

# The Implications of Queer Representation in Contemporary South Korean TV Narratives

Valerie Lombogia, University of Colorado Boulder

## Introduction

*Work Later, Drink Now* (*Sulkkundosiyejadeul*, 2021) is a South Korean TV series written by Wi So Young centering on the lives of three young women with drastically different personalities and careers. An Sohee, Han Jiyeon, and Kang Jigoo have been best friends since they met in college, and every night at the end of their workday, they gather together to discuss their lives and drink to their heart's content. Seasons one and two were released exclusively on TVING, a South Korean online streaming platform, before being aired on the South Korean TV network TVN as a result of the show's immense popularity online.

According to TVING, the rate of subscriptions to their platform increased by 308 percent after the second week of *Work Later, Drink Now's* release and jumped to 3,585 percent in the fifth week after its release. These figures only account for new users who viewed *Work Later, Drink Now* after subscribing for the first time, so total viewership is likely much higher (Sim, 2021).

Since season one's release in 2021, YouTube clips from TVING's official channel along with fan-posted clips have garnered tens of millions of views. In 2022, the cast of the show was invited to the Cannes International Series Festival where the first two episodes of the drama were screened. Overall, viewers have reported that they are particularly attracted to the show's quirky and charming characters, relatable scenes of food and drinks with friends, and memorable swearing scenes.

Weaved into *Work Later Drink Now's* lighthearted stories of drinking, romance, and friendship are contemporary issues such as depression, suicide, family conflict, sexual harassment, homophobia, and workplace abuse, but the writer of the show also pushes an unmistakably queer narrative throughout the plot that becomes more obvious towards the end of the last season. Queer characters and relationships are gradually becoming more visible in mainstream South Korean TV media. Some examples of queer narratives that have recently gained popularity are

*Semantic Error* (2022) which centers on the romantic relationship between two men and *Nevertheless* (Algoitjiman, 2021) which depicts the feelings of friendship between two women turn romantic. Considering the significant rise in popularity of Korean TV dramas not only in Asia but also in Western society, where audiences are more conscious of queer narratives, the realm of queer representation in Korean TV warrants more scholarly attention. I aim to contribute to the conversation about depictions of queerness in Korean media by analyzing the representation of queer characters in *Work Later, Drink Now*. Specifically, this paper looks at the queer subtext of Jigoo and Jiyeon's relationship and how this story reveals South Korean perceptions of queer experiences by matching and/or distinguishing itself from the tragic narratives that queer characters are often depicted as having in Korean TV dramas. I also intend to examine the reception of the show by South Korean society based on its references and discussion in Korean popular culture.

### **The Queer Coding of Jigoo**

The character of Kang Jigoo is at the center of *Work Later, Drink Now's* queer narrative. Jigoo is introduced as having a very "tough" persona in the way she is frequently

shown smoking, cursing, and fighting others to defend her friends. Although she is not explicitly stated as being queer in the storyline, the writer clearly signals viewers of her queer identity through the use of queer coding. Joan Radner and Susan Lanser define "coding" as "a set of signals that protect the creator from the consequences of openly expressing particular messages" (1987).

Drawing upon this definition, queer coding in narrative forms can be construed to mean signals employed by an author to indicate queerness or queer themes without directly expressing it. This can be seen in the drama in many instances of dialogue between the characters. For example, the fact that Jigoo has never been in a relationship with a man is mentioned multiple times during the first season and again during the second season, suggesting that she was never attracted to men. She was also known for being very popular with girls in college and even had a fan club of students who would shower her with gifts while she was a teacher at a girls' high school. Jigoo is also portrayed as a masculine-presenting woman which can be seen particularly in her wardrobe. She often wears loose-fitting t-shirts, pants, and collar shirts as well as styles from brands that are advertised towards men. Her masculine fashion style is very similar to

portrayals of queer and queer-coded female characters in other Korean dramas; one example being Sol from *Nevertheless* who is openly in a romantic relationship with a woman. Another example is Bora from *Glitch* (2021) who is commonly understood by fans as being a very obviously queer-coded character because of the romantic implications in her relationship with another female character in the show. Just as individuals continuously perform sexual identity through visual symbols such as the clothing they wear (Reddy-Best and Pederson, 2014), queer characters in Korean dramas are coded in how they are dressed to express their queer identities. There is also something to be said about stereotypical representations of queer characters in Korean TV shows. Characters such as Jigoo, Bora, and Sol fall under the archetype of the masculine “butch” woman who is often paired with a feminine or “femme” woman (Reddy-Best and Pederson, 2014). In this way, representations of queer women in South Korean TV can feel very binary and patterned with little variety in depictions of queer identities.

Jigoo is also directly associated with every instance of openly queer characters in the drama’s storyline. In season one, there is a scene where the three women go on a triple

date to the beach. Jigoo brings a date, much to the surprise of her two friends. This is the first time she is romantically linked to a man, but at the end of the episode, her date is revealed to have a secret male lover as the girls witness the two men engage in a passionate kiss. Jigoo is clearly not shocked by this revelation, suggesting that she was already aware of this. Within the South Korean LGBTQ+ community, it is not uncommon for queer men and women to stage relationships with each other to appear heterosexual to their families and the public, some of them going as far as entering marriages (Cho, 2009). It is possible that a comparable situation was going on between Jigoo and her date where they were using each other to conceal their queer identities from their friends.

A critical part of Jigoo’s storyline involves one of her former students, Sejin, who is outcast by her family and school for being a lesbian. Sejin first reveals her queer identity to Jigoo by surprising her with a sudden kiss. In a later scene, Sejin opens up to Jigoo and explains that she has known she was attracted to the same sex since she was in kindergarten before confessing her feelings for her. Jigoo responds with this line: “When I was in school, I received a lot of love letters from girls. I guess I’m strangely attractive to

the same sex. But all those girls who gave me love letters back then... are now all married and living happily. I'm not saying that you should be like that, too. Just take your time and get to know yourself." From Jigoo's own experience, the romantic feelings that girls had for her in high school eventually did not amount to anything significant, and she suggests it may have been a source of heartache for her to know they all moved on. She advises Sejin to think more deeply about her sexual identity as it might be the same case for her. Sejin responds to this by saying that her preference for women over men is as simple and obvious as preferring the mountains over the ocean or summer over winter. Then, the two of them exchange the following dialogue:

Sejin: "It's not wrong to like someone or something. Being unable to do what you love will make you more miserable."

Jigoo: "Hey. It would've been nice if you were my homeroom teacher. Then maybe my life would've been different."

In this scene, Jigoo suggests that someone like Sejin who could have been supportive of her own queer identity might have changed her life while she was growing up. Instead, Jigoo spent her life repressing her queerness.

Jigoo had several reasons to repress her queer identity. One reason being that her father was a well-respected Christian pastor. In South Korea, the most fervent opposition towards LGBTQ+ identities comes from fundamentalist Christians, some of whom go as far as accusing sexual minorities of spreading AIDS and aligning with North Korean tendencies (Henry, 2020), so it was extremely likely that Jigoo would have been cruelly rejected by her Christian family if she came out as queer. Jigoo also had an extremely strict mother who micromanaged every aspect of her adult life and fixated on the family's public image. With such a controlling and vain mother and a pastor for a father, Jigoo's home environment was not a place where she would have been free to open up about her sexual orientation nor would they ever have allowed her to openly express her identity to others for fear of the marginalization that affects the direct family of queer-identifying individuals (Henry, 2020). What might have been the biggest reason for her continued suppression of her queer identity was witnessing the discrimination that Sejin faced for being attracted to women. Jigoo repeatedly endured scathing comments about Sejin and her queer identity from her superior, the school principal, who described

homosexuality as disgusting. She witnessed the cruelty and indifference of her other students towards Sejin after she was outed on social media and consequently beaten by her father. Then, after finding out that Sejin took her own life, Jigoo completely withdrew herself from society. She quit her teaching position and cut off all contact with her family and closest friends. At that point, Jigoo became completely convinced that there was no place in the world for queers like herself and Sejin. In South Korean society, Sejin's story is not unlikely as rates for suicide and self-harm in LGBTQ+ identifying Koreans are dangerously high (Na, 2014).

### **The Queer Subtext of Jigoo and Jiyeon's Relationship**

Although Sohee, Jigoo, and Jiyeon are portrayed as best friends, the narrative insinuates that Jigoo and Jiyeon have an even deeper relationship. An example of this can be seen in season one when a man inappropriately touches Jiyeon, and Jigoo comes to her defense by attacking the man. They all end up at the police station, and Jiyeon claims the man did not do anything wrong and begs Jigoo to let it go so that she will not be in trouble with the police. Jigoo feels utterly betrayed by Jiyeon, and the two women get into an intense argument before dramatically parting ways. In this scene, they

make very personal stabs at each other, and it seems like their friendship is over. But when Jiyeon is suddenly assaulted by a stalker, Jigoo immediately comes to save her. At the end of the episode, the narration reveals that ever since the three friends were in college, Jigoo has always been the one to respond the fastest to Jiyeon's emergency calls. Only Jigoo and Jiyeon have scenes such as this one that demonstrate the emotional depth and complexity of their relationship. Even Sohee acknowledges how particularly attached they are to each other, saying that Jiyeon simply cannot live without Jigoo.

In the second season, the queer implications of Jigoo and Jiyeon's relationship start to become more obvious. Throughout this season, Jigoo becomes romantically involved with a man named Wooju. Jiyeon immediately notices this and starts acting out towards Jigoo. In one episode, Jigoo messages Jiyeon, asking to borrow a dress for a date; this is completely out of character for Jigoo who would usually never entertain the idea of wearing something so feminine, showing her obvious interest in this man. Jiyeon intentionally ignores Jigoo's calls and messages for the entire day, and Jigoo eventually becomes extremely concerned for her safety, going as far as coming to Jiyeon's workplace, incessantly calling her, and even

missing her date to make sure she is okay. Sohee is not nearly as worried as Jigoo, while Jigoo is ready to report Jiyeon as missing by the end of the day, until she finally runs into her. This scene clearly depicts Jiyeon's jealousy over the fact that Jigoo was romantically interested in someone else. She intentionally ignored her calls all day to provoke Jigoo into overreacting and potentially jeopardizing her relationship with the man. When Jigoo finally confronted her, Jiyeon could not even explain herself or her jealousy. She could not be honest about her romantic feelings for Jigoo or was struggling to even understand these feelings. Jiyeon's struggle with her queer identity is highlighted this episode during her conversation with her co-workers over dinner:

Co-worker: "I like you a little bit."

Jiyeon: "Oh my! But I'm not interested in women."

Co-worker: "I know, you little brat."

Co-worker's brother: "Someone keeps calling you. It seems like you're not answering on purpose."

Co-worker: "That means it's a man, right?"

Jiyeon: "Gosh, if I had a boyfriend, I would be with him right now."

Jiyeon's immediate denial of being interested in women when her co-worker was clearly not implying that seems almost reflexive. In a country as conservative and intolerant of homosexuality as South Korea (Rich & Eliassen, 2020), it was unlikely that her co-worker was confessing to her in this situation, but Jiyeon reading her comment in this way reveals an inner conflict she is having about her sexual orientation. The fact that Jiyeon gets a call from Jigoo in the middle of this situation serves to directly contradict her statement about not being interested in women because Jigoo is a woman of deep interest to her, especially at this specific moment. Her friends assuming that Jigoo is her boyfriend calling only confirms that this scene was deliberately queer-coded, especially because Jiyeon responds to this by saying she would be with her boyfriend right now if she had one, but it was Jigoo who she originally asked out to dinner that night.

The strongest case for the queer implications of Jigoo and Jiyeon's relationship arises towards the very end of the show. After the phone call incident, Jigoo meets with Wooju to make up for their missed date. On the same night, Jiyeon is on a blind date and happens to stumble upon the restaurant where Jigoo is meeting with Wooju. She continues her streak of irrationality and

decides to invite herself to Jigoo's date. Jiyeon brazenly flirts with Wooju right in front of Jigoo and says all she can to embarrass Jigoo in front of him. This date ends horribly with the two women arguing outside the restaurant. In this scene, Jiyeon's fears are confirmed when she directly asks Jigoo if she was jealous of her flirting with Wooju and Jigoo responds with a very blunt 'yes.'

The devastation from this answer and the fact that her best friend is in love with someone else is plain on Jiyeon's face. Jiyeon gives nothing up about her feelings or why she acted out like this, and then the scene cuts to Jiyeon with her bags packed outside of their shared apartment where the two of them have the most vicious exchange. They make the most brutal and hurtful remarks to each other, with Jigoo bringing up Jiyeon's cancer and Jiyeon mentioning Jigoo's depression. They target vulnerabilities about each other that only close friends could know. Their emotional argument and tearful parting mirror that of a lover's quarrel. In a later scene, Jiyeon opens up to another friend about the fight and reveals that during their college days, she would always flirt with and date Jigoo's male friends. Jiyeon justifies her behavior with the ridiculous excuse that she was simply screening Jigoo's friends for their loyalty, and her friend says that it was clearly

wrong of her to do this. Jiyeon's friend is meant to mirror the reaction of the audience who is confused and angered by Jiyeon's actions. Jiyeon tries to give her an explanation, but her friend's bewilderment is meant to show how little sense Jiyeon is making. This urges the audience to think deeply about the reason she acted like this. In this scene, the queer subtext is clear. The way Jiyeon's absurdity is so emphasized is meant to force the audience to conclude that the only practical reason for Jiyeon's behavior is that she is in love with Jigoo.

### **Reception of *Work Later, Drink Now* by South Korean Viewers**

Overall, *Work Later, Drink Now's* storyline was not perceived by South Korean audiences as an apparently queer work but rather a realistic depiction of friendship. In the YouTube comments of Jigoo and Jiyeon's argument uploaded by TVING, one Korean commenter chalks down Jiyeon's behavior in the restaurant to being an inferiority complex, receiving over 4,700 likes. Another commenter who received more than 4,000 likes believes that Jiyeon and Jigoo's conflict accurately reflects the reality of imperfect friendships; realistically, people can be selfish and betray even their closest friends as Jiyeon did. The queer narrative of *Work Later, Drink Now* was not as discernible to

general South Korean audiences as it might have been to Western or queer-identifying audiences, and this can be explained by the varying degrees of normativity surrounding queerness in South Korea compared to Western countries like the United States (Henry, 2020). According to David Eng, the US has experienced the effects of “queer liberalism” meaning an increased visibility of queer identities because of mass-mediated queer consumer lifestyles and expanded legal protections for queers (2010). The visibility of queer identities and queer rights in South Korean mass media and politics is much lower in comparison; therefore, queer narratives are much less apparent to a Korean audience.

Although the queer narrative was not widely recognized by *Work Later, Drink Now*'s Korean viewers, the queer coding of Jigoo did not go unnoticed in Korean popular culture. During the commercial promotion of the show, the cast made a guest appearance on *Saturday Night Live Korea*. During this appearance, Jeong Eunji, the actress who plays the role of Jigoo, participates in a skit where she portrays a personality clearly based off of Jigoo. In the skit, she visits a male friend at a restaurant where her character is shown to be extremely flirtatious and physically affectionate with every woman

present. She caresses the hair and face of one woman, calling her beautiful, and makes flirtatious advances towards another. All the women seem to fall head over heels for her. This skit arguably interprets Jigoo's character as being attracted to women and puts an exaggerated “SNL” spin on it.

They also play off of the popularity of actress Jeong Eunji for her portrayal of Jigoo. At the time of the drama's release, Jigoo's homeroom teacher clip reached the number one trending video on YouTube in South Korea, quickly gaining millions of views in a few days, and becoming TVING's most-viewed drama clip in 2021 (Kim, 2021). Jigoo's masculine demeanor and style were also viewed positively by many female viewers of the show, and entertainment articles often used the term “girl crush” to describe Jeong's performance. Commenters under the homeroom teacher clip on YouTube emphasized Jigoo's coolness and Jeong's realistic acting in the role of a teacher, many of them wishing to be one of Jigoo's pupils. After portraying Jigoo, Jeong also received a modeling deal for gender-neutral clothing brand ACBF, which appears to cater especially towards androgynous women, showing how her role resonated particularly with masculine-presenting women.

The mass popularity of Jigoo's character shows the positive reception of an atypical, implicitly queer female main character by a generally homophobic society. This speaks to the palatability of queer characters in South Korean popular culture and begs a few questions: Under what conditions can a queer or queer-coded character be tolerated and even popularized by South Korean audiences? How does this correlate to the increasing presence of queer characters in mainstream Korean media? Would the reception of *Work Later, Drink Now* have changed if Jigoo was explicitly queer? Overall, Jigoo's popularity as a character contributes to the growing conversation about queers not only within Korean media but also Korean society.

### **Conclusion**

In the bigger landscape of queer representation in Korean dramas, some aspects of *Work Later, Drink Now* work to challenge the stereotypical narratives of queer identities depicted in Korean TV shows. In mainstream Korean dramas, queer characters frequently play background or side roles and are rarely depicted as leading characters. Compared to film, television as a medium has always been more conservative because TV content is broadcast over public airwaves and is available to a wider audience

(Kwon, 2016), so portrayals of LGBTQ+ characters have been limited in that regard. Some recent examples of mainstream dramas representing queer characters include *Hometown Cha-Cha-Cha* (*Gaesmaeul chachacha*, 2021), *Reply 1997* (*Eungdaphara 1997*, 2012), *Yumi's Cells* (*Yumiui sepodeul*, 2021), and *Moment of Eighteen* (*Yeolyeodeolbui sungan*, 2019).

A common theme among the queer characters in these shows as well as queer narratives within South Korean media in general is the concealment of queer identities. Queer characters often have a romantic interest in the protagonist which they reveal to another character, but they never confess their feelings to their love interest or publicly come out as queer. The stories of queer characters often end quite tragically as the main heterosexual pairing fall in love while the queers silently look on from the sidelines, accepting their inevitable fate of isolation. *Work Later, Drink Now* departs from this narrative with the depiction of Sejin who not only directly confesses her feelings to Jigoo but even steals an on-screen kiss. Although their queerness is not explicitly expressed, the story of the show also deviates from the queer background character stereotype by implying the queer relationship between Jigoo and

Jiyeon who are main characters with complex and mostly fleshed-out personalities.

*Work Later, Drink Now* may have departed from stereotypical representations of queers in some ways, but, ultimately, it followed some form of a tragic narrative for each of its queer and queer-coded characters. Sejin, who is the only character in the show that outwardly identifies as queer, tragically takes her own life after being outed, following the common 'Bury Your Gays' trope in which queer characters die in tragic circumstances such as suicides (Guerrero-Pico et al., 2018).

Another example can be seen towards the end of the show when Jigoo comes to the surprising realization that she is romantically attracted to a man. In one scene, she contemplates a kiss she shared with Wooju and verbally expresses her shock saying: "I guess I really like men." After spending her life repressing her queer identity and being alone, Jigoo realizes that she can have a "normal" relationship with Wooju. The tragedy is that Jigoo finds herself conforming to heteronormativity and lives life continuing to suppress her queerness. As for Jiyeon, she never opens up about her feelings to Jigoo, and they move on from their fight without ever discussing it again. Jiyeon never makes sense of her romantic feelings for Jigoo or her

queer identity and simply represses both. Tragically, she ends up floundering in her love life and is comically involved with three men at the end of the drama, but it is obvious that she is not genuinely in love with any of them. Overall, *Work Later, Drink Now* does not do enough to defy stereotypical queer narratives and contributes to the oversaturation of negative and tragic tropes about queer identities.

Underneath all its humor, *Work Later, Drink Now* paints a very dark and depressing image of life for women and the queer community in South Korea. The ending scene is depicted as a hugely ironic celebration, where everyone is celebrating the predictable, heterosexual marriage of the doctor and the bar owner. Each of the main characters ends up in a relationship with a man. Jigoo finds true love, but in doing so, she complies with heteronormative societal norms and never embraces her queer identity. Jiyeon fails to have a meaningful relationship with anyone and tries to overcompensate by dating three different men. Sohee settles into a relationship with a crude, misogynistic, emotionally inept man whom she believes she can change. Essentially, the three women have conformed to the social norms of South Korean society by maintaining heterosexual relationships.

Regarding furthering queer representation in the Korean mediascape, the coding was too subtle for South Korean audiences to recognize the queer narrative, and the characters even contributed to negative

tropes about queers. The story of *Work Later, Drink Now* epitomizes a bleak reality for queer-identifying South Koreans where their only options are repressing their identities and conforming to societal norms.

## Bibliography

- Cho, John (Song Pae). "The Wedding Banquet Revisited: 'Contract Marriages' between Korean Gays and Lesbians." *Anthropological Quarterly* 82, no. 2 (April 2009): 401–22. <https://doi.org/10.1353/anq.0.0069>.
- Eng, David L. "Introduction." Introduction. In *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy*, 1–22. Durham N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010.
- Guerrero-Pico, Mar, María-José Establés, and Rafael Ventura. "Killing off Lexa: 'Dead Lesbian Syndrome' and Intra-Fandom Management of Toxic Fan Practices in an Online Queer Community." *Journal of Audience and Reception Studies* 15, no. 1 (May 2018): 311–33.
- Henry, Todd A. "Queer Korea: Toward a Field of Engagement." Introduction. In *Queer Korea*, 1–52. Duke University Press, 2020.
- Kim, Sõnu. "k'üllip Chohoesukkaji Chõpsu' Chõngũnji, 'suldonyõ'ro Ipchũhan Chin'ga." Daum, November 25, 2021. <https://v.daum.net/v/20211125150329468>.
- Kwon, Jungmin. "Co-mmodifying the Gay Body: Globalization, the Film Industry, and Female Prosumers in the Contemporary Korean Mediascape." *International Journal of Communication* 10 (April 2016): 1563–80.
- Na, Tari Youngjung. Rep. Translated by Namwoong Cho. *Key Results of the South Korean LGBTI Community Social Needs Assessment Survey*. Korean Gay Men's Human Rights Group Chingusai, 2014.
- Radner, Joan, and Susan Lanser. "The Feminist Voice: Strategies of Coding in Folklore and Literature." *The Journal of American Folklore* 100, no. 398 (October 1987): 412–25. <https://doi.org/10.2307/540901>.
- Reddy-Best, Kelly L., and Elaine L. Pedersen. "The Relationship of Gender Expression, Sexual Identity, Distress, Appearance, and Clothing Choices for Queer Women." *International Journal of Fashion Design, Technology and Education* 8, no. 1 (September 15, 2014): 54–65. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17543266.2014.958576>.
- Rich, Timothy S., and Isabel Eliassen. "Proximity, Contact and Tolerance of Homosexuals in Korea: Evidence from an Experimental Survey." *Asian Journal of Political Science* 28, no. 3 (July 7, 2020): 195–211. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02185377.2020.1788958>.
- Sim, Ŏnkyõng. "'Work Later, Drink Now'·'Would You Like a Cup of Coffee?'... Food Dramas Symbolizing the OTT Era ['sulkkundosiyõjadũl'·k'õp'ihanjanhalkkayo'... OTT Ssidaerũl Sangjihanũn 'ũmsik' Tũrama]." NAVER News, November 27, 2021. <https://n.news.naver.com/entertain/article/477/0000330667>.