

Questioning Platform-Driven Diversity: Diasporic Korean Storytelling on Netflix

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This study examines the recent emergence of diasporic Korean storytelling on subscription video-on-demand (SVOD) platforms. Drawing on a multimodal discourse analysis of two acclaimed shows on Netflix portraying diasporic Koreans in North America, *The Chair* (2021) and *Kim's Convenience* (2016–2021), the study explores how the streaming platform engages with cultural diversity. In doing so, the article initiates a preliminary discussion of how diasporic cultures and identities are integrated into the platformized media environment while suggesting that diasporic storytelling in SVOD catalogs may involve the risk of commodifying and continuing the marginalization of underprivileged groups.

Keywords: digital platform, subscription video on demand, Netflix, cultural diversity, diasporic Koreans, *The Chair*, *Kim's Convenience*

While made-in-Korea content, known as the Korean Wave or Hallyu, has increasingly been integrated into global streaming platforms, particularly Netflix, content about and by diasporic Koreans has begun to appear in the catalogs¹ of these subscription video-on-demand (SVOD) services. In particular, the U.S.-based major streaming services have recently produced or licensed several series depicting Korean American protagonists and their lives. It seems that the emergence of diasporic Korean storytelling on streaming platforms has been at least partly fostered by recent attention to cultural diversity and Asian American content in mainstream media industries in North America. For example, Asian American activists and audiences have participated in movements for inclusive media industries, such as the #OscarsSoWhite campaign (2015) criticizing the Oscars' nomination of White actors to all acting categories (Lopez & Pham, 2017; Ugwu, 2020). Hollywood and North American media industries seem to have initiated a response to social demands for cultural diversity; as a result, Asian American storytellers and storytelling have started to become more visible. In 2015, U.S. TV network ABC premiered the Asian American sitcom *Fresh Off the Boat* (Khan, 2015–2020). In August 2018, when several Asian-led films, including *Crazy Rich Asians* (Chu, 2018), *Searching* (Chaganty, 2018), and *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* (Johnson, 2018), achieved remarkable success in the United States and overseas markets, Asian Americans celebrated this moment as "Asian August" (Rubin, 2018).

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Date submitted: 2022-10-27

¹ In an analysis of subscription video-on-demand services, "catalog" refers to "the corpus of licensed or owned content distributed by a particular platform at a given time" (Lobato, 2018, p. 242).

Digital platforms offering SVOD services have been praised for their potential to facilitate the production and circulation of niche content that portrays and/or is produced by relatively marginalized populations, including diasporic people of color (Erigha, 2015; Molina-Guzmán, 2019). For example, several Asian American series and films, including *Always Be My Maybe* (Khan, 2019), *Never Have I Ever* (Kaling & Fisher, 2020–present), *Love Hard* (Jiménez, 2021), and *Bling Empire* (Jenkins, Weintraub, & Panaligan, 2021–present), have recently been introduced to Netflix’s catalogs.

In light of the seemingly enhanced visibility of Asian American and Asian Canadian content in SVODs’ catalogs, this study specifically focuses on the ways in which diasporic Korean storytelling is incorporated into the emerging mediascape centering on digital streaming platforms. Diasporic Korean content on SVODs is worth examining because it reveals how and why a marginalized group within the Western context may obtain visibility, although limited and segregated, in the digital platform age. The current state of diasporic Korean storytelling in SVOD catalogs also implies that emerging digital platforms’ attempts to explore culturally diverse content might be pursued conveniently by the adoption of non-Western content (e.g., Korean dramas, also known as K-dramas), while diversity questions from *within* the Western context (e.g., the cultural citizenship of people of color and migrants in the United States) might remain unanswered to a large extent. Indeed, representations of racial/ethnic minority groups in Netflix’s original content have not necessarily improved compared with those in traditional, legacy media (Smith et al., 2021), whereas Netflix’s non-U.S., non-English content has increased. That is, U.S.-based SVODs may have looked for diversity from the outside rather than exploring diversity from within.

On the surface, content that draws on diasporic Koreans’ storytelling has benefited from the increase in SVOD platforms and their catalog-building strategies, which allow audiences to taste culturally diverse content in forms that are niche, diasporic, multilingual, or hybrid. Diasporic Korean content—and more broadly, diasporic Asian content—may have emerged as a timely “microgenre” (Lobato, 2018) suited to major U.S.-based platform companies’ cultural diversity needs.² The introduction of diasporic Korean storytelling on global streaming platforms provides convenient evidence that the otherwise White-centric Western media industries—especially new, digital platform corporations—are engaging in diversity-seeking practices.

By examining the emerging roles of diasporic Korean storytelling and representation on Netflix, this study explores how the platform facilitates and/or commodifies cultural diversity. Drawing on a theoretical discussion and multimodal discourse analysis of two recent diasporic Korean-themed shows—*The Chair* (Peet & Wyman, 2021) and *Kim’s Convenience* (Choi & White, 2016–2021), which are produced or licensed by Netflix, this article examines how particular types of diasporic Korean identities and stories are circulated in the platformized media environment. Through these texts, the study explores the diverse meanings of diasporic storytelling and offers novel insights into the contradictory nature of platform-driven cultural diversity.

² Netflix’s catalogs and recommendation system have developed a unique genre taxonomy that comprises signature microgenres, such as “Visually-Striking Foreign Nostalgic Dramas” (Lobato, 2018, p. 250).

Digital Platforms and Content Diversity

Platform-driven media environments have significantly reshaped media production and consumption (Poell, Nieborg, & Duffy, 2021; van Dijck, Poell, & de Waal, 2018). As illustrated by the popularity of binge watching among SVOD subscribers, viewing is no longer structured by the network provider's timetable but is customized by individual consumers and their extensive engagement with digital platform technologies (Jenner, 2018). Moreover, consumers can access a broader range of content through these platforms (Chalaby, 2022). While the histories of SVOD platforms are still short, there has been increasing discussion about the potential to diversify content through digital platforms (Gonzalez-Sobrinio, González-Lesser, & Hughey, 2018; Higson, 2021; Molina-Guzmán, 2019; Ranaivoson, 2019).

As latecomers to the media industry, streaming platforms have sought to explore new content and expand their subscriber bases. Netflix, in particular, has sought to distinguish itself from legacy media, such as network TV, by promoting itself as a corporation seeking cultural diversity in terms of its products (content) and corporate values. Diversity is "an essential part of how Netflix can position itself against established media conglomerates" (Jenner, 2018, p. 174). Indeed, streaming platforms have sought to build content catalogs that include various genres and themes to increase the probability of commercial success and avoid commercial risk. The development of a culturally diverse catalog has been considered a key business strategy in the media industry, where various forms of content are produced in response to highly unpredictable cultural markets (Hesmondhalgh, 2019). Not surprisingly, Netflix executives have recently argued that diversity can be an instrumental tool for the corporation's successful growth (Khoo, 2022).

Netflix's promotion of and vision for cultural diversity are observable both on screen and behind the screen (Wiert, 2022). First, on-screen diversity has been evident in Netflix's original content, in which certain marginalized groups are represented more frequently than in existing mainstream media content, and in its multilingual catalog-building strategy since the late 2010s. As shown in the recent increase in the production of original series in Korean and Arabic, Netflix has demonstrated its "commitment to diversity and local storytelling" by engaging with more local creators and local audiences as well as socially marginalized groups (Higson, 2021, p. 16). In addition to the increasing diversity in lead characters and storytelling, Netflix has increased the language diversity of its catalogs. As a global platform available in more than 190 countries, Netflix has built catalogs including multilingual and multinational content. It is estimated that as of 2020, the Netflix catalogs had produced content in 62 languages although English-language content is still dominant in many countries' Netflix catalogs, including the U.S. catalog, where such content constitutes 55% of the total catalog (Moore, 2020). Due to the increasing number of Korean dramas and films available on Netflix, Korean content is ranked sixth (following English, Hindi, Spanish, Japanese, and Mandarin) in terms of the number of titles in the U.S. Netflix catalog. Digital platforms have increasingly allowed audiences to access foreign content. Given the limited amount of foreign language content on network TV, the role of new digital streaming services, including Netflix and YouTube channels, is noteworthy. Digital streaming platforms have undeniably lowered the language/national barriers to cultural flows. Netflix and other SVOD services have taken advantage of shifting media environments while distinguishing themselves from legacy media in their catalogs.

Second, SVOD companies have addressed the subject of behind-the-screen diversity, in addition to their on-screen content diversity, by branding themselves as diversity-seeking corporations (Havens & Stoldt, 2022; Sandoval, 2020). Through various initiatives, campaigns, and public relations activities, Netflix and several other SVOD platforms have identified themselves as inclusive and socially responsible corporations. For example, Netflix has launched initiatives to support marginalized groups of creators, such as the Netflix Fund for Creative Equity, which provides financial support of \$100 million for minority groups in the media industry for five years. Netflix co-chief executive officer Ted Sarandos has emphasized the company's commitment to hiring people from underrepresented communities and creating an inclusive workplace (Higson, 2021). By promoting diversity as a corporate value, Netflix seems to follow the branding strategy of digital platform corporations to associate the corporation with forward-looking social values and responsibilities (Khoo, 2022; Wiart, 2022).

SVOD corporations' emphasis on algorithmic recommendation systems and individualized binge-watching practices has further facilitated the discourse of platform-driven diversity. They have defined themselves as viewer-oriented media companies that provide highly customized content to different audience groups. The streaming companies' industrial logic of customization appears to constitute a crucial aspect of platform-driven diversity (Higson, 2021). Netflix has especially sought to tailor its content to subscribers from different cultural backgrounds (Havens & Stoldt, 2022). It has also developed diversity in content and user experiences through its recommendation system (known as the Personalized Recommendation System). Streaming platforms emphasize viewers' control over their viewing experiences in terms of time, space, and pattern of consuming the content. Along with the popularity of SVOD services, binge watching has emerged as a widespread practice, especially among Netflix viewers. This viewing practice, which is distinguished from linear, scheduled, communal watching patterns of traditional TV, has been favored by some audiences, such as fan communities and taste communities (Jenner, 2018). The practice of binge watching is often combined with the streaming platforms' celebratory discourse about user autonomy and freedom allegedly enabled through the customization and personalized curation of the content (Arnold, 2016; Jenner, 2018).

Media scholars and critics have debated the meanings and effects of platform-driven SVOD services' pursuit of diversity on and behind the screen. While some acknowledge the platform companies' contribution to an increase in cultural diversity in media content and industries, especially in comparison with traditional media outlets (Aguiar & Waldfoegel, 2018; Erigha, 2015; Higson, 2021; Limov, 2020), others remain skeptical about platform-driven diversity and its benefits for audiences (Arnold, 2016; Gonzalez-Sobrinio et al., 2018; Khoo, 2022).

Proponents underline that SVOD technologies allow audiences to access and enjoy diverse content at little cost. They also emphasize that digital platforms' affordances give audiences the autonomy to watch otherwise unfamiliar content, such as foreign language content, and potentially facilitate intercultural communication through which "hostility toward the Other might become an increasingly tenuous position to hold" (Limov, 2020, p. 6318).

In contrast, skeptics consider platform companies' discourse and practice of cultural diversity as nothing more than business strategies drawing on corporate branding. Khoo (2022) argued that "Netflix's focus

on diversity and inclusion serves a corporate agenda as much as a social one" (p. 10). Moreover, in their analysis of popular Netflix original content, such as *House of Cards* (Willimon, 2013–2018) and *Orange Is the New Black* (Kohan, 2013–2019), Gonzalez-Sobrino and colleagues (2018) argued that although some Netflix series have diverse casts, the ways in which marginalized groups are portrayed are similar to those in traditional outlets' TV series, and this reproduces social inequality and stereotypes of underprivileged people.

Furthermore, according to the skeptics, platforms' personalized and customized services may not necessarily increase cultural diversity but confine viewers to their filter bubbles. According to Arnold (2016), the platforms' personalization and recommendation systems do not enhance the audience's agency. Instead, predictive personalization reinforces algorithmic determinism, through which viewers' identities are reduced to user data traces and programmed classifications. That is, Netflix shifts viewers' identity markers to genre tags, and the platform's recommendation system steers the user toward content recommended by algorithms and thus ghettoizes the user "in a prescribed category of demographically classified content" (Arnold, 2016, p. 56). In this manner, Netflix's algorithms, in reality, actively negate user choice instead of supporting it. The seemingly diverse and abundant content on a digital platform may conceal the reality that "there are clear limits to what is available, the catalog is finite, access is circumscribed and content is editorialized in various ways" (Higson, 2021, p. 20). Critics also question whether Netflix's diversity strategies would offer audiences a substantially different sense of diversity and user experience. They argue that the notion of diversity should not be measured by quantity but should concern the meanings in representation (Gonzalez-Sobrino et al., 2018).

Analyzing Diasporic Korean Storytelling: *The Chair* and *Kim's Convenience*

This section analyzes two diasporic Korean-themed shows on Netflix—*The Chair* (Peet & Wyman, 2021) and *Kim's Convenience* (Choi & White, 2016–2021)—to explore how diasporic Korean storytelling operates on global digital platforms. The two shows exemplify the introduction of diasporic storytelling to Netflix's catalogs and reveal how an emerging yet nascent wave of diasporic Korean content is integrated into or facilitated by Netflix. While Netflix has actively sought to develop made-in-Korea content, diasporic Korean content may not be established as a solid category on Netflix. Diasporic Korean-themed content, such as *The Chair* and *Kim's Convenience*, has been incorporated into larger categories and themes, such as drama/comedy portraying people of color, instead of being promoted as shows with a Korean American/Canadian cast. Due to this categorization/tagging, recommended content for those watching these diasporic Korean shows, which is presented at the bottom of the show's introduction page (i.e., the "More Like This" section), is not necessarily centered on Korean or even Asian diasporas.

The two highly acclaimed shows are fascinating cases of diasporic Korean storytelling in the context of platform-driven diversity. *The Chair* (Peet & Wyman, 2021) is a six-episode Netflix original³ drama/comedy series about a Korean American university professor and her colleagues and family. The show stars Sandra Oh,

³ Netflix has extensively used the term "original" to refer to a wide range of its streamed content (Robinson, 2018). Specifically, the phrase "Netflix Original" refers to (a) content commissioned and produced by the company, (b) content to which Netflix has exclusive international streaming rights, (c) content that Netflix co-produced with another network, or (d) Netflix's continuation of a previously canceled show.

probably one of the best-known North American actors of Korean heritage. In comparison, *Kim's Convenience* (Choi & White, 2016–2021) is a Canadian sitcom that ran for five seasons on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), after which it was licensed and released globally through Netflix. This sitcom about a Korean Canadian family running a convenience store in Toronto is not a Netflix Original as Netflix did not directly invest in it and produce the content, but the show demonstrates how diasporic Korean content goes global through the Netflix platform; global attention to the show emerged only after its distribution through Netflix.⁴ As this article examines diasporic Korean content in terms of Netflix's catalogs (including Netflix-produced and Netflix-licensed titles), the two chosen shows will illustrate how diasporic storytelling is integrated into global streaming platforms and their alleged platform-driven diversity.

This section will examine the two shows through critical discourse analysis, which is useful for revealing the ideological implications of language. In particular, a multimodal discourse analysis is deployed to effectively explore how linguistic and visual texts are composed and combined and what meanings are generated or hidden (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001). As a preliminary examination of platform-driven diversity represented in diasporic Korean content, this article focuses on these two shows because they have generated relatively frequent media commentary and thus may have social significance among diasporic Korean series on Netflix. The article will concisely compare the two shows in terms of their (a) promotional discourses, (b) contexts, and (c) representations of the Korean diaspora. The multimodal analysis presented in this article is preliminary rather than comprehensive because the analyzed Netflix catalog, including lists of recommended shows and promotional images, might be influenced by the researcher's own national location and computational contexts, including search history and viewing records, as of August 2022 during which the data were collected and analyzed (Khoo, 2022). Due to the platform's increasingly country-specific catalog building and viewer-customized algorithmic recommendation system, "it is no longer feasible to speak of 'a' single Netflix," which is a challenge for media researchers (Lobato, 2018, p. 245).

The Chair

Promotional Discourse

The Chair (Peet & Wyman, 2021) tells the story of a female chair in her 40s in a predominantly White, conservative English department at a fictional U.S. university. Netflix presents this show by highlighting its storytelling of a woman of color rather than specifically an Asian or Korean American. The series' description states, "At a major university, the first woman of color to become chair tries to meet the dizzying demands and high expectations of a failing English department" (Netflix, 2021). The statement is followed by information that emphasizes the show's recognizable stars: "Golden Globe winner Sandra Oh and Emmy winner Jay Duplass star in this academic dramedy, created by Amanda Peet" (Netflix, 2021). The promotional description is accompanied by a close-up image of Sandra Oh in an academic robe. The solitary image of Oh, which may be intended to emphasize her star power and representative role as a

⁴ As a Netflix-licensed title, *Kim's Convenience* (Choi & White, 2016–2021) has been available on Netflix in many countries, including Canada where the show was produced by its national broadcasting service CBC. However, like many other licensed titles available only for a certain period, *Kim's Convenience's* Netflix license in Canada expires on March 1, 2023 (Netflix, n.d.).

pioneering actor of color, confirms the written description—storytelling of “the first woman of color.” Oh’s image as a woman of color is further highlighted as it is contrasted with the backdrop of an out-of-focus portrait of an old White man on the wall. In this contrast, the promotional discourse seems to define *The Chair* as a show that addresses gender and race in a university setting. The content recommended as “More Like This” on *The Chair* page does not include any diasporic Asian-themed shows. The list only includes several comedies starring Black actors, such as the South African show *How to Ruin Christmas* (Ramaphakela & Ramaphakela, 2020–present), the British comedy show *Turn Up Charlie* (Elba & Reich, 2019), and the French romance series *Christmas Flow* (Debeurme, Levy, & Rodenbach, 2021). This reveals that *The Chair* is not necessarily recognized even as an Asian American themed show but is rather identified by its genre and narrative (romance, parent-child relationship, etc.) and portrayal of people of color.

Context

The production and release of the series in 2021 may reflect the increasing social demand for discussions about anti-racism. The American public experienced disturbing, racism-motivated hate crimes and speeches during the COVID-19 pandemic, including the murder of George Floyd in 2020, then President Trump’s frequent use of the racist phrase “Chinese virus” to refer to COVID-19, and a series of random violent attacks against Asians, to list a few. The fact that Sandra Oh stars as the protagonist may itself have a significant implication for explaining the central theme and voice of this series.⁵ Interestingly, despite the relatively progressive portrayal of Asian characters and creative storytelling of the Korean diaspora (discussed in the next paragraph), the show was created by two White women—Hollywood actor/writer Amanda Peet and writer/scholar Annie Julia Wyman, along with mostly White producers and executive producers. However, according to Sandra Oh, who served as the only Asian American executive producer, there were collaborations with Asian contributors in the writers’ room, and she worked with the writing staff, including those who can portray Asian characters authentically (Brune, 2021). The show received positive reviews overall for its quality as a drama/comedy and its attempt to address the issue of inclusion and diversity. Yet some critics suggested that the issues were not sufficiently integrated into the show. As TV critic Robert Lloyd noted, “the series feels schematic, too declarative, a little bit dutiful, as if boxes were being ticked” (Lloyd, 2021, para. 14). While the reviews in U.S. news media were favorable overall, the show was not renewed for a second season primarily due to its failure to secure solid viewership after the first week of release (General, 2022; Schneider, 2022).

Representation of the Korean Diaspora

The Chair (Peet & Wyman, 2021) portrays diasporic Korean characters in several interwoven ways. First, the show identifies the lead character clearly by her Korean heritage without stereotyping her

⁵ Sandra Oh’s contributions to and influence on Asian American communities have been observed on several occasions. For example, during the filming of *The Chair* (Peet & Wyman, 2021) in Pennsylvania in March 2021, Oh joined a Stop Asian Hate protest in Pittsburgh that was held a few days after six Asian American women were killed by a shooter in Atlanta. In her passionate speech during the rally, she announced, “I am proud to be Asian!” The phrase was chanted by attendees and was even produced as a slogan on a T-shirt for fundraising (Davis, 2021).

otherness. The protagonist, Ji-Yoon Kim, is referred to only by her Korean name throughout the show. Having and pronouncing a Korean name for the entire series is an advancement, as other shows often identify second- or later-generation Korean characters by an English-sounding first name and Korean last name, or their Korean ties are otherwise conveniently removed.⁶ Second, the show portrays the Korean American character as a complex protagonist with intersectional identities as a woman of color raising an adopted child of Oaxacan heritage. Ji-Yoon interacts with her Korean father in Konglish (i.e., a mixture of Korean and English) while contemplating how she can help her child understand her heritage and biological parents. On campus, Ji-Yoon also negotiates power dynamics as a younger female department chair tasked with reviving the department. She does not seem like a stereotypical Asian American character situated as the other within a color-blind system. While the show does not depict diasporic Korean themes in detail, especially compared with *Kim's Convenience* (Choi & White, 2016–2021), it does have some sequences in which Korean traditions are introduced, such as the portrayal of a dol ceremony, a Korean custom for a baby's first birthday where they are encouraged to choose one of several prepared materials as a signal of their future career. In the dol ceremony sequence, Bill (Jay Duplass), a White protagonist and Ji-Yoon's love interest, is invited to participate in the ceremony as a non-Korean attendee of the party. This setting appears to portray a Korean American lifestyle through an outsider's eyes, not necessarily essentializing the Korean custom and people as enigmatic and backward.

Overall, as presented in its promotional description, *The Chair* (Peet & Wyman, 2021) focuses on the challenges of a woman of color rather than narrating a Korean diasporic story. For example, in episode two, Ji-Yoon, whose university faculty is 87% White, says to her faculty dean, who is a White male, "For the last five years, you've put the same picture of me on our recruitment brochure" (Peet, Robbins, & Longino, 2021, 05:20). That is, Ji-Yoon questions her role as a poster child for workplace racial diversity—a stereotype that disregards her diverse subject positions. In doing so, *The Chair* addresses the challenges that women of color encounter while associating diasporic storytelling with the larger context of racism in academia and U.S. society.

In a comical tone yet ambitiously, *The Chair* (Peet & Wyman, 2021) addresses racism in the workplace while partly portraying a diasporic Korean family through the relationship between a first-generation Korean parent and second-generation Korean Ji-Yoon, a single mother who adopted and is raising seven-year-old Ju Ju of Oaxacan heritage. This series appears to reflect the kind of diversity that Netflix publicly promotes—content diversity in terms of represented characters and themes. As its promotional discourse suggests, the narrative of *The Chair* seems to revolve around a woman of color rather than specifically a Korean American. The subject positions of the creators behind the camera—intellectual White women (Amanda Peet and Annie Julia Wyman)—may imply that the show aims to portray women's struggle in a traditionally male-dominated institution (e.g., the university) through the black comedy trope.⁷ In this regard, the show may serve Netflix's content diversity by building the

⁶ Sandra Oh has mentioned the importance of the Korean name and how it interested her in the first place: "When I opened that page and saw that her name is a Korean name, it really righted something in myself. I recognized it because the character was recognizing me" (Bruney, 2021, para. 1).

⁷ Renowned Hollywood actor/writer Amada Peet, who is a creator and executive producer of this show, emphasized her experiences as a woman and mother behind her motivation to create the show. According to Peet, *The Chair* (Peet & Wyman, 2021) reflects experiences of "women coming into a supervising role for

catalog that includes non-White storytelling. *The Chair* may lack a diasporic connection with Korean culture without deeply penetrating the challenges experienced through a diasporic Korean/Asian lens. As the show's main aim was to portray women's experiences in an institution where "the vestiges of White male elitism are still hugely at play" (Pay or Wait, 2021, 03:05), it is not surprising that the show engages more with the storytelling of intellectual (non-White) women than with a particular racial/or ethnic group's cultural identity.

Kim's Convenience

Promotional Discourse

On Netflix, *Kim's Convenience* (Choi & White, 2016–2021) is introduced with the following description: "While running a convenience store in Toronto, members of a Korean-Canadian family deal with customers, each other, and the evolving world around them" (Netflix, n.d.). Accompanying this description is a medium shot of the four members of the Kim family on a bench. In the photo, the two grown-up children, who are second-generation Koreans (Janet, played by Andrea Bang, and Jung, played by Simu Liu), stand still and look at the camera while the first-generation parents (Appa, played by Paul Sun-Hyung Lee, and Umma, played by Jean Yoon) sit on the bench looking at each other. The mother and daughter wistfully smile, but the father and son look relatively serious. This image effectively shows how the four main characters are portrayed on the show. The patriarch, Appa, is strict and old-fashioned, and his relationship with his son Jung, who ran away from home and dropped out of school in his teens, is in conflict in the show's early seasons. Meanwhile, spirited Umma and Janet act as negotiators to ease the tension between Appa and Jung. The description also refers to the show's awards record: "Won six Canadian Screen Awards, including Best Comedy Series and Best Lead Actor in a Comedy (Paul Sun-Hyung Lee)" (Netflix, n.d.). In Netflix's recommendation system (the "More Like This" section), *Kim's Convenience*, which is categorized under "Canadian, Sitcoms, TV Comedies," is recommended along with other comedies and sitcoms, including *Derry Girls* (a British teen sitcom; McGee, 2018–2022), *Schitt's Creek* (a Canadian comedy series written by *Kim's Convenience* showrunner Kevin White; Levy & Levy, 2015–2020), *Moesha* (an American sitcom about an African American girl and her family; Farquhar, Finney, & Spears, 1996–2001), and *Champions* (an American family comedy series; Grandy & Kaling, 2018). Interestingly, these recommendations seem to be based on the show format (i.e., family comedy or sitcom) rather than the theme of Korean/Asian diasporas. No Asian-led show appears among the recommended content. This implies that, similar to *The Chair*, *Kim's Convenience* is not identified as a show with a Korean (or Asian) diasporic theme but primarily as a family sitcom. Thus, it appears that Netflix's catalogs and algorithmic recommendation system may not yet define Korean or Asian diasporas as a recognizable theme.

the first time" (Press, 2021, para. 25). Peet also noted her experience as a mother of a teenage daughter and her sense of "being a failure as a mom—the comedy of that" influenced her creation of the heroine Ji-Yoon's arduous relationship with her adopted daughter (Press, 2021, para. 22). Peet's accounts imply that the show's initial motif was women's experiences, not necessarily experiences of women from Asian backgrounds.

Context

Compared with *The Chair* (Peet & Wyman, 2021), led by two White showrunners, *Kim's Convenience* (Choi & White, 2016–2021) was co-created by Korean Canadian Ins Choi and based on his original play of the same title, which was a long-running hit on the Canadian theater circuit. In this CBC-made sitcom, Ins Choi as co-showrunner was teamed up with experienced writer/producer Kevin White, known for several hit TV series, including *Schitt's Creek* (Levy & Levy, 2015–2020). *Kim's Convenience*, known for its Asian main cast and Korean Canadian co-creator, garnered national attention as the first Asian Canadian sitcom on its initial release on CBC in 2016. Initial responses to the show were favorable overall. In particular, critics and viewers were excited about this rare TV sitcom whose leads were all Asian. As Jean Yoon (Umma) recalled, the TV industry had not been receptive to her pitch of a show with a Korean woman as the lead in the early 2000s (Wong, 2016). However, 15 years later, the positive viewer rating and positive reviews of *Kim's Convenience* would prove that diasporic storytelling sells.⁸ Viewers of Asian or diasporic backgrounds appeared pleasantly surprised by the vivid yet comical depiction of a Korean immigrant family running a small business, which could be observed in many areas of North America. However, after CBC's cancellation of *Kim's Convenience* in 2021, the cast opened up about the production environment in which the Korean Canadian co-creator Choi had been surrounded by White writers who were not familiar with the Korean diaspora or Korean culture (Rao, 2021). Despite the controversy, the show provides an important example of diasporic storytelling's attraction of global viewers through SVOD platforms.

Representation of the Korean Diaspora

This show, produced by the Canadian company Thunderbird Films and picked up by the CBC, continues the legacy of the play *Kim's Convenience* (Choi, 2016), which was first staged in 2011, with some of the original cast (e.g., Paul Sun-Hyung Lee and Jean Yoon). Compared with *The Chair* (Peet & Wyman, 2021), *Kim's Convenience* (Choi & White, 2016–2021) situates diasporic Korean storytelling at the core of its narrative. The show deals with the challenges of living as Korean Canadians in downtown Toronto by comically addressing pressing issues such as generational conflicts, racism, and sexism. While most reviews and viewer comments welcomed the vivid portrayal of an immigrant family and their daily struggles, some debates emerged about the show's use of stereotypes, such as immigrants' heavily accented English. Jang and Yang (2018) argued that the Konglish accents and often grammatically inaccurate English voiced by Appa and Umma in the show are "linguistic and semiotic resources relating to Korean culture to give authenticity to the TV series as well as the actors playing Koreans" (p. 8). In contrast, Chung (2021)

⁸ *Kim's Convenience* (Choi & White, 2016–2021), which was initially aired on CBC, was one of the most popular national TV shows during its network TV release. In particular, in its first season, it drew an average audience of 933,000 (CBC Media Centre, 2016) and continued to be a rare example of scripted Canadian TV content that appeared among the top 30 shows in Canadian viewership, most of which usually have U.S. content. After its international release via Netflix, *Kim's Convenience* was popularly received and in high demand. According to an audience demand measurement database's estimates as of January 2021, the audience demand for *Kim's Convenience* was 3.4 times higher than the demand of the average TV series in the United States (Parrot Analytics, 2021).

considered the faked Konglish as evidence that the show did not substantially challenge the stereotyping of Asians in the West; instead, the show reiterated it.

Despite the debates, the show's representation of the Korean diaspora has been highly regarded as a rare example of Asian-led storytelling in Canadian media. Many critics—especially those of Asian backgrounds—have endorsed the show enthusiastically by describing it as “quietly revolutionary” in terms of representing the Korean diaspora (Krishna, 2021). As lifestyle journalist Brian Ng commented, “what has resonated most with Asian viewers of *Kim's Convenience* (Choi & White, 2016–2021) is that this series—an oasis where integration, not mere tolerance, is standard—exists at a time marked by bleak coverage about the hatred of our community” (Ng, 2021, para. 6). The relatively solid viewership of *Kim's Convenience*, compared with that of *The Chair* (Peet & Wyman, 2021), may be explained by the former's lighter tone and manner as a sitcom and its appeal to a target audience including diasporic Koreans and Asians. *The Chair* emphasizes drama rather than comedy and focuses on elite groups in an ivory tower; thus, the serious themes might have created a barrier to attracting a larger audience. *Kim's Convenience* is a sitcom that viewers can conveniently access. In particular, Asian Canadian/American viewers from an immigrant background could quickly identify with the characters and storytelling. In addition, the main narrative of *Kim's Convenience* develops in the tradition of conventional family-oriented sitcoms. The show may present some unconventional ideas (including the very concept of having Asian lead characters) in a conventional manner to lower audiences' resistance to the new ideas (Khaire, 2017, p. 149).

Kim's Convenience (Choi & White, 2016–2021) effectively delivers diasporic storytelling through which it explicitly addresses Korean Canadian life as the show's core theme. Therefore, *Kim's Convenience* can be considered an example of how mainstream Western content can incorporate diasporic themes and characters while creating an alternative mode of storytelling in relation to the mainstream narrative content in both the Western and Korean media industries.⁹

(In)visibility of Diasporic Korean Content on Global Platforms

The slow increase in diasporic Korean storytelling on Netflix and other streaming sites partly shows that digital platforms' catalogs target diverse tastes and audiences. However, compared with the remarkable growth of made-in-Korea products (Hallyu) on Netflix in recent years, diasporic Korean content is still nascent in the platform's catalogs. There may be several reasons why diasporic Korean storytelling is not yet substantially incorporated into Netflix's catalogs.

First, the platform's diversity discourse and practice are still focused on broader categories, such as the languages, national origins, and genres of content. In comparison, diasporic Korean storytelling has not yet been identified as a solid marketing category, or as a microgenre in Netflix catalogs. Indeed, Netflix

⁹ After its worldwide release via Netflix, *Kim's Convenience* (Choi & White, 2016–2021) attracted the attention of global viewers, including Koreans. Although the show was not one of the most popular Netflix series in Korea, it attracted groups of dedicated viewers, who posted their comments via blogs and vlogs, and intrigued critics, who suggested that Korean media industries should benchmark the cultural diversity-based narrative of *Kim's Convenience* (Lee, 2018).

has been keen on developing international content (original or licensed) to expand its global markets and build catalogs that reflect different (national) cultures and languages (Lobato, 2018). For example, by increasing the Korean content in its catalogs, Netflix can appeal to Korean audiences and global Hallyu audiences while conveniently branding itself as a culturally diverse content platform. Made-in-Korea content is sold as a trendy foreign content category such as “K-dramas,” “Korean films,” and “East Asian films.” Perhaps the rapid growth of Hallyu content in Netflix’s catalogs implies that the U.S.-based platform seeks a form of cultural diversity that presents somewhat spectacularized stories and images of foreign others rather than underprivileged groups (e.g., diasporic groups) within the Western context.

Platform-driven media audiences engage with diversity by binge watching the foreign rather than being immersed in the locally rooted issues, such as hate crimes and discrimination against Asians. While made-in-Korea Hallyu content seems to be consumed by overseas Netflix subscribers as a trendy, new-content package of the Korean Wave, diasporic Korean content remains a niche that is not yet explicitly categorized as a microgenre but is incorporated into other categories in Netflix’s catalogs. Partly due to their relatively invisible or ambiguous positioning in the catalogs, recent diasporic Korean-led series, including *The Chair* (Peet & Wyman, 2022), *Blockbuster* (Ramos, 2022), and *Partner Track* (Lee, 2022), have been canceled by Netflix after their first season (Treon, 2022).

Furthermore, the limited amount of diasporic Korean storytelling in major platform catalogs may be explained by behind-the-screen factors, such as a lack of creative personnel of diasporic Korean backgrounds in mainstream Western media industries. Even the production of *Kim’s Convenience* (Choi & White, 2016–2021), a highly acclaimed TV series about diasporic Koreans available on Netflix, struggled with a lack of Korean and Asian creative staff, which was partly responsible for the abrupt cancellation of the show in 2021 (Rao, 2021). Overall, despite some popular series and films involving actors or showrunners of Korean descent, diasporic storytelling is not yet sufficiently recognizable in the digital platform’s curational landscape.¹⁰ While made-in-Korea content has become an appealing acquisition for global streaming platforms seeking new content to build their catalogs, diasporic Korean content and personnel have not yet been distinctively integrated into the platformized media environments.

Discussion and Conclusion

Despite the seeming push to increase content diversity (e.g., non-Western content and diasporic storytelling) on streaming platforms, we must ask how and what type of cultural diversity has grown in the platform media industries (Gonzalez-Sobrinio et al., 2018). The major streaming services’ subscription-based revenue model, relative flexibility in programming, and global reach may motivate the production and circulation of content that appeals to diverse subscriber demographics, especially in comparison with legacy

¹⁰ Apple TV+’s diasporic Korean family saga *Pachinko* (Hugh, 2022–present) and its critical success remain exceptional in diasporic storytelling in the major streaming platform markets. Different from other Korean diaspora-themed shows that are relegated to relatively small budgets for niche markets, *Pachinko* had an enormous budget, which is far beyond that of most streaming series. Although it addresses specifically diasporic Korean themes, the show does not represent a niche category but targets a wide global audience (Chow, 2022).

media, which has primarily addressed relatively homogeneous imagined audiences (Erigha, 2015; Jenner, 2018; Molina-Guzmán, 2019). In this process, diverse groups, such as diasporic Koreans, have gradually gained opportunities to share their stories with local and global audiences on digital streaming platforms.

The increasing content that potentially serves diverse audience groups' interests may face the risk of commodifying and continuing the marginalization of underprivileged groups. Diasporic Korean themes and content are used as a resource to supplement mainstream content and build streaming services' culturally diverse repertoire of content, and in so doing, may replace the invisibility of ethnic-racial minorities with "carefully regulated, segregated visibility" (Hall, 1993, p. 107). The increasing visibility of diasporic Koreans and other marginalized groups on and behind the screen in the digital platform age may not necessarily result in substantial enhancement of equity and inclusion. While partial or ambiguous visibility might be an improvement, diasporic storytelling is still considered to represent a "multi-culture" or "diasporic culture," which in reality means "what the dominant culture is *not*" (Yu, 2021, p. 3). In this representation of diasporic cultures, diasporic Korean storytelling gains partial visibility while remaining marginal for niche markets, whereas White-centric media is naturalized as the commercially profitable, default setting (Lopez, 2016; Lopez & Pham, 2017; Warner, 2015).

Moreover, as in the case of the examples examined above, the increase in diasporic storytelling may reinforce "saleable diversity" (Conway, 2017)—content with themes of diversity that can be quickly sold to a general audience and enables the platform corporations to advance their cause marketing initiatives (as corporations promoting diversity) and expand their audience bases (by appealing to global audiences of various cultural backgrounds). The increasing commodification of cultural differences for wider audiences reduces the collective identities of diasporic people on screen to marketable commodities. Indeed, commercial logic may instrumentalize diasporic Korean storytelling in simplistic forms, such as the stereotypical (or archetypical at best) characterization of racialized subjects with an exaggerated accent (Chung, 2021). Therefore, it remains questionable how the recent introduction of diasporic Korean storytelling in major streaming platforms' catalogs will contribute to the diasporic populations' own cultural citizenship and recognition. In particular, we need further studies on the ways in which platform-driven diasporic storytelling facilitates collective and complex notions of diasporic identity (e.g., Korean American or Korean Canadian; Lopez, 2016).

As the analysis indicates, the two Netflix shows examined in this article, *The Chair* (Peet & Wyman, 2021) and *Kim's Convenience* (Choi & White, 2016–2021), do not seem to have escaped the commodification of diversity in media industries. Ji-Yoon in *The Chair* and the Kims in *Kim's Convenience* tell stories of diasporic Koreans, which may be relatable to many viewers of diasporic backgrounds, but the development of the characters seems to engage in saleable diversity as the shows' format and narrative development remain conventional and convenient to consume rather than explore and experiment with a new mode of storytelling.

Despite the risk of commodifying diversity and spectacularizing the other, platform-driven diversity can play a role in expanding the horizon of the global mediascape. Platforms' pursuit of diverse catalogs to expand their global markets still helps to expose global audiences to more content made in different languages and portraying different cultures and themes. Especially in the North American context, the recent

increase in series with Korean American lead storytellers implies that U.S.-based global platforms' catalog building has tended to engage with diasporic Korean storytelling as a new resource for expanding their audience bases while contributing to the corporations' multicultural branding. To some extent, the global platform-driven diversity strategies have the potential for promoting intercultural understanding and recognition of Korean diasporas (Limov, 2020). However, the strategies currently in use seem to reproduce the instrumental appropriation of the already marginal, racialized Korean diasporas both on screen and behind the screen.

As the popularity of digital streaming services is a relatively recent phenomenon, theoretical discussions on these services are still emerging. This article has addressed diasporic storytelling on Netflix as a preliminary example that has implications for further discussion about platform-driven diversity. It is still too early to conclude whether or not streaming platforms significantly contribute to cultural diversity, especially the advancement of diasporic Koreans' representation and stories on screen. For an in-depth understanding of diasporic Korean content in the context of platform-driven diversity, future studies must explore how diasporic audiences themselves decode the platform-driven storytelling of diasporas. Moreover, while this study only focused on North American content and contexts, diasporic Koreans in other regions and their engagement with global digital platforms and diasporic storytelling need to be comparatively examined.

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