

## Squid Game-boosted Netflix pulls in subscribers

Netflix reported billion-dollar profits and booming subscriber growth Tuesday that beat forecasts as global hits like Squid Game drew viewers in droves. Analysts had been worried that a surge in Netflix subscriptions during pandemic lockdowns would be followed by a plunge as the world opened back up. But the streaming entertainment star said that in the third quarter it made a profit of \$1.45 billion on revenue that grew 16 percent to \$7.5 billion in that period. Subscribers jumped by 4.4 million, double the growth seen in the same quarter in 2020, allowing the platform to end the period with 214 million worldwide.

After rolling out a lighter-than-normal slate of content in the first half of this year due to COVID-related production delays, Netflix said it was finishing the year with "what we expect to be our strongest Q4 content offering yet." "Our programming strategy is to provide members with a wide variety of high quality content that's loved and watched in large numbers," it said in a statement. New seasons of original Netflix series Money Heist and Sex Education were the biggest returning shows, viewed by 69 million and 55 million households respectively, according to



Shoppers takes picture with cosplayers dressed in outfits from the Netflix series "Squid Game" at a shopping mall in Kuala Lumpur yesterday. — AFP

the Silicon Valley powerhouse.

### Free speech controversy

Squid Game became Netflix's biggest show ever, watched by a "mind-boggling" 142 million households in the four weeks

after its release in mid-September, executives said. "The breadth of Squid Game's popularity is truly amazing; this show has been ranked as our #1 program in 94 countries," Netflix said. Squid Game-themed products were on their

way to retail outlets, Netflix told investors. Most of the subscriber growth in the quarter came from the Asia-Pacific region, which accounted for 2.2 million added Netflix members. Joe McCormack, senior analyst at Third Bridge, pointed to the power of the Squid Game phenomenon.

"Squid Game was Netflix's recent example of generating a global hit, with two-thirds of the company's total subscribers viewing the series in the first four weeks," he wrote. But Netflix has also been plunged into America's culture wars by a Dave Chappelle comedy special that raises concerns about free speech and censorship, but has been slammed by its own employees as transphobic. In "The Closer," boundary-pushing mega-star Chappelle responds to critics who have accused him of mocking transgender people in the past by asserting that "gender is a fact" and accusing LGBTQ people of being "too sensitive."

"In our country you can shoot and kill" a Black man, "but you'd better not hurt a gay person's feelings," says the stand-up comic, who is Black. While the show has been condemned by LGBTQ groups including GLAAD, which cited studies linking stereotypes about minorities to real-world harm-Netflix has so far stood

firm, insisting the show will not be taken down. But the streaming giant finds itself trapped at the center of arguably its most intense controversy yet.

Chappelle remains hugely popular, at a time when Netflix is competing with rivals such as HBO and Disney in the so-called streaming wars. "We compete with a staggeringly large set of activities for consumers' time and attention like watching linear TV, reading a book, browsing TikTok, or playing Fortnite, to name just a few," executives said in the letter. They noted that engagement at Netflix climbed 14 percent during the hours Facebook was hit with a major outage early this month. Netflix said it is continuing to push into gaming, focusing on mobile devices first, in a methodical approach expected to take years to bear meaningful fruit.

"Imagine three years from now some future Squid Game is launching and it comes along with an incredible array of interactive or gaming options that is all built into the service," Netflix chief Reed Hastings said on an earnings call. "A company like Disney is still ahead of us in some of those dimensions of putting that whole experience together but boy are we making progress." — AFP



Iranians arrive for the opening day of the 38th Tehran International Short Film Festival (TISFF) in the Iranian capital. — AFP photos

## Tehran short film fest opens, with shot at Oscars for first time

Tehran's International Short Film Festival opened this week, for the first time as an Oscar-qualifying event, giving winning entries a shot at an Academy Award. The festival jury has members from the Islamic republic as well as Italy, Japan, France and Austria. The festival, now in its 38th edition and running until Sunday, earned qualification this year as a gateway to Hollywood's annual awards showcase. The event



Iranians watch a movie in the opening day of the 38th Tehran International Short Film Festival (TISFF).

"was added as a qualifying festival in the Short Films categories this year," the US Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences confirmed. "And it is the only current qualifying festival in Iran." The designation came despite high tensions between Washington and Tehran, which have had no diplomatic relations since 1979, before the festival began.

This year's showcase also coincides

with efforts to resume negotiations on reviving Iran's 2015 nuclear deal with the United States and other world powers, with the goal of ending a punishing sanctions regime. "I am both happy and proud of the qualification of our festival," the event's president Sadegh Moussavi told AFP. "It's a big success of cultural diplomacy," he said with a smile. "We think that culture and art can have a status more prestigious than politics." Tehran's festival has been a springboard for the big names of Iranian cinema, including Asghar Farhadi, a two-time Oscar winner, Bahman Ghobadi and Reza Mirkarimi, said festival spokesman Mansour Jahani.

### Censorship accusation

Moussavi said Tehran's application to the Academy was initially rejected because its entrants are not required to pay fees. "We replied that our country was under sanctions and therefore it is impossible for those who want to present their films to pay registration fees," he said. Tehran is the only short film festival without such fees among about 130 in the world which are Oscar eligible, Moussavi said. Following recognition by the Academy, this year's festival competition received more than 6,400 entries from 128 countries — 2,000 more than last year.

Five Iranian films and 58 from abroad were selected for the grand prize and the winner will be presented to the Academy for possible Oscar nomination. The selections upset some young Iranian directors whose films were not accepted, and led to accusations of censorship, including from film-maker Farnoush Samadi. "It is my duty to write to the Academy to protest this censorship, injustice and non-professional actions of the Tehran Festival," Samadi said on Instagram. — AFP

opening ceremony via Skype to deliver a message of hope. "COVID and the climate crisis have shown us how fragile we are as human beings," she said. "But we have also been demonstrating how resilient, inventive, and how creative we can be." Books had helped people to escape the isolation of the pandemic and make sense of the world, said Atwood, author of "The Handmaid's Tale". "Books are both time travel devices and empathy machines. They take us to distant lands, allow us inside other worlds," she added.

### Young readers

The fair, which opens to trade visitors yesterday before welcoming the general public later in the week, runs until Sunday. It comes as the book industry has been "doing pretty well over the past 18 months", according to Boos, with people in many countries using the slower pace of life during lockdown to read more-adolescents especially.

In the United States, printed book sales rose by more than eight percent in 2020 to record their best year in a decade, according to the NPD research group. Growth was driven by teen categories but also adult non-fiction, as people turned to cookbooks and DIY books to pass the time at

## Beauty salon a women's haven in the Taliban's Kabul

It is one of the last places in Kabul where women can meet outside their households, a bubble of freedom and even frivolity away from the gaze of men. Mohadessa has kept her beauty salon open despite threats from Afghanistan's new rulers. Since the Taliban seized Kabul in mid-August, many women have disappeared from public spaces, driven into private areas out of fear and sometimes very real threats. But Mohadessa's beauty salon has, for now, remained a place where women can relax among themselves outside the household and share their woes-or forget them in favour of fun and fashion.



A customer shows her make-up done by a beautician at a beauty salon in Kabul.

The oasis of feminine industry provides income for the staff and moments of indulgence for the clients, but its days may be numbered. "We don't want to give up and stop working," the 32-year-old entrepreneur told AFP over the hubbub of women getting ready for a wedding celebration. "We love that we have a job, and it is necessary for women to work in Afghan society-many of them are the breadwinners for their family." Customers are dropped off outside and whisked past posters advertising fashion and beauty brands that are now blotted out with white paint. They quickly disappear into the shop through a heavy curtain. Once inside, the women shed their headscarves and outer garments and their excited voices compete with the hum of hair-dryers as they choose their new looks.

### Screaming mob

The last time the Taliban ruled Afghanistan, between 1996 and the US-led intervention of 2001, women were



In this photograph, a beautician applies make-up to a customer at a beauty salon in Kabul. — AFP photos

obliged to wear the all-covering burqa. Under the Islamist movement's interpretation of Islamic law, beauty salons were banned outright. Just having painted nails meant a woman could risk having her fingers cut off. But since the Taliban returned to the capital and declared their Islamic Emirate, the movement has been at pains to present a more liberal face to the world.

Keen to secure international finance to head off economic disaster that could undermine their war gains, they have not rushed to reimpose restrictions on daily life. That is not to say Mohadessa has not received threats. A Taliban mob has shouted abuse outside her shop, but she has made use of the legal limbo to continue. "I can say that the women at this salon are courageous because they come to work with fear," she said. "Every day they open the salon, they come in, and they continue to work, despite this fear."

### Message of 'resistance'

On the day AFP visited, around 30 women had braved the climate of fear to come to the shop and prepare for a wedding, where the sexes are traditionally segregated during celebrations. The women were clearly enjoying the rare chance to dress up and pamper themselves, with elaborate hair and eyelash decorations complementing a colorful make-up palette. The bride's sister, English teacher Farkhunda, gazes at the results of an hour-long makeover. "Yes, it's nice. It's beautiful. It's my first real day out since the end of August," she said cheerfully.

But under the splash of glittery eye-

shadow, one of her pupils is immobile, taken during a gun and bomb attack when she was a teenager. "You see my eye? I lost it on my way to school when the Taliban attacked us. But I am not scared of them. I don't want to talk about them. Today is for celebration," she said. The light-hearted mood is as fragile as the delicate bejeweled hair bands. At every movement of the curtain hiding the door to the outside world, the women stiffen and briefly fall silent.

But none of the clients want to tone down their look, a stylized, ultra-feminine rebuke to the Taliban's looming curbs on free expression: dense foundation, long false lashes, dazzling colors and a China doll finish. And 22-year-old Marwa, not her real name, with her asymmetric haircut exposing an ear dotted with piercings and decorative chains, sees a message of "resistance" in the stylings. "We are not people with blue burkas. We are not people with black burkas. That's not who we are," she said.

### 'Knife to my throat'

Some of the women dream of leaving, others of change. Farkhunda hopes she can get back to work while Mohadessa, determined to stay open, fears for her life. She showed AFP a letter she believes comes from the Taliban's new Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, warning her to close down. Her response: "Until they come and put a knife to my throat, I'm staying here." — AFP

## Frankfurt book fair returns but 'not back to normal'

The Frankfurt book fair, the world's largest, celebrated its return Tuesday, but with fewer big names attending and star author Margaret Atwood only joining via video link, was not quite back to its former glory. After going almost fully digital in 2020 to curb the coronavirus spread, this year's fair will see publishers, booksellers, authors and readers meeting face-to-face again. But it will be a more muted version of past editions, as uncertainty about travel restrictions has kept many international visitors away.

"Back to business does not mean back to normal," fair director Juergen Boos said at the opening, but the event nevertheless offered a chance for the industry to "reconnect", he added. Award-winning novelist Margaret Atwood, whose native Canada is this year's guest of honor, dialed into the

renowned German publishing house C.H. Beck, told the Handelsblatt financial daily. Books could also become more expensive, he warned.

### COVID curbs

This week's Frankfurt gathering is the latest example of trade fairs stirring back to life, and comes after the German city of Munich welcomed 400,000 visitors to the IAA auto show in September. Daily visitor numbers are capped at 25,000 however, less than half the usual capacity. Frankfurt fairgoers must also wear masks and show proof of vaccination, recovery from COVID or a negative test.

More than 2,000 exhibitors from upwards of 80 countries are attending, well below the 7,500 exhibitors from over 100 countries who attended in 2019. Some 300 authors are coming, including Canada's Michel Jean, Dany Laferriere and Michael Crummey. But compared with past years when the likes of Atwood, Ken Follett, Cecelia Ahen and Nicholas Sparks visited, this year's event lacks the same star power. Several large publishing houses are also staying away, preferring to take part online instead. — AFP



Visitors walk at booths at the Frankfurt Book Fair 2021 in Frankfurt am Main, Germany yesterday. — AFP

home. In Germany, the European Union's largest book market, bookstores used the shutdowns to expand their online sales, leading to a 20-percent jump in internet revenues to 2.2 billion euros (\$2.5 billion). Audio and e-books also saw double-digit growth. "The book industry has passed the COVID stress test," said Karin Schmidt-Friderichs, chairwoman of the German Publishers and Booksellers Association.

### Christmas concerns

But the news for the industry is not all

good. The book trade, with global revenues of around \$100 billion annually, is not immune to the shortages of raw materials and supply chain problems disrupting economies as countries rebound from the coronavirus downturn. With the crucial Christmas holiday season fast approaching, publishers are sounding the alarm about paper shortages, bottlenecks at shipping ports and higher transport costs.

"I fear that this Christmas, people cannot be sure of getting any book they want at short notice," Jonathan Beck, head of