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## **Why is ESports so prevalent in South Korea but not as prevalent in Western Countries**

The invention of the computer has been a technological advancement that has allowed us to create a variety of platforms in a digital space to learn, interact, and entertain ourselves in our society. The most effective form of entertainment today to be created out of the computer is video games. Video games have entertained millions of people worldwide, getting lost in the digital worlds developers have made based on existing popular genres. Like sports, this form of entertainment has also received competitive style tournaments, otherwise known as E-sports. E-sports have challenged players to compete against each other in popular online video games to win rewards such as trophies and money, which brings in significant viewership and revenue for sponsors. South Korea has become a trailblazer for E-sports' success in the country, but one of the biggest questions to arise from that success is why it hasn't been prevalent in western countries. E-sports in South Korea has been thriving given the history of computer entertainment in the country, generation of revenue, the social attitude towards competitive sports, and the addiction to video gaming young Koreans develop. These factors have been heavily influenced by the introduction and expanse of broadband internet in South Korea, which today is necessary for the infrastructure of a country. How broadband will evolve over time will determine how significantly it influences the evolution of E-sports in the same manner.

During the late 1990s, East Asia was going through a financial crisis affecting many Asian countries that included South Korea. To combat the crisis, the South Korean government decided to invest in the IT industry but, more specifically, in the expansion of the internet both publicly and privately. Their reasoning behind the investment was to create demand for hardware such as computers and internet servers that would expand the use of broadband networks by removing the government-owned telecom monopoly creating a field for competition (Kang, 56). The investment ultimately paid off as demand for computers arose with the help of computer cafe's otherwise known as PC Bangs in South Korea. For the longest time, Pc Bangs paved the way for the expansion of the internet in South Korea by offering a sort of free trial for Koreans hesitant about high-speed internet at home and created a social space for people to socialize daily (Kang, 57). Soon after, young Koreans began communicating amongst each other in online forums that soon became hugely popular for online game communities such as Starcraft. Starcraft was released by Blizzard Entertainment in 1998, which quickly became popular amongst Pc Bang cafes across South Korea, allowing customers to play the game at a relatively affordable price and hold tournaments amongst other cafes online (USC Annenberg Press, 3732). These cafe tournaments would be the foundations for what would later become known as E-sports around the world today. The name E-sports is an acronym for electronic sports, similar to how an email is an acronym for electronic mail. There was no official name for the Pc Bang tournaments in the 1990s until the tournaments became even more prominent and monetized by company sponsors, leading to the creation of the Korea e-Sports Association or KeSPA in 2000 ("What did you first call the game "esports"?"). This organization branded the term e-sports in South Korea and was commissioned to manage esports as an official sporting

event by the government to solidify commercial positions within the tournaments and manage the broadcast of events and encourage the playing of video games in the country (“What did you first call the game "esports"?”).

Since the creation of KeSPA, esports has significantly become a part of everyday Korean society, which has been thanks to the amount of revenue generated by these events each year. While the debate of whether or not esports should be considered a sporting activity, to begin with, it's largely overshadowed by the public interest. In 2019 alone, the audience growth for esports totaled almost 443 million online viewers worldwide (“Esports Viewership Vs. Sports In 2020.”). Just taking a fraction of those viewers, and you have a profitable event that is only growing as, by 2023, the expected viewership for esports events will accumulate to 646 million viewers worldwide (“Esports Viewership Vs. Sports In 2020.”). Gaming companies have taken these numbers into consideration and have poured millions into the prize pool of money earned in each competition. In 2014 Game company Riot Games offered up nearly \$8,052,833 million dollars in the final prize for its League of Legends World Championship, which was watched by approximately 27 million people in total (Llamas). The investment Riot Games made into the event, and the prize pool ultimately paid off as the revenue for the League of Legends game increased nearly 47 percent the following year from 818.3 million to 1.2 billion dollars earned annually (Llamas). Revenue drives industries to think bigger on investment so that they can pay off hugely, as seen with Riot Games and League of Legends. Going back to South Korea, however, money isn't just on the minds of companies themselves but also on the players participating in these events. As mentioned, the prize pool for winning tournaments can be huge, which would make the person rich and make a name for themselves in a

competitive industry. League of legends alone has 4 of South Korea's top-earning players in the country, with the player id known as Faker earning a whopping \$2,500,000 million dollars annually in both salary and endorsements (John). This is followed by other players earning a higher wage in other popular online game tournaments such as Starcraft 2 and Player Unknown Battlegrounds, in which players Maru and Loki have earned approximately \$1,600,000 and \$1,500,000 million dollars respectively (John). Putting the events and money into one space has created a passion for young Koreans to play video games not just for fun itself but also to make something of themselves.

East Asia has always had a terrible history amongst itself as each nation has been embroiled in some form of turmoil with a neighboring country. This has led to each nation competing amongst each other to see who is the one that stands out the most by what they produce for the rest of the world. In its attempt to outshine its rivals, South Korea has emphasized its militant nationalism after 35 years of Japanese occupation with sports. Sports for Koreans have allowed the increase of public moral and physical prowess that combats the Japanese oppression they felt for 35 years and gives them a sense of identity of character within East Asia (Jiang 41). With that, South Korea has been competitive when it comes to winning competitions, as seen in the London 2012 Olympics, where they took home a bronze medal against Japan, building their militant national identity (Jiang, 41). Esports in South Korea have been seen by the Korean government to have the same militant nationalism as regular sports when it comes to the competitiveness it takes to play an online video game such as StarCraft. With the intelligence and social expressiveness South Koreans have, Starcraft has allowed them to put those traits to the test by making quick strategic decisions amongst each other to

win the game either individually or as a team of players similar to real competitive sports (Rea, 23). Since the game's release, Starcraft helped jumpstart esports in South Korea as its competitive players began competing in international competitions, which later helped popularize the game domestically and led to the creation of the first World Cyber Games held in Seoul in 2000 (Rea, 24). The popularization of video games and competitiveness has not just turned into a hobby for young Koreans to take on but has also presented an escape from the reality they live in.

While South Korea remains a well-educated society with 70 percent of students pursuing a higher education, the academic environment is also competitive, leading to many families unable to hire tutors to let their children pass the difficult college entrance exams (Lee). With little social mobility and so much free time, many young Koreans have turned to the affordable Pc Bangs as a way to play video games thanks to the infrastructure and culture for gaming in place that drives them to be the best players they can be to one day be able to play professionally to make a living (Lee). This has been viewed as a problem in the social attitude of competitive gaming as young Koreans who focus a significant amount of their time playing video games tend to develop social issues that have severely impacted their ability to connect with the world around them. Some players tend to develop low empathy that can severely harm their social skills, while others develop depression and behavior problems (Chu et al. 3). Academically many adolescents who become addicted to video games have shown to have a trend of receiving bad grades in school, repeating a prior grade, or skipping school altogether (Chu et al. 3). To combat this, the South Korean government has created Rehabilitation facilities to remove young Koreans from the digital landscape and place them with other video game addicts. These facilities are designed to allow young Koreans to discuss their

addiction to not only bond in the month-long period they are present but also to help them control the addiction they have to ultimately make time for things they aspire to do in the future aside from video games (Cornish 00:00:00 - 00:24:25). While it's unclear whether these methods of curing the addiction work in the long run, the government is, for the most part, attempting to get a hold of a situation for which they are responsible for in the expansion of the internet as well the competitive environment they have created for its people.

In conclusion, many western countries lack the prevalence of esports, unlike South Korea, thanks to the expansion of broadband internet in the country. This government-supported infrastructure led to various side effects, such as a booming economy built upon the sale of technology like computers that created an environment for esports to be built upon and generate revenue. The social attitude South Korea has built upon sports has created an environment where competitiveness is the key to a national identity which has led to many young Koreans becoming addicted to video games to one day play competitively for themselves and their country. Broadband will continue to evolve and expand over time as new technology is created to make it better for the average consumer. How it will affect the future of esports will likely affect the future of South Korea as a whole in being the outstanding East Asian Country modernly.

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