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BAKALÁŘSKÁ DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE

Reprezentace sebevražd a duševních problémů v jihokorejské kinematografii

Representations of suicide and mental health problems in South Korean  
cinematography

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Prohlášení

Prohlašuji, že jsem diplomovou práci vypracovala samostatně a uvedla veškeré použité  
prameny a literaturu.

V Olomouci dne:.....

Podpis: .....

Anotace: Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá zobrazením problematiky sebevražd v současné jihokorejské kinematografii. Je důležité porozumět tomu, jak je tato problematika prezentována v médiích, abychom lépe pochopili vnímání a názorům společnosti na sebevraždu. Z tohoto důvodu jsem se zaměřila na populární současná díla prezentující toto téma, které v této práci analyzuji. Zaměřením se na konkrétní případ seriálu „Tomorrow“ se tato studie snaží získat cenné poznatky, které mohou přispět k probíhajícím diskusím o reprezentaci sebevražd a povědomí o duševním zdraví v populárních médiích, konkrétně v jihokorejských televizních dramatech.

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Abstract: This bachelor's thesis deals with the representation of the issue of suicide in contemporary South Korean cinematography. It is important to learn how the issue is presented in the media in order to better understand society's perception and opinions on the act of suicide. For this reason, I focused on popular contemporary works presenting this topic, which I analyse in this work. By focusing on the specific case of a series “Tomorrow” this study strives to generate valuable knowledge that can contribute to the ongoing discussions on suicide representation and mental health awareness in popular media, specifically in South Korean television dramas.

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## Editing note

In this bachelor's thesis, the Revised Romanization is used, with the usual exceptions (established names). The Korean expressions are written in cursive in English translation and the transcribed expression is given in brackets. The names of persons are written only in transcription.

## 1. Introduction

Suicide may be considered as one of the most painful actions people can commit. As such, there are even countries that go as far as to consider suicide a crime. South Korea may not be one of those countries, however. Suicide is an act that is very hurtful for the person committing it, as well as people around them and with the right approach, it can be prevented through various actions.

In this, thesis I focus mainly on the act of suicide, as well as on depression, since depression is one of the leading causes for the act. In first part of the thesis, I go through terminology and data about suicide. In the second part I analyse suicide representation in South Korean TV series *Tomorrow (Naeil)*.

My main reason and motivation for choosing this topic is to shed light on the importance of proper representation and understanding of this topic in our daily lives. Additionally, I find this topic interesting on a personal level. As someone diagnosed with depression and even with history of considering suicide myself, this topic is very close to me, and I believe that it is something that should be talked about more openly to prevent them.

Suicides in South Korea are a serious problem. According to the WHO (Republic of Korea, n.d.), in 2020 suicide was leading cause of death for age groups from 5 to 54 and was fifth most common cause of death in general. In time, when almost everybody consumes some kind of media, it is therefore important, how a topic is introduced to the population.

Confucian culture tends to view suicide as personal failure, which led to stigmatization and other related problems, like difficulty to seek help, or lack of understanding and awareness of suicidal behaviour as a societal issue. Social media contribute to people's views on many topics, and through the lens of media are people able to help others understand these topics. That can lead to improvement in awareness and understanding and as for the topic of suicides, the right representation can show the ones who struggle, that there is no shame in seeking help.

When certain groups are underrepresented or misrepresented in the media, it can contribute to harmful stereotypes and discrimination, for example life with mental disorders, non-heteronormative minorities, or STDs. On the other hand, when diverse groups are accurately and positively represented in the media, it can promote understanding and acceptance of those groups. This also applies to the representation of suicides and mental health problems.



When speaking about suicide, we need to understand that this phenomenon is usually caused by some sort of outer pressure, like stress or socio-cultural influence. Here we can take an example in South Korean schools. According to Bax (2016) bullying and violence are sad part of many societies, and South Korea is no exception, and it is a reason for several cases of so-called bully-suicide.

I worked with various sources, including statistics published by WHO, articles about psychology, recommendations for suicide prevention articles and also articles from South Korean newspapers about related topics.

## 2. Depression

Depression belongs among common causes of suicide. There are many variables, and, in many cases, it can be hard to even recognise symptoms of depression.

Depression refers to a wide range of mental health problems characterised by the absence of a positive affect (a loss of interest and enjoyment in ordinary things and experiences), low mood and a range of associated emotional, cognitive, physical, and behavioural symptoms. (NICE, 2022)

According to S. Chand and Arif (2023), the persistent feeling of sadness and loss of interest is a mood disorder classified as the depressive disorders and can be distinguished into disruptive mood dysregulation disorder; major depressive disorder; persistent depressive disorder (dysthymia); premenstrual dysphoric disorder; and depressive disorder due to another medical condition.

The common features of all the depressive disorders are sadness, emptiness, or irritable mood, accompanied by somatic and cognitive changes that significantly affect the individual's capacity to function. (Chand and Arif 2023)

As someone who has been diagnosed with depression, it makes it bit easier for me to recognise manifestations of depression symptoms. It also allows me to have first-hand experience of depressive disorder, which gives me a unique perspective on this matter. That being said, I may recognize the patterns more easily than someone who doesn't suffer from the formerly mentioned disorder; however, it is still important to emphasise the importance of getting a proper diagnosis from a psychiatrist who can guide the patient towards realistic improvement.

### 2.1. Treatment

Since depression is a long-term illness, caused by a variety of reasons and harming human psyche, the treatment usually takes a longer time as well. Often the recovery is not linear, and people suffering with depression can go through various severities of ups and downs

regardless of the treatment they are given. According to the British National Institute of Health and Care Excellence (NICE 2022) it is important for the treatment of the depression to communicate with the patient and agree on several points including whether they have ideas or preferences about starting treatment, and what treatment options they have previously found helpful or might prefer, their experience of any prior episodes of depression, or treatments for depression and what they hope to gain from treatment.

According to Chand and Arif (2022), the treatment is usually unique for every patient, the treatment might consist of either medication, psychotherapy, or combination therapy. It is also possible to treat the patients with brain electric shocks in cases where patients do not respond well to medication or are suicidal.

## 2.2. Causes of suicide other than psychological origin

According to Normile and Hvistendahl (2012), there are cases of suicides, which are not showing any risk factors like depression, previous suicide attempts, or mental illness. This can be illustrated by example of young Chinese woman committing suicide in order to prove innocence when she was accused of stealing her neighbour's eggs (Hvistendahl 2012:1025).

This case is not unique in the region. Zhang et al. (2004) compared China and western countries and concluded, that in west over 90% of suicide were associated with mental illness, while in China, 76% of the cases were associated with some kind of disorder.

## 3. Suicidal behaviour

Suicide is an act when a person takes deliberate action to end their own life. There are many reasons for people to commit suicide, that also varies depending on demographics, religion, age, sex, and many other factors like income, or even economic state of one's nation.

According to Vijayakumar et al. (2016) Previous suicide attempts are one of the strongest indicators of suicidal behaviour. However due to factors like the lack of standardized methods for identifying suicide attempts, methodological limitations, or unknown representativeness of the sample limit the usefulness of the statistics and complicates conceivable way of recognition and monitoring of patients at risk of committing suicide.

Suicide risk factors can be divided into outer and inner factors. The outer factors are risk factors associated with the health system and society at large include difficulties in accessing health care and in receiving the care needed, easy availability of the means for suicide, inappropriate media reporting that sensationalizes suicide, and stigmatizing people who seek

help for suicidal behaviours or mental health and substance abuse problems. Risks linked to the community and relationships including war and disaster, stresses of acculturation (such as among indigenous peoples or displaced persons), discrimination, a sense of isolation, abuse, violence, and conflictual relationships.

The inner or more individual factor consists of previous suicide attempts, mental disorders, harmful use of alcohol, financial loss, chronic pain, and a family history of suicide.

### 3.1. Reasons for suicide

According to Holleran and Poon (2018), that groups in risk of suicide are often diverse and include minorities such as the homeless, members of the LGBT+ community, or people of a non-majority ethnicity.

A project by Joyce Chu et al. presents a data about suicidal ideation among Asian Americans that introduces two main subtype groups as follows:

Utilizing latent class analysis, the study classified Asian Americans with suicidal ideation and behaviors into two main subtypes: 48% of the sample with a psychiatric suicide construct subtype and 52% with a nonpsychiatric suicide construct subtype. Findings indicate that current practices of suicide assessment may not comprehensively and accurately identify suicidal ideation and behaviors among Asian Americans. In particular, relying on psychiatric disorders as primary indicators of suicidal ideation and behaviors may not fully capture suicidal Asian American individuals who have little history of mental illness. (Chu et al. 2014: 1220)

One of the possible reasons for suicides among adolescents and young adults might be due to examination failure. Suicide rates from India shows an apparent decrease in suicide cases due to examination failure after putting into effect a law, which allowed students to retake exams within one month without losing an academic year (Vijayakumar et al. 2016).

### 3.2. Intervention

In Table 1 we can see a breakdown of the risk factors and possible interventions according to Vijayakumar et al. From this chart we can see that various risk factors have different recommended method of intervention. Although many situations might be generalized, we cannot forget that every situation is unique and must be managed according to the individuals at risk.

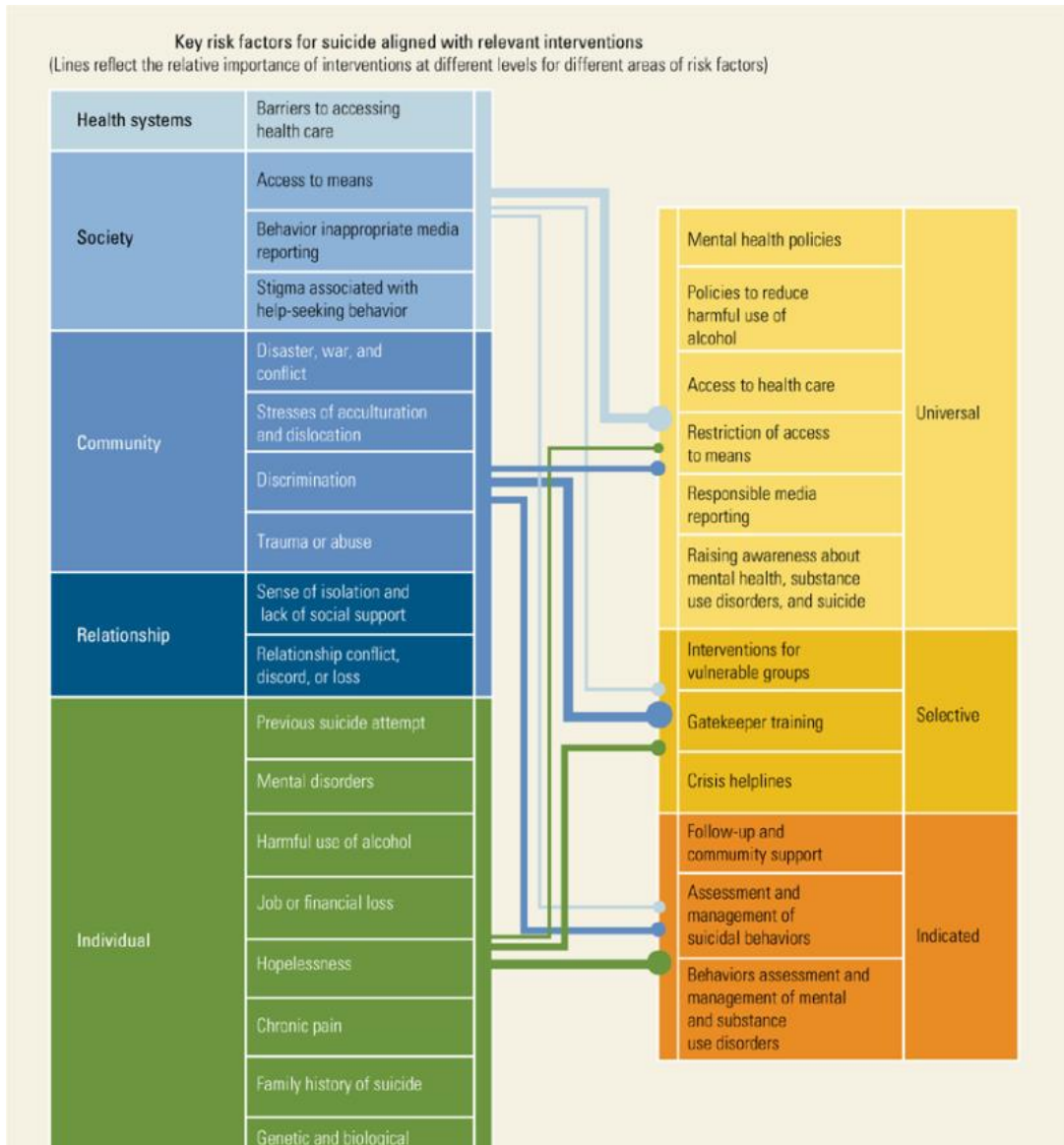


Table 1: Risk Factors and Possible Interventions (Vijayakumar et al., 2016).

In the manual for Health Professionals from Chehil and Kutcher (2012) intervention may have several targets, for example psychiatric disorders, psychiatric symptoms, chronic psychosocial stressors, acute psychosocial stressors, psychosocial crises and maladaptive patterns of thought, emotion, and behaviour.

### 3.3. Suicide prevention

There are many ways to prevent suicide. The main methods of suicide prevention according to Vijayakumar et al. (2016) are restricting access to highly lethal and commonly used methods of suicide (pesticides, guns, etc.), decriminalization of suicide, alcohol and drug misuse restriction and introduction of guidelines for media reporting of suicides. South Korea for example banned some of the most toxic pesticides as a measure to reduce the suicide rate.

Moreover, in South Korea, suicide prevention is implemented in several areas. According to Kim et al. (2019) in addition to limiting the accessibility of some pesticides and providing pesticide safety boxes, South Korea has introduced restrictions on the sale of coal in urban areas or the introduction of physical barriers at suicide hot spots like Mapo Bridge. In everyday life, Koreans may see preventive measures in subway, where barriers that block access to subway trains and tracks successfully prevents people from intentionally hurting themselves in such a manner.

## 4. Statistic

From OECD statistics (table 2) from “Suicide Rates” (2017) we can learn that South Korea has the highest suicide from OECD countries in total amount of 14,9 suicide cases per 100,000 population. Czech Republic was added for comparison as it falls within the average suicide rate. Although Lithuania has higher suicide rates among the male population than South Korea, South Korea has the highest total percentage.

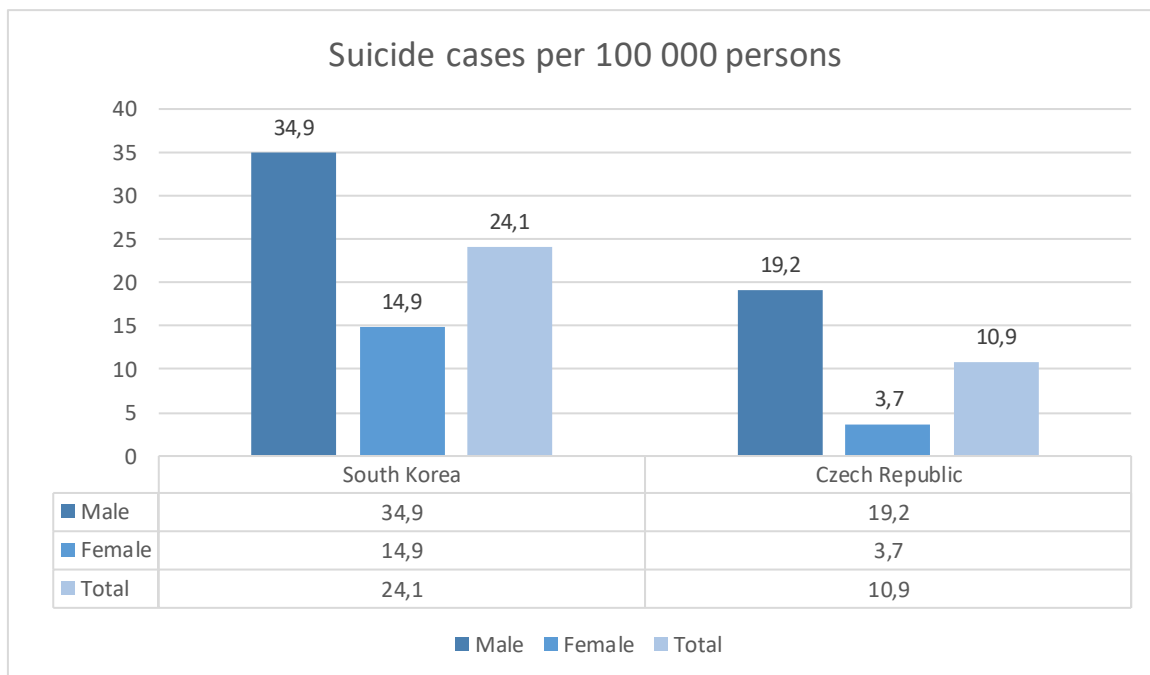


Table 2: Statistic Suicide rates Total / Men / Women, Per 100 000 persons, 2020 (Suicide Rates, 2017).

From a study of An et al. (2022) we know that suicide rates have been changing through time with South Korea’s rates of suicide continually increasing since the late 1980. We can see that the group with the highest risk of committing suicide are people above sixty years of age. The suicide rates also change depending on season. Suicide deaths were high during the spring season, low during the winter season, and high in the days after the two main holidays.

In Table 3 we can learn that the most endangered demographic group in South Korea are males above eighty-five years. According to the ‘Suicide Rates’ (2017), in general males have higher suicide rate in almost every age group with exception of youth from fifteen to twenty-four. Crude suicide rates also shows that most age groups of females fall in the range of 16 to 20 suicides per 100,000 population, excluding women between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four and women over seventy-five.

Indicator	Crude suicide rates (per 100 000 population)	
	2019	
Location	Male	Female
<b>Republic of Korea</b>		
85+ years	289.3	48.04
75-84 years	122.9	34.62
65-74 years	60.83	17.89
55-64 years	58.41	16.14
45-54 years	51.03	17.41
35-44 years of age	38.88	19.41
25-34 years of age	26.07	18.25
15-24 years	14.05	14.53

Table 3: Crude suicide rates per 100 000 population according to the WHO (Suicide Rates, 2021)

During the pandemic of COVID19 the suicide rates in South Korea in 2021 slightly increased according to “Korea’s Suicide Rate up in 2021 amid Pandemic: Data” (2023) with two major groups of people in their twenties and people in their seventies and above. The *Korea Times* reported on 20 February 2023 that the rate of suicide cases per 100,000 persons in 2021 increased to 26:

The rate among males aged 70 and above came to 81.8 in 2021, up from 79.5 recorded the previous year. As for females, the rate for the age group came to 25.7, also up from 24.6 tallied a year earlier. Korean men aged between 20 and 29 suicide rates reached 27.1 in 2021, up from 23.8 in 2020. Over the period, the rate for females in the age group rose from 19.3 to 19.6.

#### 4.1. Suicide rates and life expectancy

According to demographic research from 2016, suicide rates have effect on total life expectancy. However, the effect is surprisingly low as the age of suicide victims has also risen. The rates of causes of death changed between 1995 and 2010. Hanging and jumping off of a high place accounted for one-third of all suicide deaths in 1995. In 2010 these causes of death accounted for fifty-five percents of suicides (Noah, Acciai, and Firebaugh 2016)

### 5. Attitude toward suicide

People's attitudes toward suicide are not an unexplored topic. A comparative study by Park et al. (2006) is a good example. In this study researchers compared attitudes of general population toward suicide in South Korea, Japan, and United States of America. Result of the study did not show any direct link between attitudes toward suicide and suicide rates of the country. This study shows that all three countries had varied results through different demographical groups, and the findings suggests that that attitude toward suicide can influence the suicide phenomenon in each country, but since the act of taking one's, life is more complex than just the attitude towards suicide, there is still more to be explored.

A study of Kang and Lim (2019) explores the potential link between relative income and suicidal ideation, however the study only found link between peer income and negative correlation with the level of life satisfaction, but the effect on suicidal ideation was smaller and largely insignificant.

#### 5.1. Social stigma

Although suicide is one of the leading causes of death in South Korea, the awareness about the mental health and suicide might be difficult topics in Korean society. Social stigma of suicide might be a possible reason for this difficulty. In South Korea suicide is often considered as a personal problem, immoral behaviour, or a shameful sin rather than public health issue.

In Korea An and Lee (2017b), confirmed six types of social stigma concerning suicide: incompetence (e.g., Suicidal people are irresponsible), glorification (e.g., Suicidal people are brave), sympathy (e.g., Suicidal people are pitiable), immorality (e.g., Suicidal people are immoral), selfishness (e.g., Suicidal people are self-serving), and social exclusion (e.g., Suicidal people are isolated).” (An et al. 2022: 260)

Suicide in East Asia is regarded as a selfish negligence of the responsibility to take care of family and friends.



In Korean society, suicide is viewed often as a personal failure or admission of guilt. Therefore, suicide is viewed as an act of shame that stains the whole family and marks them as those who failed to live morally and in an orderly fashion.

## 6. Suicide and Media

Media play important role in today's society. Be it news, newspaper, social media, or movies and series, it is almost impossible to avoid consumption of some kind of media. But how does media present suicide? There are various guidelines for reporting suicide, for example the World Health Organization guidelines (2003), the Australian guidelines and their associated model of dissemination and evaluation (Department of Health and Ageing, 2004; Skehan et al., 2006), and consensus recommendations in the United States (Reporting on Suicide, 2002), however it is in question if South Korean media follow these guidelines.

A study by Choi and Noh (2019) on the influence of social media use on attitude toward suicide shows clear link between social media usage and attitude toward suicide:

The findings of this study suggest that social media use can play an important role in reducing the risk of suicide among the general population, providing practical implications for suicide-prevention strategies using social media. (Choi and Noh 2020: 1436)

### 6.1. Media coverage and suicide reporting

Media coverage of suicide have clear impact on suicide rates. A study (Niederkröthaler et al. 2012) shows that more the quality and quantity of suicide reports can influence the suicide rates, however there is more emphasis placed on the quantity of suicide reports than on the quality of those reports, as the quantity was found to sometimes have bigger effect on the quantity of copycat suicides (Stack, 2003).

One of the ways media can help in this matter is to promote calling the helpline or other service meant to discourage from the act.

### 6.2. Media coverage of suicide in South Korea

From the WHO overview (Hendin et al. 2008) we can learn that South Korean press and media frequently mentions the suicide in their headlines as well as detailing the methods used for suicide. Although guidelines exist, reporters tend to view them as a censorship or an invasion of their right to report, which may be the cause of obstacles in the implementation of these guidelines.



## 7. Representation

Representation is often connected to politics, however in this thesis I focus on representation in media, described by the Cambridge dictionary as “the fact of including different types of people, for example in films, politics, or sport, so that all different groups are represented.”

One example of importance of the representation is an article about racial representation and stereotypes (Adams-Bass, Stevenson, and Kotzin 2014). This article speaks about the influence of black representation in media on African American youth. One of the findings of this study suggests the link between negative stereotype images in media, racial identity, and racial socialization, meaning that the portrayal in media has effect on how people might view themselves, and might shape the ways they interact with other people.

When certain groups are underrepresented or misrepresented in the media, it can perpetuate stereotypes, create negative attitudes, and limit opportunities for those groups. For example, if women are only depicted as passive and submissive in the media, it can reinforce gender stereotypes and limit women's opportunities in society. Similarly, if people of colour are only portrayed as criminals or in other negative ways, it can perpetuate racial biases and contribute to discrimination and inequality.

On the other hand, accurate and positive representation can challenge stereotypes, promote empathy and understanding, and foster social change. When diverse perspectives and experiences are represented in the media, it can help to create a more inclusive and equitable society and promote social justice.

### 7.1. History of representation of suicide in cinematography

It is difficult to determine the exact date when suicide was first depicted in cinematography, as films have been exploring dark and tragic themes since the early days of cinema. However, suicide has been a recurrent theme in film history, and many notable films from various countries and time periods have depicted suicide in different ways.

One of the earliest known examples of suicide in film is the 1903 French silent film *Le Suicide de Dorian Gray* (*The Suicide of Dorian Gray*), which was loosely based on Oscar Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. In this film, the protagonist, Dorian Gray, commits suicide by shooting himself in the head.

Since then, many other films have explored the theme of suicide, including Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* (1957), where the protagonist, a knight returning from the Crusades, confronts Death and considers suicide as an escape from his torment.

Other notable examples include *The Virgin Suicides* (1999), *The Hours* (2002), *A Single Man* (2009), and *The Sea of Trees* (2015).

## 7.2. History of representation of suicide in Korean cinematography

### 7.2.1. Movies

Suicide has been a recurring theme in Korean cinema for many years and has been portrayed in various ways. Some Korean films explore the psychological and emotional struggles that lead to suicide, while others focus on the aftermath of suicide and its impact on individuals and society. Suicide has been depicted in different genres of Korean cinema, including drama, thriller, and horror.

One of the most well-known Korean films that deals with suicide is *Oasis* (2002), directed by I Changdong. The film tells the story of two outcasts, a man with cerebral palsy and a woman with a history of suicide attempts, who form a connection despite the obstacles they face. The film explores the themes of social isolation, discrimination, and the desire for human connection, and ends with a powerful scene of self-sacrifice.

Another example is the movie *Breathless* (2009), directed by Yang Ikjun, which depicts the lives of two individuals who are struggling with depression and trauma, and ultimately contemplate suicide. The film portrays the complexity and pain of mental illness, and the importance of support and human connection in overcoming it.

Other Korean movies that deal with suicide include *I'm a Cyborg, But That's OK* (2006), *The King and the Clown* (2005), *The World of Us* (2016), and *The Night of the Undead* (2020). Overall, Korean cinema has explored the theme of suicide in various ways and has contributed to a wider discourse on mental health and social issues in Korean society.

### 7.2.2. Series

Korean dramas, or K-dramas, as they're often referred to, have also dealt with the theme of suicide in various ways. Some K-dramas explore the psychological and emotional struggles that lead to suicide, while others focus on the aftermath of suicide and its impact on individuals and their relationships.

One of the most well-known K-dramas that deals with suicide is *It's Okay, That's Love* (2014), which tells the story of a psychiatrist and his patient who both struggle with mental illness, including suicidal ideation. The drama depicts the character's journeys towards healing and acceptance and highlights the importance of support and understanding for those who struggle with mental health issues.

Other K-dramas that deal with suicide include *Soulmate* (2006), *49 Days* (2011), *Hi Bye, Mama!* (2020), and *Beyond Evil* (2021). These dramas explore different aspects of suicide, including the emotional impact on family and friends, the stigma surrounding mental illness, and the importance of seeking help and support.

While suicide is a sensitive and complex topic, Korean cinema and K-dramas have contributed to a wider discourse on mental health and social issues and have helped to raise awareness and understanding of suicide and its causes.

Thus, we can recognize that suicide and depression isn't new on screens in South Korea, nor in the world. For this thesis I selected only few pieces of Korean cinematography containing representation of suicides and related themes, since the theme of suicide is quite widespread, it is impossible to include all the works containing this element in one work. For this reason, I selected only a few works. I tried to choose the most recent works in order to better describe the current attitude and perspective of contemporary Korean society, as well as the contemporary Korean cinematographic industry, towards the topic of suicide and mental health.

## 8. Material and method

### 8.1. Material

When selecting the works that will be analysed in this thesis, I proceeded according to the following criteria. The first and most important criterion for me was the extent to which the work reframes the issue of suicides.

Another important criterion was the age of the picture. Since I am trying to capture the perspective of contemporary society, it was necessary to select works that were published in recent years.

Last but not least criterion was the availability of the work. If the media I was considering was not available online, it was not used in this thesis. Since in this work I am trying to describe the representation of suicides in contemporary cinematographic works and their perception in society, it is necessary that the work be accessible to society. I also considered how the piece was received, since a picture that was not watched by many people would be hard to consider as a good example of contemporary society's view of this issue.

### 8.2. Method

This thesis deals with the analysis of South Korean cinematography, more precisely on representation of suicide in contemporary Korean series *Tomorrow (Naeil)*.

## 9. The representation of suicide in the television series *Tomorrow (Naeil)*

In the centre of this drama is a young male jobseeker who falls into coma after an accident where he tried to save a man committing suicide and two grim reapers who are saving people from committing suicide. It is based on a Naver webtoon with the same name by the author Lama.

The drama contains several examples of suicide cases including both males and females, youth, and elderly in various life situations. Different life situations, the loss of a loved one, the feeling of guilt for the misfortune of a loved one and many other circumstances are unique to each case represented. As this series is focused on saving people from committing suicides, there are mainly suicide attempts rather than actual suicides.

### 9.1. Tomorrow episode 1: Suicide pact

The first scene of the series depicts a group of people committing group suicide by exhaust gas poisoning. The group consists of one man in his forties, another in his s, a two woman around twenty. It is depicted that this group of people posted on social media about their wishes to die, on which someone responds they will teach them a sure-fire and painless method. The two grim reapers who observe the situation theorise that they met through a broker and created a suicide pact.

The suicidal four are in a remote place sitting in the car with a running motor. In one of the shots, a tube can be seen leading from the exhaust to one of the windows. The rest of the window is taped up, presumably to keep the exhaust gas from leaking out. As the four people inside the car slowly fall asleep a woman with pink hair named walks on toward the car, removes the tube, and sits in the car. It is Gu Ryeon, one of the two grim reapers and a main character of the drama.

She starts driving fast and without regard for the safety of herself or the four others in the car. The four panic and start begging her in a panic to let them live. She reaches the end of the road which happens to be under construction and skids to a stop with the back of the car dangling from the bridge. Then Ryeon asks them if they want to live or die, to which all of the four responses that they want to live.

### 9.2. Tomorrow episode 1: Man jumping of a bridge

The main character named Choe Junung is downbeat after another job interview failure. When walking across the bridge over the Han River, he sees a man who is leaning on the railing. After a moment of hesitation, he continues walking towards the man, while the man starts to climb on the railing. Junung realises that the man is probably going to jump, so he tries to stop him, but is interrupted by the two grim reapers. The three of them are trying to stop the man who is still determined to end his life. Ultimately, he succeeds to get over the railing, but when he falls, he unintentionally takes Junung with him who had tried to hold him back. They are both saved by Ryeon.

In South Korea, suicide attempts by jumping to the river are sadly common and well-known occurrence. For example, in Seoul, the Han River is one of the most visited sites for suicides. According to Yoon (2022) between 2016 and 2022 over two thousand people attempted to commit suicide by jumping of one of the bridges, Mapo bridge being to most famous in this regard.

### 9.3. Tomorrow episode 1 and 2: The target of bullying

A 29-year-old workaholic television playwright woman named No Eunbi who was bullied during high school is forced to make an interview with the person who used to bully her. The bully became a famous author of a comic about a highschooler who stands up for bullied classmates and punishes the bullies in harsh manner. This person did not recognise Eunbi at first, and when she did, she starts to pick on her again. When Eunbi wants to drop the interview and explains why, she is scolded and forced to finish the job.

After another confrontation with her bully, she cannot take it anymore, so she runs to the roof, decided to end her suffering. As she runs, the shot jumps from the present day to her school years, suggesting that this is not the first time she has thought about suicide. On the roof she is confronted by Ryeon, who is acting rude. Junung is surprised by her acting and after disagreement between him and Ryeon, the other colleague takes him inside.

The confrontation ends with Eunbi admitting she wants to live, but she is startled after Ryeon reveals that her rude words were the words that Eunbi said to herself when she was struggling during high school. She then stumbles and falls off the roof, Ryeon catches her and lands with her safely on the ground.

When they land, they talk for a bit, but Eunbi is still upset. Not knowing what happened on the roof after his departure, Junung brings Eunbi's favourite comedian to help her feel better. The comedian actually make Eunbi laugh and after a while it is clear she is feeling better.

Later surface the fact, that the author who bullied Eunbi was accused of bullying, and the boss who forced Eunbi to make the interview knew about this fact and still proceeded to continue with the interview. Eunbi calls probably to some news agency to offer interview on the matter, giving her chance to have a proper closure.

### 9.4. Tomorrow episode 3 and 4: Inability to get a job

Junung's best friend Namgung Jaesu, age twenty-nine, is struggling with depression due to his inability to get admitted to the police academy after three years of trying. He doesn't eat, doesn't sleep and most of the time he just lays in his bed unable to do anything.

Junung gets notification from the grim reaper's app because Jaesu decides to commit suicide. He tries to get his friend out to talk to him, but Jaesu doesn't recognise him due to Junung having received a new face as a grim reaper.

In order to help him, Ryeon and Junung go to the past and try to find anything they can improve about Jaesu's state of mind. Instead, they find out that his father wanted to commit suicide, so he can get insurance money to pay the hospital bill for his sick wife.

They stop him from committing suicide and help him to fulfil his promise to bring Jaesu fried chicken. They also bring another portion of this fried chicken to the present day Jaesu to remind him that he should not give up.

Ryeon tells him that he should continue to live, if only for the weather being nice, or cloudy until one day he will realize that all of what he endured, all his efforts to live on, was for this day.

#### 9.5. Tomorrow episode 4 and 5: Loss of a close person

The next would-be suicide case is 29 years old singer and song writer Gang Ujin. He was in a car accident with his wife who died in hospital due to her injuries. The ghost of the wife is trying to get the reapers to help her stop Ujin from committing suicide.

Ujin who feels guilty for the death of his wife is still in the hospital, attending sessions with a psychologist, but isn't making any progress and instead his mental state is getting more and more worse.

When he visits his wife's funeral her parents start to yell at him that it is his fault that their daughter is dead. This further worsens his mental state, as he is thrown into flashback of his childhood where his dad blames him for killing his mother.

Ujin gets back to the hospital, but unable to bear it anymore, he decides to take his life, so he climbs the stairs and wants to jump to his death, but is caught by Ryeon, while the ghost of his wife is trying to reach him. For a moment, they see each other in a place that looks like an indoor garden, where she asks him to live on and wait for them to meet again in the next lifetime. He agrees and promises that he will live a full life for both of them.

#### 9.6. Tomorrow episode 6: Loneliness and uncertainty

War veteran I Yeongcheon is living a quiet life in one of the poor deserted neighbourhoods. He lives alone collecting scraps to sell it to the collection yard. The reapers come to him to tell him, that he will die the next day, so he should not commit a suicide. They spend the whole day to keep him company.

Yeongcheon decides that even when it is his last day, he wants to spend it like any other day of his life. He also tells his life story to the reapers. He seems to be reconciled with the reality of his life; however, it can be also read as a sign of depression due to Yeongcheon not being able to improve his situation and mourning the life he could have had.

Before the war, he was a student, but then the war worsened, and he felt it was his duty to enlist. At the front, he realised that it was not a good idea to get close to someone,

because a lot of soldiers died during the clashes. However, he befriended one other soldier. During one of the clashes, his friend ended up in hospital and had to have his leg amputated. The friend was very upset that Yeongcheon saved his life, because now he had to live as a disabled.

After the war, Yeongcheon went home, but his house had been destroyed and the whereabouts of his mother were unknown. He tried to resume his studies, but due to post traumatic stress disorder had to quit. He wasn't able to hold a job nor find a wife, so he started collecting trash and ended up living alone. In the present day, a group of people who want to tear down his house to build modern buildings in the area are pressuring him and making his life uncomfortable.

At night there is a commotion in front of his house which the reapers go to solve, but the old man starts to feel pain in his chest. The reapers accompany him in his last moments and guide his soul to the afterlife.

The episode dedicated a lot of time to honouring veterans from Korean War. Yeongcheon describes his life of failure and loneliness, but he seems to be at peace. From his words, the main motivation for suicide for him is the uncertainty of the time he passes away.

### 9.7. Tomorrow episode 7: Eating disorder

After being bullied in high school for being overweight, Sin Yena started throwing up in order to lose weight. She continued living with purging disorder into adulthood. She is also overly sensitive to people's comments about her. Even when they are saying nice things, she only hears the mocking.

She is considering suicide for some time and prepares to die by nitrogen gas poisoning in her apartment but is stopped by Junung. When she wakes up in the hospital, Junung talks to her about her mental state and helps her realise that she was the one, who put herself in a cage to be judged by other people, and only she can get herself out.

The next time we see her, she meets with one of her colleagues, who is overweight in order to try changing her view on her lifestyle. We can also see her being able to eat and hold down food without any difficulty and even being able to enjoy her food. For somebody who suffered from an eating disorder from high school to thirty years of age, it seems highly unrealistic that such a person would be able to change her attitude towards food over this short time.



This is the first time the series revisited any of the previous cases, in this case Sin Yena's. We are shown that she is doing good and feeling better, even being able to eat without any difficulties despite suffering with an eating disorder for many years. This by itself is not very realistic, since eating disorders just like any other mental disorders is not the type of thing one can heal from in very short time.

### 9.8. Tomorrow episode 8: Suicide pact

Next shown case is about a group of people that meet through social media in order to commit group suicide. They end up forming some sort of suicide pact with the broker supplying the group with nitrogen gas. This gas is supposed to grant them painless death.

This group consists of four people: a woman who wanted to become a pianist, but realised, that she will not be able to reach her dream and is scared to start doing something different, seeing her colleagues with less talent success because they are more wealthy in resources and connections; a man who voluntarily retired but then felt not useful enough, and feeling like a burden to his family and realising that he lived his life for his family, but never for himself; Junung; and one more person who though he pretended to be suicidal, ends up being the broker who sold this group the nitrogen gas and just wants to see the others die.

Junung panics and tries to convince the group that they have reasons for continuing with their life. He gives them business cards of his colleagues in the Risk Management Team. Thereupon the woman pianist and the man who lived for his family leave. The last man stays and tricks Junung.

It is not shown how these people resolved their situations. People who are suicidal often attempt suicide several times which this series fails to portray.

As a result of actions of other characters, the broker ends up getting suicidal as well, since he failed to see other people kill themselves. We can see that this person is mentally very unstable, and he ends up drinking poison but is saved by Junung who calls an ambulance. Because of the poison he loses his voice, and after he wakes up, he attempts to escape from police which ends up with him falling down the stair. He hits his head and ends up being deaf and living the rest of his life confined to a bed.

### 9.9. Tomorrow episode 9: Terminal disease

Many suicidal cases are about people with disabilities or people who suffer with a terminal disease. There are countries, where those people are allowed to commit assisted suicide or euthanasia, but South Korea does not belong into this group. Although suicide is not

considered a crime, and majority of Koreans have positive attitude towards assisted suicide and euthanasia are outlawed in South Korea (see Yun et al. 2022).

In this case we are shown a rather unique suicide case, as the one who wants to commit suicide is not human, but a dog. This dog is very ill, having a tumour on his kidney that metastasized to the other organs as well.

Many people with terminal disease would choose to say their goodbyes and leave with less pain than to suffer slow death by the disease. That is one of the main reasons why the concept of euthanasia exists. Many terminal patients know that they cannot recover and seeing close people suffering because of loved one's suffering is hard on mental state as well. Some patients choose not to share the burden of knowing their cases are terminal in order to spare those that are close to them the pain of knowing that a loved one is dying. In extreme cases, a patient suffering from an incurable disease may even decide not to undergo treatment and thus hasten their departure, either for financial or personal reasons. For example, in cases of cancer, the treatment is difficult, long, painful and in some countries very expensive.

The Risk Management Team finds the dog and helps him to resolve the situation with its' owner. The team split so that Junung stayed with the dog and talk with him.

Junnung's is in the position where he relates to the dog. When he agreed to become grim reaper, his physical body was in coma and his family had to take care for him. His mother and sister had to take care for him, and he recently found out, that his mother is sick. Junung felt a lot of guilt of being a burden for his family and therefore understood the feelings of the dog.

Ryon and her colleague Im Ryunggu in the meantime talk to the dog's owner. They are trying to understand the situation. In the end they help the dog to meet its owner, and even though the dog is hesitant, they end up taking they last walk together. This also gives the dog a chance for proper goodbye, since he passes from the illness by the end of their walk.

#### 9.10. Tomorrow episode 10: Sexual assault victim

This case it is about twins, brother and sister, Cha Yunjae and Cha Yunhui, who are close and at twenty-three years of age they live together. Yunhui is the first case on this show to be portrayed as a person who tried to commit suicide before they got the attention of the Risk Management Team.

Yunhui was kidnaped when she was on her way back home from a bar. She was beaten, raped, and tormented for whole day and after waking up in the hospital, people first blamed her for what happened to her. Her parents and even her twin blamed her for going out at night, for dressing up, for being reckless and getting herself in this type of situation.

When we first see this character, she is visibly depressed and has her wrist bandaged suggesting her attempt at self-harming or suicide. When she meets Ryeon, she acts angry and hostile towards her.

Her brother Yunjae is doing one-person protest for revision of sentencing guidelines for sexual assault offenders. He is visibly upset and feels guilt for her sister's situation, since he was at the same bar and declined her when she asked him to walk with her home.

After the introduction of these characters, we are shown what happened and the show gives us hints of what happened to Yunhui when the man assaulted her. Her reaction is to sweep it under the rug like the assault never happened, but her family forces her to go to police and the case soon catches the public eye as the assault was caught on CCTV. Because of this she is forced to relive the assault and feels ashamed and upset.

We are shown the scene in the court where the lawyer of the sexual assault offender presents the case with word like "you didn't actively resist him". He said that if she screamed hard enough, somebody would hear her, and the locks in the place she was held were broken, so she could escape but she did not. He proceeded to shift the blame on her and graduated to say very inappropriate and offensive things to her.

Both she and her twin brother see the injustice of the offender get a light sentence and being able to live life in comfort while Yunhui suffers. Through her experience from the assault, the courtroom, and even social media, Yunhui started to feel that the whole thing was her fault and was very upset.

Yunhui started to self-harm in order to escape the memory of the assault. At first, she tore off her skin from biting her nails but then she proceeded to cut her wrist with a mirror shard.

This case is more realistic than the previous cases since we can see that even when Yunhui hears the things that should help her, it often is not enough. The damage was done, and we see that she is hurt and keeps getting worse and worse even after people try to help her. Ryeon is trying to get her out of the mindset of feeling guilt for what happened to her, but she only wants to escape the whole thing and not face it again, but then proceeds to look at news about the incident on social media, where the public's reaction she sees are mostly against her.

After seeing this, she confronts her brother who blamed himself. She told him that he is even worse than the man who assaulted her and screams at him that he should just die. That throws him over the edge and Yunjae goes to the place of the man who assaulted his sister.

Yunhui then breaks into tears and after she sees a cardboard cutter, she takes it but at that moment the Risk Management Team gets into their place. She threatens to cut herself. Ryeon tells her that her family is doing all this for her, and Yunhui tells her that her family members were first to blame her and even the closest person to her, her brother, blamed her for being assaulted. Ryeon then tells her how it is to cut her wrist with intent to die. She tells her that no one can or should blame her for what happened, not even herself.

Ryeon proceeds to de-escalate the situation with Yunhui while Junung and his colleague went to save her brother. Yunjae wants to kill the man who assaulted his sister and then to take his own life but is stopped by the grim reapers. We can see that Yunjae is afraid to apologise to his sister and at first would rather commit suicide, but then he decides to be by her side.

Later we see them in the court with Ryeon as Yunhui's attorney, where she vigorously defends her and asks for the defendant to be sentenced to ten thousand twenty-four years in prison. The scene is exaggerated for the purpose of this type of media, but it gives hope to other victims of sexual assault.

After the trial we can see the siblings talking about this and finding support in each other again. They seem to be in a good mental state and resolve the dispute.

Many victims of sexual assault might suffer with post-traumatic stress disorder, and we were shown before that Yunhui probably suffered from this disorder as well, but later the series only presents her as happy and being her old self. We are shown instead a shot of the twins a few days later in the cafe where they are cheerfully bickering, and Yunhui is back in her old self.

### 9.11. Tomorrow episode 11 and 12: Miscarriage

The next case in the series is woman named Im Yuhwa, aged thirty. She was shown in the past life of another character where she also committed suicide after being gang raped in her past life. We are also told that souls sometimes carry negative energy from their past lives, so the souls of the people, who committed suicide are more likely to commit them again in their next life as well.

At first everything seems to be alright with Yuhwa, but her negative energy is irregular, which is startling at first. We see her with her baby, but then the baby is not there, and Yuhwa's negative energy is high, because she faces the reality of losing her unborn child. It is not clear if she hallucinates or is choosing to see only her imagination.

After she collapses at her job the Risk Management Team takes her home and tries to take care of her. She falls asleep and her negative energy lowers, so Ryeon decides to go to her dream to find out, what made her negative energy go down. In the dream she sees Yuhwa with her baby being happy and tries to make her face the reality of losing her child.

At the same time Junung finds out that Yuhwa took an overdose of sleeping pills and calls an ambulance.

Meanwhile, Yuhwa faces Ryeon in a dream and, after some hustle, another member of the Risk Management Team, Im Ryunggu helps Ryeon convince Yuhwa that it is only a dream, and her baby is in fact gone. Ryunggu speaks with her and helps her get to better mental state. He helps Yuhwa realize that by committing suicide she would sever the connection to her baby and they will not be able to meet in the future. Through this, Yuhwa is finally able to let go of her imaginary baby and face the reality.

When she later wakes up in the hospital, she speaks with her husband who was supporting her emotionally the whole time. Despite her husband's support, Yuhwa was unable to lean on him until after her suicide attempt. Later we can see them writing a message for their baby into the sand on the beach.

### 9.12. Tomorrow episode 13: Guilt from past

The second elderly person to be in the centre of the episode, Yu Bokhui is a ninety-one-year-old woman bearing the guilt of sending her friend to become a comfort woman. In the time of Japanese occupation of Korean peninsula, Bokhui saw a newspaper advertisement for a job in Japan. She was able to go to school and knew a little of Japanese language which she taught to her friend who was not allowed to attend school due to her social class. Yu Bokhui told her friend about the advertisement and since it seemed to be a good opportunity for a person of lower ancestry, advised her to go.

Later Yu Bokhui sees a documentary about comfort woman and does not want to believe that practises like that were real. At first, she argues with her grandson about it, but her grandson shows her his research on the matter he did for school. Through this she realizes that the friend she thought lived and worked happily in Japan was actually taken into some sort of brothel for Japanese soldiers.

Most of the episode is dedicated to memories of one other comfort woman who were taken with Yu Bokhui's childhood friend. Instead of focusing on the suicide case it focuses on the memory and the story the woman tells.

Yu Bokhui then realizes that one of the grim reapers is her childhood friend who wanted to become a grim reaper in order to meet her friends again and finds comfort in this situation.

This case is not much of a good representation of suicidal behaviour since it focuses more on the story of the comfort woman than the story of suicidal person. The only reason given for suicidal behaviour was shame of knowing a that Yu Bokhui sent her friend to be a comfort woman, but we do not see her having hard time or be depressed. In many Asian countries shame might be enough of a reason for suicide but it is in question if this case can be representation of suicide out of shame.

### 9.13. Tomorrow episode 15: Celebrity suicide

In South Korea, celebrity suicide is sad reality of the industry. Idols who might be singers, rappers, dancers, and actors or various combinations of these and more, are under a lot of pressure. Their life is under the microscope and companies are in some cases even allowed to restrict their lives to various degree. The competition is huge and one single scandal can end an idol's career. Many idols drop out of school in order to train and become successful, but not many are able to achieve their goal.

The next case from the Tomorrow series is a twenty-seven-year-old idol named Ryu Chohui. She has a reputation for "saying things rather bluntly", which in South Korea is often frowned upon. As an idol, Ryu Chohui attracts a number of haters who post hateful comments about her every action. She is constantly bombarded by misleading impeachments like being mistress of a married chaebol heir.

She suffers and feels more and more depressed when her father starts to bother her and the rest of the family for money. He is a gambler addict who spends all of his money and needs more, so he threatens Ryu Chohui that he will publicise his case and will cause her a scandal.

After putting so much pressure on herself Ryu Chohui collapses during rehearsals of her new album. When she wakes up, she is depressed that she ruined her hard work by collapsing on the stage. Then one of her company colleagues posts a post on social media that makes it look like Chohui bullied her, which she did not do. She is trying to solve the situation with her company, but the pressure keeps building up.

Even though she is in care of Risk Management Team, she manages to run away and jumps in front of the car. Ryeon tries to save her but is stopped by colleague from another department. Chohui is hit by car and ends up in hospital.

After she wakes up, she looks in the mirror and see her bruised face. Then she proceeds to the window in order to jump to her death. It is one of the few cases where we can see that a truly suicidal person often tries to commit suicide several times. She is intervened by Ryeon and is comforted by her.

It is first case where the attention of the Risk Management Team is given more than just for few days during the peak of a person's depressive state. In real life, people who want to commit suicide or are in bad mental state need more than just a few words to get through these hard stages of their lives. It usually takes therapy and having close people around oneself to be able to move forward.

## 10. Summary of suicide representation

In the series *Tomorrow (Naeil)* the representation of suicide cases is leaning towards rather stereotypical portrayal. Although the show presents cases of people with problems such as long-term depression, eating disorder, loss of a close person, or bullying, almost all of those who are about to commit suicide are stopped and after single conversation or encounter, they stop being suicidal and get into better mental state. This type of representation is inaccurate and even potentially harmful since it suggests that this type of situation is possible to be easily solved, however, it still can serve as an opening point for a discussion in the country, where suicide is tabu.

The number of the cases represented in the series is eighteen; nine males and nine females. While the total amount of suicide cases can be divided into the equal groups, the amount of an episodes centred on female suicide cases was nine, while male suicide centred episodes were only four. From youngest to oldest groups there was one person in the age group under twenty, twelve persons were in the age group from twenty to thirty, one person in the age group from thirty to forty, three persons in the age group from forty to fifty and two persons above the age of ninety. Given the number of cases the series focuses on and around which cases it is centred, the viewer may get the impression that suicides are more common among females and the most vulnerable group are people between the ages of twenty and thirty which does not correspond to reality.

When we take another look at the two cases of elderly above sixty who were represented, they were not represented in sake of real cases of suicidal elderly but were presented in the manner of glorifying stories from the past. Not every elderly has story from war or Japanese occupation and many of those who did not live through this experience are too in the risk of committing suicide.

Treatment of long-term depression is usually long and difficult. It is not linear and for this type of media it is hard to do, however for example in case of Namgung Jaesu, the portrayal of depressive state was accurate and relatable way.

On the other hand, instead of showing viewers stereotypical characters and situations, it would not be bad to look at the data of suicide statistics. This way can authors offer more authentic and consistent representations of suicidal behaviour and depression as well as to show viewers pictures that are not often portrayed in media. According to the statistics the most endangered group are elderly over sixty years of age, but *Tomorrow* offered only two examples of suicidal elderly compared to fifteen people from other age groups, mainly people between twenty and thirty.

Men have higher chance of committing suicide than women in the world as well as in South Korea. In 2019 there were more than twice as many male than female suicide cases per 100 000 population, but the series shows even distribution of gender meaning nine cases of male suicide attempts and nine cases of female attempts. Moreover, when it comes to cases where there was given more attention there were six female cases, while male cases where more attention was given were only three. In reality, the number of cases is reversed meaning there are usually more than twice as many suicide cases in male population than in female population. This can support harmful stereotypes of males being expected to deal with their struggles silently and never show any weakness.

As a conclusion this series tried to shed more light on socio-economic issue of suicide as a factor in total life expectancy in South Korea. Although there were cases that were portrayed with some accuracy, many of the represented cases were stereotypical with unrealistic conclusions. The *Tomorrow* series fails to show the viewer the reality of suicide rates choosing story at the expense of reality. From the cases shown only one person seemed to be homeless, while suicide in homeless people is very common in South Korea. Only two cases portrayed suicidal elderly while according to statistics elderly above sixty-five have higher number of suicide than every other age group combined together, and there were none of LGBT+ suicidal cases, totally excluding one of the bigger contributors to the suicide rates in general.

As a conclusion, the series is good as an opening point for conversation. However, as the series shows good understanding and representation in suicidal ideation in young people, the two cases of elderly portrayed lacked deeper understanding for motivations of these people.



## 11. Conclusion

In this thesis I focused on representation of suicide cases in television series *Tomorrow*. I also summarized the statistics on suicide in contemporary Republic of Korea and compared it to the picture this series offers.

Although this series helps to raise awareness of the topic of suicide and mental health, it portrays a misleading representation in many cases. In those cases, the struggles of people are seemingly easy to reconcile and move on, even though the mental health problems usually take long time, and in many of the cases also therapy, especially if the person's mental health gets to the state when the individual considers or even attempts suicide. On the other hand, portrayal of bullying was the type of representation that many young Koreans might find relatable.

The case of Jaesu is also relatable, especially for South Korean youth. Since the country consists of high competition, in education as well as in workplace. From the schooldays the competition to be the best so one can have better life begins. This high competitiveness can often lead to worsened mental state, depression, substance abuse or even suicide.

Another more relatable representation is the case of the sexual assault. Often in those cases the society turn around and blame the victim, instead of blaming the assaulter. The MeToo movement itself was an example of this practise. The victims of the sexual harassment are in many cases dismissed, or even penalized for speaking up (see Hasunuma and Shin 2019).

In South Korea, sexual assaults and sexual harassment is an issue, that is far from resolving, as the government wants to cancel the gender equality ministry, it sparked protest from the women. The pay gap between genders, difficulties to re-enter workplace after having kids and many other problems shows the mistreatment of women in South Korea (see Mackenzie 2022). Even the guideline for education is in some way defending assaulters while blaming the victims (Hu 2017).

In South Korea, suicide is considered a taboo, so having popular entertainment focused on the issue might help start the discussion that is necessary in today's society. As there are created films and series with this topic, we can only hope, that more representation will lead to better understanding and more open discussion about the topics of suicide and mental health.

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