

# Agentive and Independent Older Female Adult in *Strong Woman Gang Nam-Soon*: Going Against Prevalent Gendered Ageism in K-Dramas

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores the representation of an older female adult (OFA) in the Korean drama *Strong Woman Gang Nam-Soon*. While scholarship on OFA has revealed their lack of positive representation—resulting in multifarious detriments—literature on OFA in K-drama is considerably scanty. Hence, this article employs content analysis, focusing on one of the protagonists, Gil Jung-Gan. Additionally, to enrich the discussion, industrial analysis was also carried out. The critical discussion focuses on three major aspects: 1) the feminist perspective influencing the K-drama industry, 2) principles of agentive and powerful OFA character, and 3) beauty and successful aging discourse. This article argues that the positive representation of Gil Jung-Gan is the manifestation of the progressive movement and influence of local and global feminism, which can be traced through the fulfillment of the majority of the principles. Additionally, the series incorporates successful aging discourse to represent Gil Jung-Gan as an agentive and non-traditional OFA, which is achieved mainly by physical appearance and social engagement.

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## INTRODUCTION

*“I’m going to indulge myself with a steamy dramatic romance for all the world to see. I’ve quit watching TV dramas these days. Do you know why? Because all of them are about youngsters in love. The old are just told to watch singing contests. But why should we? Our hearts beat even in old age. Our breasts may sag, but our hearts still beat, got it?”*

Gil Jung-Gan (*Strong Woman Gang Nam-Soon*, Episode 6)

The lines above are spoken by Gil Jung-Gan, one of the protagonists in the Korean drama *Strong Woman Gang Nam-Soon* (Lee, 2023). Her remarks highlight the underrepresentation of older adults in Korean dramas (hereafter K-dramas), especially grandmothers—referred to as “older female adults” (hereafter OFAs) in this study for the purpose of equity and inclusion. In general, K-drama audiences are perhaps more exposed to stories revolving around the romantic lives of young or middle-aged couples. On the other hand, OFAs have often been stereotypically portrayed as family-oriented figures who sacrifice everything for their children or grandchildren.

Instances of such portrayals are prevalent in family K-dramas, such as *My Husband Got a Family* (Lee, 2012), and *Wang's Family* (Moon, Kyung & Park, 2013—2014). In these dramas, grandmothers are often depicted as family leaders, wielding absolute authority and dictating the actions of their children and grandchildren. They are portrayed as sacrificial figures who expect repayment through submission and obedience from younger generations. Additionally, they typically emphasize tradition, cling to the past, and adopt conservative attitudes.

Against this backdrop, the present study examines the intersection of age and gender. Stigmatizing imagery of OFAs carries discretely detrimental outcomes (Carney, 2018; Walkner et al., 2018). In the Korean context, where Confucian values still exert residual influence on the fabric of society, women's roles are often confined to those of mothers or wives with limited freedom of choice (Gromkowska-Melosik & Boron, 2023; Handojo & Djunjung, 2016; H. Kim, 2015; Vu & Pham, 2023). Even in romantic relationships, Confucian teachings seem to deny women the opportunity to create relationships or make decisions for themselves (Gromkowska-Melosik & Boron, 2023).

In addition to the underrepresentation and lack of positive portrayals of OFAs as agentic, independent, intrinsically motivated, and powerful figures, these ingrained traditional views toward women could perpetuate systemic discrimination and ageist attitudes against them (Gonzales et al., 2021). Therefore, the representation of OFAs that challenges such norms is necessary, given the media's power in constructing meaning. For this reason, this article focuses its analysis on the OFA character Gil Jung-Gan from *Strong Woman Gang Nam-Soon*, as the series revolves around the journey of intergenerational characters.

*Strong Woman Gang Nam-Soon* is a comedic action K-drama featuring three generations of women with superhuman abilities fighting crime in Gangnam, Seoul. Gil Jung-Gan, portrayed by Kim Hae-Sook, is the eldest protagonist who finds unexpected love after her husband's departure. Written by renowned screenwriter Baek Mi-Kyung, known for her women-centric narratives, this series challenges stereotypes and focuses on an OFA. Similar to Baek's other works, it highlights independent and powerful women. However, *Strong Woman Gang Nam-Soon* uniquely centers on an older female protagonist.

This drama warrants critical examination for several reasons. First, *Strong Woman Gang Nam-Soon* is among the first K-dramas to feature an OFA as the protagonist who does not conform to the traditional 'grandmother' archetype characterized by self-sacrifice, geriatric ailments, or dependence on men, children, or grandchildren. Second, the drama reflects societal attitudes toward older adults. Through the development of Gil Jung-Gan's character and narrative, the audience observes discriminatory practices against older adults. At the same time, Gil Jung-Gan's portrayal serves as resistance to dominant ageist discourse.

This study was initiated after identifying several gaps in the literature. First, despite the growing global popularity of K-dramas, the representation of older adults, particularly OFAs, remains under-researched. To date, no English-language scholarship has specifically investigated the representation of OFAs in K-dramas. Previous studies have generally examined the representation of women in K-dramas or movies but have not focused specifically on OFAs (Boman, 2022; Sim, 2020). Second, research on the positive representation of OFAs is considerably limited. This aligns with empirical studies from various contexts that reveal a prevalent negative representation of OFAs (Edström, 2018; Gonzales et al., 2021; Hungwe et al., 2023; Li, 2021).

By analyzing the social and symbolic imagery of OFAs, this study aims to contribute to the body of literature on the representation of OFAs in K-dramas, using Gil Jung-Gan from *Strong Woman Gang Nam-Soon* as an example of a positive representation. Lastly, with the recent feminist movement in South Korea influencing

the production of cultural products such as K-pop and films (Lee & Yi, 2020; Sim, 2020), many K-dramas have begun incorporating feminist ideologies to appeal to broader local and global audiences. However, feminist perspectives on K-dramas remain underexplored, particularly in relation to the aging community. Therefore, this critical article seeks to contribute to the scholarship on OFA representation in K-dramas as a byproduct of the feminist movement in South Korea and its impact on industrial practices.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### Gendered Ageism in Media

Ageism is defined as a form of discrimination and stereotyping against older adults based on their age (Ng et al., 2023). This form of prejudice is predominantly transmitted through media, including popular culture such as K-dramas. While the digital age offers opportunities for positive transformation, shifts in media consumption patterns can also perpetuate stereotypical portrayals of specific demographics.

In general, older adults have frequently been subjected to negative and undesired representation. Several studies highlight the negative outcomes of insensitive portrayals of older adults. For example, a study by Shimoni (2024) reveals how the construction of older adults in newspaper coverage as unprotectable has reinforced policies that dismiss their need for social care during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. In Ross' (2024) study, the UK's media framed older adults as extremely vulnerable during COVID-19. Due to gendered ageism, there was a notable discrepancy in the return to work when pandemic restrictions eased. While most older adults were instructed to stay home during the lockdown, only older male adults resumed their jobs once the curbs were lifted. In contrast, OFAs did not return to work, largely due to perceived concerns about their efficiency and potential physical limitations. These two recent studies on the representation of the aging community reflect the persistent stereotypes about older adults that continue to circulate in society, even in an era when equality and inclusivity are actively promoted.

In film and television, gendered ageism is also prevalent. A study conducted by Ng et al. (2023) reveals a lack of positive representation of older adults in many movies across 11 regions. Their study suggests that, although movies from East and South Asia are the least negative compared to their counterparts, they portray older adults primarily regarding signs of aging, authority, familial love, veneration, and respect. However, the agency of OFAs to make their own decisions or achieve their goals is absent from the report.

Although the report focuses on movies, I argue that the lack of positive representation of OFAs as agentive, powerful, and non-traditional is also pervasive in K-dramas, where stigmatic images of OFAs are often embedded. The issue of representing OFAs' agency is a concern also voiced by Tindale (2023), whose works focus on the representation of OFAs in Australian cinema. This concern is particularly relevant, as the underrepresentation of OFAs can lead to marginalization, discrimination, and abuse (Hungwe et al., 2023; Park, 2021; Ross, 2024; Shaw & Langman, 2017; Shimoni, 2024; Tindale, 2021).

In the K-drama industry, it is relatively rare to see OFAs as protagonists (Park, 2021). Most of the time, OFAs serve as supporting characters, assuming the aforementioned roles and establishing themselves as peripheral figures. Even when they are depicted as protagonists, they are often portrayed as individuals devoted to their families or as people struggling with serious health issues associated with aging, which ultimately leads to dependence on others. Rovner-Lev and Elias (2020), who study the representation of older adults in children-directed TV shows, explain that older adults are frequently subject to ageism by invisibility, resulting in peripheral roles and social marginality.

In the last decade alone, two award-winning K-dramas centered on older adults depict female protagonists with infirmities or health issues, such as Alzheimer's disease in *The Light in Your Eyes* (Kim, 2019) and stage four cancer in *Dear My Friends* (Bae et al., 2016). In terms of family structure, in *Dear My Friends* and *Our Blues* (Jang, 2022), renowned actors Na Moon-Hee and Kim Hye-Ja portray grandmothers who must continually serve their husbands. In the case of Kim Hye-Ja, her character even serves her deceased husband during *jesa*, a Korean term referring to the memorial piety or yearly ancestral rites led by the men of the house, reflecting the strong upholding of patriarchal values. She is shown preparing everything for her sons to lead the rite, which, according to Park (2019), is degrading for women from a feminist perspective. These examples suggest that OFAs in K-dramas are predominantly represented in stereotypical ways, reinforcing their marginalization.

However, the growing feminist movement in South Korea has influenced many K-drama productions to adopt more inclusive portrayals of various groups. Sim's (2020) study highlights the gradual progress in Korean cinema regarding the depiction of female heroines. However, she notes a significant issue: some films merely switch the gender of protagonists while retaining traditional "macho" characteristics. This indicates a persistent challenge in fully overcoming entrenched stereotypes in media portrayals. Nevertheless, such gradual progress underscores the need to diversify the representation of women, particularly OFAs, in K-drama industry practices.

### Principles of Agentive Female Characters

To understand how Gil Jung-Gan's character defies the common representation of OFAs in K-dramaland, Tindale's (2021) principles of developing female characters provide a useful framework. These principles "build on, incorporate, and promote principles of equity, inclusion, and diversity around the representation of women on screen" (p. 67). Tindale's principles include:

1. Diversity and inclusion: a reflection of the real world.
2. Women as the lead protagonist, not merely the mother, love interest, or grandmother.
3. Women are considered young at 40.
4. Women as capable, complex characters who determine their own actions and the narrative arc of the story.
5. Women at work in both traditional and non-traditional roles, avoiding stereotypes.
6. Women depicted in their occupations are not confined to roles such as homemakers, housewives, or caregivers.
7. Women as leaders in leadership positions.
8. Women are flawed, imperfect characters.
9. An ending offering more than the binary options of death or marriage.
10. Representation that goes beyond simply passing the Bechdel Test.

These ten guiding principles are instrumental in understanding the character development of Gil Jung-Gan, including her actions and motivations. Although Tindale's principles were developed in the context of Australian cinema, they are equally applicable in analyzing how OFA characters are portrayed in K-dramas.

### METHOD

As a single-case study, the drama was selected for its unique focus on an older female protagonist and its potential to provide rich insights into the representation of OFAs in Korean media. *Strong Woman Gang Nam-Soon* serves as the source of data for this study. The series was chosen because it portrays OFAs in a positive light, countering common stereotypes. Despite its comedic and superhero tropes, the series offers a unique

perspective on the lives of OFAs, highlighting their strengths, resilience, and complexity. This representation is significant as it contrasts with the often limited and negative portrayals of OFAs in media. Analyzing this series provides an opportunity to explore broader trends in media representation and gain insights into how positive depictions of OFAs can challenge and reshape societal perceptions.

Data collection involved watching all episodes of the drama and transcribing dialogue relevant to themes of female empowerment, ageism, and gender roles. Visual cues and narrative developments that contributed to the depiction of the main character, Gil Jung-gan, and her interactions with other characters were also documented through note-taking.

Content analysis was conducted on all 16 series episodes to examine Gil Jung-Gan's representation in *Strong Woman Gang Nam-Soon*. A coding scheme tailored to the study's specific objectives was developed, comprising main categories and sub-categories. The main categories included 'Instances of Ageism,' 'Expressions of Female Agency,' 'Character Traits,' and 'Character Relationships.' Within the 'Character Traits' category, sub-categories such as 'Independence,' 'Wisdom,' 'Confidence,' 'Righteousness,' and 'Resilience' were identified. For instance, in Episode 3, a scene where Gil Jung-Gan confronts a rude individual who parked his car improperly and blocked other residents was coded under the 'Righteousness' sub-category within 'Character Traits.' In the same scene, the man's comment to Gil Jung-Gan, "An old hag like you should stay home and watch her grandkids," was coded under the 'Role Confinement' sub-category within 'Instances of Ageism.' This detailed coding approach facilitated systematic analysis and enabled the derivation of meaningful insights from the content.

The analysis also assessed whether Tindale's principles of strong, agentive female characters were fulfilled. Through iterative coding sessions, patterns and themes within the data were identified, enabling a thorough exploration of how *Strong Woman Gang Nam-Soon* portrays older women and challenges ageist stereotypes.

Additionally, an industrial analysis was conducted to contextualize the significance of the selected drama within the broader landscape of K-dramas, particularly in light of the influx of feminist ideologies. The purpose of incorporating the industrial analysis was twofold. Firstly, it provided insights into the broader cultural and commercial factors influencing the production and reception of K-dramas, especially those with feminist themes. Contextualizing the selected drama within this framework enabled a deeper understanding of its cultural significance and potential impact on societal attitudes toward age and gender. Secondly, the industrial analysis emphasized the role of the selected drama as a significant product of popular culture, reflecting recent sociocultural changes (Boman, 2022).

One key data source for the industrial analysis is Netflix's 2021 inclusion report, which highlights the company's commitment to diversity in its programming. While this report is not directly analyzed in the study, it provides important contextual support for the argument that *Strong Woman Gang Nam-Soon* aligns with industry efforts to promote positive and diverse representations. This contextualization underscores the positive portrayal of OFAs in the series as part of Netflix's broader strategic initiatives, complementing the content analysis by situating the series within ongoing industry trends to enhance representation and challenge stereotypes.

Additionally, the industrial analysis incorporated related literature on feminism in K-dramas and cinema and discussions on Hallyu 4.0. These sources were used to situate Gil Jung-Gan's representation within the broader context of inclusion as advocated within the industry.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Influence of Feminist Movement on K-dramas

As cited in Han (2022), the United Nations Commission on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (UNCERD) recommended that Korea's image as a "homogenous country" should be diminished. This recommendation encapsulates efforts to abolish racial and gender discrimination while promoting equality and inclusion. Since then, South Korea has made progress in incorporating diversity into TV series. For example, JTBC's popular K-drama *Itaewon Class* (Jo, 2020) features a Black character and a transgender character, while KBS's *When the Camellia Blooms* (Kim, 2019) includes a Western woman, among others.

Such inclusion of diverse characters reflects the notion of a globalized and modern Korea. However, while this inclusion of racial and gender diversity in K-dramas marks significant progress in the Korean mediascape, the representation still often ascribes stereotypical attributes to the characters. In many cases, these characters assume peripheral roles in the dramas and have limited quantitative visibility.

More interestingly, the problematic representation also appears to apply to the frequently featured character of the grandmother. In many K-dramas, OFAs are often depicted as sidekicks with distorted images. For instance, while older adults are generally portrayed in media and literature as experiencing physical and cognitive decline associated with aging (McGuire, 2016; Rovner-Lev & Elias, 2020), OFAs face more pronounced ageist discrimination than their male counterparts regarding this decline. Such stereotypes are deeply entrenched in society and reinforced by the distorted portrayals of OFAs in media, as "these myths and stereotypes are transmitted from one generation to another in our language, humor and literature, and through all the media by which we perpetuate the knowledge, values and attitudes of our society" (Pratt, 1992, quoted in McGuire, 2016, p. 2606).

Beyond these distorted images of physical and cognitive ability, OFAs in K-dramas are also depicted as characters striving to uphold traditions within the household, which are often patriarchal in nature. One example of such traditions is memorial piety. In most cases, OFAs also serve as moral references, with their benevolence being a central trait. They instill moral values based on tradition or Confucian teachings and monitor their children and grandchildren to ensure adherence to socially accepted behaviors, particularly in relationships with parents, spouses, and children.

Often portrayed as conservative, OFAs reject trends popular among younger generations, such as non-marital cohabitation and public displays of affection, viewing these actions as socially and morally unacceptable. Instead, they value the past and strive to pass these values to future generations. These common depictions of OFAs in K-dramas align with findings from Hungwe et al. (2023), who analyzed the ageist portrayal of older adults in the Zimbabwean novel *We Need New Names*.

However, throughout the course of the drama, Gil Jung-Gan's actions go counter to the prevalent representation of OFAs in K-dramas. Some parts, however, still pertain to the family relationship that serves as a common theme in Korean romantic-comedy series and which reifies her position as the grandmother of the family. The first episode of the drama introduces Gil Jung-Gan's character as the oldest member of the family, which is marked by her sitting in the seat usually occupied by the head of the family or grandfather. She is depicted as someone who has been estranged from her husband due to a long period of no contact and unknown disappearance. Interestingly, this particular scene also raises a question of social injustice toward women. Gil Jung-Gan's sitting in the middle of the table is only possible in her husband's absence. In the East Asian

tradition, seating order based on hierarchy is prevalent (You, 2022). The older male adult usually takes the most honorable seat, while the rest sit in the order of age—including the OFA. This simple scene, depicting the reservation of a seat of honor solely for an aging woman in the absence of a man, illustrates the peripherality of OFA.

Gil Jung-Gan does not exhibit any infirmity or debilitating physical or cognitive decline. She is portrayed as a resilient and active woman who frequently leaves her house to pursue her goals. For example, in her pursuit of a romantic relationship, she regularly visits her boyfriend's café. When her boyfriend—who is also an older adult—faces challenges, she steps in to help him. Her assistance is evident throughout the drama. For instance, in episodes 5 and 7, Gil Jung-Gan helps him address a voice-phishing fraud issue. In episode 9, she protects him from a rude and misogynistic man who cuts in line and makes a discriminatory comment, saying that old people should stay at home rather than visiting an amusement park. This instance can be interpreted as a violation of the age equality discourse. Gil Jung-Gan's act of protecting her boyfriend challenges the socially constructed image of OFAs as vulnerable individuals who require protection, particularly from men.

Furthermore, Gil Jung-Gan is depicted as the more financially dominant character than her boyfriend. This is one important aspect that should be highlighted in the drama. As Gammon (2023) notes, K-dramas have traditionally emphasized romance in women's lives by portraying men as financially and professionally dominant. This male-centric dominance is inconsistent with feminist ideology, which seeks to dismantle patriarchal structures. However, Gil Jung-Gan's financial dominance over her boyfriend in the drama signifies a gradual shift toward a more inclusive and equitable representation.

The effort to portray OFA as dominant, significant, not peripheral, assertive, agentive, independent, and not bound by men stems from the global and local rise of feminist movement (Gammon, 2023; J. Kim, 2019). In her discussion of female heroines in Korean cinema, Sim (2020) addresses how the global and local feminist movement in South Korea has influenced the trend of having female heroines on screen—despite some twisted imagery. Her commentary on the feminist movement in South Korea and its relation to screen representation holds true for K-dramas, where, recently, a substantial number of female protagonists no longer hold peripheral roles and have pitiable narratives. However, the same account may not be true for OFAs, who are still portrayed in a stigmatizing manner and have limited quantitative visibility. Hence, Gil Jung-Gan's depiction as a non-pitiable protagonist is a sign that feminist influence has begun appearing and becoming stronger in K-dramas. On the other side of the coin, as K-dramas have become more massive and attracted a wider range of audiences, K-drama production incorporates feminist values to appeal to international audiences. With the help of the internet and streaming platforms, such values become accessible and not bound by censorship. It must be noted that *Strong Woman Gang Nam-Soon* aired through JTBC, a cable channel, and Netflix, a streaming platform, which are not susceptible to government regulation and censorship like their terrestrial counterparts. As Han (2022) states, "the proliferation of cable channels in the last few decades has enabled greater experimentation with genres and programming with risqué content, particularly expanding the representational logics of race, ethnicity, and gender" (p. 2). Han's statement here represents the current trend in K-dramaland, where female characters have gradually gained prominence. All of Baek Mi-Kyung's critically acclaimed female-centric dramas, including *Strong Woman Gang Nam-Soon*, were aired through cable channels and streaming platforms, such as Netflix. This enabled each drama to be experimental in genres and, undoubtedly, representation. However, what remains debatable is the politics of representation of OFA. It is in light of the influx of feminist ideologies and movements that *Strong Woman Gang Nam-Soon* could experiment with the representation of the under-represented OFA. Hence, Gil Jung-Gan's representation as an agentive OFA who is against the traditionally constructed aging womanhood could be seen as a condition that signals Western modernity, as well as modern South Korea (Boman, 2022). It also demonstrates the intersection with the local

feminist movement and response to global feminist intervention (J. Kim, 2019). This is facilitated by broadcast through cable channels and streaming platforms, enabling a significant outflow of transnational Korean content (Chandra, 2022; Ju, 2020).

### **Principles of Agentive and Independent OFA**

In addition to exploring Confucianism and physical appearance in the depiction of OFA, it is imperative to assess the principles guiding Gil Jung-Gan's actions and motivations. This deeper evaluation helps to comprehend her portrayal as a dynamic and influential character in the series.

The series foregrounds the first principle, which reflects the real world. In the drama, Gil Jung-Gan is depicted as a retired woman who toiled in her earlier years to provide for her family. Such reflects the real world in that OFA is retired or no longer engaged in any corporal work or physical labor. However, it must be noted that her retirement does not result in an immediate depiction of a 'homebody'. Instead, she is depicted as a successful aging woman in her later life, as indicated by her appearance, activity, and ability to help her community and her love interest. This portrayal is significant as it reflects a more realistic and empowering image of aging women, challenging stereotypes and emphasizing their ongoing contributions to society. In many K-dramas, OFA are typically depicted as homebodies who do not engage in activities outside the home. By presenting Gil Jung-Gan as an active and engaged member of her community, the series promotes diversity and inclusion, showcasing that older women can lead dynamic and fulfilling lives post-retirement. This approach not only reflects real-world dynamics but also encourages a broader, more inclusive representation of aging women in media.

The second principle relates to women as lead protagonists. As Tindale (2021) emphasizes, to be a protagonist, screen time and dialogue should be more devoted to the female character. In the drama, Gil Jung-Gan has substantially more screen time and dialogue compared to her love interest. Devoting more screen time and dialogues to her allows her character to be more developed and explorative, expanding the opportunity for women's voices to be heard and for them to gain significance in K-dramas.

In relation to the third principle—that is, women are considered young at 40—Gil Jung-Gan's character is described as a 66-year-old woman, and her daughter, Hwang Geum-Ju (played by renowned actress Kim Jung-Eun), is 44 years old. Both Gil Jung-Gan and her daughter are the lead protagonists of the drama and have considerably large amounts of screen time and dialogue. Tindale (2021) notes that people over 60 only make up 3.5% of leading characters. Although her study focuses on Australian films, similar conditions can also be traced to K-dramaland, where preference toward young actors and characters is overwhelmingly significant. Most K-dramas tell stories about young people in love, which is also highlighted in one of the lines spoken by Gil Jung-Gan (refer to the introductory quotation of this article). K-dramas frequently cast female actors in their 40s and 50s as main lead protagonists, with renowned names like Kim Hee-Ae, Kim Nam-Joo, Kim Hye-Soo, and others receiving offers for leading roles. However, opportunities for actors over 60 are still comparatively scarce in the industry. Veteran actors such as Kim Hye-Ja, Na-Moon-Hee, Oscar-winning Yun Youh-Jung, Kim Hae-Sook, Go Doo-Shim, and Lee Hye-Young are perhaps the only older female actors who play leading characters in K-dramas. With Gil Jung-Gan, played by Kim Hae-Sook as the protagonist in her 60s, *Strong Woman Gang Nam-Soon* expands the representation of OFA in K-dramas. Hence, similar to the small 3.5% percentage of casting OFA as protagonists in Australian cinema (Tindale, 2021), Gil Jung-Gan is a part of very few OFA leading characters in K-drama land. This fulfills the principle of considering women in their 40s and beyond as youthful and capable protagonists, challenging the prevalent trend of casting much younger actors in leading roles.



Principle four—women as capable, complex characters who determine their own actions and the narrative arc of the story—is evident in Gil Jung-Gan's motivation and actions. As an illustration, she is someone who toiled to establish her own restaurant and subsequently nurtured its growth into a prosperous venture alongside her daughter. Interestingly, the narrative of her journey toward success omits any significant involvement of her husband, solidifying her portrayal as an autonomous and proactive figure. It must be noted, however, that Gil Jung-Gan had a work-related goal when she was young. As she ages, her goal becomes personal, which aligns with Tindale's (2021) statement that female characters tend to have personal goals rather than work-related ones. Her personal goal is to be in a relationship with a man she is interested in, a condition that is viewed as socially and culturally inappropriate for OFA because romance is not prioritized for people of her age category. The use of romance between older adults in this drama is an interesting creative choice and a representational strategy that aims to fight against the stigmatized later-life romantic relationship. It is representational for its use in establishing Gil Jung-Gan as an agentive, independent, and intrinsically motivated—a facet generally absent in the representation of OFA in K-dramas.

Principle five—women at work—is established in Gil Jung-Gan's prior job as a restaurant owner before her retirement. However, it's important to acknowledge that Gil Jung-Gan's retirement does not automatically pigeonhole her as a homemaker or childcare provider for her children, as is often portrayed in K-dramas. This phenomenon, commonly referred to as '*halma*,' is prevalent in the genre (Jeon & Walker, 2022). However, in the case of Gil Jung-Gan, her retirement and age do not necessarily define her character trajectory. Rather, she is actively helping others who need her superhuman power. Her post-retirement activities also manifest the second principle: women as the lead protagonists.

However, *Strong Woman Gang Nam-Soon* falls short of fulfilling principles six and seven. Principle six, which advocates for women to be depicted in their occupational roles rather than solely as homemakers or caregivers, is not fully realized in Gil Jung-Gan's character. Instead, this principle is exemplified through the character of Hwang Geum-Ju, Gil Jung-Gan's daughter, who is depicted as a working woman in her 40s. Gil Jung-Gan's character does not adhere to principle six as she is currently not engaged in formal employment; however, she assumes multiple significant life roles, including that of a mother, grandmother, lover, and protector.

Similarly, principle seven, which emphasizes the portrayal of women in leadership positions, is only partially realized in the drama. Gil Jung-Gan does not hold a leadership role in her professional life, further deviating from principle seven. Once again, it is her daughter, Hwang Geum-Ju, who fulfills this principle. However, despite not occupying a formal leadership position, Gil Jung-Gan becomes a figure of reliance and protection for many due to her superhuman abilities, as demonstrated in episode 16.

Principle eight—pertaining to depicting women as flawed and imperfect—is evident in her pursuit of a romantic relationship. In most K-dramas, women over 65 who assume the role of a grandmother have often been portrayed as morally upright, virtuous, principled, conservative, benevolent, and past-oriented. However, Gil Jung-Gan does not follow this convention. Despite her marital status, she boldly pursues a new romantic relationship and engages in a sexual affair. These actions signify her personal goals and motivation but do not conform to the conservative, traditional views of how a grandmother should act. This depiction of Gil Jung-Gan as a socio-culturally imperfect individual reinforces her agentive quality, accentuating how she is not bound by tradition.

Principle nine—which states that the ending should provide more than two options (marriage and death)—is reflected in how Gil Jung-Gan does not remarry or die at the end of the series. Instead, Gil Jung-Gan is seen entering a room crowded with older adults and a group of people trying to scam them. She fights them using her superhuman power and commits herself to protect her fellow older adults from scams in the future.

Lastly, the tenth principle necessitates that a series should aim more than just passing the Bechdel Test, which includes the appearance of at least two female characters, all of whom have names and talk about something more than a man (Tindale, 2021). The series is centered around three generations of women: Gil Jung-Gan, Hwang Geum-Ju, and Gang Nam-Soon. When they unite, their conversations span diverse topics, from confronting drug dealers to leveraging their extraordinary abilities to aid the vulnerable, among other endeavors. Nevertheless, these aspects should not be the limit. Tindale (2021) advocates for positioning women as the narrative leaders, asserting that they should occupy the central role, with their actions and motivations guiding the paths of other characters. In fact, the intergenerational characters in *Strong Woman Gang Nam-Soon* navigate the story because all of the main female protagonists have their own narratives and are driven by goals. Their narratives and goals become the center of the entire story.

As most of the principles are fulfilled in Gil Jung-Gan's character development, it is safe to conclude that her representation does not comply with the socially constructed standards of OFA. Such a representation, I argue, serves as a social precept of being an agentive and independent OFA.

### **Beauty and Successful Aging Discourse**

In the contemporary era, the worth of women is sometimes reduced to physical appearance and beauty, which are mostly culturally perceived based on the sets of constructed social norms (Raisborough et al., 2022). The phenotypic values of women may be instrumental in certain contexts, such as work. However, these values may diminish as they age, and OFAs might gradually devalue. When beauty and youthfulness serve as a touchstone, some OFAs who are able to age gracefully and act in ways analogous to youthful acts may find themselves being valued and, perhaps, benefit from aging (Tortajada et al., 2018). On the contrary, OFAs who are not able to fit in or embody the societal norms of 'being youthful at an older age' or reach the social standard of 'successful aging' may face the repercussions. An example of the repercussion is public invisibility because changing appearance is considered shameful and reluctance (Devi & Samanta, 2019). The reverberation of failed aging is also evident in the study conducted by Beery and Swayze (2023), who found that gendered ageism—which is the most negative for OFA—could result in diminished opportunities and micro-aggressions. Most of the time, a coping strategy generated by the detrimental effect of the intersection between age and gender is the effort exerted to improve physical appearance. Such an effort is conspicuously reinforced by the prevalent depiction of the power of attractive, youthful, and beautiful appearance in media, especially advertisements, which mostly prefer younger women as they are perceived as the ideal attractiveness, youthfulness, and beauty (Eisend, 2022).

In representing Gil Jung-Gan as an agentive and strong OFA, the series resorts to using fashion as a means to frame her. This is in line with the idea of Jerslev (2018), who delineates that agelessness, as substantiated in the public persona of Jane Fonda—one of the most prominent older female celebrities in the United States—is particularly indicated by voluptuous hair, wrinkle-free appearance, and glamor. In the drama, Gil Jung-Gan frequently appears with voluptuous hair and glamorous fashion and uses makeup to fade her wrinkles. Her appearance goes counter to how aging women are usually represented in K-dramas. Most aging women in K-dramas are depicted with white hair, which is a thrifty and modest fashion choice. Not only is her appearance indicative of her social class, the reliance on physical appearance 'successfully' distinguishes her from many OFAs in relation to the successful aging discourse. This is especially evident in episode 16, in which the contrast between successful and unsuccessful aging can be clearly identified. The reliance also attests to the statement that third-agers, the age category of people over 65 and which Gil Jung-Gan belongs, "while acknowledging old age, are likely to prefer to live at a considerable physical and psychological distance from it" (Gilleard & Higgs, 2000, quoted in Jerslev, 2018, p. 6).

Gil Jung-Gan's capitalization on attractive appearance supports the notion that attractiveness is gendered (Kukkonen et al., 2024). They argue that attractiveness unequalizes individuals because women tend to be more perceptive of their appearance as a result of unequal outcomes of appearance, especially socioeconomic outcomes. Consequently, women are more prone to evaluation regarding aesthetic standards than men. For example, attractiveness is a prerequisite for certain jobs. Thus, women who, based on socially constructed standards of beauty and attractiveness, do not possess such qualities may be disqualified for the jobs. Such a case can also be applied to OFAs. They often have to appear attractive and youthful to be called successful third-agers. Their attractiveness is negotiated within social fields and by the wider and larger discourse of power—which results in dichotomization or differentiation, marginalization, and if anything, micro-aggression. Hence, although Gil Jung-Gan uses physical appearance as a form of performative symbolic resistance toward the disempowering discourse that undermines her worth, it has to be understood that her feminine and glamorous appearance is a byproduct of inherent systemic gendered discrimination ingrained in the societal practices which dictate how women should dress to be acceptable by the public. Worse, the same systemic gendered discrimination stimulates the idea that OFAs have to look 'youthful' to be valued.

Furthermore, Gil Jung-Gan's appearance conforms to the 'successful aging' discourse, which is created as a combatting weapon against disempowerment toward older adults. In the series, 'successful aging'—which manifests in active social engagement, strength, agency, and consumption (Jerslev, 2018)—can be seen in how Gil Jung-Gan still has the strength to enjoy playful dates with her boyfriend in an amusement park, dress up to look young and decide about her own romantic journey despite opposition from her family. Nevertheless, the discourse of 'successful aging' has been debatable, especially its outcome. While some OFAs may successfully have a good appearance as evidence of consumption in old age, act with agency, become active, and maintain a strong physique, some other OFAs may not be able to do so. Hence, according to Kydd et al. (2018), the said discourse could dichotomize between those who can and those who cannot age successfully, potentially effectuating intergenerational ageism—although they particularly suggest further research on the tension between the two cohorts should be done. In episode 16, two cohorts, Gil Jung-Gan and another fellow older adults—are juxtaposed to demonstrate the dichotomization. When Gil Jung-Gan uses her superhuman power to save her fellow older adults, Gil Jung-Gan is represented as an active, consumptive, resilient, agentive, and physically strong OFA, complemented by her glamorous looks. Others are represented as weak older adults who are prone to scams. Consequently, while Gil Jung-Gan's representation may be perceived as an effort to combat the pervasive negative views toward OFA, the unequal representation of other OFAs in the drama may give rise to the victimization of OFAs who fail to age successfully. Hence, it can be said that the politics of representation in the series is evident.

## CONCLUSION

Stereotypical depictions of OFAs in cultural products must be examined from a broader perspective. The perception of OFAs is a long-standing construct, passed down through generations, deeply ingrained in societal practices, and reflected in cultural norms. To address this issue and bring about gradual change, reform is necessary. Borrowing from Monk-Payton (2017), I argue that *Strong Woman Gang Nam-Soon* offers a form of "televisual reparation" for OFAs who have frequently been subject to gendered ageism in K-dramas. The series provides a fresh perspective, portraying an OFA character unbound by traditional or Confucian expectations.

By appealing to both local and global audiences, the show challenges male-dominated narratives and disempowering portrayals of OFAs. Gil Jung-Gan's portrayal as an independent and agentive OFA counters traditional stereotypes and aligns with feminist ideals that advocate for diverse and dynamic representations

of aging women. This highlights the need to move beyond narrow views of OFAs and embrace more pluralistic perspectives.

The goal of this critical discussion is to highlight the significance of representing OFA against the traditional and conservative views of them. If Lee and Yi (2020) assert that K-pop performances by *ssen-unnies* can engender inclusivity, which allows women's voices to be heard, this commentary raises a particular question of whether there is actually room for OFA to 'perform' as agents for equality. The obsession with youthfulness, driven by neoliberalism, has often silenced OFA, potentially causing harm. *Strong Woman Gang Nam-Soon* exemplifies how a K-drama can shape and reshape perceptions of age and gender. However, despite research showing young audiences' identification with marginalized groups in *Itaewon Class* (Jo, 2020) and a shift toward progressive views, it remains uncertain whether young viewers see characters like Gil Jung-Gan in *Strong Woman Gang Nam-Soon* as positive representations of agentive, independent OFA. This analysis suggests a need for future research on audience reception of such portrayals in K-dramas.

The televisual reparation in the series suggests several practical ways for the industry (e.g., media producers and policymakers) to promote positive and diverse portrayals of OFAs. Creating content that showcases OFAs in varied and complex roles, highlights their contributions to society, and reflects their diverse experiences and personal stories is pivotal for promoting inclusion. Achieving this requires actively seeking writers, directors, and actors who are older adults themselves to authentically capture the realistic yet positive experiences of aging communities. By taking these steps, the industry can help shift societal perceptions and foster a more inclusive and respectful portrayal of older women.

Still, *Strong Woman Gang Nam-Soon* falls short of bringing about significant societal change, as the series does not position an OFA as the main lead. Nevertheless, Gil Jung-Gan's storyline offers a refreshing departure from the typical portrayal of OFAs in K-dramas, granting her agency and visibility often denied to women in her demographic. This deviation suggests that the series could serve as a catalyst for a new wave of K-dramas that place non-stereotypical, independent OFAs at the forefront of narratives. Rather than confining them to supporting or secondary roles, future K-dramas could feature OFAs as central protagonists, promoting greater representation and diversity in the genre.

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