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A Korean Case Study of OTT Platforms Based on Hesmondhalgh and Baker's Theoretical Framework

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Abstract

The rapid expansion of streaming platforms and OTT services is fundamentally reshaping traditional film production practices. This study draws on in-depth interviews with film producers and outsourced martial arts directors, who have worked on both Netflix originals and commercial films, as well as on prior research, to examine how Netflix's production system influences the economic, institutional, and administrative landscape of Korean film production labor—and its effect on creative autonomy and identity. Applying the “good work” versus “bad work” framework proposed by Hesmondhalgh and Baker, the analysis reveals both positive and negative facets. On the positive side, long-term contracts, global exposure, and considerable creative freedom for key creators have been observed. Conversely, issues such as burdensome production reporting, frequent meetings with headquarters, and inadequate insurance systems intended to reduce costs present challenges. Remarkably, the study also finds that for lower-tier production staff, the working conditions in both traditional commercial films and Netflix projects are largely indistinguishable, suggesting that conventional practices persist within certain outsourced sectors. Overall, the results indicate that Korean Netflix original productions generally meet the criteria for “good work” in terms of their final outcomes and social contributions. However, they also underscore the urgent need for policy measures aimed at streamlining administrative processes and enhancing labor protection.

Keywords: OTT, Netflix, Korean Film Production, Good Work, Bad Work, Creative Autonomy, Worker Identity.

Introduction

Research Background and Rationale

The dramatic decline in traditional film distribution models and the surge of digital media over the past decade have compelled film producers worldwide to adapt to rapidly evolving production environments. In Korea, which has cultivated a reputation for cinematic excellence and cultural innovation, the rise of OTT platforms such as Netflix, TVing, and others signals a transformative shift not only in the economic and production strategies but also in the qualitative experience of film work. Traditionally, Korean films have relied on high-budget investments, extensive theatrical distribution, and well-established collective production systems. However, with the digital revolution, new paradigms have emerged: budget allocations are now tied to long-term contractual frameworks, digital viewership metrics play a critical role in performance evaluation, and flexible production timelines have become more common. These changes bear implications throughout the production chain—from creative decision-making and communication to administrative protocols and contract negotiations.

The theoretical perspectives offered by Hesmondhalgh (2002, 2013) and Baker provide a useful

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lens through which these changes can be critically examined. Their frameworks go beyond conventional quantitative measures such as wages and work hours, instead emphasizing factors like creative autonomy, worker empowerment, social cohesion, and personal identity formation. These dimensions become particularly pertinent in the context of OTT transitions, where the promise of innovation and creative freedom is frequently juxtaposed against the realities of increased bureaucratic oversight and economic uncertainty.

Korea's distinct cultural policies, coupled with its history of collective film production and robust industrial support, further complicate how these digital shifts are experienced on the ground. The interplay between global digital standards and local cultural practices presents both opportunities and challenges for Korean filmmakers—as they seek to preserve artistic authenticity in the face of market pressures that favor quantifiable digital success indicators.

Research Questions

In light of these considerations, the present study addresses the following research questions:

1. **Economic and Institutional Changes:** How have film production salaries, working conditions, insurance options, and contractual arrangements in Korea evolved following the OTT transition compared to those in the traditional film production method?
2. **Creative Autonomy and Identity Formation:** How does the new OTT production system impact creative autonomy, internal communication, and the formation of social and cultural identities among Korean film professionals?
3. **Administrative Burden and Outsourced Labor Practices:** What is the effect of detailed reporting requirements and frequent, centrally controlled meetings—practices typical of platforms like Netflix—on the quality of work?
4. **Structural Industry Transitions:** What broader structural shifts does the OTT transition suggest for the overall Korean film industry and the career trajectories of its workers?

By exploring these questions, this study aims to contribute to emerging scholarly discussions on digital transformation and creative labor, while offering practical insights for industry decision-makers aiming to preserve the rich cultural legacy of Korean cinema.

Theoretical Background

Hesmondhalgh and Baker on “Good Work” and “Bad Work”

Hesmondhalgh (2002, 2013) and Baker argue that the evaluation of work should extend well beyond straightforward quantitative measures. In their view, “good work” is defined by an environment that fosters significant creative autonomy, fair compensation, stable employment, and a supportive culture where individual identity can flourish. Workers need the freedom to make meaningful decisions and express their creativity, and when these conditions are met, they experience not only economic benefits but also personal fulfillment, which ultimately contributes to a strong, socially embedded professional identity.

In contrast, “bad work” typifies scenarios in which workers are subject to excessive bureaucratic oversight, rigid reporting requirements, and unpredictable employment conditions. These environments restrict creativity, lead to diminished job satisfaction, and ultimately erode worker identity. Such conditions are typically associated with highly mechanized processes where labor is valued only for its economic output rather than its creative or cultural dimensions. This is

	Good work	Bad work
Labor process	Good salary, appropriate working hours, and high job security	Low wages, overworked labor market, and low labor security
	Autonomy	Helpless
	Interest and participation	Boredom
	Sociability	Isolation
	Self-esteem	Low self-esteem and embarrassment
	Self-realization	Frustration in self-development
	Balance between work and life	Overwork
	Labor security	Risk
	Excellent products	Low-quality products
Products	Products contributing to the common good	Products that do not help others have good lives

Table 1: Criteria of good and bad work in creative labor suggested by Hesmondhalgh and Baker

Applying this theoretical framework to the OTT transition in the film industry allows us to assess not only the measurable economic impacts but also the less tangible effects on creative freedom and worker satisfaction.

Korean Film Production and OTT Platforms

The Korean film industry has established a global reputation for its distinctive cinematic style and innovative storytelling. Historically, the production environment favored large-scale investments and theatrical releases, with systems in place that supported both collective organization and creative freedom. However, the advent of OTT platforms has altered this dynamic significantly.

On one hand, these platforms facilitate long-term production contracts, especially in drama series, offering workers a degree of job security and continuous income. On the other hand, the digital environment requires detailed production documentation—including daily shooting reports, equipment logs, and numerous internal meetings—to meet global quality standards and performance metrics. This shift results in an environment where creative autonomy might be sacrificed for administrative compliance.

Furthermore, traditional protective measures, such as comprehensive insurance policies, are often replaced with cost-effective alternatives (e.g., cultural worker insurance) in OTT projects. While such measures reduce costs for production houses, they also raise concerns about the long-term security and welfare of the workers involved.

Methodology

Research Design and Participant Profile

This study employed a qualitative research design based on non-face-to-face Zoom semi-structured interviews to capture detailed and nuanced perspectives on the impact of the OTT transition in Korea. Two key participants were selected:

1. **Film Producer:** Has 18 years of experience in film production, including over 12 years in a producer role. This participant represents the higher echelons of the industry where creative autonomy is more prevalent.
2. **Martial Arts Director (Outsourced Labor):** A martial arts director with 10 years of experience in outsourced production. He wanted to direct, but due to practical problems, he worked as a martial arts director for outsourced production.

Data Collection

Data were obtained via semi-structured interviews that focused on several core themes:

1. **Background and Educational History:** Participants were asked to describe their age, educational background, work experience, and how their early training (in university settings as well as on-the-job and union-based learning) shaped their career trajectories.
2. **Production Investment and Compensation Changes:** Respondents discussed changes in project volume, budget allocations, and salary structures before and after the adoption of OTT platforms.
3. **Administrative Protocols and Working Conditions:** Detailed questions addressed the daily reporting, workload, internal meetings, and changes in insurance and contractual terms.
4. **Creative Autonomy and Internal Communication:** Interviewees elaborated on how creative decision-making and communication processes have evolved in the OTT environment relative to traditional film production systems.
5. **Professional Identity and Future Outlook:** Discussions included reflections on how digital transformation has affected their professional identities, self-esteem, and long-term aspirations.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were subsequently analyzed with the key themes derived from Hesmondhalgh and Baker's frameworks.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data were coded and classified into major themes:

1. **Creative Autonomy:** Assessing how different employment levels experience creative decision-making.
2. **Administrative Control:** Evaluating the impact of detailed reporting and meeting protocols on creative productivity.
3. **Economic Security:** Analyzing changes in wage levels, insurance provisions, and contract stability.
4. **Identity and Professional Fulfillment:** Examining the extent to which workers feel that their cultural and professional identities are supported or undermined by the new environment.

Comparative analyses were conducted to evaluate differences between pre- and post-OTT production and between upper-level (in-house) versus lower-level (outsourced) labor. Quotes and examples from the interviews.

Results and Analysis

1. Creative Autonomy and Hierarchical Differences

The analysis shows that while the core of Korean film production is built on creative expression, the experience of autonomy varies greatly along the hierarchy.

Upper-Level Producers: The film producer emphasized that his role affords him considerable creative freedom. Being responsible for major decision-making processes—such as conceptual development, budgeting, and direction—enables him to pioneer innovative projects that reflect his artistic vision. He described such autonomy as central to his professional identity and a key factor driving the production of high-quality, internationally recognized films.

Lower-Level and Outsourced Workers: Less senior staff and outsourced personnel, however, operate in environments where creative decisions are largely predetermined by higher management. Despite these constraints, lower-level workers often find creative outlets by pursuing independent projects, such as writing their own screenplays. Many expressed a strong aspiration to secure higher-level positions that would allow them greater involvement in complex decision-making processes. This drive to “climb the ladder” encapsulates their desire to shift from more controlled roles toward positions that offer increased creative autonomy—a dynamic that is central to the discussion of “good work” versus “bad work.”

2. Voluntary Creativity and Work Engagement

The overall work environment in film production is described as both engaging and intrinsically rewarding. Interviewees noted that:

- **Inherently Stimulating Tasks:** The nature of film production itself, with its blend of artistic vision and technical execution, makes the work particularly stimulating and enjoyable. Many credited their ability to express creative ideas and innovate within the medium as a principal source of job satisfaction.
- **Self-Driven Creative Initiatives:** Even those in more restricted roles actively pursue personal creative projects to compensate for the limitations imposed by hierarchical control. This self-initiated creative behavior underscores a significant adaptive strategy within the workforce, where individuals seek to fulfill creative ambitions despite external constraints.

3. Economic Compensation and Working Condition Stability

The investigation of economic aspects reveals improvements along with ongoing challenges:

Positive Developments: The producer explained that adherence to a mandated 52-hour workweek represents a step forward in standardizing working conditions. In some respects, these structured working hours contribute to a more predictable and secure work environment.

Persistent Concerns: On the economic front, issues of compensation stability, contract insecurity, and inadequate insurance provisions continue to affect many workers, especially among the lower ranks. The prevalent use of “cultural worker insurance” in place of more comprehensive coverage demonstrates a cost-saving trend that can undermine long-term worker security.

Case of the Martial Arts Director: A striking and illustrative example is provided by the martial arts director. He reported, “For both commercial films and Netflix projects, I receive the same daily wage of ₩200,000, and my working conditions are identical.” This statement

highlights that, for outsourced labor in certain sectors, the core economic conditions remain unaffected by the OTT transition, suggesting that traditional production practices persist despite broader digital changes.

4. Final Creative Output and Societal Contributions

The quality and impact of Korean films serve as important indicators of the overall working conditions:

Global Competitiveness: Korean films continue to achieve international acclaim, demonstrating that the creative potential nurtured within the industry remains robust. The ability to produce world-class, innovative films testifies to the underlying strengths of the production environment, even if not every element is ideal.

Social and Cultural Impact: Many Korean films contribute significantly to societal dialogue and cultural enrichment. These films frequently engage with topics that not only entertain but also inspire audiences and promote social awareness. Such outcomes reinforce the notion that, in a holistic sense, the conditions under which Korean films are produced fulfill many of the criteria for “good work.”

5. Overall Assessment

Drawing together the findings, the comprehensive evaluation reveals:

Creative Autonomy: The foundation for creative expression is clearly present in the Korean film production system, especially among upper-level producers. Lower-level employees, while experiencing greater constraints, display a strong desire to overcome these limitations by seeking higher positions or engaging in independent creative endeavors.

Economic and Institutional Conditions: Although there have been notable improvements in regulated working hours and some aspects of worker protection, economic instability and administrative burdens persist for many, particularly among outsourced labor.

Final Products and Cultural Contributions: The overall quality and societal benefits of Korean films provide compelling evidence that, despite certain shortcomings, the industry largely adheres to the principles of “good work.” The continual global recognition of Korean films serves as a powerful metric for the success of the production process, suggesting that the positive aspects—most notably creative autonomy and cultural output—outweigh the negative.

Thus, the question of whether Korean film production is characterized primarily by “good work” or “bad work” cannot be answered solely by examining the economic and administrative metrics; it must also be viewed in the context of the final creative products and their broader cultural contributions. On balance, the evidence points toward an environment that, while not perfect, tends to align closely with the conditions of “good work.” In the coming years, with further policy enhancements and strategic reforms, the overall working conditions—and consequently the creative output—are expected to improve further.

Discussion

1. Integrating Theoretical Frameworks with Empirical Findings

The insights provided by Hesmondhalgh and Baker are borne out in the field, albeit with certain nuances peculiar to the Korean context. On the one hand, the creative freedom enjoyed by higher-level producers and the successes marked by globally acclaimed films affirm that key

aspects of “good work” persist. On the other hand, the significant administrative demands and residual economic insecurities—especially among outsourced workers—demonstrate that elements of “bad work” remain entrenched.

The case of the outsourced work is particularly instructive. Consistent daily wage with no variation between commercial projects and Netflix productions—suggests that for some segments of the industry, the transition to digital has not altered fundamental contractual practices. This finding reveals a hybrid landscape in which groundbreaking creative opportunities coexist with long-standing traditional employment practices.

2. Policy and Structural Recommendations

To harness the benefits of OTT platforms while remedying the challenges identified, several policy and structural interventions are recommended:

Administrative Efficiency: Implementing IT-driven automation solutions can ease the burden of daily reporting and data management. This would enable production teams to focus more on creative tasks rather than getting mired in bureaucratic procedures.

Worker Protection and Insurance: Revising insurance policies to provide comprehensive coverage—instead of relying solely on “cultural worker insurance”—could offer greater long-term protection to film workers. Additionally, standardizing contract terms across different project types could help reduce disparities in compensation and conditions.

Enhanced Communication: Constructing more robust communication channels between top management and production teams is essential. Such channels would ensure that creative input is effectively integrated into decision-making processes and that local needs are adequately represented in global networks.

Career and Skills Development: Creating clear pathways for career advancement, particularly for lower-level and outsourced workers, can foster an environment where every team member has the opportunity to transition to roles that allow greater creative freedom. Mentorship programs and specialized training in new digital tools should also be prioritized.

Digital Literacy Initiatives: Given the increasing reliance on digital technologies in film production, investing in continuous training programs that enhance digital literacy will be crucial. Additional skills in using automation tools and digital data management systems can help workers navigate and adapt more efficiently in the OTT landscape.

3. Future Research Directions

The present study provides an initial exploration into the dual impacts of OTT transition on Korean film production labor. However, additional research is needed to further refine and expand this understanding:

Differentiated Impact Analysis: Future studies could compare the experiences of full-time, contract, and freelance workers to better understand the variability in how different employment types are affected by digital transition.

Longitudinal Studies: Research tracking the long-term effects of OTT practices on creative autonomy, economic stability, and worker identity over several years would provide insights into the sustainability of current trends.

International Comparative Studies: In-depth comparisons between Korea and other major

film markets could elucidate how cultural, institutional, and policy differences mediate the impact of OTT transitions.

Policy Outcome Evaluations: Empirical assessments of recent policy interventions—such as administrative automation or enhanced worker protections—can yield valuable information about their efficacy and potential areas for further refinement.

Conclusion

This study examined the complex dynamics of Korean film production labor in the OTT era through in-depth interviews. Guided by the theoretical insights of Hesmondhalgh and Baker, the research reveals that despite some persistent challenges—particularly regarding economic stability and administrative burdens—the overall environment in Korean film production exhibits many elements of “good work.” High-level professionals enjoy significant creative autonomy and job satisfaction, as evidenced by the production of globally acclaimed films. In contrast, lower-level and outsourced workers, while facing certain limitations, demonstrate resilience through their commitment to career development and creative expression. Notably, compensation remains the same in both traditional commercial films and Netflix projects underscores that, at least in some sectors, legacy practices continue to prevail.

These findings strongly suggest that, overall, Korean OTT film production labor is on a positive trajectory towards ‘Good labor’ compare to the traditional film production. The remarkable quality of the final cinematic products and their significant cultural and social contributions testify that the industry largely fulfills the principles of “good work.” Nonetheless, to fully realize its potential, the Korean film sector must address lingering issues related to administrative overload and worker security through thoughtful policy reforms, improved communication mechanisms, and strategic investment in digital literacy.

As the industry continues to undergo rapid transformation, ongoing research coupled with targeted policy interventions will be crucial in ensuring that Korean film production not only preserves its storied creative legacy but also evolves into an even more robust, equitable, and inspiring arena for creative labor.

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Appendix

Interview Questions

Personal Information and Educational Background

Please introduce your age, academic background, film production experience, and family environment.

Film-Related Education

Where have you received training related to film (e.g., at university, on the job, through union training)?

Impact of OTT on Production Investment and Compensation

Please describe any changes in the number of projects, production investment, and salary adjustments before and after OTT adoption.

Working Conditions and Contractual Arrangements

How have factors such as working hours, workload, work-life balance, and insurance coverage changed in your experience?

Autonomy and Internal Communication

How do creative autonomy and communication practices differ between the OTT environment and traditional production systems?

Creative Expression and Work Environment

In what ways are creative ideas expressed in your work, and what limitations do you encounter?

Professional Identity and Pride

How has your sense of identity and pride as a film professional changed before and after the shift in production methods?

Questions Specific to the Outsourced Martial Arts Director

As an outsourced laborer, how do you perceive any differences between commercial film projects and Netflix projects, particularly regarding compensation and working conditions? (Response example: “For both commercial films and Netflix projects, I receive the same daily wage of ₩200,000, and the working conditions are identical.”)

Future Outlook and Industry Transformation

How do you envision the long-term impact of OTT transformation on the Korean film industry and on your own career development?

Selected Interview Excerpts

“In the Netflix production system, we are required to submit a shooting report within 12 hours every day and record even minute details such as lens changes. This excessive administrative control places a heavy burden on creative work.”

“In drama productions, contracts are secured for three to four months, and for commercial projects, up to eight months are guaranteed; however, the insurance system is limited to only cultural worker insurance, contributing to job insecurity.”

“As traditional theatrical film production diminishes, I feel that our artistic pride and identity are being

undermined.”

“I am a 10-year experienced outsourced martial arts director, and for both commercial films and Netflix projects, I receive the same daily wage of ₩200,000 with no differences in working conditions.”