

Rainbow Washing on Screen:

Media Representation and Framing of LGBTQ+

in South Korean Television Dramas

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Abstract

This article questions the true meaning beyond visibility in media and its connection to genuine improvement of sexual minority rights, with South Korean television dramas as its research subject. Employing McRuer's Crip Theory as the main theoretical framework, it explores how the dramas represent the LGBTQ+ community, including recent changes and limitations. 25 television dramas with queer characters and narratives are selected to comprise the corpus, with Critical Discourse Analysis as the main Methodology. The analyses of framed representations, focused on themes of heteronormativity, stereotyped characteristics, and romance and intimacy, constitute the central chapters. They are investigated through the crip lens to determine whether there are queer characters on screen, and if so, *who* they are, *how* they are displayed, *why* they appear in narratives, and *for whom* the visibility serves. Through its discourse analysis, the article unveils the illusion the increased visibility offers and asserts that it instead functions to reinforce the dominant system. By compressing the queer characters and narratives into the mold of heteronormativity, the media industry obscures their true sexualities or identities and justifies the power relations between the able-bodied heterosexual audience and the marginalized crippled others. The findings become essential evidence in revealing the power dynamics and examining the realities of Korean society.

Keywords: LGBTQ+, queer, critical discourse analysis, media sociology, sexuality, television

Introduction

Over the past few decades, the number of queer characters and narratives in media has significantly increased. Outside the zone of taboo, the gradual emergence of sexual minorities on screen has also triggered the interest of the public and acquired huge success. Korean media also joined the flow and came to present various queer characters and narratives in mainstream media. Entering the late 1990s, short drama specials marked the beginning of the emergence of queer characters in narratives, including *Sad Temptation* (1999) (Hong, 2008). Since then, more media content with queer characters has been produced, although there are differences in the degree of exposure and diversity. In other words, the level of visibility has gradually increased.

Then there comes the crucial question to ask: What is beyond *visibility*? To be specific, should being seen and recognized be the ultimate goal in improving minority rights? Regarding the LGBTQ+ community, most broadcasting news and research up to date have focused on the increase in the visibility of sexual minorities in the mainstream media. That is to say, as the community has risen above the surface of symbolic annihilation, the spotlight is on whether or not they appear on screen and are seen by the majority public. Naturally, academia often highlighted how the striking presence of queer characters and narratives in media, especially with positive images, can build resilience among the LGBTQ+ community or decrease the level of any phobic reactions (Craig et al., 2015; Levina et al., 2000; Madžarević & Soto-Sanfiel, 2018).

While most last in focusing on the increased visibility of sexual minorities in media and justify it as the acknowledgment of LGBTQ+ rights, this article questions the meaning of true visibility and challenges the intention hidden behind the change. I selected 25 Korean television dramas to structure a corpus and implemented the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) methodology to zoom into diverse perspectives. By critically analyzing these dialogues and narratives in television dramas, I reveal the power dynamics and examine the realities of sexual minorities. The research question can be broken down as follows: In what way are the queer characters ‘represented’ in the narratives? Among those representations, are there any depictions that their sexual identities or orientations are ‘framed’ in? By answering these questions, I investigate *who*, *how*, *why*, and even *for whom* sexual minorities appear on the television screen.

The core that penetrates these questions is power relations. I analyze representation, especially from the perspective of framing, to measure power inequality and repression, which is historically evident, and thus, firmly anchored to society (Foucault, 1990). In this article, the intrinsic mechanisms of power are dissected in facets and question whether they fairly represent or even frame the LGBTQ+ community. By thematically addressing these questions, I aspire to contribute to comprehending the general portrayal of the LGBTQ+

community, shed light on the status quo, and provide insights for future directions in this field of research.

I make it clear that my intention is not to degrade or neglect the meaning of visibility. In fact, visibility has a significant influence on power dynamics for it determines what is to be seen and spread (McPherson, 2022). By gaining visibility, the LGBTQ+ community can achieve more recognition and acknowledgment in the public space, which entails a higher possibility of enhancing their rights and overcoming stereotypes. It is crucial as a lack of power often entails a lack of visibility, which can lead to “death by neglect” (Thompson, 2005). This is also referred to as symbolic annihilation after underrepresentation (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). As certain communities get marginalized in media, their social existence and importance in public also diminish. In this regard, there undoubtedly is a positive potentiality in the increase of the emergence on screen.

Nonetheless, we should not settle for the current phase but move on. The next step after acquiring visibility is to examine in what way it is displayed in media since visibility is a double-edged sword (Benjamin, 2019). Hypervisibility or overrepresentation may reversely conclude in heightening surveillance and undermining minorities (Foucault, 1991). Furthermore, as visibility is difficult to control, too much privacy can be divulged or it can even result in bad visibility in which the individuals are seen but not recognized by the public (McPherson, 2022; Thompson, 2005). Hence, it is pivotal to investigate how and why the LGBTQ+ community is exposed in current media.

LGBTQ+ in Korean Society and Media

South Korea is selected as the central research field due to its unique trajectory of visibility contrasting its history and the potential for worldwide influence. South Korean media has shown remarkable progress in depicting queer characters and narratives on screen, despite the country’s conservative past and lukewarm status quo on sexual minority rights. Given its global popularity and influence through the Korean wave, or *Hallyu*, it is crucial to analyze how they are represented and framed to comprehend what message is conveyed to both domestic and international audiences.

The history of the LGBTQ+ community in Korea is far from being positive. Before the 1990s, there had not been any terminology to define people with diverse sexual orientations and identities (D. Seo, 2005). The LGBTQ+ individuals were grouped together and referred to as “homo” and “gay” (Kang, 2020; D. Seo, 2001). They faced social unacceptance and neglect, as only pervert sexual desires had been intentionally cropped (Park, 2018). Entering 2000, there was a historical moment in the Korean media industry when entertainer Suk-chon Hong first came out as gay in front of reporters and Risu Ha marked her debut on screen as a

transgender woman (J. Kim, 2012; Lee & Ryu, 2018; Yi et al., 2019). Despite their frequent appearance in various shows, they were often underrepresented and misrepresented as a tool to justify patriarchal heteronormativity (Park & Lee, 2013). They had been falsely drawn to fit into the societal gender boundaries to undermine their symbolic power and force them to succumb to certain stereotypes or even reproduce stereotypes.

To this time, the LGBTQ+ community in Korea has been considered taboo and treated as invisible (Bong, 2008; J. Seo, 2010). That is to say, Korea ranked 64th among 197 countries regarding LGBTQ+ rights by rating 54 points in the equality index, 69 points in the legal index, and 38 points in the public opinion index this year (Equaldex, 2023). According to the Stonewall Report (2018), 79% of Korean participants replied that never have seen any LGBTQ+ people around them. Not tilting to either drastic end, the Korean government and society have maintained a passive stance in embracing the LGBTQ+ community. This highlights a stark contrast to the recent trend in the Korean media industry of producing more television dramas featuring queer characters and narratives.

Whereas Korean media is gradually shifting in an unprecedented direction, especially in the portrayal of the LGBTQ+ community, there is a lack of research on those contemporary transitions and effects. In Korea, there are not many researchers who deal with sexual minorities, and even fewer who are alerted by how media deals with LGBTQ+ issues. Even those few last in narrowing their research on certain media productions or celebrities and particular sexual orientations or identities. For instance, Ji Hoon Park and Jin Lee (2013) navigate televisual images of the celebrities Hong and Ha, as mentioned earlier. Jia Hong (2008) centers the research on the drama *Coffee Prince* (2007), while Ja-hye Lee (2012), Seo Youn Cho (2012), and Jeong Seon Kim (2012) delve into homosexuality in the drama *Life is Beautiful* (2010). J. S. Kim and Young Min (2012) discuss gay romance in the films *The King and the Clown* (2005), *A Frozen Flower* (2008), and *Antique* (2008), which are further developed in Hyung-sook Lee's (2009) study on visual pleasure where she compares these films to *Brokeback Mountain* (2005). As the number of research is seriously lacking, their analysis becomes the groundwork for comparison in this article.

Nonetheless, there still exists a blank in the research. The past studies do not see the wood for the trees and center on media productions that were released more than a decade ago. They primarily concentrate on one to three dramas or films featuring gay characters. These studies help penetrate deep into a few productions or sexual orientations but are insufficient in reviewing the flow as a whole, including the latest shifts. It is now time to build more onto the basis to inspect the field in a wider scope.

Rather than focusing on a specific person or production and a particular sexual orientation or identity, this research encompasses diverse LGBTQ+ communities. Additionally, whereas the previous comparative studies have mainly concentrated on films, this research acquires its originality by centering on television dramas, one of the most accessible and influential media platforms (Davin & Jackson, 2008; Shrum, 1995; Slater et al., 2006). It will help reach

out to the unprecedented field of exploration. This research will be of critical help in grasping the recent changes in new media productions and discovering the status quo of the LGBTQ+ community in the turbulent media industry. In addition, it will serve as the standard of how and where they require further enhancements in eradicating stereotypes and facing sexual minority rights.

Furthermore, the significance of this research lies in the international impact of Korean television dramas. According to a survey conducted by the Korean Foundation for International Cultural Exchange (2024), approximately 68% of respondents outside Korea stated that Korean dramas are generally popular even beyond dedicated fan circles, with 40.9% indicating that they are very recognized worldwide. This growing interest has had a notable effect on entertainment exports, as Korean drama exports increased by over 72% in recent years, with their export value reaching 385.64 million U.S. dollars only in 2022 (Korea Communications Commission, 2024). As Korean media, including dramas, expands to international markets and audiences, the implicit messages they convey are transported and potentially magnified through varying contextual interpretations. Consequently, South Korean television dramas provide an optimal research subject for critically examining the representations and frames they embed.

Theoretical Framework

Crip Theory

This research employs Robert McRuer's (2006) 'Crip Theory' in connection with the Foucauldian perspective of power and sexuality as its main theoretical framework to address the research questions. Crip theory offers a critical lens to scrutinize how the queer and disabled existences are ostracized based on the constructed boundary of compulsory able-bodied heterosexuality (Rich, 2003). This theory sprouts from the study of ableism, which idealizes the normative bodymind as non-disabled, white, male, heterosexual, and so on (Campbell, 2009; Garland-Thomson, 2007). When ableism becomes compulsory, normativity serves as the standard for conformity and those defined as abnormal are subjected to cure or correction (E. Kim, 2017). The concept is profoundly intersectional, as it originates from disability, but extends to threads of gender (Kafer, 2013), race (Schalk, 2022), and sexuality (McRuer, 2006).

Specifically, crip theory draws from the notion of heteronormativity, which is the hegemonic system that renders "heterosexuality as natural and superior to all other expressions of sexuality" (Robinson, 2016, p. 1). It justifies the discrimination and homophobic behaviors of the majority community by designating sexual minorities as the marginals (Warner, 1991). The majority constructs the boundaries of normativity and virtually equates able-bodiedness

with heterosexuality. This becomes the weapon of power to cripple those outside the normative line and blame them for their severe disability or critical queerness.

Crip theory has often been utilized as an essential tool to examine diverse framed representations, as heteronormativity itself is a readily available mold to frame the crippled others. The embedded power relations are displayed in the form of framed representation to project and even rationalize the view of the majority audience. The concept of “crip signing”, using the crip lens, invites scholars across interdisciplinary fields to analyze the production, consumption, and interaction of crippling cinema and media studies (Kolářová, 2017; McRuer, 2019). For instance, Cynthia Barounis (2009) investigates queer hypermasculinity in the films *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) and *Murderball* (2005) and Robert McRuer (2005) explains how the television show *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (2003) obscures the normalizing process of heterosexuality. They attempt to challenge the able-bodied normative gaze and develop so-called “cripistemology”, the ways of comprehending disability from a crip perspective (Johnson & McRuer, 2014).

This article aims to contribute to this body of literature by using the crip lens to analyze framed representation in Korean media, centered on television dramas. Whereas crip theory is frequently applied in queer studies, it is yet unprecedented in a Korean context. Hence, observing Korean television dramas through the crip lens provides a pivotal opportunity to uncover how the media industry normalizes heterosexuality, frames characteristics, and crops scenes according to the majority’s interests. The result serves to unveil the deception of visibility and advocate for fair media representation.

Representation and Framing

The necessity to scrutinize the media representation through the crip lens lies in the concept of “media sociology”, which posits that media and sociology are indispensable in comprehending one other (Waisbord, 2014). Media serves as a tool to interrogate how society works, while diverse societal dimensions provide a standard to analyze media context. In fact, minority characters and narratives on screen are often considered merely fictional, and thus, able to be dismissed. Television especially takes a crucial role when speaking about minority groups, as it possesses a massive power in cultivating images when they are distant from the real lives of the majority audience (Lee & Ryu, 2018; Schiappa et al., 2006). Nonetheless, each queer character is the projection of the queer individuals around us, and each narrative is the recreation of the events occurring in society (Gross, 2020). They are the mirror to reflect on the reality in which sexual majorities and minorities interact. Conversely, the audience also comes to comprehend society and even structure experiences from their representations (McLuhan, 2010). It is a perpetuating cycle of society influencing media and media affecting society. Hence, exploring LGBTQ+-related representation in media can help comprehend how society perceives the LGBTQ+ community and what messages are delivered to society.

Then how is the representation framed and what is the implication beyond? Framing refers to “the way events and issues are organized and made sense of, especially by media, media professionals, and their audiences” (Reese et al., 2001, p. 1). It often involves the course of selection and salience of a particular culture or information (Entman, 1993; Gitlin, 2003). The frame forms a window to connect media and society. It seems to reflect reality as it is, but in fact, crops and exaggerates particular aspects to fit into the existing customs and societal norms. Thus, through investigating the frames, we can dissect how the characters and narratives are aligned with the dominant system.

As a matter of fact, frames are often socially constructed by the hands of the majority through the process of segregation, dissemination, and enforcement (Goffman, 2010). They are shaped to meet the needs of social authorities and evolve into beliefs regarding sociological positions (Goffman, 1977). These beliefs are continuously taught, diffused, and internalized by the public, influencing behaviors, appearances, and even social interactions. As a result, these frames naturally become the standards by which individuals navigate social expectations and are thus held accountable. Likewise, they justify the creation of a symbolic room for certain groups of people, the reinforcement of the boundaries of normativity, and ultimately the exclusion of others who do not fit the criteria (Lampe et al., 2019).

Sexuality is mostly vulnerable to framing in the media industry, as sexuality is not naturally defined but is socially constructed by diverse power relations (Foucault, 1990, 2023). The realm of sexuality virtually cannot be situated on the map as it has been mutated throughout history under the specification of individuals (Rivkin & Ryan, 2004; Sedgwick, 1990). Neither heterosexuality nor homosexuality is an ontological entity, as they are creations under “power relationships, systems of signs, cognitive maps, and political regimes” (Preciado, 2016, p. 408). States, institutions, and religions manipulate the boundaries of sexual identity, behavior, and knowledge to exercise their influence over sexuality as a site of power (Rubin, 2012). Thus, to measure power dynamics in television dramas and to grasp up to what extent sexual minorities are regulated, this article analyzes the portrayal of sexuality of queer characters on screen.

Methodology

Since this research aspires to focus on narratives, dialogues, and power dynamics within television dramas, the qualitative research method is implemented throughout the analysis. Among diverse qualitative methods, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is predominantly utilized. CDA is a methodology that links language and its modes of use to search for power relations within society. It emphasizes the role of discourse in revealing the embedded sociocultural norms, especially “how inequality is enacted, reproduced, legitimated, and resisted by text and talk” (van Dijk, 2015, p. 466). The whole range of printed and recorded

texts along with visual images is considered a part of a discourse and forms a corpus of analysis (Gibbs, 2018). The principal power dynamics I investigate are over sexual minorities and the major corpus will be composed of television dramas.

Television dramas are the central subject of this research for their profit model and industry structure in Korea, which render the drama market to stagnate. Due to their profit structure centered on advertisements, there are shortcomings in diversity and creativity (Jang et al., 2022; Walker & Ferguson, 1998). As commercial success is the bottom-line measure for television dramas, producers primarily value content and narrative that can appeal to a large audience as well as advertisers (Bielby et al., 1999). Drama producers lean toward safer pathways that can save costs and avoid any critical failures, compared to over-the-top (OTT) platforms and commercial movie industries. Thus, television dramas are chosen as research subjects as they are more conservative and passive in an attempt to change, whereas they are more accessible and open to many and unspecified audience compared to other media platforms.

In total, 25 television dramas are selected to comprise the corpus for analysis: *Coffee Prince* (2007), *You're Beautiful* (2009), *Life is Beautiful* (2010), *Sungkyunkwan Scandal* (2010), *Personal Taste* (2010), *Reply 1994* (2013), *Schoolgirl Detectives* (2014-2015), *Love in the Moonlight* (2016), *Cheese in the Trap* (2016), *Strong Girl Bong-soon* (2017), *Prison Playbook* (2017-2018), *Graceful Family* (2019), *Be Melodramatic* (2019), *At Eighteen* (2019), *Itaewon Class* (2020), *My Unfamiliar Family* (2020), *Sweet Munchies* (2020), *Vincenzo* (2021), *Mine* (2021), *The King's Affection* (2021), *Hometown Cha-Cha-Cha* (2021), *Under the Queen's Umbrella* (2022), *The Killer's Shopping List* (2022), *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* (2022), and *The Empire* (2022).

They are chosen based on four criteria. Firstly, they should be produced in the 21st century, which enables this research to investigate recent productions and up-to-date changes. Secondly, they should contain at least one LGBTQ+-related theme, narrative, and character. Thirdly, they should be commercial dramas that are screened on television at least once. This standard excludes web dramas or independent productions. Lastly, they should have at least three episodes and aired on screen for more than three days. Consequently, drama specials and omnibus dramas are removed from the list.

Based on the drama corpus, transcription has been created after reviewing relevant episodes that contain either LGBTQ+ characters or narratives. The dramas are all translated into English since they are in Korean. 14 dramas available on Netflix provide English subtitles. Therefore, those subtitles are used for the transcript. Besides, *Life is Beautiful* (2010) is only available on YouTube and the other 15 dramas are on a Korean OTT platform named TVING. Since they do not provide any English subtitles, I translated relevant dialogues into English myself.

Counting Representation

Before moving on to the main analysis of framed representation, I provide a brief quantitative overview to demonstrate a broad picture of how media representation functions in the corpus. Counting representations of queer characters based on their level of exposure and evaluating their importance serve as an effective tool for discovering the veiled reality behind the numbers and supporting the rationale for a deeper qualitative analysis of how they are framed. In this section, I count the number of queer characters that appear in the dramas, analyze their sexual orientation or identity, and examine their positions within the narratives.

Today, more queer characters are exposed in current media as society comes to shift its perception of different sexual orientations and identities from mental illness to new syndrome (J. S. Kim & Min, 2012). The LGBTQ+ themes are sought as original and unconventional on screen. Compared to the past, queer characters appear on screen at a more constant pace and the interval is narrowing in recent years. In the drama corpus, there appear (1) three queer characters in one drama, (2) two queer characters in eight dramas, (3) one queer character in eleven dramas, and (4) no queer character in five dramas. These five dramas without any queer characters are the ones related to pseudo-homosexuality, which will be further explained.

Despite the increase in exposure of LGBTQ+ themes, queer characters in these dramas mostly are deprived of their chances to stay at the center of narratives. They do not acquire a central role in deciding the flow but instead support the other characters in soothing the tension or entertaining them with pranks (J. Hong, 2008; H. Lee & Ryu, 2018). In fact, out of the 25 dramas in the corpus, only one of them has a queer character as the main protagonist. Others are mostly supporting characters who either help or attack the main protagonist. Some of them still possess the power to affect certain parts of the plot, such as being the main protagonist's family member, coworker, or friend. However, since they do not stand at the core of the narrative, the story fails to focus on discussing sexual minorities in detail. The discourses on their endeavors for equal rights, relationships with family, and even romance appear but only last in a couple of episodes.

Apart from the level of exposure, it is also essential to consider the diversity of queer characters on screen, as the degree of discourse among diverse sexual orientations and identities can differ (Park & Lee, 2013). Among the drama corpus, (1) 64% include gay themes, (2) 16% include lesbian themes, (3) another 16% include transgender themes, and (4) only 4%, which is one drama among 25 dramas, contain a bisexual theme. Likewise, most LGBTQ+-related dramas are concentrated on gay themes. Additionally, themes other than gay, lesbian, and transgender are seriously lacking overall. There still are no television dramas that match the corpus standards which brings out other LGBTQ+ communities including asexual, pansexual, intersex, and non-binary.

Furthermore, these dramas biasedly display only one particular group of transgender individuals. There are four transgender characters in the drama corpus, and they are all male-to-female (MTF) transgenders. In detail, Wan-jun in *Graceful Family* (2019), Hyun-yi in *Itaewon Class* (2020), grand prince Gyeseong in *Under the Queen's Umbrella* (2022), and Fish in *The Killer's Shopping List* (2022) are MTF transgender characters. Considering that there are different groups in transgender communities, including female-to-male (FTM) transgenders, it is clear that television dramas are yet to comprehensively embrace the community as a whole.

In this regard, the dramas are yet to center the narratives on discussing sexual minority rights and the discrimination they are facing. If they are to naturalize them, it may be a success, but it is pivotal to consider why all the dramas in the corpus only sweep the issue over a couple of episodes. According to David M. Halperin (2003), queer theory has become increasingly normalized and rapidly expanding in scope but is limited in its depth of analysis. He urges that society should not settle in the present but induce the radical potential to make changes. Such can also be related to queer discourses in television dramas. It is affirmative that queer characters' identity and presence are continuously mentioned and not neglected to symbolic annihilation. However, it is pivotal to doubt why only one among 25 dramas has queer character as the main protagonist, and not one narrative is solely focused on the queer issue itself. Naturalizing and normalizing the community is not pessimistic, but there is still a necessity to enlarge its radical potential to shed more light on LGBTQ+ rights and their realities.

Framed Representation

Having superficially counted the instances of exposure and evaluated the significance of their roles, this article now transitions to a more in-depth examination of how these representations are framed, utilizing discourse analysis. The shift is crucial, as the current state of the community persists in the depiction of sexual minorities on screen. According to Larry Gross (2001), social minority groups including sexual minorities are often invisible in media, and even if they appear, they are mostly represented after their biases or in a way that suits the interest of the majority audience. As the majority clings to the existing gender norms and heteronormativity, the LGBTQ+ community is seldom recognized "in roles that support the natural order" and is "thus narrowly drawn" (p. 14).

The three subchapters of (1) 'Heteronormativity', (2) 'Stereotyped Characteristics', and (3) 'Romance and Intimacy' respectively demonstrate frames assigned to queer characters and narratives. Observing three frames through the crip lens highlights how the compulsory heterosexual able-bodiedness is subtly woven into the mediated power structure. Together, they reinforce the constructed boundaries of normativity and demarcate the deemed disabled

others outside these boundaries.

Heteronormativity

In the Korean media industry, heteronormative norms become a critical barrier to producing LGBTQ+ content. Despite the gradual increase in exposure and diversity, the drama industry remains to allow only the narratives that do not counter the major stream of heteronormativity. On that account, particular characteristics of the community are cropped to fit into the frame. Often queer sexuality is exaggerated, homosexual romance is selectively spotlighted, and discourse about minority marginalization is amputated (J. S. Kim & Min, 2012; Park & Lee, 2013). By compressing the minority characters through the mold called heteronormativity, the dramas conceal the threat they may trigger, and consequently, the narratives become the evidence to support the given norms. In the end, the dramas are successful not only in conforming them to the existing standards, but also in attracting audience with original themes and relaxing the majority crowd.

There is a unique type of narrative in Korean media related to the LGBTQ+ community. The industry has discovered the most favorable scheme of ‘pseudo-homosexuality’ to kill two birds with one stone. The narrative feigns homosexual romance which ultimately turns out to be heterosexual. In detail, female characters pretend to be men for inevitable reasons, such as family livelihood, and male characters come to believe that they are men. They gradually fall in love with the female characters not knowing that they are women and agonize over their sexual orientation. Eventually, they find out the truth and resolve their concerns.

Starting with *Coffee Prince* (2007), which was a huge hit with a viewing rate of 27.8% (Y. Kim, 2007), other dramas including *You’re Beautiful* (2009), *Sungkyunkwan Scandal* (2010), *Love in the Moonlight* (2016), and *The King’s Affection* (2021) continued reproducing similar narratives and solidified pseudo-homosexuality as a cliché which guarantees success (Park & Lee, 2013). Such a trend can also be construed based on the culture industry, in which media as cultural production is motivated only by economic domination. The media industry is no longer an art, but an entertainment business grounded in capitalism, as profitable narratives are mechanically reproduced, given the complete pattern and prepared interpretation (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2020).

To specify, there are several striking traits to be found in the pseudo-homosexuality narratives. To start with, male characters deny their love in different ways to refuse to identify themselves as gay. They mostly express their anxiety and anger towards female characters feigning as men. For instance, in *You’re Beautiful* (2009), Jeremy shouts, “I am a man too! I only like pretty women. Women with pretty faces and bodies, all men do. It is normal. Do you think I will like a guy like you?” at the female character. Also, in *Coffee Prince* (2007), Han-kyul perplexes his orientation by uttering, “I cannot do anything lately because of you. So let me hug you just once. I think that will make everything clear,” and then cries, “I do not

like you anymore. So do not even bother me again.” Despite their confusion, audience knows that these male characters are straight and that they can even discover love regardless of the disguise. Accordingly, the anxiety and anger they express do not disturb, but rather stimulate audience.

These male characters, in the end, give in to their emotions and confess their love. Seon-jun in *Sungkyunkwan Scandal* (2010) states, “I like you Yoon-sik. I who do not head except for the right path, do not act except for the right rule, think the etiquette and law are everything of this world like you who is a man. That is the reason I cannot keep you near me as a friend or a colleague,” and Han-kyul in *Coffee Prince* (2007) also confides, “Just once. I am going to tell you this just once so listen closely. I love you. Whether you are a guy or an alien, I do not care anymore.” These are the moments when the male characters surrender their masculinity and conviction for love. Though this does not last for long as they soon find out that they are women, such a romance-oriented narrative is enough to attract the female audience in particular to fulfill their desires (J. Hong, 2008).

Besides, lesbian themes are difficult to find even in pseudo-homosexuality scenarios as no men are pretending to be women in the drama corpus. The reasons can be conversely assumed that lesbian-themed gender disguise dramas fail to attract female as well as male audience and do not conform to patriarchal heteronormativity. They can damage male masculinity and reinforce women’s traditional gender roles, which may elicit a sense of discomfort among both audiences. In fact, in *The Tale of Nokdu* (2019), the male protagonist disguises as female but the female protagonist soon catches that out. It is a similar cliché but only without the homosexual theme. Here, it can be understood that heteronormativity in Korea is supported by patriarchal norms and homosexual dramas are produced by and for the majority audience.

Apart from pseudo-homosexuality, *Personal Taste* (2010) and *Sweet Munchies* (2020) are ‘sexuality deception’ dramas where male characters pretend to be gay and female characters suffer from unobtainable love. Again, homosexuality is used as a major barrier but in a different direction. In this narrative, female characters begin as friends and even live together recognizing male characters as gay, but their feelings come to change. An interesting fact is, there appears another genuine gay character that falls for them in both dramas. Their love remains unrequited as it is out of misunderstanding and does not get the chance to take away the spotlight from the heterosexual love with the female protagonist. It is the ideal scheme to attract the female audience with gay themes, yet to reinforce the existing norms simultaneously.

Thus, in these two types of narratives with gay themes, homosexuality is utilized as a temporary obstacle that is readily set up to be resolved. It is not even an unexpected twist as audience can predict the conclusion from the beginning. Still, they give a novel impulse apart from the stale barriers of love and function to intensify heterosexual romance. Over time, some drastic expressions toward different sexual orientations diminished such as when

characters ponder their sexuality. Nonetheless, the essence that these narratives are employed for the entertainment of the majority, especially the female audience, and ultimately advocate heteronormativity is open for controversy.

Stereotyped Characteristics

Secondly, television dramas can also construct a frame through stereotyped characteristics, especially with particular behaviors and appearances. They contribute to misrepresenting the LGBTQ+ community by assigning erroneous stereotypes, which often leads to justifying power relationships (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Seiter, 1986). It is pivotal to view media's misrepresentation as those frames shape or reproduce stereotypes outside the screen. As there are fewer possibilities to face sexual minorities in conservative Korean society, and therefore, fewer firsthand opportunities for cultivating images, the majority community comes to passively perceive them through media (L. Gross, 2020; H. Lee & Ryu, 2018). Along with the representation comes stereotypes which help construct certain impressions of the unfamiliar community and make judgments (Coleman, 2010). Since television dramas are mainly produced by sexual majorities, they tend to project images based on common stereotypes. The images may be positive but contain the ideal characteristics that the majority can appreciate. Or else, the images can comprise objects of disgust such as AIDS and feces (Nussbaum, 2010).

The most representative characteristic when depicting sexual minorities is the “gendered homosexuality frame” (J. S. Kim & Min, 2012). Media divides same-sex couples as male and female by endowing them with traditional gender roles, which are also referred to as top and bottom. In this way, the majority can still consume homosexual narratives by minimizing any visual or emotional repulsion and maintaining similarities with heterosexual romance. The masculine side is mostly in higher status, handsome, and privileged. On the contrary, the feminine side is fragile, pretty, and needs protection. Some are even displayed as extraordinarily erotic and sexy.

As for gay characters, there are studies about how they comply with the gendered homosexuality frame. Often in yaoi comics, fan fictions, and commercial movies, top and bottom, or masculine and feminine roles are fixed both in appearance and behavior (J. Hong, 2008). For instance, in the movies *The King and the Clown* (2005) and *Antique* (2008), the feminine sides have long hair and beautiful faces with maximized sexual charm. Nonetheless, for the gay couples in the drama corpus, it is complicated to spot the gendered homosexuality frame except for the pseudo-homosexuality dramas where female characters pretend to be males.

-Brother: Gosh, your boss looks so handsome.

-Mother: No need to mention that. He looks immaculate as Choon-sim's finished food bowl.

-Brother: It is a relief that he is gay. If not, his relationships with women would be quite promiscuous.

Instead, it is quite common that gay characters are depicted as attractive, other than being feminine and pretty. They are said to be pitied for their sexual orientation despite their handsome face. Above is the discourse from *Strong Girl Bong-soon* (2017). Although the boss is actually straight, the family misunderstands him as gay and speaks of how his appearance is a waste. Furthermore, in *Be Melodramatic* (2019), a female character describes the gay couple as “funny, sweet, and handsome” and that she likes them both. Kyung-soo in *Life is Beautiful* (2010) is also popular with women as one of them tries to ask him out. Likewise, gay characters are mostly illustrated as nice-looking and the reason is either one of three: to give the role of femininity, to conceal essential problems with flamboyant appearance, or to provide visual pleasure to the majority audience (H. Lee, 2009). The commonality is that these frames distract the audience from noticing minority marginalization and implant stereotypes.

Not as couples, but as individuals, gay characters in *Vincenzo* (2021) and *Strong Girl Bong-soon* (2017) express feminine behavior as well as high sexual desire. Since male femininity is generally considered a “ritual function in male homosocial cultures,” these characters project the prejudice that gay individuals will be feminine (Halberstam, 2018, p. 940). When Vincenzo asks Min-seong, a gay character in *Vincenzo* (2021), whether he can ride his horse, Min-seong replies, “Sure. Be as rough as you want,” with a leer look. He speaks in a high tone and chortles in delight like a little girl in an exaggerated manner. In the amusement park, he puts his hands around Vincenzo's chest to enjoy the touch and hugs him around his waist. Likewise, the character is highly stereotypical in that he is portrayed as girlish yet obscene.

The gay character named Odolbbyo in *Strong Girl Bong-soon* (2017) can be said to be the collection and maximization of all gay bias. He wears lots of jewelry, choker, and red or pink shirts with wide openings alongside the weird makeup stressed on his red lips. He applies manicures in his office, has a high-pitched voice with nasal sound, blinks his eyes fast with long eyelashes, and uses a lot of hand gestures. Moreover, he shows hysterical behavior towards Bong-soon, who is female, such as trying to hit her and ordering coffee, out of jealousy. Most importantly, he is drawn to be fond of physical contact with men as he pulls the male coworker's collar and cries in his chest. The compilation of his lines below explains how the drama misrepresents him for amusement and mockery.

-Odolbbyo: Are you that pretty? ... I am the crazy bitch in this area ... Why are you keep flirting? ... You got your nose fixed? The boss does not like gals like you ... Sweet, sweet, sweet! Brew me a coffee as sweet as me ... You drink it first. You spat on this, right? ... Why would he give flowers to you when he is not even your boyfriend? Are you easy with men?

Conversely, the gendered homosexuality frame is prominent in lesbian couples. In the first lesbian-themed drama in the corpus, which is *Schoolgirl Detectives* (2014-2015), the external appearances of the two female characters are similar, but while Soo-yeon is active and determined, her partner is comparatively shy and introverted. In the other three dramas with lesbian couples, *Mine* (2021), *Hometown Cha-Cha-Cha* (2021), and *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* (2022), there is a striking division in appearance than in personality. In all three, one partner is short-haired and wears pants, whereas the other partner has long hair with feminine clothing. Accordingly, there are obvious characteristics allowing the audience to estimate which gender frame is given.

As for transgender characters, no romantic relationship is exposed, and therefore, it is difficult to trace whether there is a certain gender frame. Even apart from the romantic relationship, there are no explicit gender stereotypes represented in these characters. Furthermore, since there are only MTF transgenders appearing in the drama corpus, there is a limitation in analyzing diverse transgender frames. In other media, such as documentaries, transgenders tend to be demonstrated as flashy and rather feminine to gather attention than to be focused on their suffering in society as sexual minorities (J. Hong, 2008). However, in four dramas with transgender themes in the corpus, transgender individuals are portrayed more in a neutral direction. It can be interpreted that as transgender characters have only recently begun to emerge, which is in 2019, the dramas attempt to be more cautious and not touch any sensitive boundaries.

Howbeit, there still are conspicuous characteristics that they are mostly secretive, prudent, and taciturn. While gay and lesbian characters are illustrated in multidimensional perspectives and have diverse personalities despite their secrets, transgender characters are consistent in nature with a more unidimensional approach. In addition, they each have their methods of expressing their sexual identity. All in dresses and wigs, Wan-jun takes photos of himself in his studio, Hyun-yi dances in the club, Fish strolls the streets at night, and grand prince Gyeseong wears makeup in an abandoned chamber. They each discover their ways to exist as women, though always get caught by others.

Since television dramas are mostly produced for and consumed by sexual majorities, the frames are shaped and stereotypes are reproduced in a way that can entertain the majority audience. For these reasons, an increase in exposure and enhancement in representation does not always mean that sexual minorities are candidly accepted the way they are. The media industry should not settle for the present but need to urge for a more critical view in facing the frame squarely.

Romance and Intimacy

Last but not least, the emotional romance and physical intimacy of sexual minorities in

dramas are also defined and manipulated under power relations. To begin with, even though the LGBTQ+ community has been considered taboo in the Korean media industry, the reason some dramas include minority romance into narratives is ironically to reinforce the majority power. The dramas formulate their own definitions for minority romance so that it does not harm existing social norms yet can entertain the majority audience (J. S. Kim & Min, 2012). The most popular method is to demonstrate homosexual romance as tragic love (Joo, 2003). Although most narratives tend to either utterly conceal or metaphorically hint at minority loves, in cases when they expose them on screen, they romanticize them as sacrificial, devoted, and idealistic (J. Hong, 2008).

Such depiction seems positive, but it is an exquisite design to distract the majority audience from the essence of the problem. Eventually, it describes minority loves as unrealistic, unlike heterosexual romance where diverse down-to-earth barriers exist. As they are immaculately idealized, the majority audience, especially females, can acquire unique satisfaction apart from their gender role in the patriarchal society and safely fulfill their sexual desires (Kwon, 2019). Ultimately, amusement and stimulation are favorably consumed and then the real-life burden is removed from the discourse.

Among 25 dramas in the drama corpus, there is a total of 16 romance narratives with corresponding partners. Among those 16, (1) seven are about unrequited love, (2) six are about tragic love, and (3) the other three are about consummated love that succeeds. As for the nine dramas excluded, four dramas have queer characters but without any romance, and the other five dramas are non-applicable as they are about pseudo-homosexuality with no genuine queer characters.

To specify, seven loves are unrequited as queer characters come to fall in love with heterosexual characters. In *Personal Taste* (2010), *Reply 1994* (2013), *Strong Girl Bong-soon* (2017), *At Eighteen* (2019), *Sweet Munchies* (2020), *Vincenzo* (2021), and *Hometown Cha-Cha-Cha* (2021), queer characters confess their feelings towards heterosexual characters who are already in love with other heterosexual characters. Their loves cannot be answered from the start due to different sexual orientations. Consequently, they all get rejected either directly or indirectly.

Additionally, six couples are broken and last in tragic love. In *Schoolgirl Detectives* (2014-2015), *Mine* (2021), and *The Empire* (2022), homosexual couples break up due to fear. They are afraid of how their friends, families, and society will react to their relationship when revealed. Hence, they decide to leave their lovers to protect both of them. As for *Mine* (2021), Seo-hyun resolves to come out and holds on to her partner in the last few episodes, but still is not getting a divorce from her husband. Besides, the other three couples break up due to personal issues, such as prospective future or drug addiction.

It is noteworthy to pinpoint that 13 out of 16 loves conclude in misery, as they are either unrequited or broken. Their relationships often end with tragedy or unwanted marriage as if to prove that homosexual love cannot come true. The majority audience comes to appreciate

the cliché of star-crossed lovers, whereas they are persuaded that there is an acceptable factor why they cannot be together. Only the stimulation originating from desperate and sacrificial love is consumed and then ends with rejection or separation, which eventually advocates heteronormativity. Likewise, as minority romance is depicted as unrealistic, the narratives distract the audience from facing what is true and what is right.

Neither a corresponding partner nor romance appears in dramas with transgender characters. In fact, in *Itaewon Class* (2020), there exists a slight emotional connection with the coworker, yet ambiguous to confirm whether it is friendship or the beginning of a romance. This limitation proves that the current Korean television industry has far to go in depicting the transgender community. The reason can be either that transgender romance is not stimulating for the majority audience or that transgender individuals are often considered unable to form a wholesome family with children (Park & Lee, 2013).

Then how does television depict physical intimacy? In diverse media, especially comics or movies, queer characters are often demonstrated as obscene and sexual. For instance, the movies *The King and The Clown* (2005) and *Antique* (2008) implement close-up shots of certain body parts and display them as erotic objects (J. S. Kim & Min, 2012). The sexual touch is exaggerated as it gives a different pleasure from heterosexual love.

On the contrary, this is not the case for television dramas. They prefer not to contain any sexual scenes either directly or indirectly. It is comprehensible as unlike comics or movies, dramas are often open to a broad range of audiences. Accordingly, the level of physical intimacy cannot be as high as in OTT productions. Still, it is necessary to view how physical touch and sexual desires are illustrated for sexual minorities. Considering that television dramas broadcast physical attraction in heterosexual relationships such as kissing or metaphorical signals of sexual intercourse, there should be a comparative analysis of how sexual intimacy is portrayed for minority couples.

Most television dramas tend to desexualize sexual minorities, as their sexuality and sexual desires are eradicated in the narratives (Fejes, 2000). For instance, gay characters are de-sexed and de-eroticized so that they do not threaten the traditional notions of masculinity. Hence, gay relationships are mostly portrayed as more of a close friendship than love. The reason for implementing de-sexualization is to cancel out all discourses on minor sexuality. By eliminating all factors of sexual desire, the majority audience can only appreciate idealized romance without any visual or emotional repulsion. That is to say, homosexual intercourses often project objects of abhorrence such as sperm or feces (Nussbaum, 2010). There is still a widespread bias that their promiscuous sexual activity leads to the high possibility of spreading AIDS (J. Hong, 2008). Therefore, dramas displace sexual intimacy and desire from the screen to avoid provoking any monopoly of knowledge that does not accept different sexualities.

The dramas in the corpus also tend to focus more on queer couples' psychological depictions rather than physical ones. They mostly do not touch each other, and even if they do, they end

up holding hands, giving hugs, and kissing on the forehead. There is hardly any physical contact that crosses over this border. For example, Hyo-bong in *Be Melodramatic* (2019) does not touch his partner, but instead hugs his sister and her friends. They remain kiss-less and sex-less as if these forms of intimacy are perilous and forbidden. In fact, *Schoolgirl Detectives* (2014-2015) attempted to transgress this strict borderline by airing the kiss scene of a lesbian couple. Eventually, their unprecedented trial led to receiving a warning from the Korea Communications Standards Commission (I. Kim, 2015).

If not desexualized, queer characters' sexual desire is frequently demonstrated as a sign of danger, which is on the opposite extreme. It is counted as a perverted and impulsive craving, which should be avoided. It mostly occurs in situations where homosexual characters are attracted to heterosexuals. They give heterosexual characters a lustful look and outwardly express their desire for the body. In *Prison Playbook* (2017-2018), Yeom gropes Je-hyuk, a heterosexual character, around the neck and sniffs as he says, "You know, athlete's sweat smells good." Besides, in *Vincenzo* (2021), Min-seong grabs Vincenzo on the chest or kisses him on the cheek and overreacts when there is a physical touch. Though it is Vincenzo who is maliciously deceiving Min-seong, it is Min-seong who is depicted to enjoy dense sexual interaction, and accordingly, perilous. Either way, the demonstrations equally result from fearing and ostracizing their sexual desires.

Even the minimal physical contacts and sexual desires are portrayed under certain editing techniques. Television does not explicitly portray sexual minorities but implements camera works and description methods to comply with social norms (Joo, 2003). These devices become the packaging of controversial physical touches when entering the screen. They can be divided into three parts: (1) mise-en-scene, (2) compression and omission, and (3) retrospection.

Firstly, dramas utilize 'mise-en-scene', especially visual aesthetics, to make the scene more hypnotizing. Dreamlike filters, sparkles, or slow-motion techniques are employed to adorn the moments when queer characters touch their partners. Likewise, the touch may seem more enchanting, yet unrealistic. For instance, dim filters are used to make the faerie and aerial mood when a lesbian couple touches each other in *Mine* (2021). When they run while holding their hands, slow motion techniques and soft background music with chirping sounds are implemented to intensify the atmosphere.

Secondly, 'compression and omission' techniques are employed to implicitly symbolize any sexual contact. Since it is obvious yet hidden, audience cannot see it but can estimate what happens behind the camera frame. Nonetheless, they cannot accuse of sexual intimacy outside the angle. For example, in *Prison Playbook* (2017-2018), Herong and his partner stand behind the curtain on New Year's Eve. As soon as the clock strikes twelve and people yell out a cheer, they disappear into the curtain and what audience can witness is two feet standing close. In addition, in *Life is Beautiful* (2010), Kyung-soo pulls his partner and conceals themselves behind the wall. Only the wriggling fingers of his partner linger on the

screen and then disappear. The camera focus moves to the red flowers which indicate their physical contact. In this way, the camera intentionally misses the physical touches as if to avoid any responsibility.

Lastly, the ‘retrospective’ description persuades audience that the sexual contact occurred in the past. Through reminiscence, the parted minority lovers hark back to the old days with their partners and the physical interaction they shared. Both scenes I mentioned of *Mine* (2021) and *Prison Playbook* (2017-2018) happen not in the present but in the past. Again, the drama attributes the responsibility to the past and stresses that minority couples are apart in the present timeline.

In conclusion, for sexual minorities in television dramas, romance is partially allowed, while physical touch and sexual desire are still thoroughly regulated. Love, which all human beings are entitled to, is only partially and even biasedly represented to the audience. The depiction of love, encompassing both emotional romance and physical affection, becomes evidence that an increase in exposure in dramas alone does not necessarily indicate a parallel increase in candid and open discourse on sexual minorities.

Discussion & Conclusion

Through an analysis of framed representation employing the crip lens, this article examines the deeper implications of visibility in media and its relationship to genuine advancement of sexual minority rights, with South Korean television dramas as its central research subject. It thoroughly investigates whether there are queer characters on screen, and if so, *who* they are, *how* they are displayed, and *why* they appear in narratives. It even takes a further step by questioning *for whom* they appear. The core that penetrates these frameworks is power relations. Throughout this article, I measure power inequality and repression, which is historically evident, and thus, firmly anchored to society. The intrinsic mechanisms of power are dissected in facets based on McRuer’s (2006) crip theory to question the meaning of visibility.

To recapitulate, the analyses are structured into two main streams: counting representation and framed representation. First, I provide an overview of the media representation of queer characters by counting the number of queer characters that appear in the corpus, analyzing their sexual orientation or identity, and examining their positions within the narratives. This section addresses the question of *who* appears on screen. The results display that most queer characters are relegated to supporting roles and there is a noticeable lack of diversity beyond gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender characters. Second, I conduct a qualitative analysis of framed representations in discourses, focusing on the themes of heteronormativity, stereotyped characteristics, and romance and intimacy. The result shed light on *how* queer

characters are represented and framed within the narratives. The findings reveal further limitations as the dramas implement LGBTQ+ themes to ultimately reinforce heteronormativity, shape their characteristics to reproduce stereotypes, and selectively manipulate or conceal their sexualities.

Noticeably, the analysis of framed representation offers a novel application of crip theory within the Korean context, specifically through television dramas. These dramas in the corpus are interpreted through the crip lens, in which only the normalized able-bodied heterosexuality is socially accepted, while queerness is positioned as a deviant “other”. The Foucauldian (1990, 2023) viewpoint of power and sexuality, along with Goffman’s (2010) frame analysis, are employed to reinforce the argument.

The overall findings answer the research question regarding whether the enhancement in visibility alone is sufficient. Although there are positive implications of increased visibility in mainstream media, the study suggests that it does not translate into a genuine improvement in sexual minority status. Instead, the emerging inclusion of queer characters and narratives is primarily intended to appeal to the majority audience, answering both *why* and *for whom* they appear on screen. That is, by compressing the minority characters into the mold of heteronormativity, the media industry obscures their true sexualities and identities to align them with dominant social standards. Only the remaining gender-conforming narratives, exaggerated stereotypes, and debris of idealized minority love perform to render the majority to enjoy the stimulation but perceive them as unrealistic. In this way, these framed representations contribute to justifying the power relations posited between the able-bodied heterosexual audience and the marginalized crippled others.

Unlike other independent productions, television dramas with queer characters are produced “by” the majority community to profit “from” the majority community. There exists the apparent irony of sexual minorities being ostracized from both production and consumption of homosexual media. There are stark power dynamics beneath as majorities purchase the display of minorities and amuse them in the shape they prefer. As a result, queer characters are framed and their sexuality is cropped to conform to the existing system for the majority. Hence, sexual minorities, the so-called deviant crips, are once again isolated from the boundary.

This research is significant for its effort to unveil the deception of visibility, especially with South Korea serving as a compelling field to explore this issue. As the level of visibility on screen far exceeds the level of societal acceptance in this country, it is essential to examine whether the rising media representation of queer characters and narratives reflects genuine progress or whether it is a well-crafted strategy to cater to the preferences of the majority. As questioned, the findings uncover that they are often framed to fit into the existing societal norms, serving to entertain the mainstream audience. In this regard, this study calls for deeper critical insight to inspect the power relations in their manifestation and urges a more nuanced analysis of their broader social implications.

Moreover, the originality of this research is that it attempted to extend the understanding of LGBTQ+ in the Korean media industry. Not concentrating on a single individual, orientation, identity, or production, this research covers diverse LGBTQ+ communities in television dramas and even considers the latest productions. These findings enable us to explore the recent changes and remaining tasks within the broad dataset of drama corpus. It is a bold venture to embrace the past, present, and future of LGBTQ+-related television dramas.

On the other hand, the limitation of this research is that the intentions of the producers are not counted in the analysis. Text is a unit of meaning that contains a message, and the meaning is intertextually determined when it is encoded by its creators and decoded by its readers (Hall, 1980). Although CDA provides a broad picture of how the message is encoded when produced, it does not directly answer why. That being the case, it is recommended that future studies incorporate interviews with directors or scriptwriters of television dramas to concretely comprehend the inclusion of queer discourses.

Based on this research, which is centered on television dramas, there can be further investigation into various media platforms as well as comparison across different countries. In this regard, there will be a more extensive comprehension of the LGBTQ+ community in the Korean media industry. This research can be the starting point as well as the basis for further comparative studies over a variety of media productions. It adds to the hope to provide the current Korean media industry with guidance on how to deal with media in the direction of fairly representing, and ultimately, going along with the LGBTQ+ community.

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