concentrated in the dark, suspenseful, and violent keywords. Given this duality, if Netflix continues to play a significant role in shaping the content and character of K-Dramas, what will the future of K-Dramas look like?

On the one hand, Netflix has created an opportunity for the expansion of K-dramas' topics, themes, and genres. Korean TV stations are obligated to censor sex, profanity, goriness, and nudity, placing further restrictions on subject matter to appeal to a wider audience. With a budget that enables the company to take risks, Netflix has encouraged unconventional K-drama genres and innovative storytelling approaches that have ushered in a new wave of horror and thriller K-dramas. Through in-depth interviews with those working in the Korean drama industry, Park et al. (2023) found that Netflix provided directors, producers, and writers creative freedoms that they could not enjoy before and that without Netflix's aggressive commitment to innovative and unconventional storytelling, Korean Netflix Original hits containing dark social

commentary or violence such as *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021–present) would not have been made. Although Korean cinema has been well known for its socioeconomic and sociopolitical commentary, as demonstrated through films such as *Parasite* (Bong, 2019), Netflix has extended the opportunity for K-dramas to manifest this characteristic as well.

On the other hand, though K-drama's performance and successes are often celebrated with a focus on total hours viewed, this study reveals that they come from a concentration of few keywords. This creates the false impression that a few specific types of dark, suspenseful, and violent dramas represent the entire genre's success. Netflix's main goal is to drive profits by attracting subscribers, whose engagement is directly linked to personalized suggestions generated by combining carefully segmented genres with viewing activity (Andjelic, 2019). The company will continue to leverage its unprecedented database of subscriber predilections for the "terrific advantage" of producing its own content; as Madrigal (2014) notes, "the data can't tell them how to make a TV show, but it can tell them what they should be making" (para. 12). Although Netflix claims it is committed to producing a diversity of Korean content, its most recent lineup announcement featuring *Gyeongsung Creature* (Jung, 2023), a monster thriller; *Black Knight* (Cho, 2023), a survival tale in a dystopian future; the return of zombie-thriller *Sweet Home* (Kim, 2020); and dark military drama *D.P.* (Ban & Han, 2021–present) suggest that the company is likely to continue investing in a specific archetype of K-dramas.

We argue that Netflix's persistent focus on a limited set of genres can be both advantageous and restrictive, potentially fostering a unique K-drama brand or hindering the exploration of diverse genres. Rather than focusing on the positive outlook of how Netflix has enhanced the availability of Korean dramas globally, we emphasize the concept of platform imperialism to better understand the evolving K-drama landscape under Netflix's dominating impact. Though previous literature has emphasized Netflix's platform imperialism in relation to the company's aggressive intellectual property acquisition of Korean dramas' global streaming rights (Park et al., 2023), we argue that their control and influence extend to the future of K-drama content as well. Theoretical analyses examining the relationship between competition and diversity have proven time and again that competition does not lead to diversity; in fact, it reduces diversity (Hendrickx et al., 2019). As Netflix is likely to direct its immense financial capital toward creating dark, suspenseful, and violent K-dramas that have proven to receive the most viewership worldwide, the company may limit the future content and character of K-dramas to a specific archetype. This scenario becomes particularly likely given the competitive pressures from OTT streaming services, or if Netflix begins to face financial challenges; though Netflix added more subscribers in the last quarter of 2022 than expected, the company barely turned a profit (Maglio, 2023).

Although Netflix has facilitated creative freedom and expanded the themes explored in K-dramas, it is important to consider the potential limitations of the company's data-driven approach, which may lead to a reduction in the diversity of Korean content over time. This study advocates for a political-economic perspective that accounts for platform imperialism to better theorize the evolving Korean Wave, particularly under Netflix's dominant influence. We recommend that future research on the Korean Wave should continue to emphasize platform studies; this will help ensure the continued growth and diversity of Korean content while addressing the challenges and opportunities posed by dominant platforms like Netflix.

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