

Analysis of Gender Roles and Romantic Love in the K-Drama “My Secret Romance”

Katia Sofía Mercado Gutiérrez., Rosalva Enciso Arámbula., Gabriel Zepeda Martínez

Universidad Autónoma de Nayarit

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100800343>

Received: 12 August 2026; Accepted: 25 August 2026; Published: 04 September 2026

ABSTRACT

The objective of this research is to identify the indicators of romantic love and define the representations of gender roles in the Korean romance series “My Secret Romance”. Adapting a qualitative, descriptive, and cross-sectional content analysis design, this study employs a systematic observational technique across all 14 episodes. To address methodological rigor, coding was conducted via a two-coder independent framework with intercoder reliability assessment (Cohen's Kappa = 0.88), establishing clear operational definitions for psychometric categories adapted from the Gender Ideology Scale and Hendrick & Hendrick's Love Attitudes Scale. Among the main findings, traditional gender role statements exhibited low direct verbal frequency (e.g., “A woman's place is in the home,” 8 occurrences; “Children suffer if their mothers work,” 4 occurrences) but profound narrative impact in constraining female autonomy. Regarding romantic love, a total of 256 behavioral occurrences were categorized, with Mania (145 occurrences) and Eros (68 occurrences) dominating the affective structure. The most frequent indicators centered on cognitive obsession (“When I am in love, I find it hard to concentrate,” 56 occurrences) and somatization of distress (“When something is wrong, I feel a knot in my stomach,” 55 occurrences). The manuscript concludes that while the textual representation in My Secret Romance naturalizes obsessive attachment and emotional dependence, such findings reflect narrative tropes within the text rather than audience reception or behavioral effects.

Keywords: Gender roles, romantic love, Hallyu, k-dramas, qualitative content analysis, intercoder reliability.

INTRODUCTION AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

The global rise of cultural products from South Korea, a phenomenon known as the “Korean Wave” or Hallyu, has become one of the most significant media and industrial developments of the twenty-first century (Torrero, 2021). The term was originally coined by Chinese media in the late 1990s to describe the extraordinary penetration of Korean pop music and television series into Asian markets. Subsequently, this cultural flow expanded massively into the West, finding a highly receptive audience in Latin America following commercial milestones such as the success of “Gangnam Style” in 2012 and the subsequent mass distribution of series formally known as k-dramas or Korean dramas (Ladevito & Bavoleo, 2015; Rivera, 2018).

The transnational distribution of these audiovisual materials was definitively strengthened by the development and mass adoption of global streaming platforms, primarily Netflix and Viki (Ju, 2019). In Mexico and the Latin American region, k-dramas regularly rank among the ten most-watched contents. Romance series such as “True Beauty” and “My Demon” have remained for multiple consecutive weeks in the Top 10 viewing lists in countries such as Honduras, Peru, Bolivia, Chile, Ecuador, and El Salvador. Likewise, Korean productions from different genres, such as “All of Us Are Dead” and “Squid Game,” have achieved historical records in worldwide viewing hours, confirming that the consumption of South Korean narratives is not a marginal phenomenon, but rather a mass cultural practice fully integrated into the everyday lives of young audiences (Soo Kum & Nur Izzah, 2022).

Nevertheless, the popularity of these melodramatic fictions opens a profound debate in the fields of communication and gender studies. Unlike other Western products explicitly designed for global export, k-dramas are produced primarily in their original language and according to South Korea's internal sociocultural logics, directly reflecting its customs, institutional values, and traditional relational dynamics (Baudoin, 2019;

Kohan, 2006). When these narratives enter distant and dissimilar markets, they act as symbolic channels that disseminate specific models of affective interaction, normative patterns of behavior, and worldviews that come into direct contact with viewers' local imaginaries (Ladevito & Bavoleo, 2015).

The central problem is that, behind the façade of visually polished productions, highly attractive soundtracks, and stories of personal growth and idyllic romance, there are discourses that tend to reproduce, naturalize, and legitimize traditional views of romantic love and gender roles within the text. Romantic love, far from being a purely biological or universal experience, constitutes a historical and social construction that promotes extreme idealization of the beloved, overvaluation of suffering and unconditional sacrifice for the partner, and acceptance of possessive or restrictive behaviors in the name of mutual affection (Marroquí & Cervera, 2014; Orellana & Garay, 2020). Various sociological studies have shown that the uncritical representation of these love myths obscures the detection of harmful behaviors and reproduces dynamics of domination and submission within fictional romantic relationships (Marroquí & Cervera, 2014).

At the same time, gender roles frequently portrayed in these productions tend to reinforce the traditional division of labor and the asymmetry of power between men and women (Romo, 2015). Gender stereotypes presented on screen often confine female characters to roles associated with fragility, domestic care, emotional support, and hierarchical subordination to male figures, who are represented according to parameters of economic provision, directive control, rational firmness, and, at times, the legitimate use of force or psychological domination (Luque, 2023; Romo, 2015). The textual reproduction of these stereotypes through mass entertainment directly reflects the persistence of sexist structures such as androcentrism, the double moral standard, and the over-specificity of basic human needs according to biological sex.

The Korean romance series "My Secret Romance," consisting of 14 episodes, constitutes a paradigmatic object of study for exploring these relational and discursive tensions. The plot begins with the chance encounter between Cha Jin Wook, the rebellious and immature heir to a business conglomerate, and Lee Yoo Mi, a young nutrition student deeply traumatized by her mother's past as an adult-film actress. After spending a night together in a car, the protagonist flees at dawn, deeply hurting the protagonist's pride and masculinity. Three years later, the story resumes when Yoo Mi is hired as the lead nutritionist at the corporate company now headed by Jin Wook. Following their reunion, the male character displays a persistent repertoire of harassment, workplace bullying, and emotional manipulation aimed at forcing the protagonist to acknowledge their previous relationship and yield to his demands for emotional attention.

Although the narrative presents these interactions through the formal conventions of romantic courtship and melodrama with a happy ending, a critical gender perspective reveals the explicit presence of gender violence, power asymmetry in the workplace, and reinforcement of traditional marriage and domestic ideology. Crucially, while this study examines how such themes are constructed within the script and visual staging of *My Secret Romance*, it maintains a strict focus on textual analysis. It does not measure audience reception, psychological impact, or direct behavioral consequences on viewers, recognizing that text-centered content analysis can elucidate narrative structures but cannot establish audience effects without empirical reception data.

Accordingly, this research poses the following questions: How are romantic love and gender roles textually constructed and represented in the series "My Secret Romance"? What operational indicators of romantic love structure its affective narrative? And what specific gender roles are reproduced through its dialogue, character behaviors, and interaction dynamics?

Theoretical And Conceptual Framework

To rigorously support the analysis of the selected audiovisual work, this research adopts the contemporary approach of Gender Studies (Luque, 2023). Gender is understood as a category of analysis in the social sciences, developed by feminist theory to designate the attributes, roles, behaviors, and values that societies differentially assign to individuals according to the anatomical and biological characteristics of their bodies. While sex refers to natural chromosomal and physiological distinctions, gender constitutes a sociohistorical and ideological construction imposed and assimilated through processes of socialization, such as formal education, family structures, and mass-media discourse (Luque, 2023; Romo, 2015).

Within this theoretical framework, gender roles operate as normative prescriptions that determine the tasks, spaces, and responsibilities considered socially appropriate for men and women (Romo, 2015). Sexism emerges precisely when these cultural differences are transformed into structural inequalities and injustices. Androcentrism places masculinity as the universal measure of humanity, rendering women's experiences invisible; the double moral standard judges the same behavior asymmetrically according to the sex of the person who performs it; and over-specificity assumes that certain psychological needs and aspirations belong exclusively to one gender, such as unconditional motherhood or economic leadership of the household (Luque, 2023).

The construct of romantic love, on the other hand, is analyzed through the typology of love attitudes and the demystification of traditional narratives (Marroquí & Cervera, 2014; Orellana & Garay, 2020). Romantic love myths include the belief in the "other half" or predestined complementarity, the fallacy that jealousy is an unequivocal indicator of the intensity of affection, the idea that love can overcome any socioeconomic or psychological obstacle, and the justification of extreme suffering and sacrifice as evidence of fidelity (Marroquí & Cervera, 2014).

To empirically operationalize this construct within a qualitative content analysis methodology, the classification of love styles proposed by Hendrick and Hendrick (1986) is adapted. The Love Attitudes Scale (LAS) originally identifies six distinct typologies: Eros (passionate, intense physical and emotional attraction), Ludus (playful, uncommitted love), Storge (friendship-based, gradual affection), Pragma (practical, logical partner selection), Agape (altruistic, selfless love), and Mania (obsessive, jealous, and emotionally dependent love) (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1986; Lascurain Wais et al., 2017; Rodríguez et al., 2023).

Adaptation and Construct Validity of Psychometric Instruments for Textual Content Analysis

A primary theoretical and methodological contribution of this study lies in the adaptation of validated psychometric instruments—specifically the Love Attitudes Scale (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1986) and the Gender Ideology Scale—into qualitative qualitative observational coding categories. In psychometric research, these items are designed as self-report questionnaire statements to measure individual subjective attitudes. When adapted for media content analysis, construct validity must be rigorously preserved to ensure that the observational indicators measure the exact latent constructs defined by the original authors (Lim, 2024).

To maintain construct validity during this transformation, each psychometric item was operationalized into observable behavioral, verbal, and visual media indicators. Rather than measuring a character's internal psychological state directly, the framework operationalizes the externalized narrative expression of that state. For instance, item 33 of the Mania scale ("When I am in love, I find it hard to concentrate on anything other than my partner") was operationalized as observable instances where a character demonstrably neglects professional duties, postpones critical executive tasks, or engages in persistent workplace surveillance centered on the romantic interest. Similarly, traditional gender ideology items (e.g., "A woman's place is in the home") were coded when explicitly spoken in dialogue or when visually reinforced through narrative plot devices that penalize female professional autonomy.

Through this qualitative operationalization, the construct validity of Hendrick and Hendrick's (1986) typologies was preserved: the coded categories directly mirror the core theoretical attributes of Eros, Mania, Pragma, Ludus, Storge, and Agape, converting self-report psychological constructs into standardized observational units for media analysis.

METHODOLOGY

The research adopts a qualitative, empirical, descriptive, and cross-sectional approach, implementing content analysis as the central method for examining the discursive and behavioral universe of the television series (Hernández et al., 2014; Lim, 2024). Qualitative content analysis makes it possible to explore, in a rich and contextualized manner, the latent and manifest meanings of human interactions represented in media, prioritizing an in-depth understanding of social structures over statistical generalization to populations (Lim, 2024). The design is descriptive because it seeks to characterize and detail the distinctive features and behavioral patterns

associated with the variables under examination (Morales, 2012), and it is cross-sectional because analytical data were collected during a single, uniform period, covering the entire documentary corpus consisting of the 14 episodes of “My Secret Romance” (Rodríguez & Mendivelso, 2018).

The study population comprises all broadcasts of the series, totaling approximately 14 hours of audiovisual material across 14 full episodes. The unit of analysis is defined as any distinct interactive sequence, dialogue exchange, or character behavior containing an explicit or latent representation of gender roles or romantic love attitudes.

Operational Coding Framework and Rules

Data collection was guided by a structured coding framework that mapped theoretical dimensions to explicit inclusion and exclusion rules, operational definitions, and representative episode examples. Table 1 outlines this coding framework, establishing standard procedures for category assignment.

Category	Operational Definition	Inclusion Rules	Exclusion Rules	Representative Example
Traditional Gender Ideology	Statements/actions reinforcing rigid, hierarchical division of labor based on biological sex.	Explicit verbalization of domestic mandates, male economic supremacy, or maternal guilt.	Equal distribution of household tasks or mutual career support.	Ep. 5: Jin Wook's father stating a man needs a wife to cook and care for health.
Egalitarian Gender Ideology	Statements/actions supporting equal rights, shared leadership, and sexual autonomy.	Advocacy for equal work opportunities, rejection of double standards, or shared authority.	Superficial female participation that ends in male dependency.	Ep. 4: Yoo Mi's mother defending her personal autonomy against social stigma.
Mania (Obsessive Love)	Behaviors showing possessiveness, anxiety, cognitive obsession, and somatization.	Stalking, workplace surveillance, severe loss of concentration, territorial jealousy, panic during separation.	Playful teasing, mutual consensual affection, or healthy concern.	Ep. 2/3: Jin Wook postponing corporate meetings to monitor Yoo Mi's location.
Eros (Passionate Love)	Actions driven by intense physical attraction, immediate emotional fusion, and idealization.	Declarations of instant soulmate connection, intense physical intimacy, idealizing partner's appearance.	Casual, non-romantic physical contact or friendship-based bonding.	Ep. 1: Rapid emotional and physical bonding leading to the car scene.
Pragma / Storge / Agape / Ludus	Practical choices, gradual friendship, selfless sacrifice, or game-playing affection.	Arranged corporate marriages (Pragma), childhood history (Storge), non-reciprocal sacrifice (Agape).	Obsessive control or intense passionate fusion.	Ep. 7: Discussion of corporate marriage suitability for business alliance.

Table 1. Operational Coding Framework for Content Analysis.

Coding Procedure and Intercode Reliability

To guarantee methodological transparency and establish consistency in identifying scenes and matching them to the adapted scales, coding was conducted independently by two trained researchers. Both coders underwent a calibration session using Episode 1, refining category definitions and resolving ambiguities in unit segmentation.

Following calibration, both researchers independently analyzed and coded the complete corpus (Episodes 1 through 14). Each scene was logged with its exact timestamp (start/end minute and second), specific statement/item, character involved, theoretical dimension, and qualitative context. Intercoder agreement was statistically evaluated across all identified units of analysis using Cohen's Kappa coefficient (κ). The double-coding process yielded an overall intercoder agreement of $\kappa = 0.88$, indicating strong reliability across both gender and romantic love categories. Discrepancies between coders (primarily concerning the boundary between Eros and Mania in highly physical, dramatic sequences) were thoroughly discussed in peer debriefing meetings and resolved by consensus based on the explicit inclusion/exclusion rules.

Distinguishing Numerical Frequency from Narrative Significance

A critical methodological principle in qualitative content analysis is distinguishing between the raw numerical frequency of a behavioral statement and its qualitative narrative significance (Lim, 2024). High frequency demonstrates the repetition and saturation of a trope, but low-frequency occurrences can exert disproportionate narrative weight if positioned at key dramatic turning points.

For example, while explicit traditional gender statements occurred with low absolute numerical frequency (e.g., “A woman's place is in the home” recorded 8 times), these statements are spoken by high-status authority figures (such as the corporate chairman) and serve as the central structural constraint driving the entire conflict of the series. Conversely, high-frequency behaviors (such as 56 occurrences of cognitive obsession) illustrate the pervasive emotional climate of the narrative. In the following analysis, numerical counts provide a systematic observational foundation, but interpretation remains centered on how these occurrences function structurally within the story.

RESULTS AND DATA ANALYSIS

The analytical coding process implemented across the 14 episodes comprising the complete Korean series produced a comprehensive dataset concerning the narrative dynamics of k-dramas. First, the quantitative analysis of recorded frequencies reveals a marked disparity between the explicit visibility of statements about gender roles and the extensive manifestation of behaviors associated with romantic love. While interactions directly associated with the Gender Ideology Scale showed a numerically moderate but ideologically powerful presence, the behavioral and verbal expressions corresponding to the Love Attitudes Scale showed a massive volume of 256 repetitions or critical occurrences.

Qualitative Analysis and Frequency Distribution of Gender Roles

A detailed examination of the gender-role variable confirmed the clear predominance of a traditional ideology. Although explicit dialogue concerning women's employment capacities or civil rights is not massively repeated in every sequence, the plot is organized and constructed around rigid normative premises that constrain the female character's freedom and autonomy, subordinating her to domestic-care structures and collective social judgment.

The most frequent indicator overall was traditional statement number 2: “A woman's place is in the home,” with a total of 8 repetitions distributed strategically throughout the story: one (1) occurrence in episode 2, three (3) in episode 5, three (3) in episode 7, and one (1) in episode 10. This ideological postulate is primarily verbalized and imposed by the father of the male protagonist, an elderly man who embodies the structures of South Korean corporate patriarchy. In his interventions, he repeatedly insists to his son on the imperative need to marry, explicitly arguing that he requires a formal wife who will assume full responsibility for cooking, caring for him, and looking after his personal health and well-being, based on the premise that an autonomous man is inherently incapable of providing such care for himself. Although protagonist Cha Jin Wook shows signs of indifference or annoyance at his father's comments, the narrative never offers a critical questioning or dismantling of this mandate, thereby naturalizing the social expectation of female domesticity within the story universe.

The second category with the greatest empirical representation, accumulating a total of 4 repetitions throughout the series, corresponds to the traditional statement: “It is likely that young children suffer if their mothers work.”

This indicator is organically linked to one of the central dramatic and psychological conflicts of the protagonist, Lee Yoo Mi, whose personal development and self-esteem are severely fractured by her mother's past as an adult-film actress. During childhood and adolescence, the protagonist was subjected to severe bullying, marginalization, and punitive moral judgments from her community, generating a chronic feeling of humiliation and social insecurity. Through this conflict, the series shows how maternal employment that transgresses the boundaries of traditional decency and conventional domesticity is sanctioned through the suffering and psychological trauma of offspring.

Nevertheless, the emergence of peripheral indicators with egalitarian orientations should be noted; these operate reactively in response to traditional oppression. Two (2) repetitions were recorded of the statement: "Women should be allowed as much sexual freedom as men," mainly in passages where Yoo Mi's mother verbally confronts the discrimination and social stigma resulting from her former profession. Through these dialogues, the series introduces an explicit critique of the double moral standard that celebrates male sexual experience while severely penalizing women's bodily and erotic autonomy. However, this emancipatory discursive strand remains superficial; the main narrative reabsorbs the transgression through the young protagonist's constant expression of shame and regret regarding the casual sexual encounter that triggered the plot, reinforcing the traditional notion that female respectability is linked to chastity or affective monogamy.

Other traditional and egalitarian indicators were recorded once (1) in the overall analysis, evidencing the complex fabric of the script: "It is natural for men and women to perform different tasks"; "A woman should have exactly the same job opportunities as a man"; "Women should run the household and let men run the business"; "Hiring a woman only causes problems for employers"; and "A woman should appreciate the admiring looks she receives when she walks down the street." The presence of these statements confirms that the series functions as a mirror of tensions in contemporary South Korean society, where modern demands for workplace equality coexist with deep patriarchal mandates concerning economic and marital interdependence.

Indicator / Statement	Orientation	Total Frequency	Key Episodes
A woman's place is in the home	Traditional	8 repetitions	Ep. 2, 5, 7, 10
Children suffer if their mothers work	Traditional	4 repetitions	Ep. 1, 3, 9
Allow women the same sexual freedom	Egalitarian	2 repetitions	Ep. 4, 12
Business leadership belongs to men	Traditional	1 repetition	Ep. 5
Same job opportunities	Egalitarian	1 repetition	Ep. 7

Table 2. Distribution and Frequency of Gender Role Indicators.

Quantitative Analysis and Dimensions of Romantic Love

The empirical analysis of the romantic-love variable represented the most extensive finding of the research, totaling 256 analytical frequencies across the 14 episodes. When this volume was broken down according to the conceptual typologies adapted from Hendrick and Hendrick (1986), it was categorically established that the dramatic architecture of "My Secret Romance" rests almost exclusively on two love styles: Mania (obsessive, jealous, and dependent love), which accumulated the largest volume with 145 critical frequencies, and Eros (passionate, intensely physical love with rapid bonding), which recorded 68 occurrences.

The overwhelming prevalence of the Mania indicator reveals the focal theme of the series' affective proposal. Within this dimension, the most frequently repeated statement in the entire study was item number 33: "When I am in love, I find it hard to concentrate on anything other than my partner," recording a record 56 repetitions. This psychological pattern appears throughout the actions of male protagonist Cha Jin Wook. Following his chance reunion with Yoo Mi in the corporate environment, the corporate president systematically neglects his senior managerial responsibilities, postpones crucial business meetings, and uses the organization's logistical

resources for the sole purpose of monitoring, summoning, and disrupting the nutritionist’s work. The narrative codes this absolute inability to concentrate and this diversion from professional duties as an unequivocal sign of the intensity of his love, presenting mental obsession as a central component of romance within the dramatic context.

In the same manic vein, statement number 29: “When something is wrong with my partner, I feel a knot in my stomach,” obtained a massive presence of 55 repetitions. This indicator captures the somatization of affective suffering and separation anxiety constantly experienced by both protagonists. Whenever a verbal misunderstanding, third-party interference, or forced separation caused by the characters’ socioeconomic asymmetries occurs, the series presents prolonged sequences in which the protagonists abandon eating habits, suffer crying spells, isolate themselves socially, and experience real physical symptoms. Suffering thus becomes the obligatory currency for validating the authenticity of the emotional bond, reinforcing the romantic-love myth that equates pain with the significance of mutual commitment (Marroquí & Cervera, 2014).

The third most frequent pattern within the Mania style was statement number 25: “One of the essential things when choosing a partner is our family’s acceptance of him/her,” with a total of 14 repetitions. This indicator acquires considerable contextual relevance because it directly reflects the coercive weight of traditional family structures in Korean society. Throughout the plot, the protagonist’s father exercises suffocating surveillance over his son’s romantic life, explicitly expressing his contempt for and rejection of Yoo Mi, whom he considers a woman of lower socioeconomic status and lacking the social lineage required to join his corporate dynasty. This family opposition creates a relational dynamic in which the lovers must hide their relationship, endure subtle humiliations, and perpetuate severe emotional sacrifices to obtain the validation of the hierarchical family unit.

Likewise, item number 34 of the Mania dimension: “If I suspect that my partner is with someone else, I cannot really relax or feel at ease,” obtained 12 occurrences. This indicator repeatedly appears in scenes in which Cha Jin Wook observes the protagonist interacting cordially or closely with her childhood friend and male confidant. In these sequences, the protagonist displays behaviors compatible with pathological jealousy and territorial possessiveness: he abruptly interrupts the young people’s conversations, alters his body language to show contained aggression, manipulates Yoo Mi’s work schedules to physically distance her from her friend, and resorts to indirect psychological pressure. Rather than portraying these behaviors as expressions of authoritarian control or dysfunctional insecurity, the series’ direction uses comic or melodramatic music to soften the seriousness of the harassment, framing jealousy and possessive control as evidence of passionate affection.

Finally, behavioral pattern number 42: “I am willing to put up with anything to be with my partner,” completed the list of the most significant frequencies with a total of 11 repetitions. This indicator condenses the apotheosis of the myth of unconditional sacrifice. As the romantic relationship becomes formally consolidated in the final episodes of the series, both characters are shown willing to tolerate punitive public scrutiny, potential loss of employment status, class-based humiliation by corporate elites, and the deterioration of their emotional health in order to safeguard the romantic union, canonizing the idea that authentic love possesses an omnipotent quality capable of redeeming and justifying personal harm.

Love Style / Specific Statement	Recorded Frequency	Central Narrative Manifestation	Item Code
Mania — Difficulty concentrating outside partner	56 repetitions	Jin Wook neglects presidential duties to monitor Yoo Mi.	Item 33
Mania — Somatization and knot in stomach	55 repetitions	Loss of appetite, isolation, crying, and anxiety during separation.	Item 29
Eros — Rapid emotional fusion and attraction	68 total reps	Immediate casual sexual encounter and rapid passionate dependence.	Eros

Mania — Imperative for family acceptance	14 repetitions	Protagonist's father opposes relationship, forcing secrecy.	Item 25
Mania — Intolerance/anxiety at third parties	12 repetitions	Forced interruption of protagonist's interactions with childhood friend.	Item 34
Mania — Willingness to tolerate anything	11 repetitions	Unconditional acceptance of class-based humiliation and scrutiny.	Item 42

Table 3. Distribution of Romantic Love Dimensions and Narrative Manifestations.

DISCUSSION

The empirical findings of this research directly engage with trends identified in international literature on mass communication, popular culture, and gender studies (Baudoin, 2019; Ju, 2019; Pambouc, 2019; Romo, 2015). When the results obtained for “My Secret Romance” are contrasted with previous research on romantic cinema and the evolution of k-dramas, structural continuities become evident, relativizing the presumed discourses of modernization and equality that the South Korean audiovisual industry claims to implement in its contemporary productions (Pambouc, 2019).

First, the results converge with conclusions from analyses of the persistence of gender tropes in global film and television (Romo, 2015). Previous studies demonstrate that, despite formal transformations in mass-media narratives, many fictional stories continue to reproduce traditional gender stereotypes and roles (Luque, 2023; Romo, 2015). Although there is a gradual emergence of plots featuring women participating in the labor market—as occurs with Yoo Mi, who has a university-level profession as a nutritionist—this apparent modernization operates primarily at a narrative surface level. At its core, the series’ text fails to dismantle the classic “damsel in distress” archetype, which ultimately depends on the providential intervention, economic rescue, and emotional validation of a male subject with high socioeconomic status (Pambouc, 2019).

This structural tension coincides with the theoretical propositions of Pambouc (2019), who qualitatively examined female roles in South Korean dramas following the emergence of feminist movements in Asia. Pambouc (2019) argues that contemporary demands encouraged production teams to experiment with female characters who appear more autonomous. However, her study reveals that these characterizations compete asymmetrically with traditional narratives that remain highly profitable for the entertainment industry. In “My Secret Romance,” this competition is resolved by subordinating the protagonist’s autonomy to the corporate male-lead model. The story is structured around a traditional Hallyu cliché: the wealthy man with emotional deficiencies whose maturity is redeemed through the selflessness and care of a woman, perpetuating a narrative that places a woman's value in domestic sacrifice and emotional containment (Baudoin, 2019; Pambouc, 2019).

Furthermore, the extensive representation of the Mania love style and workplace pushiness recorded in the series show a conceptual relationship with studies on benevolent sexism and symbolic representation in media (Marroquí & Cervera, 2014; Orellana & Garay, 2020; Romo, 2015). Benevolent sexism is characterized by framing behaviors of control and power asymmetry beneath a façade of chivalry, protection, and romantic devotion (Romo, 2015). In the series analyzed, President Jin Wook's persistent demands—such as forcing Yoo Mi to serve him food personally outside working hours and questioning her personal life—are framed by the story's melodic direction as acceptable expressions of courtship.

Methodological Boundary: Textual Representation versus Audience Reception

A vital theoretical distinction must be emphasized regarding the scope and limits of these findings. While content analysis offers robust empirical tools for identifying how gender roles and love attitudes are textually constructed within a media artifact, it cannot establish how actual viewers perceive, interpret, or adopt these behaviors in real life (Lim, 2024).

Past media literature has occasionally made unexamined leaps from analyzing textual content to asserting direct pedagogical effects, normalization among viewers, or real-world behavioral consequences. In line with rigorous methodological standards, this study explicitly refrains from making audience-effect claims. Content analysis reveals the structural properties of the narrative text; it does not collect empirical reception data, audience audience surveys, or psychological impact metrics. While media texts provide symbolic frameworks that interact with cultural imaginaries (Ladevito & Bavoleo, 2015), audiences active and critical consumers who negotiate, resist, or re-interpret televised tropes based on their own lived experiences and cultural backgrounds (Ju, 2019). Therefore, all interpretations in this study remain strictly centered on textual representation within *My Secret Romance*, acknowledging that demonstrating text-level normalization does not prove audience-level adoption.

CONCLUSIONS

In light of the research objectives and the qualitative content analysis performed across all 14 episodes of *My Secret Romance*, this study yields fundamental conclusions regarding the textual representation of gender and romantic love in contemporary Hallyu fiction:

Regarding the gender-role variable, it is concluded that “*My Secret Romance*” sustains a predominantly traditional gender ideology within its narrative architecture. Although explicit dialogue concerning civil inequality occurred with low numerical frequency, the underlying story structure consistently reinforces mandates of female domesticity—exemplified by statements such as “A woman's place is in the home”—and symbolically penalizes non-traditional maternal employment through themes of guilt and filial trauma.

Regarding the romantic-love variable, it is concluded that the series constructs its romantic narrative around theoretical dimensions dominated by Mania and Eros (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1986). The 256 categorized occurrences demonstrate that the text systematically portrays chronic cognitive obsession, disruption of professional duties, somatization of relational distress, possessive jealousy, and unconditional self-sacrifice as core elements of romantic affection (Marroquí & Cervera, 2014; Orellana & Garay, 2020).

Finally, from a methodological standpoint, this study demonstrates the utility of adapting psychometric instruments into qualitative content categories when supported by explicit operational definitions and intercoder reliability procedures ($\kappa = 0.88$). Crucially, the conclusions of this research apply strictly to the textual representations contained within *My Secret Romance*. Because no audience reception data were collected, these findings characterize media content rather than audience behavior or psychological impact. Future research should combine qualitative textual analysis with empirical reception studies to explore how diverse audiences critically negotiate and interpret Hallyu romantic narratives in their daily lives.

REFERENCES

1. Baudoin, M. (2019). El impacto del amor romántico en las producciones del fenómeno Hallyu. *Revista de Estudios Culturales Asiáticos*, 4(1), 5–18.
2. Hendrick, C., & Hendrick, S. (1986). A theory and method of love. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 50(2), 392–402.
3. Hernández, R., Fernández, C., & Baptista, P. (2014). *Metodología de la investigación* (6ta ed.). McGraw-Hill.
4. INEGI. (2021). *Encuesta Nacional sobre la Dinámica de las Relaciones en los Hogares (ENDIREH)*. Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía.
5. Ju, H. (2019). Preachiness or realistic comfort? US audience reception of Korean dramas on Netflix. *Journal of Transnational Media Studies*, 15(2), 38–57.
6. Kohan, S. (2006). El cine como herramienta terapéutica y de autoconocimiento. Paidós.
7. Ladevito, M., & Bavoleo, M. (2015). La llegada del melodrama coreano a América Latina: Nuevos canales simbólicos y flujos transnacionales. *Comunicación y Sociedad*, 24(1), 25–48.
8. Lascrain Wais, P. C., Lavandera Liria, M. C., & Manzanares Medina, E. L. (2017). Propiedades psicométricas de la Escala de Actitudes sobre el Amor (LAS) en universitarios peruanos. *Revista de Psicología Interamericana*, 31(2), 175–189.
9. Lim, J. (2024). *Foundations of qualitative methodology for scientific inquiry*. Academic Press.

10. Luque, A. (2023). La perspectiva teórica de los estudios de género en las ciencias sociales contemporáneas. *Universitas*, 19(2), 89–106.
11. Marroquí, M., & Cervera, C. (2014). Los mitos del amor romántico y su relación con la violencia de género en parejas jóvenes. *Revista de Salud y Sociedad*, 5(2), 138–144.
12. Morales, F. (2012). Diseños descriptivos en la investigación social y diagnóstica. Editorial Científica.
13. Orellana, K., & Garay, L. (2020). Construcción social del enamoramiento y el vínculo pasional en los medios de comunicación. *Estudios sobre el Mensaje Periodístico*, 26(1), 45–56.
14. Pambouc, E. (2019). The evolution of female roles in South Korean dramas: Challenges to traditional gender ideology since the 2016 feminist restart. *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*, 25(3), 305–322.
15. Rivera, J. (2018). Doramas frente a telenovelas: La inserción cultural del drama coreano en las audiencias latinoamericanas. *Intersecciones en Antropología*, 19(2), 197–208.
16. Rodríguez, M., & Mendivelso, F. (2018). Diseño de estudios transversales en ciencias de la salud. *Revista Médica Sanitas*, 21(3), 160–167.
17. Rodríguez, I. A., Montgomery, M., Peláez, M., & Salas, W. (2023). Actitudes amorosas y experiencias en el cortejo en adultos jóvenes de tres distintas culturas. *Revista de Psicología Social y Cultural*, 40(1), 12–29.
18. Romo, M. (2015). Sexismo y estereotipos de género en los contenidos audiovisuales masivos. Editorial Síntesis.
19. Soo Kum, C., & Nur Izzah, A. (2022). Influence of Korean dramas on young Malaysian audiences' mentalities and relational expectations. *International Journal of Media and Cultural Politics*, 18(1), 125–142.
20. Torrero, L. (2021). El ascenso global del fenómeno Hallyu y la diplomacia cultural de Corea del Sur. *Documentos de Trabajo de Relaciones Internacionales*, 12(2), 75–92.