"Everyone Was Talking About It"

A Thematic Analysis of Audience Interpretation of Squid Game on IMDb

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation investigates the transnational success of Squid Game from an audience perspective. Existing literature on transnational media flow is primarily informed by the theories of cultural proximity, affective affinity, and proximity with US products in conjunction with the theoretical consideration of cultural capital and cosmopolitanism. Situating audiences in the transforming digital mediascape where online participatory culture plays a key role in facilitating audience interpretation and enhancing audience agency, an underresearched audience segment, as prominent as fan communities, is identified. This study aims to uncover how highly engaged, transnational audiences decode, negotiate, and construct the meaning of Squid Game through the lens of culture, politics, affect and production values. A thematic analysis was conducted on reviews of Squid Game posted on IMDb. The findings shed light on how Squid Game is dissected by audiences from varying perspectives among which a dominant US hegemony is evident. Cultural references are made within the range of cultural proximity. Audience agency is reflected in the negotiated and oppositional readings displayed in the collaborative meaning-making and cross-cultural communication on IMDb. While the study has implications on the usefulness of IMDb as a rich interpretative database for investigating transnational media reception and audience diversification, future research should aim to use a multi-platform approach and employ other methods such as surveys to encompass a wider range of highly engaged audiences and their reception patterns of transnational media.

INTRODUCTION

In September 2021, the dystopian South Korean series *Squid Game* topped Netflix's most-watched charts in more than 70 countries within two weeks of its release. Though *Squid Game* is not the first non-US, non-English series winning a global audience, its statistics are so phenomenal and surreal that it marks a new era of transnational cultural flow. The '*Squid Game* cult' has amplified the 'Korean wave' by sweeping across almost every part of the world where distinctive audience behaviour and fan culture can be observed, including binge-watching, costume play, pop-up experiences and TikTok challenges (Ahmed *et al.*, 2022; Siregar *et al.*, 2021).

Looking back on the history of transnational media, the 20th century witnessed the dominance of American content that impeded cultural export by other countries. A form of cultural imperialism arose as the US exported television programmes and distributed cultural products to less developed countries, obtaining a worldwide control over media technologies and ideological ethos (Dorfman and Mattelart, 1975; Sinclair, 1993). Cultural exports from countries other than the US are considered exceptional and are often studied as existing under US influence. Prior to the Korean wave, another commonly researched transnational genre is Latin American telenovelas. Scholars normally perceive the growth of commercial Latin American media as a by-product of US efforts to enhance consumer capitalism (Straubhaar *et al.*, 2021). From a Marxist perspective of capitalist production, audiences are passive consumers and their reactions to cultural commodities are informed by propaganda and what the producers want the audiences to see (Huang, 2009). Hence, traditional cultural studies on transnational audiences were largely influenced by a monolithic account of media power and cultural imperialism under American propaganda, suggesting a one-way cultural flow of TV programming from US to the rest of the world (Nordenstreng and Schiller, 1979).

In today's media-saturated society, we have witnessed the transnational success of more and more foreign productions. From cable distribution of international channels to satellite and now streaming television, the inflow of foreign television has increased substantially,

including content produced in Brazil, Hong Kong, Japan and elsewhere (Straubhaar *et al.*, 2021). As the changing mediascape "continues to be swept along in the turbulence of the much-vaunted global trends of media convergence, digitalization, Internetization, and deregulation" (Dwyer *et al.*, 2018: 4557), audience studies have entered an era of transnationalism, characterised by "multiple ties and interactions linking people or institutions across the borders of nation-states" (Vertovec, 1999: 447). The technological impetus of digital communication is not only transforming how information is circulated, but is also reshaping audience community in such a way that "[i]ts existence alters the very texture of our lives" (Giddens, 2003: 11). In that respect, US programming is gradually losing its monopoly over the world audience.

Nowadays, phenomenal global flows of cultural content have become a key research area in audience studies. From television broadcast to video on demand (VOD) and over-the-top (OTT) streaming , audiences have been dissected at multiple angles as global, national, and regional viewers. Under the rapid development of a participatory culture on social media and the growth of OTT platforms, an increasing number of classifications of audiences has emerged, including transnational audiences, transcultural fans, and highly engaged reviewers (Jang *et al.*, 2021). Currently, Netflix, an OTT service, is cutting at a transverse angle across cultural boundaries, reconfiguring how US media imperialism manifests itself in cultural output and redefining transnational taste cultures through algorithms (Straubhaar *et al.*, 2021).

In reaction to the increasing visibility of Netflix, scholars have questioned the exact role Netflix is playing in transforming the mediascape and reshaping the relationship between audiences and transnational content (Aguiar and Waldfogel, 2018). Netflix seems to be promoting regional content from Europe, Latin America, and Asia, while also being involved in reinforcing US hegemony by disproportionally offering more US-produced content in its global catalogue (Penner and Straubhaar, 2020). Straubhaar *et al.* (2021) describe the strategy of Netflix and other US-based platforms as further pushing the unbalanced flow of media imperialism led by the US. Though allegedly incorporating a more diverse content from a global community, the majority of the financial benefit is still in the hands of US headquarters

2

(Birkinbine *et al.*, 2016). In addition, scholars are interested in what happens with audiences in response to the digital shift in media reception and diversification of content? Are audiences still cultural dupes accepting whatever ideological messaging is embedded in the TV programmes they watch? Should transnational audiences be conceptualised the same way as general audiences were before? Locating audiences in the new media era, a gap in the literature was found regarding how concepts such as transnational media reception and audience online engagement are linked to the success of cultural exports.

Drawing parallels between the transnational success of *Squid Game* and Latin American telenovelas, we can dissect audience reception of global content at the same angle by using Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model. Previous studies of transnational audiences are largely studied at the macro level against the backdrop of media globalisation and conglomeration, in terms of how the industry makes a profit from distribution of cultural content; little has been said about the cultural experiences and audience behavioural patterns. Additionally, existing literature investigating the phenomenon of *Squid Game* is extremely limited. For instance, Ahmed *et al.* (2022) only offered a snapshot of the discussions taking place on social media on the day of release. The purpose of the current study is to address the empirical gaps regarding the understanding of audience reception of transnational content and to contextualise it in the online environment where *Squid Game* became a global phenomenon. By pointing towards a highly visible and influential subsection of audiences, this study aims to unpack the unprecedented phenomenon from an audience perspective and explore how highly engaged audiences decode, negotiate, and construct the meaning of *Squid Game* and make sense of their viewing experiences through the lens of culture, politics, affect, and production values. The sample of the study is the user reviews of *Squid Game* on IMDb. A thematic analysis was performed to identify distinctive reception patterns of highly engaged, transnational audiences while capturing the heterogeneity of audience interpretation of *Squid Game*.

THEORETICAL CHAPTER

This chapter involves a literature review of relevant theories and previous research. By incorporating areas of inquiry and knowledge that have not been brought together before, this section concludes with a conceptual framework that informs the investigation of research questions and the addressing of research gaps.

Literature Review

To situate the study of transnational audiences in the context of the new media era, I conduct a literature review from two major perspectives: intercultural communication in relation to transnational media flows, and online participatory culture in relation to audience engagement and active readings.

Intercultural Communication: Theorising Transnational Media Reception

When it comes to theorising transnational media flows, scholars have sought to suggest predictors of the transnational acceptance of cultural products. The most cited theoretical frameworks include Straubhaar's (1991) theory of cultural proximity and Bourdieu's (1984) concept of cultural capital.

The theory of cultural proximity plays a foundational role in explaining audience reception of cultural products that are initially produced outside of the national context and then exported to other countries (Straubhaar, 1991). The mechanism at work is presumed to be that "[t]he language and cultural similarities representing the unique characteristics of each country seem to have formed a cultural psychological range that understands and appreciates the contents and emotions" (Jang *et al.*, 2021: 6). In other words, what drives audiences' interest in exotic television programmes is the shared cultural or linguistic experiences. The assumption of cultural proximity has been widely corroborated, especially in the reception of soap operas and telenovelas (Castelló, 2010). The transnational success of K-drama in East Asian countries is another example showing that a shared Asian identity can lead to higher audience involvement (Lu *et al.*, 2019; Yoo and Lee, 2001).

To complement the theory of cultural proximity, Hoskins and Mirus (1988) put forward the concept of cultural discount, illustrating why exported television programming cannot always reach a global viewership. There is a cultural distance between the utility value of the original production and that received by foreign audiences. The effect of cultural discount can be seen in US audiences' rejection of foreign films that use dubbing or subtitling (Renaud & Litman, 1985). Despite substantial evidence corroborating the importance of cultural proximity in the transnational success of media texts, there is still an unanswered question regarding what constitutes cultural shareability that renders certain archetypes transferable in media reception while others get discounted. According to La Pastina and Straubhaar (2005), historical experiences, moral values and gender role expectations are all considered part of the cultural affinities that audiences may experience. They have also proposed for multiple layers of proximity to be considered, in the same way that people have multi-layered identities. Genre proximity is one of the layers and there seems to be a universal preference for genres such as melodramas and subgenres like telenovelas (Martín-Barbero, 1993). In this vein, one may reason that the genre of dystopian dramas to which *Squid Game* belongs also appeals to a global audience, thus explaining its global success. With the unclear definitions of cultural proximity, the theory lends itself to the possibility of multiple adaptations of 'proximity' that could be used to explain audience preference.

From a political economy perspective, proximity with US cultural products could be another layer of proximity that acts as a key driver for building a transnational audience base (La Pastina and Straubhaar, 2005). Hoskins and Mirus argue that US television exports and Hollywood productions tend to be well received overseas and are less susceptible to cultural discount as they are 'high production quality, undemanding, tried- and-tested entertainment programming aimed at appealing to the largest audience possible' (Hoskins and Mirus, 1988: 504). Similarly, Olson adopts the concept of 'narrative transparency' in articulating why 'American cultural exports, such as cinema, television, and related merchandise, manifest narrative structures that easily blend into other cultures' (Olson, 1999: 4), allowing for alternative readings that are open to various values, beliefs and personae based on individual

audiences' interpretation. The transparency of US-produced television texts echoes Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model and the notion of 'polysemy' devised by Fiske (1987), which is considered the main reason why the US is a hegemon with competitive advantage in the commercial distribution of television and film. Exposure to Hollywood moviews with US values renders certain texts familiar in multiple cultural contexts regardless of the place of production (Hoskins and Mirus, 1988; Olson, 1999). While the increasing imports of telenovelas from Latin American countries was questioned as being stimulated by US consumer capitalism, we should dig up the global success of *Squid Game* in the same way and ascertain whether any cultural agenda of Americanness is hidden in the text, especially considering the series being produced by and streamed on a US platform (Aguiar and Waldfogel, 2018).

Audience preferences tended to be influenced by cultural proximity within both national and cultural-linguistic boundaries; however, cultural proximity cannot fully explain viewing patterns of transnational audiences, as other forces should also be accounted for (La Pastina and Straubhaar, 2005). Outside of the boundaries of culture, affect, or strong pathos, there is believed to be a universal factor that audiences would consider in media reception. Ahmed *et al.* (2022) pinpoint emotional response as a key predictor of virality. Lu *et al.* (2019) also discover that emotions are part of a universal mechanism in media consumption that is closely related to audience involvement and enjoyment regardless of cultural distance. Chin and Morimoto (2013) argue that affective affinity, similar to cultural proximity, plays a pivotal role in the cultivation of transcultural fan culture which overcomes cultural distances and language barriers. In this vein, content with heavy emotional investment can easily appeal to transnational audiences without the need for contextual knowledge. Affective consumption allows transnational audiences to be emotionally involved in the content and gain pleasure irrespective of the cultural nuances embedded in the texts (Ju, 2020). Furthermore, an affective element is also commonly found in audiences' online reviews of movies (Schneider *et al.*, 2020; Topal and Ozsoyoglu, 2016). Audience interpretations and evaluations of a media text tend to be dominated by emotions because affective responses are the most direct representation of

the valence of judgement on a television programme or a movie. Thus, the emotional component of audience reception is not to be neglected in the understanding of the transnational success of *Squid Game*.

However, affective affinity does not stand alone as a separate school of thought that can be easily differentiated from the theory of cultural proximity. Though from a psychological point of view, the expression of emotion may be universal, the understanding and interpretation of affect is socially constructed. Castelló (2010) argues that feelings of cultural proximity can be activated in a discursive manner where shared meanings of what constitutes culture in the immediate surroundings of audiences can work an indicator of 'proximity'. Emotion is one of those elements that are processed at the instant of consuming the media text and therefore can be part of the cultural discourses.

Another major theoretical perspective through which scholars study audience choices and interpretation of foreign content is that of Bourdieu's (1984) cultural capital. According to Schluetz and Schneider (2014), the reason why some people enjoy watching foreign television is that the process of reception and meaning-making allows audiences to be involved in intercultural communication, thereby improving their multicultural fluency (Ksiazek & Webster, 2008). The cultural capital acquired through this process is symbolic and reflective of class stratification and cosmopolitan attitudes. Straubhaar *et al.* (2021) demonstrate that foreign content on Netflix is more appealing for better-educated, middle-class audiences. German youth prefer to watch US content despite language barriers because the symbolic capital associated with consuming US materials (e.g., recognition by peers, global identities) can compensate for the cultural discount experienced (Schluetz and Schneider, 2014).

Subscriptions for Netflix represent broadband access, possession of economic capital, a form of elite culture, the identity of cultural omnivores and affiliation with a global public (Straubhaar *et al.*, 2021). Bourdieu's (1984) discussion of 'habitus' and 'cultural distinction' also explains the cosmopolitan spirit and cultural openness brought about by Netflix and similar platforms, as a disposition to embrace foreign cultures in order to achieve an internationally

discriminating taste for art, film, television and so on (Jenkins, 2006). The resulting habitus 'enable[s] agents to view events, objects and things in culturally unique but nevertheless structurally grounded ways, bringing to bear a particular set of cultural understandings on the world' (Woodward *et al.*, 2008: 211).

Additionally, Jenner (2018) argues that Netflix adopts a strategy that features the 'grammar of transnationalism' which means an exclusive focus on the quality of content, including aesthetics, subtitling and dubbing. In this vein, Netflix calls for cultural distinction and the development of international taste in cultural products that is opposite to the consumption of simple and shallow culture, in line with the distinction drawn by Bourdieu (1984). Cultivation of such appreciation for global content renders Netflix viewers' tastes more alike than expected (Sender, 2017). Indeed, influenced by discourses of affinity, cultural proximity can sometimes predict how appealing foreign content is to audiences with cultural identities; however, in other contexts, cultural distance is also appreciated as mobilising the taste for exoticism (Athique, 2014).

Online Participatory Culture: Theorising Audience Engagement and Active Readings

As mentioned in the introduction, the flourishing of social media and OTT services has contributed to the diversification of content and reception mediums, thereby leading to the pluralisation of a mass audience. This section explores how the participatory culture of social media is associated with increasing audience engagement and active readings of transnational content.

Hall's (1980) seminal encoding/decoding model marked the beginning of the 'active audience' debate in audience research. Along with the highlighting of the range of reading positions audiences could adopt regardless of the preferred meanings embedded in media messages, the conceptualisation of 'passive audiences' no longer prevails and the role of active audiences in media production and consumption formed the basis of a new research agenda: The common-sense idea that the meanings of media texts are of no interpretative significance was

defamiliarised and audience readings are now considered an important meaning-making process for media and communication scholars (Livingstone, 2000).

Though acknowledging audiences' contribution through active readings, their involvement with media texts used to be controlled in a top-down manner. Audiences could only express their views if they were invited to partake in programmes through phone-ins on radio or television (Ofcom, 2009; Willems, 2013). In this way, only a small number of audiences had the chance to influence media production. Recent development of new media has enabled more interactive and participatory modes of audience interpretation. Now, audiences are freed by technologies and granted more agency in steering media production and consumption as they engage in bottom-up decoding and co-production of media texts on social media and online forums (Dahlgren, 2013). The new active audiences are sometimes referred to as 'prosumers' (O'Neill *et al.*, 2013) since they 'in this social media era react[…] and reinvent[…] to/within interactive and participatory work, by re-interpreting and re-contextualising the artwork similarly to the way game players do in their game play' (Lee and Kim, 2016: 474).

By rejecting the dismissive, outdated perception of audiences as 'cultural dupes', audiences in the new media era are no longer precluded from critical or political engagement with the media texts. In fact, active audiences are found to be involved in voluntary deliberation and civic engagement while consuming media content (Willems, 2013; Yu, 2006). In addition to active political reading, Schneider *et al.* (2020) also reveal a list of movie evaluation criteria commonly found in film/TV reviews. A key component is artistic and aesthetic quality, or production values, i.e., "the professional appearance, or polish, of a production, including video and audio quality … lighting, the number of errors, and the amount and quality of special effects" (Kim and O'Connor, 2011: 245). Production values including genre, characters, storytelling, etc., are so closely related to the level of audience participation that they constitute a significant portion of active readings of media texts (Bae and Lee, 2004). Taken together, active audiences tend to engage with a film/TV series at the production level and through the lens of cultural politics to ideologically work on the texts (Srinivas, 2016). To quote from van Dijck, audiences' active involvement in media production is a declaration of user agency not

only representing their "cultural role as a facilitator of civic engagement and participation, but also [their] economic meaning as a producer, consumer and data provider, as well as the user's volatile position" (van Dijck, 2009: 55).

The interactivity of multimedia affords an online participatory culture where a large number of audience members can come together to discuss, negotiate, and construct the meaning of a media text (Yang and Coffey, 2014). Owing to the sophisticated interactive features of social media, audiences like/dislike, comment on, share or rework media texts, contributing to virality and transcultural circulation (Alhabash and Mcalister, 2015).

Nowadays, increasingly digitalised forms of media reception grant audience interpretations with electronic word-of-mouth (EWOM) value if they provide insights into the viewing experiences of 'non-professional' film/TV reviewers, "whose voice – due to the ubiquity of the Internet – has become more prominent compared to the pre-Internet era" (Swierczynska-Kaczor and Wachowicz, 2017: 178). EWOM is considered to hold a significant position in the global media market as its persuasiveness and pervasiveness is key to the spread of transnational content. In addition, the trend of media convergence with digital devices always at our disposal means more audiences display second screen media use, "the companion device that people use when watching television, whether it be a smartphone, tablet, laptop, or home computer" (Lee and Andrejevic, 2014: 41). Second screening is not only reflective of technological advancement but is also associated with a vital social practice in today's context of media consumption. According to Gong (2020), a second screen is used by audiences and fans to find networked publics online in order to satisfy their need for information seeking, discussion and political deliberation.

The technological features of the second screen have invited in-depth and devoted decoding of media texts from audiences. There is a voluminous literature on fan communities and how they use social media to perform their identity and act on their interpretation of the text, echoing the works of Hall (1980) in terms of the rejection of a monolithic representation of media power and acknowledgement of the polysemic nature of text. However, other types of

audiences stay under the radar as scholars revisit Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model in relation to online commenting culture. For instance, film reviewers and critics (professional and amateur) are also considered a unique group of audiences offering rich interpretative data (Godeanu-Kenworthy and Popescu-Sandu, 2014). Moreover, Jensen and Jacobsen (2017) propose a 'three-leaf clover' model incorporating multiple agents playing a key role in the transnational success of foreign television, namely: distributors and buyers, journalists and critics who behave like cultural intermediaries or messengers, and normal audiences who watch a series because they have encountered relevant messages. The study of transnational audiences lacks sufficient categorisation and contextualisation as Netflix and other streaming services are so naturalised that their digital, interactive audiences are taken as a given. New audiences are studied as being subsumed under the residual category of generic viewers "disembedded from their immediate social and cultural environment" (Athique, 2014: 11) and treated as a collective mass as traditional audience studies did (Athique, 2013). Therefore, it is crucial to investigate these audience groups separately and identify the interactions taking place between and within each segment in order to fully capture the drivers of the global success of *Squid Game*.

Conceptual Framework and Research Question

Audience diversification with multiple levels of participation is necessary in the new media era and for understanding the transnational success of cultural products, especially since "different readers read differently because they belong to what are known as various interpretive communities, each of which acts upon print differently and for different purposes" (Radway, 1984: 53). To reiterate, the question raised here is that while previous studies on transnational audiences have been primarily focused on fans, another highly visible group of audiences, acting as amateur reviewers online, have received little research attention but their reception patterns are of significant importance to the understanding of audience engagement and active readings (Schneider *et al.*, 2020). Hence, it is important to investigate how audiences use the socio-cognitive repertoires specific to their identity to construct textual schemas that can be applied to their viewing experiences (Livingstone, 1998).

In order to access a vast amount of data that is representative of how transnational amateur reviewers engage with *Squid Game* in online participatory culture, I identified IMDb as a suitable data source since it is an online database with rich information on ratings and reviews about films and TV series supported by a global user base (Scholz, 2018). A reviewing culture is especially prominent on IMDb, which caters for the needs of a large group of audience members who need to decide what to watch and always look for ways to interact and engage with on-trend movies/series (Boyle, 2014; Topal and Ozsoyoglu, 2016). Previous works on IMDb have largely been quantitative, with user ratings analysed using sentiment analysis. However, quantitative research can only capture generic audience behaviour on the surface, therefore missing out on the complex, discursively constructed viewing experiences.

To address the above-mentioned research gaps, I used IMDb User Reviews of *Squid Game* as my data source. Adopting the audience segmentation categories of the Arts Council England, I identified users who post reviews on IMDb as highly engaged audience members who are 'highly connected socially and once engaged could be used to engage others … could be arts advocates online through reviews and tweets to tell others what is up and coming' (Arts Council England, 2011: 10). Highly engaged audiences are often referred to in conjunction with fans due to a similarly high level of participation and self-expression with regards to the interpretation of media texts. More importantly, highly engaged audiences 'serve not only as a standing audience base but also as amplifiers of awareness that elicit interest among mainstream audiences' (Davis *et al.*, 2014: 56).

Building on the theories and concepts mentioned in the literature review, I created a conceptual framework that guides my investigation into the decoding and meaning-making process of high engaged transnational audiences (see Figure 1). In the context of online participatory culture facilitated by interactive media, the transnational media reception of *Squid Game* is analysed primarily through the theory of cultural proximity, which has three branches of theoretical consideration, that is: affect affinity, proximity with US ideology, and cultural discount. Other relevant concepts that can be borrowed from cultural studies include cultural capital and cosmopolitanism. Also, considering that active audiences' engagement

with movies/TVs tends to have elements of political readings and rumination on production values, the analysis was conducted through four lenses: culture, politics, affect, and production values. In addition, audience interpretation of *Squid Game* was not analysed on an intratextual, semiotic level but was predominantly dissected intertextually concerning the 'contract' that readings have forged between the texts and audience positions (Lim, 2007). This is to say, I did not intend to provide an interpretative analysis of *Squid Game* but an interpretation of the readings of *Squid Game* and how the significance of the series is situated in the wider context, considering culture, affect, politics, and production values.

The research objectives include understanding highly engaged transnational audiences who post reviews on IMDb and, through a study of their intensive involvement with media text consumption and production, shedding light on the process of meaning-making in transcultural content and contributing to the existing body of knowledge on the media reception of transnational audiences.

Therefore, the study aims to answer the following research question and sub-question:

> Research Question: How do highly engaged audiences decode, negotiate, and construct the meaning of *Squid Game* and make sense of their viewing experiences through the lens of culture, politics, affect, and production values
>
> Sub-question: How do highly engaged audiences display their unique consumption patterns of *Squid Game* through IMDb reviews?

Figure 1 Conceptual Framework.
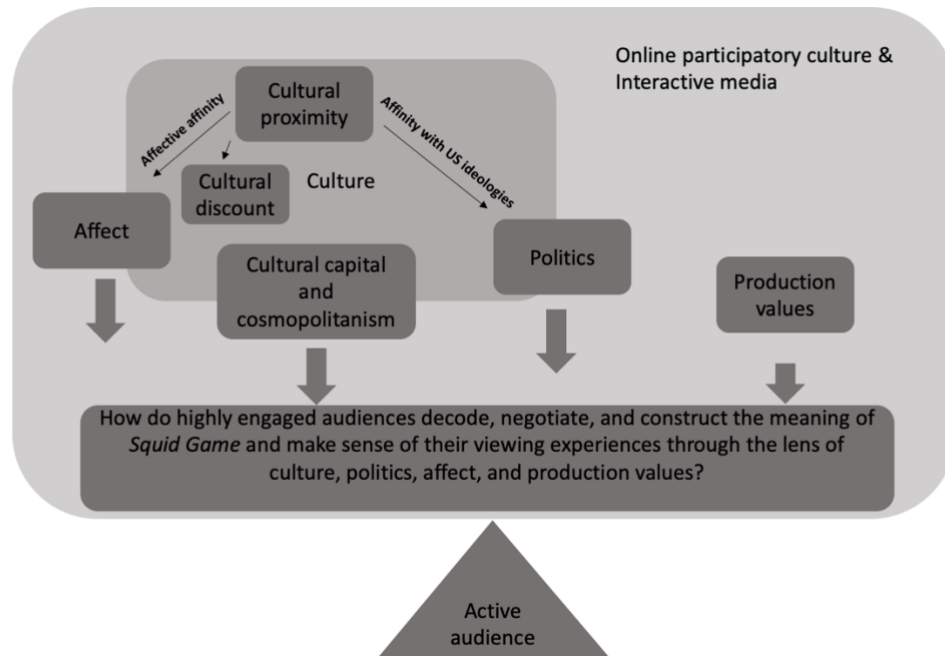
METHODOLOGY

Rationale

As the aim of the study is to uncover how *Squid Game* was received by members of highly engaged, transnational audiences, a qualitative method is more appropriate than a quantitative one. Since my goal is to capture transnational audiences' spontaneous interpretations of *Squid Game* along with their mundane engagement with the media text, I deemed naturally occurring user-generated data to be more useful than contrived data, such as those collected from interviews or focus groups, which are subject to researcher provocation (Speer, 2008). Naturalistic data can also provide narratives of audiences' viewing experiences in an active tone, as contrasted with delayed, passively generated responses to interview/focus group questions. In addition, Hermes (2009) suggests that beyond the more commonly used approaches, such as interviews, focus groups and ethnography, other creative methods can be

equally valuable for studying media audiences. In particular, it is useful to perform detailed research within web communities where innumerable visitors gather to comment on, learn from and provide feedback on hit shows and movies. Although one could simply contact audiences through interviews or focus groups, the information on digital platforms, which feature many users and intricate interactions, is of significant importance (Jones, 1999). Hence, I decided to rely on the rich online database IMDb, which boasts more than 83 million registered users who post reviews of TV series and movies (Scholz, 2018). Regarding the analytical approach, I chose thematic analysis rather than qualitative content analysis or critical discourse analysis due to the flexibility of the format, coding procedures and epistemology (Allen, 2017; Braun and Clarke, 2006). Unlike critical discourse analysis, which requires that researchers account for power structures and ideological underpinnings in the wider sociocultural and political context, thematic analysis is more attuned to the text itself. While qualitative content analysis is similar to thematic analysis in terms of coding and theme development, thematic analysis has more theoretical flexibility as a hermeneutic method; this accords with the interpretative nature of this study where factors such as context, interaction and intertextuality can come into play in the systematic coding process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A pilot study showed the appropriateness of the chosen method and was used to make minor amendments to the coding process, as discussed below.

Sampling and Data Collection

Based on Guest *et al.* (2012), purposeful sampling is considered more apposite to exploratory, content-driven studies that do not contain any pre-determined hypotheses. Hence, purposeful sampling was used to intentionally select participants who could be described as being highly engaged *Squid Game* viewers. Since the target population consists of those who actively seek to interpret *Squid Game* online, all the users who have posted reviews of *Squid Game* on IMDb before the date of data collection were selected as participants. As of May 30, 2022, a total of 2,599 reviews were collected, which form the data corpus in this study.

Data were collected by directly copying and pasting reviews from IMDb in chronological order. All publicly available reviews were included. The reviews were cleaned to remove user

information and saved in Word documents. No exclusion criteria were applied since it would have been difficult to establish comprehensive criteria that could be used to filter out generic and irrelevant reviews without losing meaningful pieces of information (Xiang *et al.*, 2015). By ignoring noise in the dataset, I noted the necessity of extra reflexivity when extracting themes from the data; this could be described as a process of "continual bending back on oneself – questioning and querying the assumptions we are making in interpreting and coding the data" (Braun and Clarke, 2019: 594). This allowed me to stay attuned to the relevant pieces of information while filtering out noise. Each individual review was treated as a unit of analysis. Unlike focus groups, where a group of discussions can be analysed together, the data collected in this study were independent reviews. Though there may be hidden group dynamics present in reviews from a certain time period, no explicit conversations or reactions took place. Hence, all reviews that contained implicit references to other reviews were coded individually.

Analytic Approach

The coding and analysis of data were conducted using NVivo 12 (Mac). The coding process was guided by a contextualist epistemology, which is situated between essentialism and social constructionism. A contextualist method acknowledges how people "make meaning of their experience, and, in turn, the ways the broader social context impinges on those meanings, while retaining focus on the material and other limits of reality" (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 81). This is to say that though the reviewers socially constructed the meaning of *Squid Game*, there were parameters in place to limit the scope of audience interpretations. Adopting the hermeneutic paradigm as a theory for interpretative analysis, the decoding of *Squid Game* was investigated at the intratextual, intertextual and interpretative levels to uncover the overarching and latent themes embedded within both individual and multifaceted interpretative practices (Gunter, 2000; Hansen *et al.*, 1998).

For the analysis procedure, I followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach to thematic analysis and complemented it using Strauss and Corbin's (1990) axial coding method. I first read through the entire dataset and annotated it with codes to organise the corpus into manageable segments of information. Recurring patterns were identified and emerging

concepts that were relevant to the research questions were categorised together with the coded extracts. Next, the codes were coalesced, subdivided and contrasted until they reached a point of saturation; this point was when no more new concepts appeared, and the existing categories were considered inclusive of all relevant information pieces (Morrow and Smith, 2000). Then, I referred back to the conceptual framework and proceed on to axial and selective coding; this coding process involves "specifying a category (phenomenon) in terms of the conditions that give rise to it; the context … the action/interactional strategies by which it is handled, managed, carried out" (Strauss and Corbin, 1990: 97). The aim was to evaluate codes along the axes of existing theoretical frameworks and abstract them to a higher level of themes. While main themes were derived through deduction, lower-level sub-themes were obtained through inductive reasoning. All the themes were revised repeatedly against the extracts in relation to how they answer the research questions. A web-like thematic map that illustrates the relationship between all the themes and sub-themes was drawn.

In the pilot, I deduced three major themes from the overarching theories around transnational media flow. While the theories of cultural proximity and affective affinity were appropriate for the cultural and affective perspectives, cultural capital and active audience debate did not directly correspond to data in that respect. Hence, in the final analysis, some of the main themes were named after the theory-driven, pre-existing codes, while others were the product of a combination of theories and interpretation of the data.

Ethics and Reflexivity

Admittedly, there are ethical dilemmas associated with using IMDb reviews that were written by individuals who are unaware they would be used for research purposes. Some scholars posit that information shared in a public cyberspace, as opposed to a private forum or closed website, can be used for research purposes without the authors' informed consent (Beninger, 2016). However, this is still a topic of debate, and it would be more ethical to inform participants of the goal of the research and how their data will be used. Townsend and Wallace (2016) suggest that researchers can expect study participants to be cognizant of the consequences of sharing information on publicly accessible platforms, especially on sites like

IMDb where the purpose of posting a review is so that other users can read it. It is not possible to contact participants to obtain their informed consent because IMDb offers only limited user information, and thus informed consent was not sought in this study. In addition, in the current study, a proportion of the unidentifiable reviews may have been posted by users under the age of 18, according to the Rating By Demographics table, available on IMDb. Hence, the study was initially flagged as being high risk. After obtaining ethical approval from the LSE's Research Committee, I took extra care in my approach with respect to Internet ethics in subsequent data collection. Furthermore, considering the nature of the study, there are no significant concerns about vulnerable participants or sensitive issues (Ess, 2007). Additionally, confidentiality is expected in academic research as a component of standard netiquette (Nissenbaum, 2009; Jones, 1999). To protect participants' privacy, identifying personal information (e.g., username, IP address) was not collected. The reviews were anonymised and labelled with random participant numbers. To further prevent the identification of participants through the searching of quotes on the Internet, the extracts in the final write-up were in large part paraphrased rather than copied verbatim (Townsend & Wallace, 2016). In order not to compromise the clarity and the original intent of the posts, the final write-up includes direct quotes of specific phrases and very short sentences.

For studies that use a hermeneutic approach to qualitative analysis, some interpretive practices are subject to the researcher's pre-existing conceptions and interpretations of the text; therefore, it is necessary to make a declaration of researcher reflexivity in these studies (Ezzy, 2002). To improve credibility and situate findings in the exact context from which they were obtained, it is crucial for researchers to reflect on their own positions, values, and other assumptions as they may bring them into the analysis (Hesse-Biber, 2012). As an Asian woman, I must acknowledge that I have pre-conceptions about Korean and Asian culture. I also consider myself an insider on the subject of K-dramas and personally identify as a fan of the genre. Considering the possibility that media scholars may be fans of their subject of study, Hills (2007) suggests that scholar-fans can be a valid existence as long as they can remain as

objective as possible. Thus, I adopted a reflexive approach throughout the analysis to account for my ideological assumptions and audience-based academic identity.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter discusses the findings from my analysis, the themes of which are set out in Figure 2. I situate the main themes based on how they work together to represent highly engaged, transnational audiences' interpretation of *Squid Game*. While answering the main research question through the four lenses of interest (i.e., culture, politics, affect and production values), I also interweave a discussion of the sub-question in each theme into the analysis.

In addition to what Ahmed *et al.*'s (2022) snapshot study revealed, highly engaged audiences' discussions on IMDb about *Squid Game* went deeper and were more devoted than the brief plot summaries or generic emotional reactions to the series that appeared on Twitter. The first theme shows the American influence on transnational media reception and how audiences perceive *Squid Game* as a cultural product, which can be juxtaposed with Hollywood productions and Western values. This is followed by repeated discussions of audiences' affective responses to the series, including how suspense/horror works to produce pleasure and how forming emotional connections with the characters helps transnational audiences overcome cultural barriers. Then, I examine how the reviewers negotiated cultural references in relation to the barriers and facilitators to appreciating *Squid Game*, with audience interpretation largely echoing Straubhaar's (1991) theory of cultural proximity. The section concludes with the fourth theme, which is concerned with the unique consumption patterns of highly engaged, transnational audiences.

Figure 2 Thematic Map
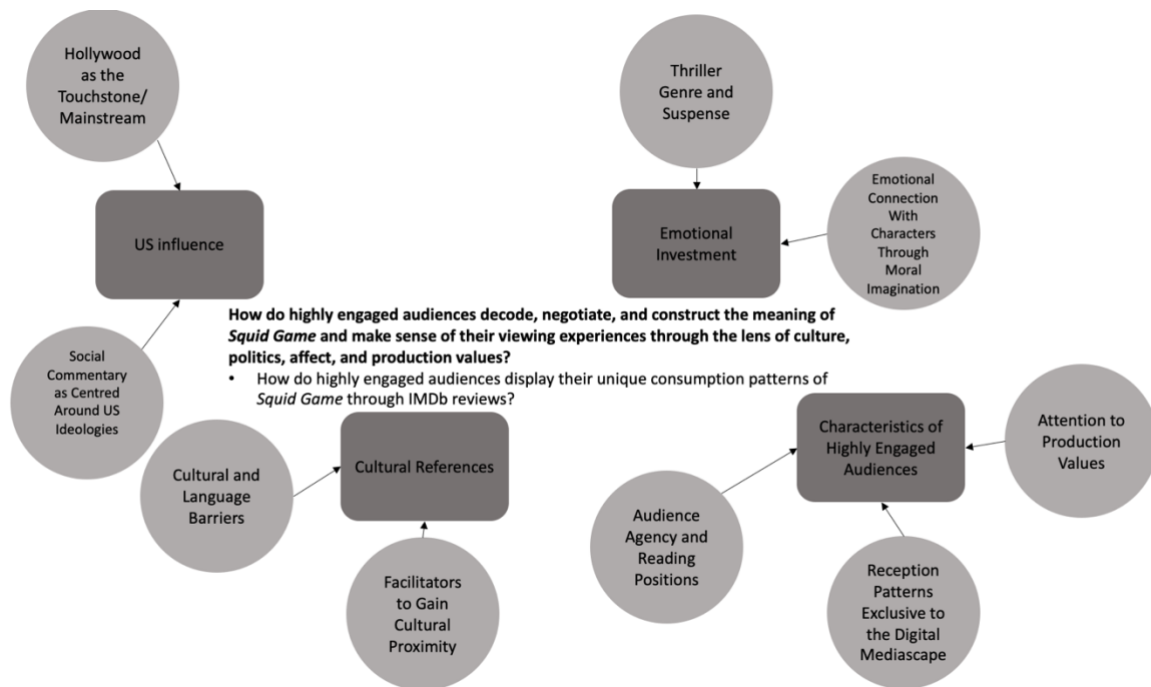
US Influence

The first prominent theme is characterised by audiences' inclination to juxtapose *Squid Game* with US productions and ideological influences. It seems natural for global audiences to compare non-American content with its US counterparts and comment on the production values using US content as a benchmark. References to terms like "American drama" and "Hollywood" were commonly found. This reflects how US dominant ideologies have been imposed on global audiences for so many years that it is imperative to incorporate proximity with US cultural products as a key factor influencing transnational media reception of non-US content (La Pastina & Straubhaar, 2005).

Hollywood as the Touchstone/Mainstream

Direct elicitation of US content is evident in audiences' attempts to compare *Squid Game* with Hollywood products. Some reviewers wrote that *Squid Game* is 'cheesy' or 'childish' compared to Hollywood productions. They admit to having 'prejudiced' ideas towards films and series from 'cultures other than English or American' that are 'outside of their comfort zone'. They

appear to take for granted that a review of any popular foreign television show or film should be compared against 'Hollywood-level quality'. IMDb reviewers rarely de-naturalise such comparisons; instead, they draw upon 'American actors', 'American psycho' and 'American TV and storytelling' and gauge the relevance of the series to 'American audiences'.

The expansion of US media and the imbalance of media flows in the 20th century have left a long-lasting mark on how audiences perceive genre and read television texts (Straubhaar, 1991). Every time a foreign television or film adopts the Hollywood formula, it exposes world audiences to US entertainment values and reinforces the formula, making audiences more receptive to Hollywood-style productions (Hoskins and Mirus, 1988). Rooted in efforts by Korean filmmakers to compete with Hollywood cinema, the Hollywoodisation of films and televisions has become commonplace in South Korea (Kwon, 2016). Hollywood content is not only perceived as a touchstone by audiences but also as a type of mainstream culture; this results in audiences labelling other foreign productions as 'being subcultural'. Though *Squid Game* followed a normative process, being produced by and streamed on an American platform, audiences still recognised it as an 'outlandish non-American entertainment form' and a 'weird attraction'. It was classified as 'not mainstream', and some audience members grouped it alongside 'Japanese anime/manga'. These reviews allude to the proposition that there are only two types of media productions: Hollywood and non-Hollywood. This implies that to 'become mainstream', *Squid Game* and other foreign transnational content must not only reach beyond national audiences but must also catch Americans' attention, invoking a cultural hierarchy in audience perceptions of quality content and successful transnational media (Wood, 2003).

Social Commentary as Centred Around US Ideologies

Reviews of *Squid Game* by highly engaged IMDb users tend to draw upon social commentary, a common device of audience interpretation. Audiences use fictional television to connect with civic issues and engage with public debate; any television series can be 'interpreted as politically or ideologically laden' (Nærland, 2019: 665). When dissecting *Squid Game* through a political lens, rather than seeing its success as an ideological confrontation with Korean

propaganda – a soft power strategy that Korean scholars usually identify in popular Korean films and dramas (Jang, 2019) – most reviewers nonetheless interpret the series by drawing upon American ideologies and Western values, regardless of whether they are similar or contradictory.

The results show extensive evidence that reviewers endeavoured to identify symbols, metaphors, and tropes alluding to 'a democracy based on rules of capitalism', 'racism', 'misogyny', 'ageism', 'consumerism', 'class separation', 'gender inequality' and 'the absence of an egalitarian society'. They even go so far as to point out racial stereotypes: 'the only white people in this whole series are cast as the irredeemable bad guys' and 'all of the characters are Korean except the one who is Pakistani'. The posts note the poor acting of white people whose 'slurs are intentional', attributing this to the producers' intent to make a political statement about 'anti-woke' postures; posters note that this is something 'you would never get away with in an English-language show these days'. Some suggest that how these values are represented does not comport with the Western system, stating that they are 'basically everything that's wrong with South Korea today' and 'would be outright rejected if this was a Hollywood/Western production'. These readings could have been guided by American ideologies, including 'wokeness', a prevalent religion of identity that has its roots in African American political consciousness and seeks to repudiate white supremacy (Bunyasi and Smith, 2019).

In contrast, some reviewers' responses reject American 'woke culture' and its presence in many modern films and television programs. Nowadays, 'woke culture' appears frequently in televisual forms in Anglo-American contexts. Scholars have noted that programming features 'an increasing saturation of 'feel good' and 'positive' messages of female empowerment, LGBTIQ pride, racial and religious diversity and inclusion, and environmental awareness' (Kanai and Gill, 2020: 10). Content creators have transformed 'wokeness' into a new consumer culture, which is another channel for the dissemination of US propaganda, including neoliberalism and capitalism. Posters point out that Hollywood content 'shove[s] their woke religion down our throats'. Audiences sometimes prefer their content to be purely

entertainment, seeking content that offers escapism, thrills, and interesting stories without political agendas, 'gay couples', 'forced identity' or any 'obvious message from the rich elite'. Therefore, *Squid Game* was extolled for "not including [an] unnecessary BLM or LGBT agenda". The different decoding of *Squid Game* in relation to dominant US ideology represents what Sinclair (1993) called 'the disaggregation of audiences in the era of globalization' (Sinclair, 1993: 124) where despite the domination of a cultural hegemon that could homogenise audiences' receptions, one must still account for differential positions and cultural impacts.

Emotional Investment

The reviews giving credit to *Squid Game* were dominated by references to a range of affective responses such as 'chill', 'thrill', 'edgy', 'a roller coaster of emotions', 'guilt', 'remorse', 'relief', 'anger', 'anxiety-inducing', 'depressing' and so on. Echoing Hall's (1980) proposition that there are emotional consequences to audiences' meaningful decoding of messages in television, negotiating *Squid Game*'s affective meaning underlies the importance of audiences' emotional investment in the content. On the same note, the act of writing reviews features an affective component; the activity itself is cognitively demanding, which is indicative of a heightened level of affective investment in providing text feedback compared to simply awarding the show a numerical rating (Alhabash and Mcalister, 2015). In addition, Gibbs's (2011) notion of 'affect contagion' is evident in the reviews. As audience members made an affective contribution by commenting on the series, they indirectly drew upon the affective practices of other viewers; in so doing, a feedback loop of emotional engagement was created and disseminated (Barnes, 2018). The analysis reveals that emotional investment not only leads to psychological gratification from the viewing experience but also acts as a social driver for inducing engagement online. By participating online, audiences can form affective relationships with the text and other viewers at the same time, a phenomenon that is not exclusive to fan communities (Gregg and Seigworth, 2010).

Thriller Genre and Suspense

Many audiences consider *Squid Game* as an entry in the psychological thriller genre, which allows them to experience a type of horror that they derive pleasure from. Suspense is also a crucial element that elicits "an affective response to narrative structure that accompanies the reduction in quantity or quality of plans available to a protagonist faced with potential goal failure and/or harm" (O'Neill and Riedl, 2011: 246). Most reviewers enjoyed the excitement they felt when engaging with the horror and suspense presented in *Squid Game*. Such emotionally driven reactions echo Ju's (2020) vision of how the universal affective features of television narratives facilitate consumption that transcends cultural and national boundaries – the pleasure generated may predict the transnational mobility of media content.

Indeed, audiences report a level of affective affinity in viewing transnational horror. However, the assumed universality of such feeling was actually dissected from a Western perspective, situated 'within the bounds of Western modernity … [that] belie such a constrained reading' (Och and Strayer, 2013: 112). In other words, though some audiences acknowledged *Squid Game*'s thrill and suspense as key emotional elements that facilitate transnational media reception, presumptions originating from the Hollywood cinematic paradigm about the usefulness of such conventions are often ignored; this is because the spectatorial pleasure of the horror genre is derived from a familiarity with Western subjectivity (Strayer, 2013). Therefore, as discussed in the theoretical chapter, affect affinity is not a universal phenomenon that can be separated from cultural proximity and affinity with US ideologies, and the processing of the emotional component of *Squid Game* is inevitably influenced by cultural cues.

Emotional Connections with Characters Through Moral Imagination

Prior to the emergence of digital media, emotional investment in a television show was associated with audience participation in traditional studio discussion programmes. This was especially true for fan audiences who 'want to discover what ordinary people are thinking and are themselves stimulated to think by the programme discussions, finding these emotionally involving, relevant to their own lives, and of broader social influence' (Livingstone, 1994: 435). Following the reconfiguration of audience participation from top-down to bottom-up

engagement, these trends with respect to studio discussion programmes have been transferred to contemporary online participatory culture. Emotions still underlie active audiences' motivation to participate in online discussions on IMDb. Audiences cite the undeniable "emotional punch", the easily elicited 'emotional investment' and the 'emotional impact to those who [become] invested in the story which seems to be everyone'. These comments appear alongside confession of how easily audience members end up identifying with the characters and vicariously experiencing their sadness. These strong emotional effects can be attributed to the relatable plot points that some believe 'you can find it in our everyday life'. Viewers connect with the characters as they are transported into the narrative, which leads to greater audience enjoyment and involvement (Tal-Or and Cohen, 2010).

In the affective reading of *Squid Game*, moral decision-making plays a pivotal role. Many audiences clung to the 'emotionally grabbing' plot, discussing 'what is the morally right decision" and questioning "morals and the dark side of humanity'. In studies of how audiences receive narrative artworks and literary narratives, audience engagement was found to be influenced by how effectively media text stimulates moral judgement, which in turn cultivates deep emotional investment and the urge to understand the characters' motivations and feelings (Carroll, 2001; Krijnen and Verboord, 2016). While television narratives may function differently in terms of how they provoke audiences' moral understanding of the characters, the reviews showed that the moral imagination of television narratives is analogous to the ones that appear in other media. This is conducive to establishing an emotional connection with audiences in such a way that 'a straightforward morality' can attract 'those who are not interested in Korean cinema' and help them relate with every character even if their 'culture is far' different.

Cultural References

IMDb users describe the phenomenal success of *Squid Game* as 'a future cult classic' that created 'a tsunami' of Korean wave. Drawing an analogy from telenovelas of the 1980s (Straubhaar *et al.*, 2021), K-drama is now being acknowledged as a distinct cultural genre, representing a 'cultural superpower' that is 'ravaging the earth'. In acclaiming *Squid Game*'s

high production value, references to other Korean films like Train to Busan, Parasite, and The Handmaid were made. While one can identify a number of explicit and implicit cultural references embedded in *Squid Game*'s meaning-making process, there is a diverse range of attitudes towards the transcultural reception of the series. Some reviewers note that the series 'exploded their blinkers as to what Korean culture is', evoking a sense of optimism and cosmopolitan spirit towards exotic cultural experiences. In contrast, other reviewers dismiss 'other people's culture' that Western audiences tend to have difficulty understanding. Hence, the third theme is centred around cultural references. This relates to La Pastina and Straubhaar's (2005) claim that cultural proximity is an important predictor of, but not a prerequisite for, audiences' preferences for content that goes beyond their cultural-linguistic boundaries.

Cultural and Language Barriers

Korean cultural references or 'Asian quicks' were identified as potential barriers to the effortless consumption of *Squid Game*. Many transnational audiences lack the cultural background to fully understand the 'out-of-context' Korean childhood games presented in the series as well as the Korean societal issues such as 'the North-South Korean dispute', 'household debt', 'urban poor' and gender inequality. Some found it difficult to relate to the series right from the start as 'Korean culture is so different from what we Europeans and Americans have'. Straubhaar (1991) suggests that precisely these sorts of cultural boundaries limit the flow of television programmes from Asia to Western countries. Furthermore, in *Squid Game*, Western audiences repeatedly raise questions about the 'overdramatic' and 'exaggerated' acting styles. IMDb reviews consistently assail the 'awful' and 'cringey' acting of the English-speaking characters, the VIPs. They refer to the 'overacting' as 'a cultural thing' and point out their confusion by asking 'if the wild gesturing and shouting is normal in that culture'. By stating that 'overacting' is 'too common in Korean and Japanese show[s]', the reviewers implicitly drew upon cultural differences in their understanding of acting and demarcated the East Asian genre from European and American television. In line with Jang *et al.* (2021), cultural proximity could be a psychological range that affects audiences' ability to

26

appreciate a show's emotional and cultural nuances. The strenuous discussions of the acting issues highlight how the exchange of opinions takes place between IMDb reviewers even though the platform lacks a 'comment' or 'reply' function that other platforms possess. The way that IMDb users draw upon 'other users' comments' or 'what everyone has mentioned' reveals a sense of co-constructedness in online participatory culture (Wu and Bergman, 2019). Evidence of meta-discussions between reviewers on why the acting was controversial exemplifies how digital technologies have contributed to increasingly diverse and rapid cross-cultural communication (Tombleson and Wolf, 2017).

In addition to the cultural cues, audience members who do not speak Korean also perceived the dubbing or subtitle translations as language barriers to a holistic viewing experience. The series received substantial criticism for its characters' 'weird accents and pronunciation[s]', 'translation loss' and 'dorky voice acting'. Some even asked for 'a European or an American version' due to the language barriers. Hoskins and Mirus (1988) echo such issues in their discussions of how dubbing and subtitling can result in cultural discount whereby audiences could have difficulty identifying with the ways of speaking that appear in the series, which is particularly common among US audiences (Renaud and Litman, 1985). Non-English-speaking audiences or those who watched the series in languages other than English offer an alternative perspective, noting that Anglophone audiences 'are used to Netflix shows where people speak perfect everyday English'. Further, they defend that the 'poor English and dubbing' in *Squid Game* was to 'ensure a non-English speaker or someone with limited English skills' could understand the conversations. They display a welcome attitude towards non-English movies and television since they can obtain 'fresh perspectives from different nations around the world' by watching such programming. The positive attitude towards consuming international televisions coincides with what Beck (2002) describes as 'banal cosmopolitanism', which refers to an impulse among audiences who live at a distance from the cultural centre of the global media system (e.g., non-Anglophone audiences) to experience 'globality' in everyday life (Kuipers and de Kloet, 2009).

Hence, discursive dissonances were found among audiences with different linguistic backgrounds (Castelló, 2010). For non-English speakers, the acting and language in *Squid Game* did not appear awkward or inept, so there were few reviews among that audience that spoke negatively about the English dubbing or the acting of VIPs. One reviewer stressed that English (either as translation or dubbing) can be seen as 'a gesture' to underline that a show has an 'international connection'. The producers of *Squid Game* clearly wanted to cater to the Anglophone world and garner American attention given that the US dominates decisions about global media flow and is undoubtedly the largest centre of global media production (Kuipers and de Kloet, 2009). Indeed, despite Netflix claiming to promote linguistic diversity, the privileged position it grants to Anglophone cinema determines how transnational audiences, who are predominantly exposed to US content, perceive translation. Furthermore, since the translation of Netflix and VOD programming is still an underresearched field in Anglophone screen studies (Lobato, 2018), *Squid Game*'s target audience should be further investigated in relation to the underlying issues that impede audiences' cultural identification with the acting and dubbing.

Facilitators to Gain Cultural Proximity

On the other hand, transnational audiences can overcome cultural and language barriers when they actively search for cultural proximity using a series of textual apparatus embedded in the cultural goods (Straubhaar, 1991). For instance, memes are a basic unit used in cultural communication to clear the hurdles in transnational media flows and increase the speed of dissemination through self-replication of cultural information (Dawkins & Davis, 1976). Memetic symbols in *Squid Game* make 'the costumes […] memorable' and 'the games […] viral'. Even though most audiences were not from South Korea, they 'felt nostalgia' when they recognised the accessible memetic symbols in the series. Likewise, some of the generic elements proved to be universal themes that transnational audiences could relate to, including violence and sex (La Pastina and Straubhaar, 2005). Discussions of 'the stunning gore effects', 'the unflinching violence', 'the sex scene' and 'the blood' are prevalent. They provide a universal understanding that these themes can help audiences search for genre proximity.

This can be further extended to Olson's (1999) concept of narrative transparency, a key factor that accounts for why *Squid Game* seems familiar to Western audiences despite being crafted by Korean producers and situated in the Korean cultural context. Many mentioned the 'simple plot and concept', which makes the series more accommodating to a global market. *Squid Game* uses the narrative transparency technique, which allows audiences to fill in the blanks with their own cultural values. For example, the social problems discussed in *Squid Game* are not examined in depth; as a result, audiences are able to circumvent cultural barriers and form emotional connections with the characters, thereby understanding the content (Hong and Yang, 2022). Furthermore, Western audiences could project Western culture onto the series. For example, many state that *Squid Game* 'embodied American culture' but simply used a Korean crew in doing so. Transnational audiences' diverse, meaningful interpretation of *Squid Game*'s cross-cultural transparency has resulted in the emergence of interpretative communities that foster an exchange of meanings built upon each audience member's own cultural values (Olson, 1999), which is exactly the function of IMDb.

The avoidance of cultural discount complements the concept of narrative transparency and is also evident in the encoding and decoding of *Squid Game*. According to Hoskins and Mirus (1988), the US commercial model tends to have so little cultural discount that it can be used to appeal to the widest range of global audiences. In identifying *Squid Game*'s cultural archetype, many of the reviews mention that the series is 'a variant of Hunger Games', a successful Hollywood movie that also has characteristics of the dystopian genre. Many reviewers refer to what they saw as a 'formulaic plot', making *Squid Game* a remake of Hunger Games in South Korea using childhood games; they perceived the series as 'copying American style with a bit of a twist' and 'westernising themselves to go trending', which is why it has been well-received globally. The discussions of how *Squid Game* has appropriated and modified Hollywood conventions and used these to eliminate cultural barriers for Western audiences is not a new supposition. Kim (2019) and Choi (2011) both note that successful Korean films have employed Hollywood production norms and blockbuster models (e.g., special effects, aesthetics) to appeal to global audiences. Returning to Aguiar and Waldfogel's (2018) question as to whether

Netflix is subverting the US's position as the global hegemon, many audiences believe that, on the surface, *Squid Game*'s success implies the increasing dominance of a counter-hegemonic cultural formation. However, audiences' instant recognition of the US cultural archetypes in the series, their acknowledgement of an international taste that is shaped by Hollywood productions and most importantly, the producers' perceived intention to mimic US commercial model all suggest that audience preferences for cultural proximity are not solely based on familiarity with one's ethnic or cultural background; instead, they are more importantly built upon proximity with US products (La Pastina and Straubhaar, 2005; Och and Strayer, 2013).

Characteristics of Highly Engaged Audiences

To paraphrase a prominent reviewer, *Squid Game* is a text that can be interpreted on multiple levels depending on the intensity of one's engagement with it. In line with my classification of IMDb users as highly engaged audiences, a number of reviewers identify themselves as 'avid readers' or 'astute and analytical viewers' as opposed to general audience members who merely want to be entertained. This partially explains why *Squid Game* is 'suspiciously popular': it has the depth and layers necessary to 'please smart viewers'. The last theme, which is mainly dedicated to answering the sub-question, consists of a compilation of the distinctive viewing patterns displayed by these highly engaged spectators. As an underresearched audience segment (Athique, 2013), IMDb reviewers exhibit unique reception patterns that should be given special research attention. Their unintentional but highly visible role as cultural intermediaries should be factored in when contextualising *Squid Game*'s transnational success in its immediate digital and sociocultural environment.

Audience Agency and Reading Positions

The IMDb reviews of *Squid Game* tend to follow a similar pattern, incorporating both the merits and demerits of the series. Most reviewers are critical of but do not unfairly exaggerate their criticisms of plot holes, the illogical ending and the unrealistic/predictable plotlines. One can observe a divergence in how highly engaged audiences decode the series. This divergence is

representative of audience agency in independently and criticality examining the meaning of *Squid Game*. Mapping this onto Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model, IMDb reviewers tend to adopt a negotiated or oppositional reading position. As active audiences, IMDb reviewers demonstrate their awareness of the dominant-hegemonic perspective dictated by the press. They note that the 'marketing tricks' and 'promotions by Netflix' suggest that *Squid Game* is a must-watch. Nonetheless, they admit that these advertisements and recommendations on social media influenced them and prompted them to watch the programme. Some acknowledge that Netflix algorithms play a key role in priming the users to click on the 'play' button. At the same time, many argue that the series is 'overrated' and 'hyped'; there was a notable increase in these sorts of critiques in the reviews beginning in the third week after the release of the series (potentially in response to the series becoming a global hit). In line with the findings from a previous study that investigates the online comments of Chinese audiences, there are apparent parameters on audiences' critical engagement with media texts (Wu and Bergman, 2019). Despite knowledge of the hype surrounding the show, the negotiated and resistant audiences were nonetheless affected by the previews of the programme they encountered on social media or other platforms. This conforms with Gray's (2008) assertion about audiences' susceptibility to hype. Reviewers try to negotiate with or resist the dominant perspective that the series deserves 'international recognition', but they also do not deny their willingness to watch the series and perceive it through the lens of dominant US ideologies. Hence, the results show a multi-dimensional paradigm of audience reception in accordance with Michelle's (2007) findings: Highly engaged audiences were absorbed into the series; meanwhile, they used intertextual information to make a judgement, most importantly, counter-hegemonic discourses of audience volition were constructed with reference to the inescapable hegemonic struggles.

Attention to Production Values

In addition to negotiating or resisting *Squid Game*'s preferred meaning, which has been foisted on an imaginary mass audience, the highly engaged IMDb reviewers are especially attuned to production values and intertextual representations. They attach great importance to *Squid*

Game's 'aesthetically pleasing' viewing experience and spoke highly of the 'visuals', 'set designs', 'cinematography', 'use of colour', 'music', 'character development', 'costume', 'acting', 'screenwriting', 'editing' and more. Such patterns coincide with Schneider *et al.*'s (2020) findings, where production values are identified as an important criterion in movie reviews that appear on IMDb. Reviewers also passionately investigate the intertextual references in *Squid Game*, including 'the Escher sets', 'the island hideaway from the Pinewood 007 stage' and the homages to Stanley Kubrick, noting 'everything from the music used in 2000: A Space Odyssey to the masks from Eyes Wide Shut'. Like Batman, the reason why *Squid Game* resonates with a wide range of transnational audiences is that the producers situate the series in a web of cross-references, working towards a commercial intertext in which audiences are free to position themselves anywhere to discover the meanings they prefer, thereby activating intensive participation (Meehan, 1991). Within *Squid Game*'s intertextual narratives, another interesting pattern is the attempt to classify the programme into a certain genre by listing a number of similar movies and television series, such as Gantz, Alice in Borderland, The Purge, Money Heist, Battle Royale, Kaiji, Parasite, Saw and Hunger Games. These highly engaged audiences actively construct intertextual meanings by identifying 'uses of conventions by popular genres' while also being 'makers of these conventions [and] genres' (Nelson, 2013: 172). Furthermore, the wide range of intertextual references that reviewers draw upon demonstrates that they are 'cultural omnivores' who pursue a cosmopolitan spirit through the consumption of a diverse range of cultural content; they can transform that content into cultural capital to be employed in peer interactions (Straubhaar *et al.*, 2021).

Reception Patterns Exclusive to the Digital Mediascape

Finally, IMDb reviewers, who use the platform as a 'second screen' to enrich their viewing experience, also reveal reception patterns that are exclusive to the digital mediascape. Supporting Jenner's (2018) rumination on Netflix's 'grammar of transnationalism', viewers perceive Netflix as an important platform that encourages high-quality media productions and facilitates the circulation of Korean wave content. Netflix has been credited for diversifying entertainment options, accommodating the tastes of different audiences, and intensifying the

competition in the creative content field. In addition, reviewers highlight a binge-watching culture that is prevalent on Netflix and among the audience members of *Squid Game*. Except for how 'bingeable' the series is, some complain about how the series could have fewer episodes. This recalls commentary about how fragmented audience attention is in the new media era, with short videos and fast-paced social life condensing audiences' consumption patterns (Hong & Yang, 2022). Audiences' receptions of the series are simultaneously influenced by technological innovation. In Ahmed *et al.*'s (2022) study, they note how *Squid Game*, as a global hit, has been facilitated by the distribution strategy of 'seeding' and 'broadcasting' on social media. Similarly, IMDb reviewers highlight the importance of meta-discussions online and the influence of 'second screening'. They note that "everyone on social media was talking about the show" and the viral videos on Twitter and TikTok 'numbed people's brains'. This shows that the audience participation that IMDb and other social media platforms facilitate creates a collaborative commenting online culture. Such culture has EWOM value and offers a stage on which audience interpretation is turned into a social activity featuring continuous meaning-making by networked publics (Yang and Coffey, 2014).

CONCLUSION

This dissertation employs the theory of cultural proximity together with relevant concepts including affective affinity, proximity with US products, and cosmopolitanism to expound on audience reception of *Squid Game*. As a response to audience pluralisation, I dissect the new active audiences from multiple angles and identify an underresearched segment, a prominent cohort of cultural intermediaries in transnational media flow. Through revisiting Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model, the study investigates audience reading practices against the backdrop of digitalisation, conglomeration, and globalisation. To recap, the aim of the dissertation is to conduct an original investigation into how high engaged audiences interpret the meaning of *Squid Game* and engage with the text in an online participatory reviewing

culture where the meaning-making process is continuously informed by digital and sociocultural encounters.

The findings contribute to a comprehensive understanding of how *Squid Game* is decoded from four interrelated perspectives. On the surface, *Squid Game* is acclaimed as a subversion of US cultural imperialism. K-drama receives recognition as a new cultural genre apart from Western productions. However, US hegemony is found to be deeply rooted in transnational audience reception of *Squid Game*, from the comparison with Hollywood productions to the adoption of Western values in social commentary. Anglophone audiences are likely to encounter cultural and language barriers in reception, but the cultural archetype of *Squid Game* is regarded as assimilated to that of US productions where narrative transparency is used to eliminate cultural obstacles. Though affective investment is treated as a universal mechanism that shapes audience preference beyond cultural boundaries, it remains contested that whether the use of horror and suspense to elicit pleasure is predominantly influenced by Hollywood conventions.

In addition, the meta-data regarding the hidden audience interactions between reviews sheds light on the distinctive reception patterns of high engaged audiences and captures the cultural specificities of IMDb as a participatory platform that reshapes audience reading practices into a social networking activity. The cultural capital and cosmopolitan spirit acquired is an important component of the discussions of motivators for consuming and engaging with transnational media. Audiences also use IMDb to engage in deliberation and civic communication where their negotiated or resistant readings contribute to a counter-hegemonic discourse of why audiences should watch *Squid Game* and what message is conveyed by the series. This highlights the technological affordances of interactive, digital, second screens that facilitate a networked public to share their voices.

The study has theoretical and empirical implications on a conceptual framework that synthesises cultural theories and relevant audience studies situated in the context of Internet, social media and OTT platforms to reconsider power-generated pop culture in the digital age.

The results also advert to audience diversification and highlights the role of 'new active audience' in dismantling cultural imperialism. Moreover, the study points towards a source of user-generated data other than Twitter which has been substantially examined by media scholars: IMDb is a platform offering rich qualitative information on the bottom-up civic participation process of highly engaged audiences in relation to the cultural shift promoted by digital media.

However, the study is not without limitations. Regarding the use of IMDb reviews as the data corpus, it needs to be stressed that the data was not originally produced to address the research questions. Thus, there might be a substantial amount of irrelevant data that might have confounded the analysis process (Mayr and Weller, 2016). Despite efforts to filter out unrelated textual pieces, there is still a large degree of subjectivity in researcher's discrete choice of coding and extracting. In addition, despite claiming a global usership, an IMDb report of user demographics showed that reviewers were predominantly American males aged 30 to 44, so the data might not be as representative of an international voice as expected (Bahraminasr and Vafaei Sadr, 2020; Boyle, 2014). Due to the protocol on the protection of user privacy, demographic information could not be collected, so researchers have little control over such sampling bias introduced (Taylor *et al.*, 2016). As opposed to generalising representative findings to a wider population, I would like to stress that the main objective of the current qualitative study is to capture the heterogeneity of audience interpretation and shed light on how common themes might inform audience research. In addition, unfettered text mining of IMDb reviews inevitably introduces noise to the research where reviews of varying quality might have been included, all the way from professional analytic critiques to summaries of content and emotionally driven comments (Ridanpää, 2014; Schneider *et al.*, 2020). This provides grounds for further inquiry where the collection of primary data is necessary in order to monitor and control data quality.

To conclude, future research should aim to conduct large-scale surveys or interview high engaged audiences who are not represented on IMDb in order to corroborate the themes relating to audience reception of transnational content in the digital age. The investigation into

the meaning-making of Squig Game in relation to audience pluralisation needs to be further brought about so as to uncover how non-American media is treated by a global audience and whether there is a cultural shift in audience reception of foreign content.

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