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How did ‘Squid Game’ Become a Global Syndrome?

With its release in September of 2021, one Netflix series blatantly and crudely displayed the bloodthirsty and two-faced nature of humans: a global phenomena, *Squid Game*.

Squid Game, a Netflix original TV series, revolves around 456 players, each risking their lives for a chance to win a 45.6 billion-won prize (38.6 million U.S. dollars). Desperate contestants, each suffering from massive debt and financial issues, compete in 6 deadly games, each inspired by traditional children's games played in Korea.

As soon as *Squid Game* was released worldwide on Netflix last September, it received international attention and accolades. After effortlessly topping No. 1 in 94 countries, it received the glorious title of “Netflix’s Most Viewed Show.” *Squid Game* attracted over 111 million global viewers in the first 17 days of its release, and that number jumped to 142 million only 11 days later.

“[*Squid Game*] would be the biggest title in our history and around the world,” Ted Sarandos, a chief executive officer of Netflix, commented after acclaiming *Squid Game* for its unprecedented achievements.

All of this brings us to one staggering question: why is *Squid Game* so popular?

Here are the top 8 reasons why *Squid Game* became a global syndrome:

Realistic Storyline

Even though the story portrays an exaggerated dystopian society, many challenges and conflicts within *Squid Game* parallels our present reality. Ever since the outbreak of COVID-19 two years ago, poverty rates have exponentially increased in America. In all four of America’s largest cities, more than 50% of the population have reported financial problems due to job loss or reduction in wages after the pandemic. Poverty rates globally doubled by more than 500 million, and lockdowns around the world led to unemployment and food shortages. *Squid Game* mirrors this financial hardship by showing the desperate lives of 456 participants of the game. For instance, Gihun, one of the main characters of the film, joins Squid Game to pay for his mother’s medical treatment. Another character, Saebyeok, chooses to participate in the deadly game to provide a home for her North Korean younger brother. Although the extreme life and death elements of *Squid Game* are overly hyperbolic, *Squid Game* realistically and empathetically reflects our financial difficulties in the lives of the players.

Gender Inequality

“Prostitution is bad, yet it still managed to survive as the oldest job in the history of mankind. That just explains how corrupted human beings are.” After further research and to my horror, I was forced to agree with my 10th grade U.S. history teacher. In 2021, out of the 40 million prostitutes globally, 80% of them are females. “Sex workers,” a euphemism for prostitutes, tend to be connotated and stigmatized as immoral or disgraceful. However, the vast majority of the women involved in the prostitution industry were either forced through human trafficking, extreme poverty, past trauma, or lack of social opportunities. In *Squid Game*, Mi-nyeo, a desperate mother of a newborn baby, uses her seductive skills to gain aid from Deok-su, a gangster. She engages in sexual relationships with Deok-su to gain her status within his gang and endures verbal and physical sexual harassment from the other gang members. More than 3 out of 4 women have been verbally harassed in America, and more than 50% of women have been

sexually touched without consent. And of those, almost 70% of the women have been harassed in public. Squid Game indirectly but indeed reflects how social issues such as poverty and domestic violence can lead to women participating in prostitution out of hopelessness.

Goodness and Evil

All movies, shows, novels, and even cartoons have a hero and a villain. However, in Squid Game, characters do not have a thick barrier between the borderline of “good and bad.” As a matter of fact, there is almost none. Each and every character in the show possesses both aspects of goodness and evil. For example, Sang-woo, one of the main contestants in Squid Game, is an intelligent graduate of Seoul National University (the top university in Korea). Throughout each game round, Sang-woo uses his excellent observations and radical decisions to ruthlessly eliminate his friends, earning him the reputation of an “evil character.” Unlike Sang-woo, Gi-hun, the show’s main character, is portrayed as warm, friendly, and naïve to others, which sometimes even led to him putting himself in danger. This gave Gi-hun the typical stature of “good.” Many viewers of Squid Game heavily criticized Sang-woo’s violent and selfish characteristics after the conclusion of the series. However, others claimed that Sang-woo was not, in fact, evil but rather down-to-earth and realistic. This unique quality of Squid Game allowed the viewers to empathize and relate with various decisions each character made in the show.

Paradoxical Aesthetics

One element that contributes to the resonating anxiety of Squid Game is its life-like set. However, unlike the deadly tension that surrounds the plot of the series, the set’s aesthetics is quite the opposite. For example, the Escher-like staircase that leads the contestants to arenas is painted in vibrant pink, contrasting the somber and anxious mood of the characters. Viewers can also spot that the outfit of the game guards is pink-colored. Pink, a color that generally symbolizes love and kindness, becomes a symbol of terror and fear to the contestants in the show. Paradoxical elements can be further seen in the fifth game of the series, Glass Stepping Stones. Here, players had to cross two parallel glass bridges. Contestants had to progress across the bridge by jumping only on tempered glass panels, avoiding the weak, regular glass. If players landed on weaker panels, they would plunge to death. Even though crushing anxiety enveloped the plot, the set of this round was designed to resemble a circus stage. Bright green and purple curtains from the 70s and 80s surround the set, and vivid neon lights portray an amusement park like splendor.

Dramatic and Violent Elements

The existing gap between the rich and the poor has exponentially increased after the Covid-19 outbreak. While the impoverished begged for economic opportunities, others prospered; the world’s 2,365 billionaires are living their best life amidst the coronavirus pandemic. After the outbreak, the total wealth of the world’s billionaires class grew more than 50% (4 trillion dollars). Crypto billionaires emerged as the richest Americans, and CEOs of companies such as Amazon have experienced explosive growth due to the increase in online service usage. This cycle has continued all throughout the virus: rich people get richer, poor people get poorer. This expanding gap between the rich and the poor has caused one significant effect in our society: increased violence. Poverty, unemployment, decreased economic opportunities, and diminished community participation is all leading factors to community violence; we get violent as we feel social exclusion and isolation. This similarly parallels the aspects of violence in *Squid Game*. During the game, money was the sole mind-altering substance that seemed to allow murder and violence. Anguished contestants ruthlessly murdered their friends and acquaintances as they realized that killing one another was a simple method of elimination. The violence that is painted throughout the series shows the inhumane yet humane nature of people.

TikTok Challenges

Our generation was born and raised on the internet and social media. Therefore, it is inevitable that social media has played a significant role in the rising popularity of *Squid Game*. Even my first encounter with *Squid Game* was through a social media platform, TikTok. In the short clip I watched, the game “Red Light, Green Light” was being played. A jumbo-sized doll wearing a bright yellow dress detected the movements of the players with its glaring, red eyes. When players moved after the word “red light” was announced, they were shot brutally on the spot. I scrunched my eyebrows in disbelief and hastily opened Netflix. 12 hours later, I had completed the entire show. On online platforms, such as TikTok and Instagram, fans replicated the characters of the game played in the show. For

instance, characters in *Squid Game* were given “dalgona candy,” a cookie made of brown sugar and baking soda. Players in *Squid Game* had to cut out specific shapes imprinted on the honeycomb candy using a needle without breaking the shape; if they did, they were eliminated. This game along with several others trended on TikTok as “*Squid Game* challenges.” Even popular gaming platforms, such as Roblox, were flooded with *Squid Game*-themed games that fans have created.

Halloween Costumes and Cosplay

As a person who has a sweet tooth, Halloween has always been my favorite celebration of the year; getting sugar headaches after eating a bucket of candy should be everyone’s tradition. But along with Kit Kat and Skittles, dressing up in staggering costumes has been the hot topic of every Halloween season. And this year, on October 31, American, Korean, and European streets were all full of *Squid Game*-inspired costumes. The infamous pink soldier onesies and the green tracksuits worn by the contestants in *Squid Game* flooded online markets such as Amazon and eBay. Furthermore, professional cosplayers, such as M4STIFF, took inspiration from the robotic doll, Younghee, in *Squid Game* and transferred it to reality. The vivid orange pinafore dress, knee-high white socks, black pigtails, and the expressionless face of the robot was mastered in M4STIFF’s cosplay. *Squid Game* costumes will resurface next Halloween, for sure.

Growing Popularity of K-Cultures

Have you ever listened to K-Pop or watched a K-drama before? Over the span of under 30 years, South Korea experienced phenomenal growth regarding its traditional culture as well as popular culture. For the past few decades, South Korea was largely known for its Hyundai cars and Samsung phones, while its music and movies were limited to regional audiences. But now, Korea has become a cultural juggernaut: a major cultural exporter around the world. For instance, in September of 2021, K-Pop girl group Blackpink surpassed Justin Bieber as the most subscribed artist on the YouTube platform. With a whopping 65.5 million subscribers and combined YouTube views of about 10 billion, Blackpink now stands as one of the top global artists. However, the rapidly growing popularity of K-Pop also stirred a massive attraction to another aspect of Korean pop culture: K-dramas and Korean films. In 2020, *Parasite* marked the new Oscar history by winning 4 Academy Awards at the 92nd Academy Awards. The parasite was the first Korean film to receive Academy Award recognition as well as the first non-English film to win Best Picture. Streaming platforms, especially Netflix, have torn down geographic and language barriers and allowed Korean shows such as *Squid Game* and *Sweet Home* to be popularized among global audiences.

Our lives in the 21st century are surrounded by greed, competition, and self-interest. We, humans, have naturally deceived, lied, and beguiled others to drape ourselves in valuable resources. Maybe we are the murder and tyrants of our modern-day society. *Squid Game* directly and crudely displays the inherent evil that resides within us. Throughout the show, contestants murdered, blamed, and misinformed others to win 456 million won. By the end of the series, Gi-hun, a player who eventually wins the game’s final round, receives the promised 456 million dollars. However, when Gi-hun comes back to his mundane reality, he does not carry out an extravagant lifestyle; Gi-hun lives in poverty of heart, full of guilt and sin.

By the final episode of *Squid Game*, audiences can grasp the true meaning and moral of the show: people will do anything for wealth and luxury, even if it means risking their lives. But the even deeper message *Squid Game* sends out to the audience is that people naturally favor choices that will benefit themselves under extreme situations. Maybe we are the tyrants of this modern-day society. *Squid Game* made the audience, including myself, ponder on the genuine facade of human beings.

[suspenseful music]

You have been logged out of your Netflix account. Goodbye.