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Emerging Digital Spaces and Social Practices linked with Precarious Urban Youth in Post-Crisis Seoul

Seoul holds a unique reputation worldwide as a city symbolic of technological integration. Acting as a leading figure in many of the major digital innovations of the past two decades, the city of Seoul, alongside South Korea as a whole, has been able to seamlessly bridge the gap between the online and offline in many significant ways to integrate the two worlds in a way not many have done before: having professional online game players become national idols on equal status as K-pop stars (Jin 137), hosting some of the world's most technologically advanced ICT infrastructure ("Still Mobile" 196), and being the birthplace of internationally renowned digital trends and practices, such as *mukbang*, proliferating in the online world. To further examine the roots of digital practices in Seoul, this paper examines the link between the digital and urban, arguing that cyberspace, defined as the environment created by computer networks in which people communicate and interact ("Cyberspace"), and digital socialization have emerged as important alternative forms of space and intimacy inherently linked with the social precarity and urban inequality of youth in post-financial-crisis Seoul.

Chee argues that "participation in a gaming environment [and consequently within digital space] has just as much, if not more, to do with the cultural and geographical context than the

actual game itself" (227). Likewise, within the context of Seoul, to adequately examine the evolution of cyberspace and online practices it is important to first examine the urban offline precipitating factors surrounding the history of public space and the modern prevalence of the *bang*, defined as a hybrid form of private and public space encompassing much of the role Western public space typically has (Kwangsoo Kim 2-3).

The notion of private and public space is relatively new in Korea, with the concept of privacy itself remaining nearly nonexistent a mere 50 years ago (Kwangsoo Kim 3). Kwangsoo Kim argues that the emergence of public space and its alternative forms in Korea resides upon the "by-products" left behind the frantic rush of modernization gripping South Korea in the 20th century (2). As the South Korean government frantically and violently popularized the usage of APT (apartments) within their national push for modernity, Kwangsoo Kim argues that the deconstruction of local community, the acceleration of migratory culture and the extreme expansion accompanied by the government's push to modernity planted the seeds for urban bangs to proliferate to meet Korean society's modern need for new forms of space (11). Unique to Korea, bangs serve as prominent building blocks of the city as a primary form of public space in modern Seoul, acting as catalysts for social connection and playing a critical role towards the identity, culture, and cohesiveness in the city (Choi et al. 137). As an unintended result of the urban modernization of Korea, bang culture, alongside the several uniquely Korean forms of cyberspace discussed later in this paper, can be considered as an example of alternative spaces emerging from Korean locality mixing with aspects of imported compressed urban modernity.

In order to understand why bangs are relevant to urban youth today, it is important to examine the unique challenges that urban youth in post-1997 Seoul have faced in maintaining a satisfactory livelihood and quality personal space. In the wake of the 1997 Asian financial crisis,

the city of Seoul became a hotbed for neoliberal economic, social, and spatial reforms in South Korea (Jung 746). As a result of intense labor and housing policy focused on deregulation and privatization, an entire generation of urban young adults in Seoul who grew up during an economic boon have found themselves both precarious workers and vulnerable tenants, sparking a crisis of youths faced with social precarity, defined as the global expansion of precarious work and its relationship with social problems, security, citizenship, and social life (Jung 745), within post-crisis South Korea (Jung 746-747). As workers, they have faced a hostile labor market which has failed to create enough stable jobs for jobless youths over the 2000s compared to other OECD countries (Kim and Lee 160, 140). Furthermore, they have also faced intense social pressure to excel academically to overcome an increasingly competitive labor market extremely oversaturated with skilled workers (Kim and Lee 157) where only a few are allowed to succeed according to the standards set by society before them. This has led to the normalization of nonstandard work arrangements, contingent work, and significant joblessness (Jung 748) which has been shown to have increased the risk of economic marginalization, social exclusion, and psychological stigmatization for these youth at a pivotal moment of their lives (Kim and Lee 144). As tenants, urban young adults in Seoul are faced with an increasingly hostile, unaffordable, and diversified housing market unable to meet their needs for adequate personal space. Nearly a quarter of young adults in Seoul live in housing units such as *panjiha*, *okt'appang*, and *kosiwon* which fall below the minimum housing standard set by the government (Jung 751), creating, for many, a vicious cycle of cheap substandard housing (Jung 753) at odds with Cho's concept of "Hilberseimer's dream" describing the "dream of a majority of Koreans to own a residence" in Seoul (Choi et al. 136). As a result of this prolonged vulnerability, urban youth in Seoul suffer from a new form of social precarity linked with urban inequality in post-

crisis South Korea that “exceeds material deprivation” (Jung 762) and has made them more vulnerable to economic marginalization and disengagement, social exclusion, and prolonged psychological stigmatization (Kim and Lee 144). As a result of the effect that social precarity has imparted on urban Seoul youth, this paper argues that these modern challenges affecting precarious urban youth in Seoul have precipitated new evolutions of the bang within cyberspace, intertwining aspects of the urban with the digital world as a natural response to the psychological and urban needs of precarious youth in Seoul. As Choi et al. state, “space is not only geographical, but is also techno-socially established, and further transformed in relation to technological and socio-cultural developments” (137), allowing the analysis of digital interactions over cyberspace with the same urgency and tools as offline interactions. In the following sections, this paper will address the different manifestations of new cyberspaces which have emerged as important and relevant spaces for precarious youth in Korean society.

PC bangs are a form of bang culture that allow guests to choose from a variety of online activities such as online games, e-mail, online chat, and web surfing while being physically amongst others (Chee 230-231). Within the context of precarious youth in Seoul, PC bangs are important for two key reasons. Firstly, they are uniquely accessible towards youths as precarious workers. Due to the low cost of operating a PC bang, these sites average an affordable price of access at around $1.00 per hour and remain an inexpensive, accessible, and popular alternative to more expensive bangs to the degree of acting as cheap shelter for the unemployed to spend the day or night in the context of the unkind job market (Chee 231, 234). Secondly, PC bangs act as psychologically important, comforting spaces of support for the stresses associated with the urban landscape of Seoul. Chee states that PC bangs fulfill an important role of a ‘third place’ for a large majority of youth, which are places that “are neither work nor home,” but “are places of

psychological comfort and support…[which] often contain people of like mind and like interests" (230), allowing visitors to create community online through online activity whilst partaking in physical community at the same time (231). Therefore, PC bangs act as critical places of refuge away from home for urban youth suffering from a missing sense of belonging from precarious and poor housing. As Chee illustrates through the story of a 27-year-old university student, "to [the student], the PC bang was a way to escape the various constraints of his domestic environment," (232) exemplifying its potential as a powerful alternative space for precarious youth.

Whereas the PC bang can be considered a more mainstream hybrid space existing in between the offline and online worlds, a related yet more marginal alternative space can be observed in the online presence of Yingyeo discussions and culture. The Yingyeo people in South Korea are defined as those who "reside almost exclusively in the virtual world" (Mo 1) and see the concept of aspiring for a stable future as "quite delusional" as a result of the intense unemployment, underemployment and precarity arising in post-crisis South Korea (Mo 3). Within this unique pocket of online culture, Yingyeos prove themselves by displaying the amount of time they have spent in the online world and share activities on how "one kills time consciously in a hopeless manner" such as by boasting about "the experience of counting the number of snacks in a snack pack" (Mo 2-3). Mo describes the online shared presence of Yingyeos as the emergence of "another space from the stressful offline world to deal with mental hardships of having a stigmatized future, or no future." This represents another instance of another 'third place' manifesting in the digital world as described by Chee as an arena of psychological comfort and support (234) where Yingyeos, as a subset of precarious youth in

Seoul, are able to share a digital emotion of a commonality of no futurity (Mo 3) with others through an online space.

One particular Korean digital social practice that has gained great international popularity in the past decade is mukbang, a new form of streaming consisting of live online eating broadcasts. The term mukbang, a mixture of the South Korean words for 'eating' ('*meokneun'*) and 'broadcast' ('*bangsong*'), refers to broadcasts where individuals eat food and interact with viewers (Kircaburun et al. 1). More than just a passive form of media consumption, Mukbang can be considered as another digital cyberspace which plays an important role within the online culture of South Korea and a psychological role in providing support for young Koreans in the modern Seoul urban landscape. For instance, talk show host Hwang Kyo-ik argues that "Korean food fever [around mukbang] is a symptom of widespread unhappiness amid the country's economic doldrums" ("The Food-Show Craze"). As many South Koreans, especially post-crisis youth afflicted by urban inequality and social precarity, lack neither the time nor the means to dine elegantly, he believes "mokbang and cookbang offer[s] them a feast for their eyes" ("The Food-Show Craze"). Furthermore, evidence also exists to suggest that the rise of mukbang is intrinsically linked with the shifting nature of Seoul's housing market. South Koreans across all age groups have been increasingly suffering from elevated social isolation living in single-person households and accordingly have been watching more mukbang as a response to social isolation (Kircaburun et al. 4). This is especially significant in urban post-crisis South Korea as the number of single-member households reached 5.62 million in 2017—2.5 times higher than the figure in 2000 ("Newborns Decline"). Research has indicated that watching mukbang allows viewers to feel "emotionally connected as if they were dining with someone" creating a feeling of "co-presence that overcame physical distance" and allowing a psychological sense of

connection with a virtual community (Kircaburun et al. 4, 9). While it is unclear whether or not mukbang itself is definitively helpful for the mental health of those suffering from social isolation, these figures indicate that the rise of mukbang is inherently linked with and rooted in the shifting nature of the urban landscape of Seoul and the social precarity and urban inequality of the city's youth.

Furthermore, another digital practice which comprises a significant part of the culture of Seoul can be seen in the overwhelming prevalence of mobile-based social media and play platforms exemplified by KakaoTalk. KakaoTalk is a mobile application designed specifically for mobile media and smartphones, allowing friends and family to catch up and bond online across various modalities such as messaging, calls, image sharing, and mobile gaming ("Co-presence Café Cultures" 95). What is significant about KakaoTalk, and the broader Kakao platform to which it belongs, is how its accessibility is uniquely suited towards augmenting modern Korean social life in ways that have remained unavailable in other digital or offline social modalities. Firstly, Kakao is interstitial, meaning that social media games such as *I Love Coffee* and *Anipang* are able to be consumed in small, interruptible chunks in the in-between moments of everyday life ("Co-presence Café Cultures" 98-99). Secondly, Kakao is both telepresent and asynchronous (Co-presence Café Cultures" 101), allowing collective shared action to occur anywhere, anytime with friends and family. Lastly, Kakao is able to provide to users, as a purely mobile application, the benefit of interacting within a "peer-to-peer, 'walled garden' interfaction space" where "established friends, who have regular face-to-face contact, can find each other" in a manner "less vulnerable than the public sphere with increased intimacy" (Choi et al. 137). Combining these three unique features, marginalized groups in Seoul such as young women, who have been marginalized from fully participating in Korean gaming

culture, have benefitted by becoming significant participants in the Kakao online space (Co-presence Café Cultures" 96), while precarious youth in general who face long work hours, if employed, in the highly competitive Korean economy have found these features accommodating in allowing more social interaction to occur within their daily schedules (Co-presence Café Cultures" 95). Hence, Kakao can be seen as an important platform in the context of widening access to participate in cyberspace for precarious young Koreans.

By extension, this allows the Kakao platform to provide a way for social connection and online co-presence to happen almost anywhere, allowing otherwise ordinary physical places to transform into meaningful spaces and impromptu bangs. As Hjorth discusses in "Still Mobile" the subway, as coordinated through mobile media platforms such as Kakao to provide a variety of multimedia experiences and interactions, has been transformed into "such an important space for various everyday activities that it can be seen as a 'mobile bang'" (201). Thus, it can be argued that the emergence of the Kakao mobile platform and other similar cyberspaces have allowed a multitude of otherwise ordinary places to become transformed into spaces for social connection with peers away from work and home that provide psychological comfort and support for youth (230). This can be viewed as a fulfillment of Cho's 2007 prediction of the "dream lifestyle of contemporary *flâneurs*," a term meaning urban nomads, who "are capable of creating and appreciating subjective experiences of space… to be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be the at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world" who travel "through the plethora of bangs and other 24-h establishments, such as convenience stores, to fulfil their needs" (Choi et al. 136). Based on Cho's prediction, the prevalence of cyberspace among precarious urban youth in Seoul, through mobile platforms such as Kakao and the variations of bangs discussed in this paper, can be

viewed as a broader response by the precarious youth who participate in these cyberspaces to move towards this urban nomadic lifestyle. Looping back to the topic of Korean homeownership, as Cho directly contrasts this urban nomadic lifestyle against the ideals of "Hilberseimer's dream" (Choi et al. 136), this suggests that the broader response of precarious urban youth in Seoul participating in cyberspace is itself an antithetical distancing away from the commonplace yet unattainable ideal of homeownership towards new attitudes regarding space as a response to the urban inequality and social precarity they have faced in their lives.

What can be concluded from these examples is the inherent link between the offline and online spaces that comprise Seoul today. Just as Chee argues that participation in the digital space is inherently linked with its cultural and geographic context (227), it can be argued that it is more important now than ever to examine online spaces to understand offline urban space. As new forms of cyberspace continue to emerge and weave themselves in increasingly dynamic and complex ways throughout the offline world, it can be argued that the multiplicative ways in which online technologies and modalities breathe new meaning and complexity into existing spaces will become an important area of study for ensuring the social well-being of current and future generations. Personally, as an academic subject, I'm interested in applying similar methodologies and frameworks from urban studies using space on other online cultures and regional contexts to gain new perspectives on how humans continue to interact and digitally 'walk' within cyberspace. I find it immensely interesting to see how these new forms of cyberspace emerging are so closely linked with Seoul's long history of urbanization, and will continue to both shape and be shaped by generations now and generations to come.

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