

North Korean Defectors in South Korean Media:
The State of Representation and Defectors'
Thoughts on Infotainment, *Squid Game*, and
How Their Community Can Be Better Portrayed

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Abstract

This article accepts the premises that reality is socially constructed, in large part by traditional media, which has a societal obligation to influence that reality in a responsible manner. Background on the social construction of reality, media representation, and information relevant to the Korean context is provided, followed by the views of North Korean defectors (hereafter NKDs) on said representation, and finally a brief discussion and recommendations. Each issue impacting the majority female NKD population is examined through a gendered lens. Conclusions include the need for greater diversity in the representation of defectors, a reduction of sexualization and victimization as previous authors have discussed, and minimizing the use of the “strong NKD woman” narrative.

Keywords: gender, social construction of reality, minority representation, intersectional, soft power, Netflix

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The power of mass media, to not only discuss but also shape conventions and our understanding of the world, is difficult to overemphasize; as Berger and Luckmann (1966, 134) succinctly state, “[r]eality is socially defined.” The media plays an enormous role in creating and perpetuating this reality (Blumler 2018; Harris and Sanborn 2014; Luhmann 1996; UNHCR 2015). Accepting that, this piece examines how the media is defining those who have left the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (hereafter NK for North Korea), specifically those NKDs in the Republic of Korea (hereafter SK for South Korea). The overwhelming majority of these NKDs are female (MOU 2022) and gender is intricately linked to any issue impacting the community, therefore each issue will be considered through a gendered lens.

This study accepts that reality is socially constructed, and the media has a societal obligation to influence this reality in a responsible manner, in public and commercial broadcasting as well as other mediums (Bardoel and Brants 2003; Bardoel and D’Haenens 2004; Commission on Freedom of the Press 1947). Behaving in a responsible manner “simply means that the images repeated and emphasized be such as are in total representative of the social group as it is. The truth about any social group, though it should not exclude its weaknesses and vices, includes also recognition of its values, its aspirations, and its common humanity. . . if people are exposed to the inner truth of the life of a particular group, they will gradually build up respect for and understanding of it” (Commission on Freedom of the Press 1947, 26–27). Academics and human rights groups have also emphasized the necessity of balanced coverage (Harris and Sanborn 2014; UNHCR 2015) and according to Fraser “parity of participation” is a vital component for justice (2008). Finally, given previous apologies for negative depictions of other non-SK-born¹ individuals (Hae-yeon Kim 2021; T. Kim 2008; Pietsch 2021), it is assumed that SK in general does not embrace inaccurate representation.

Having volunteered in the NKD community for over half a decade, I have heard many complaints regarding media representation from defectors themselves and those who have worked closely with them. Yet, while those objections

¹ “SK-born” is used to represent all non-NKD South Koreans in SK. This is not meant to be exclusionary towards South Koreans born elsewhere, but is an attempt to be clear that NKDs are also SK citizens, therefore comparing NKDs to South Koreans would be egregiously misleading.

are widespread, they're often reduced to sporadic quotes in academic works, if included at all. Part of the purpose of this study is to allow a larger audience to hear defectors' thoughts on their representation, along with a theoretical and practical context for considering this matter. The first section will provide background on the social construction of reality, media representation, and information relevant to the South Korean context. As this study is aligned with recent calls for centering the voices of impacted communities, including migrant and refugee populations (Alvarez et al. 2021; Bucken-Knapp, Fasih, and Spehar 2019; Bucken-Knapp, Omanovic, and Spehar 2020), the second section will ask NKDs their thoughts on particular portrayals and their representation in general. Finally, there is a brief discussion with recommendations.

Over 1,000 NKDs arrived in SK every year from 2001 to 2019, with over 2,000 yearly between 2006 and 2011, before dropping to just a few hundred arrivals in 2020 and remaining low since then (MOU 2022). While early defectors were predominantly male, nearly every year since 2002 over 50% of arrivals have been female; females now constitute 72% of SK's NKD population (MOU 2022). Though the fewer than 34,000 total NKDs represent less than 1% of SK's population, in addition to their intrinsic worth, the community may also be an invaluable bridge if greater collaboration between the Koreas, or even reunification, were to occur, as well as an indicator of what integration may look like in the case of the latter (S. Kim et al. 2017; Yoon 2001). However, this instrumental group faces unique impediments to shaping their societal portrayal.

Much of how the media contributes to the social construction of reality is indirect, including the selection of topics or which types of NKDs are given a platform and what such representation looks and sounds like. By giving voice repeatedly to the same issues, the media is able to, in large part, set the agenda and frame which issues are important (Dalton et al. 2016; Iyengar 1991; Mccombs and Shaw 1972; Weaver 1991). Traditional media sources still hold tremendous power in framing what societies consider significant and shaping public sentiment (Dalton et al. 2016; Keumjae Park

2014; Webster, Rice, and Sud 2020), even in a nation with one of the world's highest social media penetration rates (Shim 2020). This power is especially noteworthy in cases involving minority groups, where such outlets may be the sole providers of information to the citizen-consumer on a given issue, thereby having a substantial impact on how said group is perceived (Bleich, Bloemraad, and de Graauw 2015; Harris and Sanborn 2014).

Signification or “the human production of signs” is a key term regarding the social construction of reality (Berger and Luckmann 1966, 50). When you see X, what meaning do you assign to it? Without seeing their face, who would you rate as more cheerful, a woman dressed in a black suit, or one wearing a yellow sundress? In some cultures, maintaining eye contact is a sign of attentiveness, while in others excessive eye contact, especially by subordinates, may indicate disrespect and a lack of serious attention to what is being said (Kawaguchi-Suzuki et al. 2019). What is unemployment a sign of? For many, it invokes images of laziness or other negative, low-status generalizations (Furnham 1982; Krug, Drasch, and Jungbauer-Gans 2019; Krugman 2014; McFadyen 1998; Wahl, Pollai, and Kirchler 2013).

In 2019, 6.3% of NKDs were unemployed compared to 3.0% of other South Koreans² (Korea Hana Foundation 2020). At an instinctual level, do you interpret this, as Montesquieu might, as a sign that naturally some people are lazier than others? Or do you think such myths have been used against everyone from citizens in the southern parts of the United States and Europe to those in the global south and to most Asians in previous eras, as Rota and others have asserted (Rota 2012)?

Perhaps some citizen-consumers read such news with little astonishment, knowing the NKD population is mostly female and SK has struggled for years with low female workforce participation (B. Lee, Jang, and Sarkar 2008; OECD 2018; Statistics Korea 2020). Additionally, approximately one-third of NKDs are 15-29 years old (MOU 2022). This age group is notoriously underemployed in SK's general population (Noh and Lee 2017; Yun 2010). One might also realize that SK not only has the highest worldwide tertiary education level in the 25–34 year old demographic, at virtually 70%, with

² The pandemic hit NKDs especially hard. The details of that deserve dedicated investigation, which is outside the scope of this piece. As such, several pre-pandemic measurements will be used to provide an understanding of the situation outside the dimension of the current crisis.

the rate among females being over 75% (OECD 2022b), but even after including all 25–64 year olds, SK still has over 10% greater attainment than the OECD average (OECD 2022a). However, in the majority female NKD community, less than 18% have acquired such schooling (MOU 2022). Also, among the total South Korean population in January of 2020, male unemployment was lower than that of females, and those with college degrees had the lowest unemployment while those without a high school degree had an unemployment rate of 7.6% (Statistics Korea 2020).

Even if they were not NKDs, this community would face significant disadvantages due to the intersectionality of marginalizations prevalent among this relatively young group attempting to work in one of the most gendered and highly educated economies in the world. Additionally, there is the exceeding importance of networking bonds based on region of birth, alma mater, and “blood” or family ties (Horak 2014; Horak and Yang 2018; North 1990; Yee 2015), virtually none of which NKDs are able to leverage. After this lengthy illustration, it may seem reasonable for NKDs to have substantially lower employment rates than the SK-born population. Which makes it astonishing that, despite the focus on “high” unemployment, in 2019 NKD men were employed just 0.4% less than SK-born men and NKD women were employed at a 2.0% higher rate than their SK-born peers (Korea Hana Foundation 2020). Though unemployment has negative connotations for many, it is not a measure of economic inactivity, but rather an indicator of who is looking for work and not yet successful, whilst the employment rate provides a clearer picture of labor-force participation.

According to Schudson (1982, 107), news in particular, “does not mirror the world, but constructs one,” a widely shared sentiment (Luhmann 1996; Steuter and Wills 2009; Webster, Rice, and Sud 2020). Many SK-born people and academics across the globe know NKDs are working far less than their SK-born peers; that is their reality. This is influenced by numerous news reports and academic works that do not mention employment rates, but instead discuss how much higher NKD unemployment is than total SK-born unemployment (*Chosun Ilbo* 2015; Chung 2008; Jung 2016; J.

Kim and Jang 2007; Lankov 2006; A. Lee 2016; K. Park and Ok 2017; Yoon 2001), almost all of which ignore or gloss over the gender, age, education, and networking differences between these groups, leaving a rational citizen-consumer with the impression that NKDs do not work as much as their peers and they don't do so *because* of their defector status. This example illustrates through numerical data how the social construction of reality is at times completely contrary to the evidence. Most examples are far less tangible.

Readers from many nations can probably attest to witnessing bellicose news reports or headlines regarding NK. Headlines “ultimately influence and direct interpretations as much as they summarize content” (Steuter and Wills 2009, 13). Presenting the news in an emotionally charged manner can lead to further othering of both NK and its former citizens (Dalton et al. 2016). As such, mass media in general also plays an important role in supporting peace processes and spreading new systems of beliefs (Bar-Tal and Halperin 2013; J. Park et al. 2020; Wolfsfeld 2004). This is relevant for the peninsula’s future and the well-being of NKDs within its southern border.

Infotainment, with its presentation of select “information,” often coupled with an emotional or otherwise “entertaining” approach, is neither a new phenomenon nor strictly a local occurrence. In SK, a few of these shows feature NKDs, including *Ije mannareo gamnida* [On my way to meet you] (hereafter, *On My Way*), which will be discussed in greater detail in subsequent sections. Since at least the mid-1990s, some have bemoaned increasing informality in media as problematic for an informed citizenry (Blumler and Gurevitch 1995; Tucker 2009), while others have argued that the “infotainment scare” is an overreaction (Brants 1998). Regardless of one’s thoughts on the impact of these changes, it is clear that traditional media, in its myriad forms, still plays a substantial role in framing and informing public opinion (Bardoel and D’Haenens 2004; Blumler 2018; Harris and Sanborn 2014; Luhmann 1996).

Whether it is on-screen or in print, there are clear incentives to embellish portions of the, very hard to verify, stories of NKDs (Fifield 2015; Ju-min Park 2015; S. Sung 2015).

One NKD who has agreed to make other appearances for financial remuneration, refused to appear on entertainment shows because, “[y]ou can be a crook or be asked to lie. I have seen so many people lying and making mistakes on camera . . . People only care about spicy stories” (Ju-min Park 2015). In the midst of a very supportive review of her time on an infotainment program, one NKD described the production process, including writers and producers sending questions to the NKD guests, after which the “writers pick the most fun and interesting stories for the script” (Zuo 2020). Hence, even if the selected stories are 100% accurate, it is likely that only the most “entertaining” stories are aired. Who gets such airtime or publishing support seems related not only to gender but also to their attractiveness and their fit in the prevalent victim narrative (Song 2021; M. Sung 2010). As Song (2021, 60) points out in a discussion on which NKD memoirs and personalities reap the most publicity and profits, “to sell stories, they would prefer innocent-looking young female victims to produce shocking, tragic and sensational stories.”

Scholars and the general public alike have remarked upon the dramatic evolution of social media (Bastos 2015; Blumler 2018). While distinctions can be drawn between social media and social networking sites, for this study all will be classified as “social media,” including but not limited to Naver Band, Instagram, KakaoStory, Facebook, and Twitter. These newer media sources can be used not only for self-expression but also to democratize opinions, allowing those with access and rudimentary technological skills to have a platform for their ideas and even challenge the media establishment (García and Treré 2014; Murthy 2012). Many marginalized groups can utilize social media’s private group options to create safer spaces, where only select people can “join” and those who are disrespectful can be ejected; this helps provide a sense of community, with one author speaking of them as a “cocoon” where marginalized groups, “can express themselves creatively and freely” (Murthy 2010, 191).

However, the ability to use social media platforms to express personal views is not universal (Chouliaraki 2013). SK boasts high connectivity and affordable, alacritous connections. Unfortunately, it only has a Freedom House

ranking of 'Partly Free' in 2021 (a single point improvement from its Partly Free 2020 ranking), having lost points in categories concerning the criminality of online activities, in part due to SK's strong defamation laws that can find defendants guilty regardless of the truth in what they purport, as well as the 1948 National Security Act, which "allows prison sentences of up to seven years for praising or expressing sympathy with the North Korean regime" (Freedom House 2021).³ Points were also lost in relation to blocking or filtering content as well as self-censoring, and significant points were missed regarding infringements on users' privacy rights (Freedom House 2021). This poses a problem for all South Koreans, but the ability to represent the defector aspect of themselves as a 'citizen journalist' on social media or in other ways use their voice (Chouliaraki 2013, 2017; Murthy 2011), comes at a higher cost for NKDs. Even the use of private groups is a luxury not afforded to all NKDs, as some are highly distrustful of other defectors (Min 2008). Here too, the hurdles of being a NKD are raised higher for most by their status as South Korean females on the internet, where social communities may replicate misogynistic societal divisions in a digital domain (Boyd 2011; J. Kim 2018b). This is especially troublesome in a nation that is continuously accused of leniency when prosecuting crimes against women, including digital offenses (Schieber 2020). Cyber confrontations are especially problematic as "online misogyny not only attacks individual women, but also limits their public presence" (J. Kim 2017, 806).

There is ample documentation of the stigma and discrimination that NKDs face in SK (Hough and Bell 2020; S. Kim et al. 2017; Lankov 2006). Discomfort about broadcasting one's defector status, including concerns about employment or social intolerance, is compounded for some by apprehension over what may happen to oneself or one's family remaining in NK. While much of this is whispers and hearsay, the case of Ji-hyun Lim left many adamant that NK was actively kidnapping NKDs. Though Lim has appeared in NK, disavowing her time in SK, NKDs have asserted her statements appear fabricated and question why she would not take the equivalent of nearly \$20,000 USD she left in SK if her

³ To be clear, I have not heard a single NKD express such sympathy, but I have heard Koreans express worry that saying anything positive about NK may put them at risk for prosecution.

intention was to leave permanently; it also would not be the first time that a NKD appeared to be taken from within China (*Chosun Ilbo* 2004; Haworth 2021; Hyungjin Kim 2017). Even for those who have a desire to publically share the defector dimension of themselves, many make the calculation that doing so is not worth the risk.

Stereotyping “others” is not limited to the mainstream media’s representation of NKDs. One author noted the persistence of “media-fuelled Korean racial prejudice against others” (Han 2015, 13). In Olympics coverage, among other negative depictions, Chernobyl was used to represent Ukraine, leading to broadcaster apologies (Pietsch 2021), and multiple broadcasting companies were sanctioned in 2008 “for their commentators’ inappropriate or racial comments during the coverage of Olympic Games in Beijing” (T. Kim 2008). Being a majority female group, NKDs are also disproportionately impacted by gender stereotypes of women in programs and advertisements in SK (K. Kim and Lowry 2005). This includes “misogynistic culture and male-centered narratives in Korean films, in which women tend to be ‘eye candy’ or victims of male violence” (J. Kim 2018a, 506). NKD women in particular are often portrayed both as highly sexualized objects and as victims, including of sexual abuse (Choo 2006; Joowon Park 2016; S. Sung 2015).

On My Way is an infotainment program that features NKDs. In a single episode, it may be reminiscent of a friendly talk show, a community center talent contest, and an editorial international news program. Only by watching the show can one begin to understand how a program that utilizes cartoonish sound effects also lead one guest to be greatly moved by the sentiments of NKDs, while simultaneously describing the program as feeling emotionally manipulative (Blue 2013). *Frontline* concisely described it as “part current affairs, part talent show, part beauty pageant” (Jones 2014, 32:46), while *The New York Times* summarized, “[a]t center stage sit a dozen guests, many of them women in short, colorful dresses . . . The two hosts engage the group in rapid-fire patter, while an all-male panel of B-list celebrities called the South 4 tosses out ooohs, aahs and sexual innuendo” (E. Kim 2019). Many, including former cast members, have lamented

that the stories are exaggerated and accuse such shows of sexualizing NKD women (S. Sung 2015; Zuo 2020). The sexualization accusation is hard to refute given descriptions uploaded by the program's network that refer to the NKD cast as the "North Korean Beauties" (Channel A 2017). While NKD men have also appeared regularly on the program, I am not privy to any indictments of them being sexualized by it.

On the other hand, some credit the show with fostering goodwill and humanizing NKDs (E. Kim 2019; Yoon 2001). While it is unknown if protests and calls for the show's cancelation, increased dialogue between the Koreas, or something else entirely is responsible for the change, the current version of *On My Way* is markedly different from earlier iterations (Epstein and Green 2015; Kang 2018). In recent years, the hemlines have become noticeably longer while the ratio of females has diminished considerably. Since the last half of 2021, the show features round-table style discussions dominated by men, who make up well over half the participants on over a dozen shows examined since that time, with women sometimes accounting for less than a quarter of the ensemble.

Netflix only entered SK in 2016 (Netflix 2021), yet has already produced some notable North Korean and NKD-related content. Though defectors have been represented in popular South Korean media for over a decade, the portrayals of defectors and North Korean society by Netflix have struck many as unique. *Crash Landing on You*, featuring the life of a wealthy SK-born female executive after she accidentally lands north of the DMZ, has been "widely praised for its well-researched and nuanced portrayal of North Korea, something it achieved by having a real-life North Korean defector on its writing team" (S. Kim 2020). To news outlets, one NKD shared that she enthusiastically discussed the drama with her family in SK (S. Kim 2020) while another said she previously avoided media concerning NK in SK, but what she "liked about this series is that it showed different kinds of people living in North Korea" (M. Kim and Denyer 2020). Those differences have found broad support, with Al Jazeera reporting, "South Korean fans say the series . . . has opened their eyes to North Korean life and the lives of defectors" (Kasulis 2020).

The writer-director of *Squid Game* had pitched the idea over a decade ago, with no luck, and when he tried to solicit interest again in 2018, instead of traditional South Korean networks, he approached Netflix (Verhoeven 2021). This drama also featured Sae-byeok Kang, a NKD who is a pickpocket trying to save enough money to help her mother escape to SK. In the biggest hit in Netflix history, hundreds of heavily indebted residents of SK compete to win the equivalent of over \$38 million USD via lethal versions of Korean traditional children's games (Spangler 2022). The show is estimated to be worth more than \$890 million USD for Netflix and, though demonstrating some of the drawbacks of capitalism, it also adds to SK's soft power expansion via Hallyu, not only exposing new audiences to SK, but also winning Golden Globe Awards along with receiving four nominations for Screen Actors Guild Awards and winning three of them, including one for Hoyeon Jung's portrayal of Sae-byeok Kang (MacDonald 2022; Pardo 2021; Shaw 2021; Spangler 2022). Kang became a fan favorite and is positively received by NKDs who praise the show's accuracy representing their lives (G. Kim 2021; LaMantia 2021; Y. Park 2021; Shah 2021).

For interviews, defectors were contacted through snowball sampling which, though not representative of an entire community, is often used with hard-to-contact groups, including NKDs (H. Lee et al. 2020; G. Shin and Lee 2015). An initial contributor referred two additional interviewees, each given 30,000 won (about \$25 USD) as compensation for their time, and the initial interviewee received an additional 30,000 won for arranging the introductions. It was made clear that this was a one-time interview and I was not looking for any "right" or exciting answers, but rather hoping for their honest thoughts. While social-desirability bias is still possible, financial and fame-based reasons for exaggerations were minimized as the payment was small and interviewees knew their information would be shared anonymously. Each interviewee physically or electronically consented to the interviews, which were held separately and lasted approximately one hour each. Two were conducted in Korean with a translator while one was conducted in English as she

works professionally in English. Those interviewed were in their mid-20s to early 30s. Their time living in SK varied from less than two years to more than ten years but all live in Seoul. Two are university graduates and one is a university student. All three are female. It would have been optimal to have a fuller range of views, including from men, blue-collar workers, the unemployed, and older NKDs, but this sample was deemed appropriate for the time and budget constraints of the current examination. Given the small group size and the fact that the interviewees know each other, rather than identifying each with a pseudonym, their answers are mostly presented all together, in an attempt to keep their views anonymous, even from each other. Only in a few instances where it seemed particularly significant to the reader's understanding, did I clarify some identifying details. This method of presentation is less common than the use of select, pseudonym-attributed quotes, but was the most succinct way to present the greatest amount of answers and insights. On a number of occasions only one or two responses are provided, usually due to other interviewees saying they had no opinion or could not think of an answer at the time.

YouTube was the medium through which two of the NKDs consumed the most media, while the third watched more television shows. When asked about their own social media presence, two interviewees said they use popular platforms, but none make their defector background known publicly and each of them was incredulous at the idea of doing so.

Interviewees were asked to talk about a show or movie they recently enjoyed. One was watching an American comedy series to help improve her already fluent English and the others enjoyed historical dramas. When asked about the female characters in these shows, the one watching the American show responded that they do not need to be as smart as the male characters, as long as they are pretty. She described her favorite female character as well-balanced and, while lacking the level of academic achievement of the male characters, she was able to communicate well with others and had a clear advantage in social skills. Another thought historical pieces that showed exceptionally strong female characters were unrealistic, and described her favorite

character as humble and wise. The third talked excitedly about how exhilarating it was watching a Korean female superhero take down the bad guys, calling the character very active, powerful, and a leader. Then asked about media characters that were inspiring or good role models, the latter praised the Korean version of *Wonder Woman*, saying she was both of those things and added that she is not only good at combat, but also uses brilliant words and clever schemes to fight evil.

Multiple interviewees communicated feelings of déjà vu when discussing news coverage of NK and NKDs. It was seen as mostly concerned with nuclear weapons, the relationship of SK with NK, and other international ramifications, with one saying it did not focus enough on how harsh daily life is for North Koreans. Asked how factual it was, one thought it was accurate, while another thought it represented an interpretation of events, and the third thought it was inaccurate, most notably when discussing NKDs; she knew another defector who had been in the news and said the story presented was “not only exaggerated, but also inaccurate.”

When asked how they think SK-born people feel watching such news, words like strange, threatened, and scared were used. One worried such news could be “dangerous because it can inform their perspective in a bias way,” explaining that, since most people in SK had no direct experience with NK, they would probably accept exactly what the newscasters say as fact. Regarding what they would like to change, responses included greater accuracy and not overhyping stories, as well as showing more diversity, including showing NKDs of various economic statuses, and showing how people in NK are manipulated by their government.

When asked about *On My Way* and shows similar to it, they replied they were familiar with the broadcasts but none watched them regularly at this time. They felt such shows were unrealistic; they over-generalized the NKD experience and did things to make the show more interesting, rather than presenting subjects as accurately as possible.

Many segments of *On My Way* discuss traumatic topics, therefore when looking for a clip, random scene selection was deemed inappropriate. The segment referenced below

was uploaded by the show's network, Channel A, making the provenance clear, and it has English subtitles, allowing any reader to watch the YouTube clip for themselves. This scene dealt with the possibility of magpies "crying" upon Kim Jong-il's death. In it, jokes are made about the scenario, followed by NKDs sharing their experiences, with some discussing the necessity of appearing to cry (Channel A 2017). After watching this clip, the youngest interviewee said there was a large generational divide in NK and that members of Gen-Z felt neither sad nor compelled to cry. Another said when Kim Il-sung died, people were truly sad and did cry; however, when his son Kim Jong-il died, people were not very sad and either made an effort to cry or pretended to do so. The clip gave the impression that there would be ominous consequences for anyone who was not shedding heartbroken tears, which the last interviewee found laughable, saying, "There won't be *real* problems if you don't cry. They are not going to check your eyes individually." She added that people would feel guilty if they weren't crying and explained that with no information about the outside world she believed everything she was taught, even using the word "brainwashing" (*senoe*). If a Kim family member passed away, it was sad. No one pushed her to cry, but she did, clarifying, "Even if you didn't initially feel sad, you would become emotional because everyone around you is crying." In the clip, one NKD explains how they would even poke themselves in the eye in order not to be accused of being a "rebel," which one of the SK-born regular guests appeared to find exceptionally amusing (Channel A 2017, 3:59). When asked what she thought of his reaction, one responded, "It's not funny at all, why are they laughing that much?" but added that if she were on the show, "Maybe I would laugh too because I wouldn't want to make it awkward, so I'd go 'ha ha ha ha,'" adding, "We are social animals."

The segment showed a clear difference in attire, most notably between male guests and female NKDs. The male SK-born guests were described by one interviewee as looking shabby, in contrast to the sophisticated manner in which men in SK usually dress. The NKD women were described as wearing colorful clothes but multiple remarks were made regarding *how* short their skirts and dresses were. One

⁴ Short hemlines are a routine sight in SK. However, having met hundreds of NKDs, my anecdotal contribution is that I have not ever seen a NKD wearing such clothes off-screen. Also, until recently the typical NKD cast was more than 80% female, however when male NKD guests appear, they often wear professional clothing, including suits or vests and ties. Though short clothing is acceptable in social situations, such clothing is unlikely to be seen in formal settings, where the clothing the NKD men wear would be completely appropriate.

recognized, “It’s normal here (to wear short clothes), and they have the freedom to wear anything,” but asked rhetorically, “Why does everyone on this show have to wear such *short skirts?*” and another said they looked almost naked.⁴

When asked how NKDs are portrayed on these shows, there were overwhelmingly negative responses. Unrealistic. Manipulated. Pitiful. The last was from a defector who credits the show with perpetuating stereotypes that all NKDs were starving and, regarding schooling, either NKDs were part of the elite or had no education. She relayed her frustration at disclosing her defector background to someone and having them immediately tell her how she must not know things like mathematics. This was especially erroneous as she was volunteering teaching math to SK-born students, based solely on what she learned in NK.

There was a wide range of answers when describing the show’s female NKDs from “independent” to “only representing one type of NKD.” One interviewee even called them “puppets who only say provocative things and don’t speak truthfully.” Two interviewees discussed the benefits of having more men on the show. One said some of the male NKDs speak truthfully while another spoke of how gendered NK is, therefore, men have stories about parts of North Korean society that most women do not have direct knowledge of.

Interviewees also had positive insights. One, living in SK more than ten years, said she watched the program often, a long time ago. She felt a connection with it and credits shows like this with helping to change the harsh perception of NKDs, saying that she can feel the change in recent years. Each also mentioned, unprompted, that the NKDs appear to have a lot of strength. But this was a double-edged sword; that NKD women must be strong was spoken of as an especially harmful stereotype. Concerning SK-born viewers, two worried that they would believe everything they saw on the show and one thought that the show’s NKDs would look like strong survivors of difficult circumstances.

When asked if the NKDs of *On My Way* were similar to themselves or people they knew, they all said no, amidst varying degrees of laughter and frustration, with one adding that NKDs vary in personality and lifestyles, just as SK-born

people do. Asked about how representative the cast of NKDs was, their views aligned, with one succinctly stating, “They don’t represent NKDs at all.” All three said that they would not want to be on the program, with one relaying that she had been asked to take part in the past and had rejected the offer.

Each had interesting ideas for improving such shows. The first insisted that no one should be on the show that had left NK more than five years ago; NK changes so much, those who left earlier would not be very knowledgeable about its current state. Another discussed the time of arrival in SK, exclaiming it would be best to have a group of NKDs who arrived at different times, with no scripts, and allow them to talk about a given topic. The last wanted to include more men who had held various jobs, create a trustworthy program that is accurate, and change to more conservative women’s attire.

The next set of questions concerned *Squid Game*. One interviewee had not seen the show, so this section contains responses from the other two. When asked about the NKD character of Sae-byeok Kang, one thought she was what SK-born people expect of a NKD while the other spoke of how realistic she was and how any NKD would respond in a similar way, if put in such a cruel situation. This character was seen in a positive manner, with one saying, “I feel identical to her.” After conveying that it is obviously wrong for anyone to steal, both remarked on the preponderance of pickpockets in NK and felt that Kang was just trying to survive. Describing her further, one said that she had bad luck but kept trying to save her family, which made her pity Kang. The other said that Kang represented empowerment and she was struggling in order to save her family, like many NKD women do.

Though Kang did not have a tremendous amount of screen-time, both interviewees were able to quickly identify a favorite scene. For one, when she tried to find clues to win the games, she seemed not only desperate but also active and brave. The other found the scenes with the marble game especially moving, saying that the friendship between the two women was impressive and showed Kang’s humanity. Asked why they thought so many non-Koreans liked her, their answers emphasized her filial piety. One thought that viewers could see that she was struggling to help her family and was

in the game through no fault of her own. The other thought that people must admire how she took responsibility for her whole family, even sacrificing her life to try and help them. This interviewee also noted that not only was Kang never daunted in the middle of the men but she portrayed true humanity and friendship.

Next, an image was shown from episode one, where Kang is confronted by a gang leader who she previously worked under; she remains calm and collected throughout the encounter while other players watch with shocked faces (Hwang 2021, 34:30). One interviewee thought that she looked brave, but both thought that her demeanor was unrealistic and the onlookers were more credible, with one saying, “The people in the background are exactly like people in reality. They don’t care about others,” before adding that she understood such behavior. One thought that this scene showed that Kang had been through many difficulties and was desperate while another said, “She is trying to be brave although in her mind she must be scared.” Without prompting, both stated that Kang was relentless.

When asked to compare the *Squid Game* NKD to the infotainment NKDs, both noted how unambiguous the differences were. One worried that others might get a bad impression about NKDs after watching a show where this character was a thief while the other thought that this representation was close to reality. They thought that SK-born viewers would feel sorry for her, never choose such a path themselves, pity how hard her life is, and questioned whether her degree of strength would make her unapproachable, saying, “Are North Korean defector women really powerful like that? They are too strong to be friendly neighbors.”

Too strong is also how interviewees felt NKD women were represented throughout the media, along with being brave, sacrificing, and trying hard to survive. One felt that SK-born women were represented as being too easily forgiven in every situation and another said that they were usually shown as pretty and smart while the last said that they appear to be sexualized. There was consensus that the media should not exclusively highlight the harshness of the lives of NKDs and should avoid the incessant depiction of excessively

strong, tenacious NKD women. Instead, all three asserted that it would be beneficial to have greater variety in their representation, showcasing unique perspectives and opinions.

The interviewees were also asked if they would be interested in watching a hypothetical show that centered on the real daily lives of NKDs in SK (making new friends, missing family, finding jobs, creating a new social life, and so on). All the interviewees said that this is something they would watch and such a show could help their SK-born peers truly understand NKDs. None of them would want to be on such a show themselves right now; one demurred for privacy reasons, another hates talking in front of others, and the university student said that she would not want to be on such a program at the moment but perhaps in the future.

Lastly, when asked how South Korean media can be more empowering for women, particularly NKD women, one respondent said, “Social media is empowering women’s voices,” pointing out that, among other things, women comment or interact with posts at a high frequency, and seem to have more voice now than in the past. Another said, “I met a woman working at the Korea Hana Foundation who helps North Korean defectors with all her heart. I want to see that kind of woman represented in the media.”

One important facet of the social construction of reality, is that others become “real . . . in the fullest sense of the word only when I meet him face to face” (Berger and Luckmann 1966, 44). Repeated exposure to a person or group of people has the ability to change rigid perceptions (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Fujioka 1999; Harris and Sanborn 2014). For most in SK, such exposure will not occur or they will not be aware that they met a NKD, due to most keeping that information private (Hough and Bell 2020). Without such interactions being commonplace, impressions and judgments are based on what they see repeatedly. This includes reports on high unemployment and infotainment shows that appear to take a singular type of NKD women, the naïve, pitiable, petite female, sometimes sullen but always strong, and present them in dozens of iterations over multiple shows and seasons. It would be illogical for the average citizen-consumer to see these repeated depictions and assume that

they misrepresent NKDs.

It is important to remember that the NKDs who want to and are given the opportunity to share their stories on popular platforms are not representative of the average defector. As previously noted, many NKDs have no desire to speak publically. Add to this, the screening of television speeches for what is most entertaining, plus sensational stories having great sales potential, and there may be a public image of NKDs that bears little resemblance to their community. As reported elsewhere and reiterated by those spoken to for this study, public embellishments by just a few are detrimental to the image and credibility of all NKDs. Even relatively minor falsehoods reduce the perceived trustworthiness of a group whose stories are often nearly impossible to verify (Fifield 2015). Such being the case, it is imperative that the media outlets, which have profited for years off the stories of NKDs, bring in diverse voices. This includes more NKDs behind the scenes, where those who may not feel comfortable with public speaking can still assist in the production of more realistic representation as well as in the promotion of diverse stories.

Some assert that the media has no ethical or societal responsibilities. Even if one accepts that argument for the population at large, who have the ability to use social and traditional media to counter poor representation, I agree with previous authors who assert that the depiction of minority groups should receive heightened scrutiny, due to the outsized influence it has on the perception of citizen-consumers about such groups (Bleich, Bloemraad, and de Graauw 2015; Commission on Freedom of the Press 1947; Harris and Sanborn 2014). While NKDs in SK now live in a democratic, highly technologically connected society, their “freedom” to utilize social media to scold producers or networks for what they see as a misrepresentation of their community would come at a significantly greater cost than asked of other South Koreans. This greatly increases the responsibility of the media to portray them truthfully. Additionally, there is already considerable self-censoring in SK and previous remorse for poor representation belies a lack of obligation.

Though the first section discussed previous apologies regarding stereotypes, those particular examples were related

to media consumed in or discussing other nations (Hae-yeon Kim 2021; T. Kim 2008; Pietsch 2021). Companies may be less concerned with misrepresenting NKDs, given defectors' reluctance to voice that frustration publically, regardless of how offensive it may be. Traditional media outlets may worry that less sensationalized stories will mean less viewership, but Netflix has proven that a multifaceted presentation of NKDs is not only possible but is profitable.

On My Way has transformed into a show about NKDs, where SK-born men and male NKDs greatly outnumber the NKD women who make up the bulk of the community. More professionals on-air is a positive move towards improved accuracy, but the show's unwillingness to find women from the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, Ministry of Unification, Korea Hana Foundation, other CSOs, or academia, all of which have scores of qualified women whose expertise is vital to any discussion on NKDs, is deeply troubling. Time will tell if the female NKD community will get their literal seats at the table, now that the set no longer shows off the gams of the "beauties."

By centering the voices of NKDs, not only were frustrations over the victimization and sexualization of NKD women heard, but it was also revealed that all interviewees felt far more intensely about how problematic the "strong NKD woman" characterization was. This vexation is reminiscent of the "strong Black woman" stereotype, which has received increasing attention due to how harmful even a "positive" categorization can be (Corbin, Smith, and Garcia 2018; Nelson, Cardemil, and Adeoye 2016; Watson and Hunter 2015). Respondents found the weight of this depiction significant. Given the gravitas they expressed in discussing it, this is an area that should be seriously investigated by subsequent works.

Content creators should respect this and other critiques proceed accordingly. Given the well-documented health disparities of NKDs (S. Lee 2017; Y. Lee, Lee, and Park 2017; Wright et al. 2019), continuing to contribute to an inaccurate and harmful socially constructed reality of the community is not just disrespectful but irresponsible.

As SK continues to pursue soft power through the spread

of culture, it behooves the media to be mindful of accurate representation, not only regarding NKDs, but also other marginalized and non-SK-born groups. By providing truthful representation, creators can assist in the construction of a more accurate reality among the populace and greatly reduce the likelihood of future scandals when Hallyu is consumed elsewhere. This is beneficial for media networks and may strengthen SK's soft power arsenal.

NKD's are not just characters in but also consumers of media. Dramas and music have even been cited as inspirations for their defections (Denyer and Kim 2019; Shin 2020; Zuo 2020). But where are the depictions of their growing community they can take pride in? No one expects, nor is it advisable, for every Korean drama or infotainment program to have a dozen Sae-byeok Kang style characters. Instead, variety in the voices and portrayals of this unique segment of new South Koreans is not only supported by the NKDs spoken to for this study, but also demanded by the social responsibility that mass media is expected to have for accurate representation.

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