

Hybrid Work, Institutional Barriers, and South Korea's Productivity Gap: A Sociological Analysis

Ben Choi¹, Ridley Sendow², Tophy David³

¹The Hill School, Pottstown, PA, USA

²School of Business, La Sierra University, Riverside, CA, USA

³Graduate School of International Studies, Yonsei University, Seoul, South Korea

Email: jaeminbenjaminchoi@gmail.com, ridley.sendow@pcakorea.org, tophy.david@pcakorea.org

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Abstract

There is a striking sociological paradox that exists in South Korea, a country that is infamous for its demanding workplace culture. Here, the economy can be described as high-income with a world-class digital infrastructure that ranks last among 40 countries in hybrid working adoption (averaging just 0.5 remote days per week), yet the country already achieves productivity above what cross-national patterns would predict, given its lack of workplace flexibility. A comparison of data from 25 countries suggests that South Korea is an outlier, with actual productivity of \$53 purchasing power parity (PPP) per hour, exceeding the Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) trend line prediction of \$40.13 at 0.5 working from home (WFH) days per week ($R^2 = 0.54$, $N = 25$). This paper argues that Korea's position in this data set reflects an institutional lock-in where productivity is maintained through the exhaustion of embodied social capital rather than technological efficiency. Drawing on Bourdieu's field theory, Hall and Soskice's institutional complementarities, and Esping-Andersen's care regime typology, we identify six interlocking barriers—Confucian hierarchy, *ppalli* urgency, presenteeist evaluation, *chaebol* governance, the Gender Flexibility Trap, and extreme land constraints—that neutralize the gains of remote work. Additionally, this paper explores the MZ generation as a potential catalyst for field transformation. We argue that their resistance to traditional workplace norms represents a rejection of the current symbolic capital, which could shift South Korean corporate culture from loyalty-based physical presence to digital-native competency. This paper concludes that while the current system sustains a local equilibrium, South Korea is forgoing potential gains of \$78 - \$107 PPP/hr found in high flexibility economies. Realizing these gains requires a shift in the symbolic, institutional, and care-regime domains to support the

emerging counter-culture views of the younger workforce.

Keywords

Hybrid Work, Institutional Complementarities, South Korea, Labor Productivity, Bourdieu

1. Introduction

South Korea presents a sociological paradox. It ranks among the world's leaders in broadband penetration, has one of the most educated workforces among OECD countries, and has achieved rapid economic development through the quick adoption of technology and institutional agility. Despite these achievements, South Korea showed extraordinary resistance to change when the COVID-19 pandemic forced many workers to work remotely. As of 2023, South Korean college-educated workers average only 0.5 remote days per week, which ranks the lowest among all 27 countries surveyed in the Global Survey of Working Arrangements (Aksoy et al. 2023), while the United States averages 1.5 days and Ireland and Canada situate themselves at 1.7 and 1.8 days, respectively. South Korea's case is curious because this gap is not a technological gap; it is a sociological one.

This paper aims to explain this gap through a Bourdieusian and comparative institutional lens. We argue that South Korea's position as an extreme outlier reflects the operation of mutually reinforcing institutional complementarities (Hall & Soskice, 2001) that make hybrid adoption individually costly even when it would be collectively beneficial. Physical presence in the office is not simply an institutional preference in South Korea. It is a field in Bourdieu's sense (1986), a structured social space where symbolic capital (*chemyeon*, or social face) can only be gained through visible, physical co-presence. Although remote work may be more efficient, it prevents workers from entering this field in which *chemyeon* is produced and recognized, threatening their positional advantage regardless of their productivity. This incentive for physical presence is reinforced by institutional structures (*chaebol* corporate governance, seniority-based evaluation) and other macro-level institutions (a familialist care regime), which altogether produce a system of barriers that prevent South Korean companies from adopting more remote work policies.

South Korea's labor productivity of about \$53 PPP per hour worked, compared to \$85 in the United States (OECD, 2025), already exceeds what the cross-national OLS trend line predicts for a country that averages 0.5 WFH days per week. Purchasing Power Parity is a metric used to compare adjusted price levels and living expenses between countries. According to these predictions, South Korea should be at about \$40.13, which is a difference of +\$12.87. This above-trend position refines this paper's argument that South Korea is not underperforming relative to its hybrid adoption rate. Rather, it is achieving levels of productivity that are above

expectations because of intensive in-office work while simultaneously leaving additional productivity gains on the table. “Above-trend performance” refers specifically to a positive OLS residual. This is the gap between a country’s actual GDP per hour worked and the value predicted by the regression line at its observed WFH adoption rate. “Forgoing potential gains” refers to the difference between South Korea’s current productivity and the higher productivity levels observed in high-flexibility economies in the upper-right quadrant of **Figure 1**. This is a descriptive comparison, not a causal claim. “Productivity gap” is used throughout to refer to this latter shortfall between South Korea’s actual output and those higher observed benchmarks. These potential gains appear through experimental evidence from comparable economies, which suggests that South Korea would be even more productive by adopting more flexible workplace practices to include remote work. The barriers to productivity documented in this paper do not suppress South Korea’s productivity below the cross-national trend; instead, they suppress it below the higher level that it could reach with more hybrid working hours, which is the level visible in the upper-right quadrant of **Figure 1**.

2. Theoretical Framework

This paper draws on three sociological frameworks that, when used together, predict that South Korea’s workplace culture will continue to resist hybrid work adoption even when the technological and economic conditions for it are favorable. Bourdieu’s (1986) field theory provides the micro-sociological foundation; Hall and Soskice’s (2001) institutional complementarities concept explains the meso- and macro-level functions of these barriers; and Esping-Andersen’s (1999) care regime typology explains why workplace flexibility is gendered in ways that make the problem worse, rather than solve it.

2.1. Bourdieu’s Field Theory: The Office as the Site of Symbolic Capital Accumulation

The primary analytical lens of this paper is Pierre Bourdieu’s (1986) concept of the social field and its associated forms of capital. According to Bourdieu, a field is a structured social space where actors compete for position by gathering different forms of capital: economic, social, cultural, and symbolic. The symbolic dimension consists of different attributes that are recognized and valued by others in the field, and gaining this capital requires participation in the field’s rituals and practices. This makes symbolic capital the most important for South Korea’s case. In this country, the corporate workforce functions almost exactly like Bourdieu’s symbolic field. The main form of symbolic capital is *chemyeon*, a concept documented thoroughly in Korean organizational sociology (Kim & Hamilton-Hart, 2022). *Chemyeon* is not simply one’s reputation, but rather a hierarchically ordered form of status that is collectively followed and maintained. It can only be performed and witnessed through physical presence with superiors, peers, and subordinates in any given work environment.

Remote work, in this framework, acts as a threat to a worker's position in the field as it removes them from the space where their social capital is produced, displayed, and recognized. A Korean worker who works from home two days per week is invisible to the field on those days, unable to show respect to their superiors, to show effort through visible overtime hours (*yageun*), or to accumulate goodwill and recognition that drives them to move up the company hierarchy in a seniority-based system. Naturally, workers will therefore resist hybrid work even when their productivity is unaffected because the field values physical presence, not just output. Along with *chemyeon*, the practice of *nunchi*, which refers to the ability to read and respond to unstated expectations of superiors (Kim, 2025), deepens the dependency to show up physically in the Korea field. *Nunchi* can only work well through the continuous monitoring of facial expressions, tone, and mood. Unfortunately, digital communication significantly harms the ability for a worker to read these signals, again incentivizing physical presence as an important strategy to use when properly navigating the field.

2.2. Varieties of Capitalism: Institutional Complementarities and Path Dependency

At the macro-institutional level, this paper uses Hall and Soskice's (2001) concept of institutional complementarities. South Korea can be best classified as a state-orchestrated coordinated market economy (CME) characterized by concentrated corporate governance (*chaebol*), long job tenure, seniority-based pay, and top-down industrial policy (Lee & Kim, 2024). CME institutions tend to reinforce systems of pay based on seniority, which requires long job tenure and stable employment relations. In South Korea, this includes signaling loyalty through visible effort. Unfortunately, hybrid work disrupts this chain by introducing individual scheduling power into a system that is built around collective, monitored in-person work. As institutional complementarities theory predicts, workplaces will resist changes that disrupt the stability of the complementary system, even when evidence shows that such changes are more efficient (Hall & Soskice, 2001).

2.3. Care Regime Theory: The Gendered Flexibility Trap

Esping-Andersen's (1999) welfare state typology provides the third pillar on which this paper is built. South Korea is a familialist welfare state where unpaid care is assigned mostly to women in the families. This care regime has a paradoxical interaction with workplace flexibility. Rather than allowing women to remain employed through flexible schedules, hybrid work in South Korea's familialist context is viewed as showing parental over professional priorities. In a cross-national survey, Cha et al. (2026) found that flexible workers in South Korea are perceived as better parents, but less committed to their work, with this view sharply gendered toward mothers. Thus, hybrid flexibility becomes a hindrance to the group that actually has the most to gain from it, as it reinforces rather than disrupts the gender division of labor.

3. Literature Review: Hybrid Work and Productivity

A review of the literature on hybrid work and its relationship to productivity has expanded significantly since the COVID-19 pandemic. Bloom et al. (2015) conducted a randomized controlled trial at Trip.com in China in which workers randomized to a work-from-home schedule showed no decline in their productivity, while attrition (employee turnover) fell by 33% and job satisfaction increased. A second randomized trial by Bloom et al. (2024) assigned 1,612 graduate-level employees to a hybrid schedule or full-time office work over six months. Over a two-year follow-up, hybrid workers showed equal performance review scores and promotion rates, while attrition fell by 33% and satisfaction improved significantly. These two studies provide the strongest available evidence that hybrid work does not harm productivity while simultaneously delivering meaningful benefits.

Gibbs et al. (2023) found that remote work increased individual output on well-defined tasks, but reduced collaborative communication. Yang et al. (2022) discovered that fully remote work weakened informal cross-team bonds, a cost that hybrid schedules could mitigate through regular in-office days. Choudhury et al. (2021) found a 4.4% output increase under geographic flexibility at the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office. Mas and Pallais (2017) used experimental variation in job postings to estimate that workers value the option to work from home at about 8% of their yearly wage, suggesting that firms can attract and retain talent at lower compensation costs through hybrid schedule offerings.

Cross-national evidence on adoption rates shows strong regional divergences. Aksoy et al. (2022, 2023) report that college-educated workers in English-speaking economies average about 1.5 to two remote days per week, while Asian economies average only 0.5 to 0.7 days. These patterns have stabilized since 2022, suggesting that the causes for this difference are structural rather than transitional. For South Korea specifically, Shin (2025) reports that telework improves job satisfaction, but simultaneously increases work-family conflict, especially for employees with children, a finding that is consistent with the care regime analysis in Section 2.3. Kim and Hamilton-Hart (2022) document through ethnographic research how Korean managers actively reinforce Confucian workplace norms to resist organizational changes that threaten hierarchical authority.

4. Data and Methods

This study uses a cross-national descriptive design to illustrate the relationship between hybrid work adoption and labor productivity. Data on the prevalence of remote work are drawn from Wave 3 of the Global Survey of Working Arrangements (G-SWA) (Aksoy et al., 2023), which surveyed college-educated full-time workers from 27 countries in April to May of 2023. Labor productivity is measured as GDP per hour worked in purchasing-power-parity-adjusted U.S. dollars (PPP USD) from the OECD Productivity Statistics database (OECD, 2025). The analytic sample includes 25 countries for which both measures are available. The 25 countries included are: Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, China, Denmark,

France, Germany, India, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Singapore, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America. Of the 27 G-SWA countries, Brazil and one additional country (Indonesia) were excluded from the analytic sample because matching OECD GDP-per-hour-worked figures in PPP USD were unavailable for the same reference year; all productivity figures are drawn from the 2022 reference year in the OECD Productivity Statistics database (OECD, 2025). Readers should note a level mismatch inherent in this pairing. The G-SWA WFH variable captures college-educated full-time employees, a subset of the workforce, while GDP per hour worked reflects the economy as a whole. We retain this pairing because college-educated workers disproportionately hold hybrid-eligible professional roles, making their adoption rates the most relevant indicator for the main argument developed in this paper. Therefore, claims about productivity effects should be understood as applying specifically to the hybrid-eligible professional segment rather than to the full economy.

We present a scatter plot (Figure 1) and a simple OLS regression of GDP per hour worked on average WFH days per week. This regression is intended to be a descriptive illustration of a cross-national association consistent with our theoretical argument, and not as a causal estimate. The small country-level sample ($N = 25$), single-predictor specification, and absence of controls for income level, industrial composition, or institutional quality preclude causal inference. The paper's main contribution is theoretical and sociological, concluding that the regression illustrates that South Korea sits above the OLS trend line by \$12.87 per hour, an above-trend position our sociological framework explains as the result of intensive in-office work within a constrained institutional possibility set. Qualitative evidence in Section 6 is drawn from a critical synthesis of peer-reviewed literature in organizational sociology, Korean studies, and comparative political economy.

5. Cross-National Patterns: A Descriptive Illustration

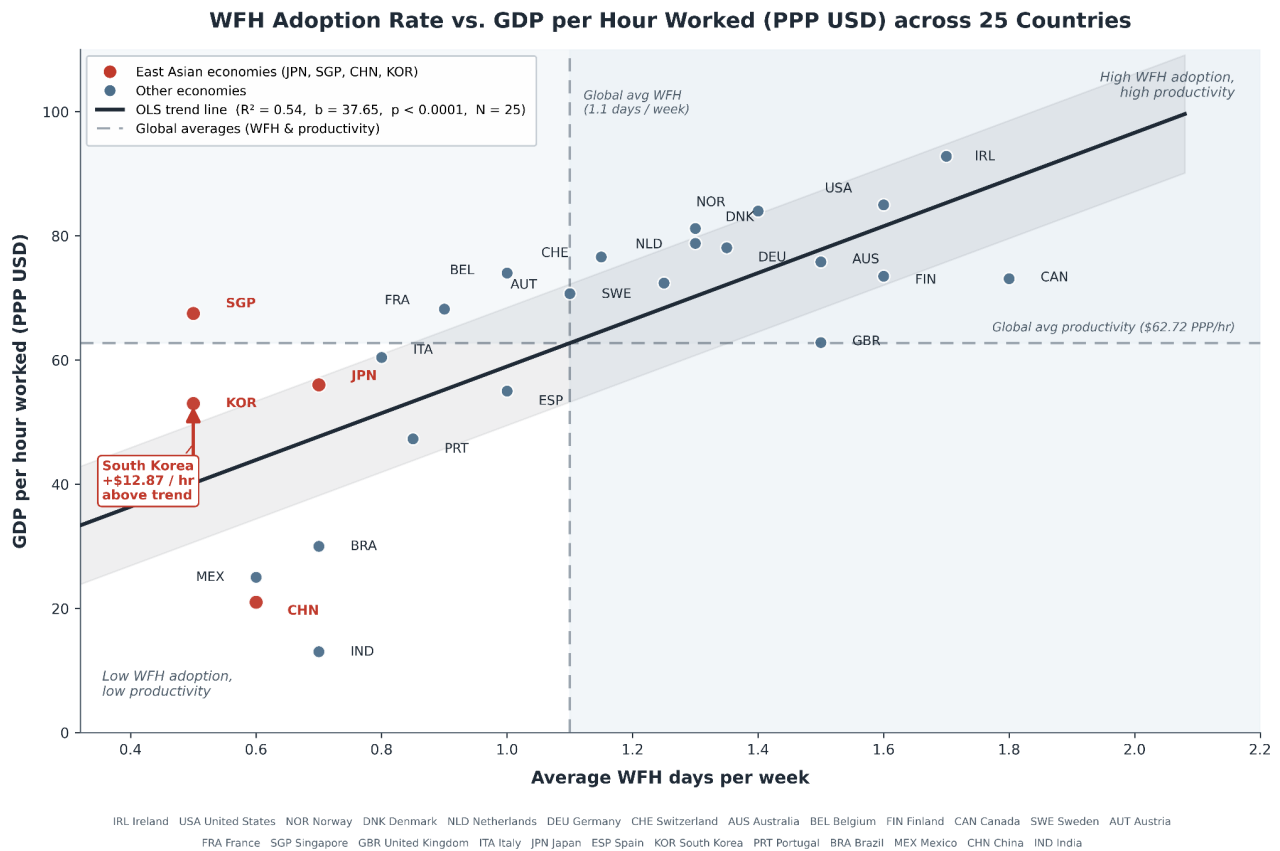
Figure 1 presents a scatterplot combining two analytical elements derived from our R analysis: 1) dashed quadrant reference lines at the global average WFH adoption rate (1.1 days/week) and global average productivity (\$62.72 PPP/hr), and 2) a solid OLS trend line ($b = 37.65$, $R^2 = 0.54$, $p < 0.0001$, $N = 25$) showing the expected relationship between hybrid adoption and productivity. East Asian economies are marked in red. The upward red arrow beside South Korea shows its positive residual of +\$12.87/hr: the gap between its actual productivity (\$53 PPP/hr) and the trend line prediction at 0.5 WFH days/week (\$40.13), confirming that South Korea lies above the trend line.

The figure reveals two distinct findings, which together make up the paper's main contribution. The first is a strong positive cross-national relationship between the adoption of hybrid work hours and productivity ($R^2 = 0.54$, $b = 37.65$): countries with above-average WFH adoption including Ireland, the United States,

Canada and the Nordic and Benelux economies, cluster in the upper-right quadrant, while countries below the global average on both dimensions, specifically China, India, Mexico, and Brazil fall in the lower-left quadrant. This broad pattern is consistent with the institutional complementarities theory (Hall & Soskice, 2001), which states that higher flexibility institutional configurations result in greater productivity per hour worked. The second, and arguably more important, finding concerns South Korea's specific position relative to the OLS trend line. According to the figure, South Korea lies above the trend line by \$12.87 per hour. Its actual productivity of \$53 PPP/hr exceeds the trend prediction for a country that averages only 0.5 WFH days/week (\$40.13). This means that South Korea is not underperforming relative to its hybrid adoption rate. Rather, the country is achieving productivity outcomes that exceed expectations through intensive, in-office work hours, specifically the presenteeist model that its institutional field (Bourdieu, 1986) incentivizes through *chemyeon*, *nunchi*, and *yageun*. Thus, the paper's argument is not that South Korea is currently failing relative to the cross-national trend, but that it is achieving despite its constraints and simultaneously losing out on significantly higher productivity levels, between \$78 - \$107 PPP/hr, a range derived from the observed GDP per hour worked of Ireland (\$107), the United States (\$85), Canada (\$78), Denmark (\$83), and the Netherlands (\$89)—the five high-flexibility economies (above 1.5 WFH days/week) in the upper-right quadrant of **Figure 1**, which are consistent with other economies in the upper-right quadrant that have greater workplace flexibility. Singapore's position reinforces this finding since it also lies above the trend line (+\$27.34/hr), combining very low hybrid adoption with very high productivity. Both South Korea and Singapore show that certain institutional settings can sustain above-trend performance without hybrid flexibility, though the potential gains in productivity remain unrealized.

It is worth acknowledging alternative explanations for South Korea's positive residual. Sectoral composition may be a relevant factor: South Korea's economy is more concentrated in high-value manufacturing and semiconductor exports than in lower-value service industries, which mechanically raises output per hour independently of workplace organization. Capital intensity in the manufacturing and technology sectors similarly lifts measured productivity without any contribution from hybrid flexibility. Export structure also plays a significant role, as South Korea's large share of high-technology exports may raise GDP relative to hours worked in ways unrelated to the flexibility or intensity of office-based work. Finally, the hours composition is also important to consider. If the denominator in GDP per hour worked understates actual hours because unpaid overtime is common—as Section 6.3 documents—South Korea's measured productivity would be artificially elevated. These factors do not invalidate the institutional argument developed in this paper, but they mean that the regression residual should be treated as a descriptive starting point rather than definitive evidence of presenteeism-driven output. The sociological framework in Section 6 is therefore offered as a theoretically grounded account of the mechanisms sustaining South Korea's

above-trend position, rather than as the sole causal explanation.



Note: WFH data from Aksoy et al. (2023). Productivity (GDP per hour worked, PPP USD) data from OECD (OECD, 2025). Dashed lines indicate global averages (WFH: 1.1 days/week; productivity: \$62.72 PPP/hr), N = 25. The solid OLS trend line: $b = 37.65$, $R^2 = 0.54$, $p < 0.0001$. East Asian economies (Japan, Singapore, China, South Korea) are marked in red. The upward red arrow annotates South Korea’s positive residual of +\$12.87/hr: actual productivity (\$53 PPP/hr) exceeds the trend prediction at 0.5 WFH days/week (\$40.13), confirming above-trend performance despite minimal hybrid adoption. South Korea is not currently underperforming relative to the cross-national trend; it is forgoing the additional gains visible in the upper-right quadrant of the figure.

Figure 1. WFH adoption rate vs. GDP per hour worked (PPP USD) across 25 countries: quadrant analysis with global averages.

6. South Korea’s Institutional Barriers to Hybrid Adoption

Figure 2 maps the six institutional barriers that account for South Korea’s low hybrid adoption rate, organized according to the three theoretical frameworks in Section 2: Bourdieu’s field theory (left column), Hall and Soskice’s institutional complementarities, and Esping-Andersen’s care regime theory (right column).

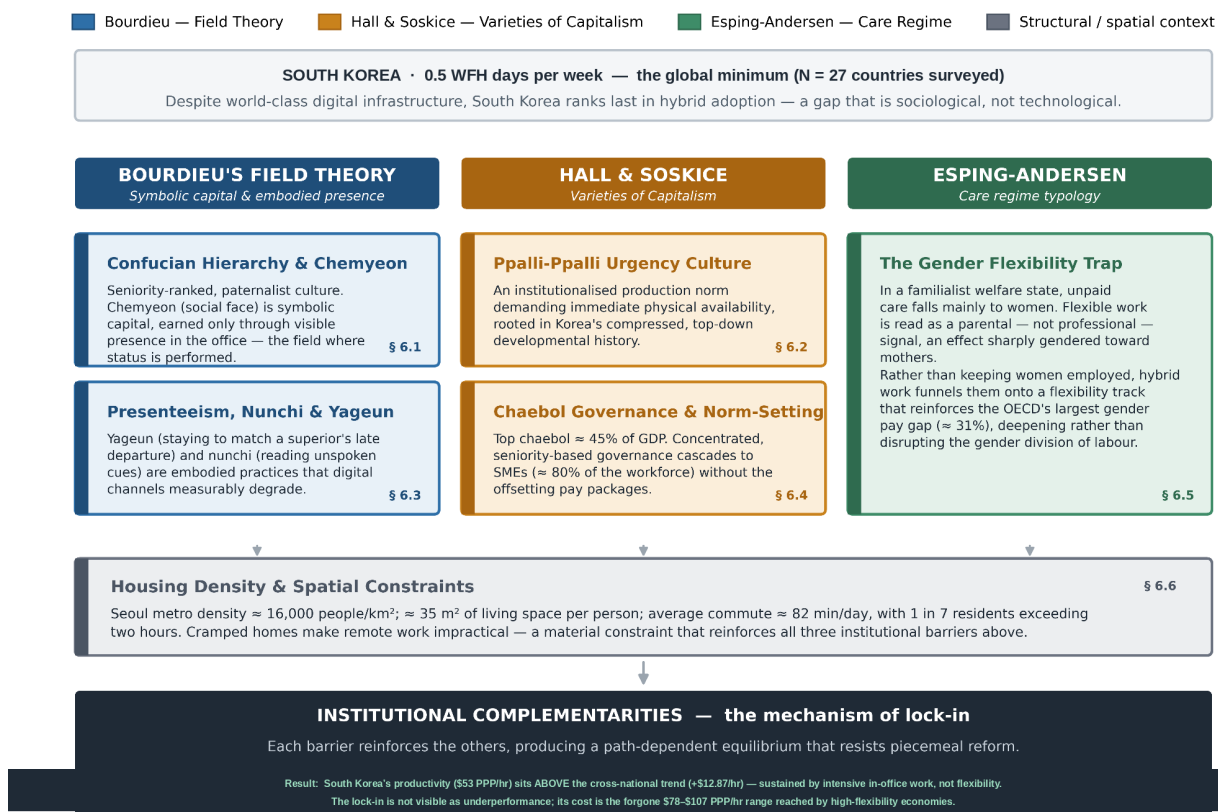
6.1. Confucian Hierarchy and *Chemyeon* as Symbolic Capital

Korean organizational culture is a hierarchically closed, seniority-ranked system where respect and group cohesion are more important than individual performance (Kim & Hamilton-Hart, 2022). Within Bourdieu’s (1986) framework, *chemyeon* functions as symbolic capital that can only be earned through physical presence in the hierarchical field. Thus, workers who are absent from this field

cannot gain *chemyeon*, cannot perform *nunchi*, and lose the visibility that typically drives promotion in a seniority and presence-based system. This creates an incentive for presenteeism that persists even when formal productivity metrics are unchanged.

Sociocultural and Institutional Barriers to Hybrid Work Adoption in South Korea

Six interlocking barriers, each mapped to one of three sociological frameworks



Note: Each barrier is mapped to its primary theoretical lens. Left column: cultural and behavioral norms analyzed through Bourdieu's field theory (Bourdieu, 1986) and institutional path dependency (Hall & Soskice, 2001). Right column: structural and institutional constraints analyzed through Hall and Soskice's Varieties of Capitalism (Hall & Soskice, 2001) and Esping-Andersen's care regime typology (Esping-Andersen, 1999). The bottom banner identifies institutional complementarities as the mechanism of lock-in. Sources: Bourdieu, 1986; Carcillo et al., 2024; Cha et al., 2026; Esping-Andersen, 1999; Park et al., 2021; Hall & Soskice, 2001; Kim, 2025; Kim & Hamilton-Hart, 2022; Kim et al., 2018; Lee & Kim, 2024.

Figure 2. Sociocultural and institutional barriers to hybrid work adoption in South Korea.

6.2. Ppalli-Ppalli Culture and Path-Dependent Urgency Norms

South Korea's pervasive culture of urgency, known as *ppalli-ppalli*, requires immediacy as a workplace norm with deep roots in the country's economic developmental history (Kim et al., 2018). This cultural norm demands physical availability in the workplace, which makes the adoption of hybrid practices extremely difficult. From a Varieties of Capitalism perspective (Hall & Soskice, 2001), *ppalli-ppalli* is an institutionalized production norm embedded in how Korean companies respond quickly to hierarchical orders.

6.3. Presenteeism, *Nunchi*, and the Embodied Workplace

The practice of *yageun* (workers remain in the office beyond contracted hours to match a superior's departure time) reflects the operation of *nunchi* as a field-survival strategy (Kim, 2025; Kim et al., 2018). Before COVID-19, fewer than one in ten Korean managers used any form of hybrid work or other flexible working arrangements (Kim & Hamilton-Hart, 2022). Research on long working hours finds that South Korean workers averaged about 1,901 hours annually in 2022, well above the OECD average (OECD, 2025), with overtime recorded as a structural feature of workplace culture rather than a temporary outlier (Kim et al., 2018). A 2018 legal reform aimed at limiting the maximum hours of work per week to 52 hours only resulted in a modest reduction in office hours worked, as employees reallocated rather than reduced their presence in the workplace (Carcillo et al., 2024). Thus, *yageun* has continued to become a significant obstacle to adopting more flexible hybrid practices in South Korea.

6.4. *Chaebol* Governance and Institutional Norm-Setting

A large portion of South Korea's economy is made up of *chaebol* conglomerates. Together, their combined revenues represent about 45% of GDP, and they effectively function as the norm-setters for the economy as a whole (Park et al., 2021). Their top-down, paternalistic governance structures exemplify Hall and Soskice's (2001) state-orchestrated CME, which states that decision-making is concentrated at the chairman level, performance is evaluated based on seniority, and employee voice in governance is weak (Lee & Kim, 2024). The small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) employing about 80% of South Korea's total workforce copy these norms without the compensation packages that allow *chaebols* to offset them (Park et al., 2021).

6.5. The Gender Flexibility Trap

According to a study conducted by Brinton & Oh (2019), South Korea has the largest gender pay gap in the OECD at around 31% (OECD, 2025). Cha et al.'s (2026) cross-cultural experiment produced findings consistent with evidence that in South Korea, flexible workers are seen as better parents but less committed professionals, with this effect being more prevalent in views toward working mothers. Within Esping-Andersen's (1999) familialist welfare state framework, hybrid flexibility does not free women from the care regime. Instead, it funnels them into a flexibility track that reinforces their lower position in the labor market.

6.6. Housing Density and Spatial Constraints

Over 26 million people live in the greater Seoul metropolitan area, with densities of about 16,000 per square kilometer. Nationally, the average person has about 35 square meters of living space. As for the commute, the average worker spends about 82 minutes of their day in their commute, with one in seven Seoul residents

commuting over two hours per day (Korea Times, 2025). The spatial constraints mentioned above impose another large barrier to hybrid adoption. Working from home and reducing time spent commuting seems like a win-win for both employees and companies; however, due to these spatial constraints, home environments are often inadequate to make it practically productive.

The critical insight from institutional complementarities theory (Hall & Soskice, 2001) is that these six barriers are not independent risk factors that are just added together, but rather they are mutually reinforcing. Seniority-based evaluation requires visible presence to measure effort; *chemyeon* presupposes the office as the field for capital accumulation; *chaebol* governance uses hierarchical coordination that requires physical presence; the familialist care regime hurts working mothers who try to stay productive through hybrid work; and the *ppalli-ppalli* culture requires immediate physical presence and availability. Each barrier stabilizes and requires the others, creating a structure of dependency that Hall and Soskice (2001) identify as characteristic of coordinated market economies.

7. Productivity Mechanisms: What South Korea Is Not Accessing

Figure 3 presents a conceptual flowchart that identifies three productivity mechanisms through which higher hybrid adoption creates better efficiency. Unfortunately, South Korea's institutional and cultural barriers, highlighted in Section 6, prevent the country from activating these mechanisms.

7.1. Reduced Commuting Time

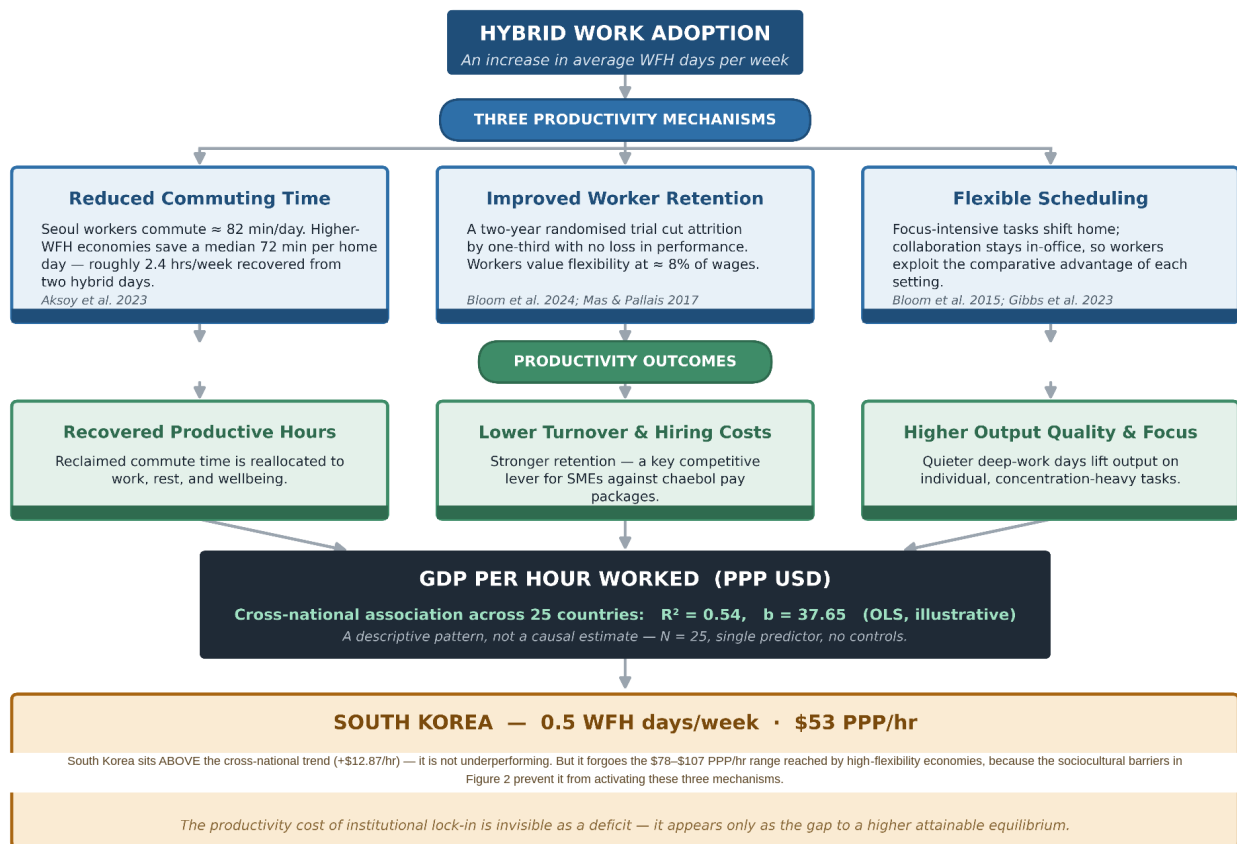
As mentioned in Section 6, the average worker in Seoul spends about 82 minutes per day commuting to and from work (Korea Times, 2025). Aksoy et al. (2023) estimate that workers in higher WFH countries save a median of 72 minutes per home-working day, the majority of which is used for additional work and health-sustaining activities. Two hybrid days per week would recover about 2.4 hours of productive or restorative time for Seoul workers.

7.2. Improved Worker Retention

Bloom et al. (2024) found that hybrid work reduced attrition by one-third over a two-year randomized trial. Mas and Pallais (2017) found that workers value flexibility at about 8% of their annual wage, which means that companies can maintain talent quality at lower total compensation cost through hybrid arrangements. Unfortunately, this path to saving costs cannot be utilized by South Korea's SMEs, who employ about 80% of the total workforce, since they struggle to compete with the much larger compensation packages used by *chaebols* (Park et al., 2021). Consequently, the refusal to adopt hybrid models does more than just harm employee well-being. It actively damages the economic viability of the SME sector by taking away one of their strongest tools for competing against the large conglomerates in a labor market that already lacks talent.

Hybrid Work Adoption: Three Productivity Mechanisms and Aggregate Outcome

How higher hybrid adoption generates productivity gains — and what South Korea's barriers block



Note: The flowchart shows how hybrid adoption activates three mechanisms, specifically reduced commuting time, improved worker retention, and flexible scheduling, each producing a productivity outcome that aggregates to higher GDP per hour worked. The bottom bar illustrates South Korea’s position and the productivity gap. Cross-reference: barriers to hybrid adoption are detailed in **Figure 2**. Sources: Aksoy et al., 2023; Bloom et al., 2015; Bloom et al., 2024; Gibbs et al., 2023; Mas & Pallais, 2017; OECD, 2025.

Figure 3. Hybrid work adoption: three productivity mechanisms and aggregate outcome.

7.3. Flexible Allocation of Work Hours

The benefits of remote work extend beyond worker convenience and cost savings. Research from Bloom et al. (2015) and Gibbs et al. (2023) suggests that remote settings are better for individual-task days, particularly for jobs like software engineering, where deep concentration is extremely important. A hybrid schedule allows workers to intentionally arrange their work responsibilities so that days that require more focus and concentration can be done at home, while the in-office time can be used for more collaborative activities. In this way, a worker can maximize the comparative advantage of each setting.

8. Discussion: Bourdieu, Institutional Lock-In, and the Korean Field

South Korea’s hybrid adoption rate of 0.5 days per week is not a statistic that

simply reflects the preferences of Korean workers. It is a path-dependent outcome of institutional complementarities (Hall & Soskice, 2001) that makes hybrid adoption individually costly even when it would be collectively beneficial. **Figure 1** strengthens this argument in an important way. South Korea is not currently underperforming relative to the cross-national trend. Its performance of +\$12.87 per hour is consistent with above-expected output being extracted from in-office work. The Bourdieusian interpretation (1986) is that Korean workers understand that presenteeism is a productive field strategy, and that *chemyeon*, *nunchi*, and *yageun* have generated real, but inefficient performance. The institutional lock-in is therefore not producing obvious failure. It is producing above-trend performance within a constrained setting. The cost of this lock-in is not visible in a comparison of actual to predicted productivity. It is visible in the gap between South Korea's current position and the productivity levels of between \$78 - \$107 PPP per hour that the economies in the upper-right quadrant of **Figure 1** achieve through greater flexibility in the way they work. This is the institutional trap Hall and Soskice (2001) describe—a complementary system that is locally stable and generates real results, but loses higher-return alternatives requiring coordinated change across several institutional domains.

While South Korea and Singapore both appear as high-performing outliers in the data, the institutional mechanisms that drive their success are different. Like South Korea, Singapore also sits above the OLS trend line, with a positive residual of about \$27.34 per hour, despite similarly low hybrid adoption. A quick look at the data might suggest that the two economies share the same institutional settings. However, Singapore's above-trend productivity is consistent with its concentration in financial and professional services, its small city-state geography, which largely eliminates long commute times, and a developmental state model that has achieved high output through centralized labor rather than the Confucian presenteeism described in Section 6.1. South Korea's above-trend position, on the other hand, is a result of the constraints such as *chemyeon* and *yageun*, which have been discussed and analyzed throughout this paper. This means that while both South Korea and Singapore are outperforming according to data predictions, the mechanisms that drive this performance are fundamentally different. Therefore, the data suggest that multiple variations of institutional configurations can sustain above-trend performance, each of which gives up different upside potential.

The persistence of the South Korean above-trend paradox is not simply a product of the aforementioned unique cultural norms. It can be seen as a three-level institutional lock-in where micro-sociological performances of *chemyeon* are structurally mandated by the meso-level *chaebol*/hierarchy and stabilized by the macro-level familialist care regime. In this configuration, Bourdieu's (1986) field acts as the main connector where the office is the physical stage where workers must perform *yageun* and *nunchi* to secure the symbolic capital necessary for survival in a seniority-based system. This micro-performance is not irrational. It is a calculated response to a CME where the *chaebols* set norms that make physical presence a sign of institutional loyalty. This lock-in is further sealed by the familialist care

regime, which effectively genders the cost of flexibility, ensuring that any deviation from the norms of the South Korean workplace, such as remote work, is categorized as a lack of professional commitment rather than a tool for enhancing productivity. As a result, the \$12.87 above-trend statistic identified in this paper (**Figure 1**) represents a phenomenon where South Korea achieves its current productivity by exhausting the embodied social capital of its workforce within a rigid physical field, a strategy that simultaneously prevents the country from transitioning into the high-flexibility, high-output area (between \$78 - \$107 PPP/hr) occupied by more digitally integrated western CMEs.

The MZ Generation as a Catalyst for Field Transformation

It is also worth noting that the Korean corporate field is not static. Bourdieu's (1986) framework allows for fields to be renegotiated when enough people gather sufficient counter-capital to contest the prevailing norms. This is evident in the dynamic among South Korea's MZ generation. These younger workers have begun contesting the idea that physical presence is directly related to professional commitment. They made their voices heard in their scathing criticism against the proposed 69-hour workweek cap in 2023. However, whether this is enough to change the seniority-based evaluation systems that make up much of the field's current rules is yet to be determined. What the Bourdieusian framework predicts is that a shift in any given field would require significant changes in institutional pressure across the evaluation, governance, and care regime domains identified in Section 6.

This analysis highlights why top-down interventions may be insufficient to change the current workplace norms. Bourdieu (1986) emphasizes that field transformation requires a significant shock that disrupts the rules of the game, or the organized collective action of actors whose interests are harmed by the existing arrangement. Both forces are present in South Korea today. The COVID-19 pandemic provided the shock that briefly expanded hybrid adoption, and the MZ generation's organized protest against the 2023 proposal to expand the maximum workweek to 69 hours represents the early formation of a collective counter-position in the field. North's (1990) theory of institutional change also suggests that lock-in is broken through a similar combination of shock and collective group activity. Whether Korean institutional change follows this pathway remains a question with considerable sociological significance.

While the institutional lock-in described above suggests a static equilibrium, the emergence of South Korea's MZ generation represents a significant factor that could disrupt the corporate field. Unlike previous generations who accepted *che-myeon*-based presenteeism as part of the working culture, younger workers are increasingly using hybrid work and other digital innovations as leverage to contest the necessity of physical co-presence. This generation's organized and vocal opposition to the proposed 69-hour workweek cap serves as a critical sociological pivot point. It was not simply a protest against hours, but a rejection of the existing norms that viewed labor through the lens of endurance rather than productivity.

In Bourdieusian terms, these actors are attempting to redefine the symbolic capital of the workplace, moving away from performances such as *yageun* and toward a new way of work that favors efficiency and digital autonomy. However, the success of this transformation is currently being blocked by the meso-level *chaebol* structures and seniority-based evaluation systems that remain the primary gatekeepers of the field. In order for the MZ generation's counter-norms to fully transform the field, the macro-level institutional pressures must evolve from financial incentives to structural mandates that legitimize and support remote work as a professional right rather than a concession.

9. Implications for Policy and Practice

With a fertility rate of just 0.72 and a rapidly aging workforce, South Korea faces immense pressure to maximize the amount of output per worker. Expanding hybrid adoption could offer a viable solution through the mechanisms outlined in **Figure 3** and by reducing the dropout rate of the female workforce who require time at home before and after giving birth. The government's financial subsidies of up to KRW 3.6 million per employee per year for firms that offer hybrid options (with that amount doubled for employees with young children) is a promising start, but it only addresses the economic cost of flexibility without fixing the symbolic capital cost of lost *chemyeon*. Thus, these subsidies are unlikely to disrupt the existing institutional equilibrium.

Our analysis suggests that true reform requires a synchronized intervention across all three levels of the Bourdieusian institutional framework. At the field level, the rules of the game must be rewritten to favor performance-based metrics over seniority-based physical presence. At the institutional level, formalizing workers' rights to request flexible working arrangements through legislation similar to European "right to disconnect" laws could provide a better alternative to informal negotiation under hierarchical pressure. Finally, at the care-regime level, expanding government childcare provision would reduce the degree to which women's use of flexible work signals familial priorities rather than professional commitment. Unless all three interventions proceed together, South Korea's deeply rooted institutional customs will continue to neutralize any attempts at partial reform.

10. Limitations

While this paper identifies significant sociological barriers to the adoption of hybrid work in South Korea, its claims are subject to a few constraints. First, the cross-national OLS regression does not establish causation. The association between hybrid adoption and GDP per hour worked certainly reflects shared confounders, including income, industrial composition, institutional quality, and human capital, rather than a simple causal mechanism. This reality is further complicated by Ireland's position on the trend line, which may substantially inflate the slope estimate. Second, because the G-SWA sample is limited to college-educated professionals, it may not fully capture the nuances of the labor market as a whole. Third, the causal

mechanisms in **Figure 3** are drawn from firm-level experiments in China and the United States. Thus, their validity in South Korea's unique cultural field would require further empirical testing. Fourth, the institutional analysis necessarily generalizes across a heterogeneous economy. Lastly, this paper's Bourdieuan framing centers the corporate field. Other sociological perspectives, such as Giddens' structuration theory and Foucauldian analysis of workplace discipline, could further highlight complementary dimensions of the South Korean workplace.

11. Conclusion

This paper highlights a fascinating contradiction in South Korea. It is a technologically advanced economy that ranks last in hybrid work adoption, yet it still manages to be more productive than its low-remote work numbers would suggest. Using Bourdieu's (1986) field theory, Hall and Soskice's (2001) institutional complementarities framework, and Esping-Andersen's (1999) care regime typology, we have identified six major factors that keep Korean workers bound to their physical workplaces:

- Confucian Hierarchy: A culture that values seniority and group cohesion over individual metrics
- *Ppalli-Ppalli* Culture: A deep-rooted need for immediate, in-person availability in order to work more rapidly in response to managerial orders and demands.
- Presenteeist Evaluation: Workers are judged based on their physical presence rather than productivity.
- *Chaebol* Governance: Massive conglomerates that value in-office, visible work and set the standard for the rest of the economy.
- The Gender Trap: A system where flexibility often results in career penalties for mothers.
- Spatial Constraints: Cramped housing in Seoul and its surrounding cities makes working from home difficult and uncomfortable.

The data shown in **Figure 1** reveals a more nuanced picture than a simple conclusion of inefficiency would suggest. It shows that South Korea is actually outperforming the expected trend for a country with little flexibility (+\$12.87/hr). However, by sticking to this intensive in-office model, the country is missing out on the much higher productivity levels seen in countries like the United States or Ireland.

South Korea is stuck in a local equilibrium. While it has built a system that works well through intense in-person office work, that same system prevents it from reaching the next level of productivity that modern, flexible work could provide. Breaking this cycle will require a fundamental shift in cultural norms and values found in the Korean workplace.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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