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Queer Coding in Squid Game: A Semiotic and Queer Theory Analysis of Hidden LGBTQ+ Subtexts

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Abstract - This research analyzes how the Squid Game series utilizes queer coding as a semiotic strategy to insert LGBTQ+ representations in the context of South Korean culture which is still dominated by heteronormative norms. Using a qualitative approach and visual semiotic analysis based on the theories of gender performativity (Butler), cultural myth (Barthes), and the concept of representation (Stuart Hall), this study identifies four forms of queer coding: predatory aesthetics, ambivalent queer heroism, gender ambiguous bodies, and symbolic resistance. The findings show that queer coding in Squid Game is ambivalent and can challenge patriarchal norms, while simultaneously reproducing stereotypes and deviance. The analysis also reveals that queer coding operates in a tug-of-war between political resistance, global market demands, and local cultural censorship. This research contributes to the global discourse on LGBTQ+ representations in non-Western popular media, and opens up space for critical reflection on how queer aesthetics are commodified in contemporary entertainment capitalism.

Keywords: Queer coding, Squid Game, LGBTQ+ representation, Visual Semiotics, South Korean culture

Introduction

The global phenomenon of Squid Game seasons 1-3 (2021-2025) has attracted widespread attention around the world. Not only as a product of South Korean popular culture, but also as a tool to critique capitalism, social stratification, and tensions arising from the pressures of neoliberalism (Akyildiz & Şesen, 2022; Kim & Park, 2022).

The series offers more than just a narrative of social injustice; it also creates a space to explore more complex dimensions of identity, including representations of gender and sexuality. However, one aspect that has received less attention is the

portrayal of queerness in Squid Game's narrative and visual aesthetic, which introduces what is known as queer coding.

Queer coding is a practice in media where queer identities are inserted through visual symbols, character design, and story dynamics that do not explicitly state this, but still convey messages related to non-normative sexuality (Piluso, 2023). In the context of South Korean media, LGBTQ+ representation is still severely limited by heteronormative dominance, both culturally and regulatively (JinJu et al., 2023; Nan, 2023). In the context of Squid Game, queer coding emerges through gendered and sexually ambiguous characters, visual

spaces that resemble voyeuristic fantasies, and narratives of power that construct the body as an object and a terrain of struggle for meaning.

In Korean media that is still restricted by regulations and stigmatization of LGBTQ+ people, queer coding becomes a strategic and political representational strategy, even though it risks being commodified.

This phenomenon signifies the dilemma of queer representation in global media, where on the one hand there is an increase in visibility, but on the other hand the representation is often ambivalent and trapped in the logic of commodification. Queer identities become hyper-visible yet remain marginalized, presented to stimulate global market attention without actually disrupting the dominant social order (Kong, 2019; Whitten, 2023). As Lacey notes (Lacey, 2023), mainstream media often present LGBTQ+ characters within narrative frameworks that elicit empathy but remain subordinated.

This tension becomes even more complex when series like Squid Game must negotiate between local cultural sensitivities and international market demands. Previous studies on Squid Game have mostly focused on its critique of systemic violence and the logic of capitalism (Akyildiz & Şeşen, 2022; JinJu et al., 2023), but rarely have they systematically examined how queer coding is strategically used as a semiotic device.

Queer subtexts are often treated as incidental or merely symbolic, rather than an integral part of the narrative and its aesthetics. As a result, there is a gap in understanding how non-Western media negotiate LGBTQ+ representations amidst conflicting global and local power structures, while analysis of non-Western media, particularly in the East Asian context, is scarce in the existing literature.

Problems arise when such representations are read simply as 'progress' without questioning the context of production, aesthetics, and ideology surrounding them. Many previous studies

have focused on socio-economic critiques in Squid Game, such as brutal capitalism, class inequality, and critiques of neoliberalism (Akyildiz & Şeşen, 2022; Kim & Park, 2022), but aspects of queer representation have not received equal attention. In fact, gender identity and sexuality in Squid Game do not exist in an ideological vacuum, but are part of a complex and politically charged representational dynamic. An alternative approach is needed to read LGBTQ+ representation not only from the aspect of quantitative visibility, but also how visibility is symbolically and cinematically constructed.

A visual semiotics approach allows the deciphering of non-explicit representational strategies such as queer coding, while Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity (Butler, 1990) helps explain how gender is not a fixed identity, but the result of repeated and socially constructed practices. In addition, Stuart Hall's framework of representation (Hall, 1997) asserts that meanings are never neutrally present, but rather produced within relations of power. Thus, queer coding is not only an aesthetic issue, but also a representational practice in a discursive field full of ideological tensions.

This research maps queer coding strategies in the Squid Game series as an ambivalent form of symbolic representation: on the one hand challenging South Korean heteronormative norms, on the other subject to the aesthetics and economics of global capitalism. By combining visual semiotics (Barthes & Howard, 1957), representation theory (Hall, 1997), and gender performativity (Butler, 1990), this study builds a comprehensive analytical framework to understand how queer narratives are shaped, negotiated, and politicized in international media.

Studies on queer in Korean media have mostly focused on independent films or explicit characters, while queer coding in mainstream products has not been systematically discussed. In fact, queer coding has major implications for how

LGBTQ+ visibility is negotiated in spaces constrained by censorship, stigma, and the logic of the global market. Squid Game is an ideal example because it sits at a crossroads between conservative cultural production and global progressive market acceptance.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical approach used in this study combines Roland Barthes' semiotics and Judith Butler's performativity theory. Barthes' semiotic approach offers an important framework for reading Squid Game as a cultural text full of signs and meanings (Barthes, 2021). Barthes distinguishes between denotative (literal level) and connotative (ideological level) meanings, which allows for a deeper reading of the symbols, colors, and narrative dynamics in the series (Li, 2024).

Visual symbols such as costumes, colors, and spaces in Squid Game represent social hierarchies and power relations, while implying queer identities through non-verbal signs (Tutar, 2022; Witera et al., 2021). Queer theory, particularly through the concept of performativity (Butler, 1990; Kerrigan, 2020), views gender and sexuality as repeated cultural constructions rather than essential identities.

In the media, queer representations often emerge through implicit coding as a form of resistance to heteronormative norms, and can reinforce existing stereotypes (Ferreday, 2022; Iskander, 2021; Whitten, 2023). In this context, queer theory helps to understand the absence or invisibility of queer identities, which creates interpretive space for the audience to explore hidden meanings. These theories are used to answer the problem of the use of queer coding in Squid Game.

How are queer coding strategies constructed in the Squid Game series as a form of ambivalent LGBTQ+ representation in the context of conservative South Korean culture and the global media market? So as to show visual and narrative elements to implicitly insert queer identities? And show how these queer

representations challenge heteronormative norms in South Korea while still operating within the confines of conservative culture.

Material and Methodology

This research uses an interpretive qualitative approach to examine how queer coding operates as a representational strategy in the Squid Game series. This approach was chosen because it is able to explore hidden meanings, ideological ambiguities, and social constructions contained in visual and narrative representations. The object of study in this research is the series Squid Game (2021-2025), produced by Hwang Dong-hyuk and released by Netflix. The series was chosen because it displays strong visual and symbolic complexity, and holds the potential for implicit queer representation in a South Korean cultural space that is still dominantly heteronormative.

The analysis process was carried out through thorough and repeated viewing of the series to identify scenes that contain indications of queer coding, both in the form of character relationships, visual expressions, cinematic styles, and symbolic narratives. The researcher then examined the scenes using visual semiotic analysis as formulated by Roland Barthes, which distinguishes between denotative meaning (what is visible) and connotative meaning (what is ideologically and culturally interpreted).

This semiotic analysis is combined with Stuart Hall's theory of representation to understand how the media constructs queer meanings within the framework of symbolic power relations, as well as Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, which views gender as a social construct that can be negotiated and disrupted through representation.

To maintain interpretive validity, this research uses theoretical triangulation and logical connections between thematic categories found. The analysis is done contextually and critically on how queer representation in the series is closely related to local cultural norms, state censorship,

and the demands of the global market. With this approach, the research is expected to answer the overarching research question: how queer coding is constructed in Squid Game, and how this strategy operates ambivalently in creating LGBTQ+ visibility in South Korean visual culture.

In the analysis process, every visual and narrative cue that indicates queer coding is recorded in detail, including the location of the scene, duration, characters involved, denotative description (what is explicitly seen), as well as the narrative context of the scene. This recording follows the principle of thick description as described by Perusset (Perusset, 2020), to ensure that the meanings that emerge are analyzed in depth and are not detached from the surrounding socio-cultural context.

The analysis was conducted in three main stages. First, the researcher identified all signs indicating queer coding, both in visual and symbolic forms. This process considered South Korea's conservative cultural context, the existence of media censorship, and the influence of global capitalism (Kong, 2019; Reed, 2018). Second, the researcher examines the signs in the social and industrial context of the media.

The aim is to see whether queer representations in Squid Game challenge or conform to heteronormative norms (Charvel et al., 2025; Goldberg et al., 2020). Third, we interpreted the deeper meanings of the signs using Roland Barthes' myth theory (Barthes & Howard, 1957). This approach helps to see how queer coding is used not only as a visual style, but also as a political and commercial strategy that reflects values such as masculinity, alienation, or social deviance (Comer, 2021; Whitten, 2023)

Result and Discussion

The Squid Game series (2021-2025) not only presents a dystopian narrative of social inequality, but also contains complex visual representations, including subtle but significant queer coding practices. Through its cinematic aesthetics, the series inserts visual and narrative signs that indicate the

presence of queer identities without the need for explicit mention.

In this study, four main forms of queer coding representations were found: (1) representations of queer characters as predators, (2) ambiguous depictions of queer heroism, (3) subversive aesthetics that challenge gender and body norms, and (4) agency of queer characters against heteronormative domination.

These four categories are analyzed in depth within the context of conservative South Korean culture and global media discourse, to understand how queer representations in Squid Game work ambivalently-while simultaneously challenging and perpetuating dominant ideologies. The findings were analyzed using Barthes' semiotic framework (Barthes & Howard, 1957) and Butler's performativity theory (Butler, 1990), and contextualized with recent literature on queer representation.

The results identify four main themes of queer coding in the Squid Game series that are revealed through visual, symbolic, and cinematic language. Each theme is analyzed through theoretical approaches from Butler (gender performativity), Barthes (visual myth), and Stuart Hall (representation), and contextualized within conservative South Korean culture and the global media industry.

First, queer characters are presented as threats through predatory aesthetics that evoke visual discomfort. Second, queer heroism emerges ambivalently, challenging and affirming the dominant value system. Third, subversive body aesthetics are used to blur masculine-feminine boundaries. Fourth, queer agency is represented through symbolic resistance to heteronormative domination. Each theme is not only read visually, but also critiqued in a global ideological context, opening up debates on the relationship between resistance, stereotypes, and the commodification of queer identity in contemporary pop culture.

Queer as Predator

The representation of VIP characters

wearing animal masks with flamboyant tones and speaking in English is the most explicit visual finding related to queer coding in season 1. In one of the key scenes, one of the male VIPs approaches a young male character (Jun-ho) with sensual gestures and an exaggerated tone of voice. Her designs are exaggerated, her body is polished, and she comes across as a sexual predator in a power-play space.

Through Judith Butler's lens of gender

performativity (Butler, 1990), this character demonstrates how queer expression is framed as exaggerated, theatrical and unnatural, a strategy that reinforces the construction of gender as something to be performed. Within the framework of Barthes (Barthes & Howard, 1957), this character is read as a devian symbol that threatens the heteronormative order within a competitive and masculine system.



Picture 1. VIP seducing the boy servant

While the portrayal of the VIP character in "Squid Game" as a queer predator reflects a problematic stereotype, it is important to recognize the potential of media to challenge this narrative. Filmmakers consciously present LGBTQIA+ characters in more diverse and authentic ways, because "they" are aware of how media can contribute to greater acceptance and understanding of sexual diversity.

This is consistent in the next two seasons, where the appearance of VIPs is repeated and portrayed as an exclusive, luxurious community with the power to be at the top of the game chain in the movie "Squid Game". In contrast to VIPs, players in Squid Game are depicted as representations of chess pieces in a game that can be easily managed and controlled.

South Korea's conservative cultural context also shapes the way queer coding is packaged, distancing itself from affirmative

representations in favor of hyperbolic and negative imagery, as reflected in other Korean media (Kong, 2019). This also reflects the legacy of queer representations in East Asian cinema that position LGBTQ+ characters as villains, predators, or comic relief. Critical reflection shows that queer coding in this theme contributes to long-standing stereotypes that position queer characters as sources of moral distress or hidden threats. While it can be read as a critique of global power and patriarchal capitalism, this unsympathetic visualization further reinforces queer associations with violence, destructive pleasure, and alienation.

Queer Heroism

The character of Ali Abdul, a male migrant associated with loyalty, emotional vulnerability, and a conventionally non-masculine body, offers subtle but significant queer coding. He is not an

explicitly queer character, but his maternal gestures, gentle gaze, and submission to the Korean main character (Sang-woo) in season 1 suggest a relationship that transcends conventional masculinity.

Analysis using Butler's framework (Butler, 1990) highlights how Ali demonstrates a subordinate form of masculinity that is non-aggressive, soulful, and appears as "other" to the Korean masculine norm. In Judith Butler's view (Butler, 1990), this character operates in an ambivalent space: he is accepted for his function, but at the same time symbolically discarded for not conforming to the dominant norm.

For the next, Hyunju's character in the Squid Game series represents the concept of gender performativity and queer visibility, as articulated by Judith Butler (Butler, 1990). Through her actions and presentations, Hyunju challenges traditional

gender norms and stereotypes, embodying the complex interplay of femininity, authority, and queer identity. This portrayal not only subverts heteronormative expectations but also highlights the fluidity and agency inherent in gender performance.

In the scene where Hyunju uses female makeup and feminine gestures, this depiction is in line with Butler's theory of gender performativity, which states that gender is not an innate quality but rather a set of socially constructed actions and performances that are repeated over time (Prosser, 2022; Rocha, 2020). Her character's openness about being transgender, as seen when Young-mi calls her "Unni," further affirms her queer identity and challenges binary gender models, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of gender as fluid and performative (Muhlisian, 2024)



Picture 2. Hyunju starting the rebellion

Throughout the rebellion scene at the end of season two of Squid Game, Hyunju's character becomes one of the heroes who combines femininity with authority, Hyunju dismantles the stereotype of queer individuals as passive or subordinate, instead presenting a figure of strength and leadership (Dreysse, 2021). Hyunju's leadership and decisive actions in the play reject passive queer stereotypes, presenting transgender individuals with full agency

and ability (Nichols, 2019).

Her role as a mentor protector and her ability to teach and persuade others, such as instructing players on the use of weapons, demonstrates queer authority in traditionally masculine contexts, such as military settings (Gowlett, 2015). The combination of queer heroism with gender performativity in Hyunju's character challenges heteronormative norms while maintaining her non binary gender identity,

illustrating the potential for subversion and redefinition of gender roles (Shin, 2018).

The character of Hyunju in Squid Game season two offers a strong example of gender performativity and queer visibility, as Butler states, those who deconstruct hegemonic gender norms may face significant risks and social backlash (Rocha, 2020). While in the third season, Hyunju is still portrayed as a transgender figure who can be interpreted through the lens of heroism and queer resistance, as they challenge traditional heteronormative narratives. The majority of Hyunju's scenes highlight her protective and empathetic nature, her resistance to oppression, and her ultimate sacrifice, which can be seen as a form of ambiguous martyrdom.

These portrayals are in line with broader discourses on LGBTQ+ representation in media, where characters often embody complex identities and challenge societal norms. Hyunju's assistance to the weaker player in depicts queer heroism characterized by empathy and protection. This is in line with Ahmed's concept of queer heroism, which emphasizes the importance of empathy and protection in queer narratives (Klidzio et al., 2022).

Furthermore, Hyunju's confrontation with the man threatening the other players demonstrates queer resistance to heteronormative oppression. This reflects Butler's notion of resistance to social norms that marginalize queer identities (Ávila, 2015).

The consistency of the heroic and empathetic roles performed almost throughout seasons two and three by Hyunju, reaches an anticlimax when finally in scenes 15-17, where Hyunju helps a woman give birth while protecting her, then he argues violently with the other players to fight the oppression of the other two weaker characters and accidentally finds a way out that could have saved him, but he prefers to go back and save a grandmother and a young mother in labor, until finally he is killed by the father of the child he saved, this series of scenes depicts ambiguous

heroism as a tragic savior.

This is in line with Benshoff & Griffin's analysis of queer characters who often embody tragic heroism in media narratives (Ávila, 2015). Tragic savior stories are a common theme in queer media, where characters often face significant personal sacrifice for the greater good (Aston, 2024).

Hyunju's return to save another player who gets himself ultimately killed highlights queer altruism and self-sacrifice, culminating in him becoming a martyr. Doty's concept of queer martyrdom is evident here, as Hyunju's actions transcend personal safety for the welfare of the collective (Stang, 2021).

This theme of martyrdom is prevalent in queer narratives, where characters often face ultimate sacrifice, reflecting the harsh realities faced by LGBTQ+ individuals in a heteronormative world (Aston, 2024).

While these scenes highlight the complexities of queer heroism and resistance, it is important to consider the broader context of LGBTQ+ representations in the media, thus reinforcing the existence of an approved gender binary in society. Portrayals of queer characters often oscillate between empowerment and victimization, reflecting the dual realities faced by LGBTQ+ individuals.

In the ethnocentric and patriarchal social context of South Korea, characters like Ali and Hyunju present the discourse of racial and gender difference as deviation. This representation is in line with a global trend where minority characters are given empathetic roles, yet sacrificed to the narrative mainstream (Charvel et al., 2025).

Critical reflection on this theme shows how queer heroism in Squid Game is presented as a form of limited agency: it evokes sympathy, but is tragically erased. This creates a tension between visibility and erasure in mainstream media.

Subversive Aesthetics

The appearance of the pink uniformed guards in "Squid Game" serves as a

powerful symbol of queer gender signs, challenging traditional gender norms through color, choreography, and body discipline.

The use of pink, a color historically associated with femininity and deviation from hegemonic masculinity, is a deliberate choice that references the pink triangle, a symbol of queer oppression and resistance. The pink triangle, originally used to mark homosexual prisoners in Nazi concentration camps, has been reclaimed as a symbol of queer resistance.

This historical context enriches the symbolism of the pink uniform in the Squid

Game series, serving as an "interruptive symbol" that challenges hatred and oppression (Rorholm & Gambrell, 2019).

The use of pink in the guard uniforms can be seen as a visual metaphor for the resilience and hope of the LGBTQ+ community, as it disrupts traditional associations of masculinity and power (Rorholm & Gambrell, 2019).

The guards' pink uniforms disrupt the gender binary, similar to how queer aesthetics challenge traditional gender roles and offer diverse expressions of identity (Gunn et al., 2021).



Picture 3. The guards' pink uniform

This aesthetic choice, combined with the synchronized movements of the guards, highlights the performative nature of gender, as theorized by Judith Butler, and underscores the potential for queer resistance within the deeply embedded patriarchal framework of South Korean society.

The movement illustrates Butler's concept of gender performativity, where gender is seen as a series of repetitive actions rather than an innate quality (Selimoğlu, 2022).

The choreography exposes the artificiality of gender norms and highlights the potential for subversion within rigid heteronormative structures (Selimoğlu, 2022). Squid Game consistently portrays resistance to hegemonic masculinity through the scene where Song Gi-hun holds a baby, this scene presents an alternative form of masculinity that is gentle and empathetic, challenging the dominant and aggressive forms of masculinity typically

portrayed in the media (Jensen et al., 2023).

The act of care in this brutal setting resonates with the pink aesthetic of the guards, both of which offer a vision of masculinity that includes nurturing and inclusivity (Jensen et al., 2023).

In Korean cinema, this kind of representation is often encountered, as a normalization of the incongruity of color symbols with gender, opposing the use of certain colors together with aesthetics that typify one gender, thus creating gender bias. As such, this symbol represents ambiguity: it is free and not subject to society's norms of symbol agreement, but is ultimately sidelined in the narrative. This shows how subversive symbols can only exist temporarily in a system that upholds heteronormative order.

Queer Agency

Seong Gi-hun's own character, as the protagonist, manifests emotional expression, touching male closeness, and

dependence on social relations. Some of his gestures reverse the logic of hegemonic masculinity dominant in Korean culture.

In some scenes, he shows excessive empathy, cries openly, and shows emotional attachment to other male players. In Butler's view (Butler, 1990), this opens a space for masculine performativity that is not bound to violence, toughness, and domination. Barthes (Barthes & Howard, 1957) would see such gestures as a re-reading of the meaning of heroism-where the main character does not have to perform in a stereotypically masculine manner.

The Korean cultural context of hard-

working, silent and strong masculinity makes Gi-hun's character unique. He came to symbolize the changing way media imagined men in East Asian culture, and represented the global trend of emotional masculinity (Whitten, 2023). Critical reflection on this theme shows that queer coding does not always appear in the form of explicit LGBTQ+ characters.

It comes in the form of resistance to rigid gender roles. In this context, Squid Game opens up the possibility that queer agency can be interpreted through forms of empathy, vulnerability, and non-competitive relations between men.



Picture 4. Seong Gi-Hun

Besides Seong Gi-Hun, Noeul symbolizes rebellion against the system on the basis of empathy and justice. Noeul's character is told of trying to fight the men who oppress him to save a man who is a player in the Squid Game. The portrayal of No Eul in Squid Game as a queer-coded female sniper who negotiates with her superiors and then sets fire to the VIP room to save a man is a significant representation of queer agency and resistance to traditional gender norms.

This is in line with the idea that queer

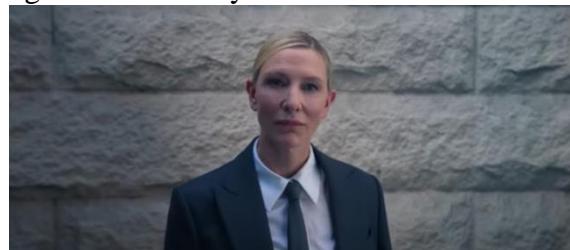
identities can challenge and redefine existing power structures by embodying non-traditional roles and actions (Bigé, 2023; de Faria & Modena, 2020). The act of burning down the VIP room symbolizes a rejection of the oppressive order represented by the elite, demonstrating queer rebellion and resistance. This is in line with the idea that queer individuals are not just victims but active agents of change against heteronormative power structures (Beaunoyer, 2023; de Faria & Modena, 2020).



Picture 5. The Sniper No-eul Scene

No Eul's character challenges the strong binary gender norms in South Korean culture by presenting a protective and authoritative figure, traits traditionally associated with masculinity. This representation is in line with broader discourses on gender fluidity and the rejection of binary gender roles, as discussed in queer ecology and feminist theory (Bigé, 2023; Lacey, 2023). The portrayal of No Eul as a figure of authority

and rebellion also reflects feminist themes of empowerment and leadership, where women are depicted as capable of making decisions and leading actions that challenge patriarchal structures (Santika, 2023; Sutanto, 2017). Often, queer characters are portrayed in ways that reinforce certain stereotypes or are limited to certain roles, which can undermine the diversity and complexity of queer identities.



Picture 6. The Women in man suit scene

In addition to Noeul's character, Squid Game provided closure by choosing a female character as a hint for the next season. That Squid Game will be in a different place with the representation of a woman in a black suit who looks masculine playing a game and hitting a man on the other side.

Female characters in games and media have historically been hypersexualized, often depicted with unrealistic body images and revealing clothing, which can lead to negative self-perceptions among women and girls (Chen, 2023; Jin, 2023).

The portrayal of women in the media as objects rather than subjects has become a pervasive issue, influencing society's

perception of gender roles and contributing to gender inequality (Chen, 2023; Pearce et al., 2020). In line with Noeul's character, the representation of masculine black-suited women in the hallways of Los Angles may provide closure by hinting at future narratives that continue to explore and expand on these themes.

The depiction of queer-coded scenes in Squid Game serves as a complex ideological terrain that reinforces and challenges heteronormative norms in South Korea. Through Barthes' semiotic analysis, these scenes are seen as carriers of ideological connotations carrying South Korean cultural myths, where styles of dress, gestures, and interactions bring to life stereotypes of queer criminalization

(Agarwal, Chinkey, 2022; Cabrera, 2023).

However, Butler's queer theory suggests that these representations also provide performative sites for identity(Cannon, 2020), allowing queer characters to challenge norms and invite critical reflection on existing societal structures(Walters, 2005). This duality in representation creates a dialectical relationship with dominant ideologies, offering both reinforcement of stereotypes and space for resistance(Sachar, 2024)

Overall, queer coding in Squid Game not only presents ambivalent visual representations, but also reflects the complexity of power ideologies in contemporary South Korean entertainment capitalism. The representation of queer-coded characters, ranging from predatory VIPs to emotional and empathetic protagonists, displays an ambiguity between resistance and reproduction of heteronormative norms. On the one hand, queer coding opens a gap in mainstream television narratives to insert gender and relational expressions that deviate from dominant norms. But on the other hand, this insertion often does not escape the trap of stereotypical aesthetics, where queer is associated with deviance, violence, or exoticism.

In ideological terms, queer coding in the Squid Game series reproduces the tension between agency and subordination. It shows how non-normative bodies are used as tools of dramatic effect in a globalized production system, but without sufficient transformative space to form a discourse of equal representation. South Korea's system of entertainment capitalism, as outlined by Whitten (Whitten, 2023), often adopts queer expressions to appeal to progressive and global markets, yet keeps them within the confines of consumable visuals, without transforming representational power structures. The gender aesthetic that emerges in these series foregrounds ambivalence: queer-coded characters appear powerful and emotional, yet are never the center of full agency.

This visualization marks a shift from

the representation of queers as 'funny' or 'hidden', towards ambiguous figures who play a symbolic role in the morality of the narrative, both as warnings and objects of empathy. The social implication of this pattern of queer coding is the creation of a more fluid space of representation, one that does not necessarily present LGBTQ+ identities in a literal way, but disrupts established gender boundaries. However, this space remains fragile as it relies on cinematic aesthetics shaped by market norms and South Korean national cultural censorship.

Therefore, for future visual productions, a more conscious approach to the politics of representation is needed. Filmmakers and visual creators should be more reflective of how queer coding is not simply an aesthetic strategy or dramatic tool, but rather part of a broader struggle for representation.

Queer narratives should be built not only through symbols of ambiguity, but also by providing character depth, narrative agency, and diversity of representation that goes beyond predator, victim, or deviant stereotypes. Thus, queer coding has subversive potential, but only if it is consciously used as an ideological practice that disrupts visual hierarchies and opens up alternative discourse spaces in global popular culture.

Conclusion

This research finds that queer coding in Squid Game is articulated through four main visual strategies: predatory aesthetics, ambivalent queer heroism, gender ambiguous bodies, and symbolic resistance. These four strategies operate semiotically in shaping characters and narratives that challenge the boundaries of normative representation amidst conservative South Korean culture.

However, the findings also show that queer coding in Squid Game is not entirely subversive. Instead, it often moves in an ambiguity between resistance to heteronormative norms and reproduction of established visual stereotypes. These

representations demonstrate the close entanglement between queer visibility, entertainment capitalism, and ideological control in contemporary visual production. As such, queer coding can be read as a complex ideological terrain, where aesthetics, identity politics and the global market are intertwined.

For future research, a cross-cultural exploration of queer coding in popular media from other non-Western countries is recommended to understand how the politics of queer representation is constructed in different local contexts.

Practically speaking, media creators and cultural policy makers need to consider more balanced and transformative representational strategies to promote LGBTQ+ inclusion without falling into patterns of exoticization or stereotyping. More reflective, diverse and political visual and narrative approaches are needed to build equitable representational spaces in global media culture.

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