

SEOUL'S GAY DISTRICTS: SPACE, PLACE, AND IDENTITY

by

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Abstract

For men navigating sexual identity that lies on the periphery of culturally understood and politically acceptable discourse, places where they can express such identities are critical for creating a sense of belonging to a wider community. Gay districts have existed as bastions of open self-expression, providing a sense of belonging in restrictive societal contexts. This is particularly true in South Korea. Through direct ethnographic engagement, this thesis analyzes how gay men use Seoul's gay districts to reinforce identity and create a sense of belonging. In this thesis I argue that while accessing Seoul's gay districts, individuals are able to interact with like others to reinforce a sense of self as gay. In this study I also show how it is simultaneously important for gay men to conform to normative patterns of social interaction via culturally based expectations of behavior for men in the South Korean context. Chongno, one of Seoul's gay districts, is uniquely configured to accomplish both processes. Through accessing this space, gay men formulate relationships that affirm gay men's understanding of self and allow for the transformation of these spaces into places fixed in physical reality. Furthermore, these normative patterns of social interactions with other gay men help individuals reaffirm the self as being both gay and Korean while creating a network of relationships. Such social relationships then allow for the embodiment of this identity outside of such places when participating in and with these networks of people.

Lay Summary

This thesis looks at how gay men utilize particular spaces (gay districts) in the context of Seoul, South Korea. Further, this thesis attempts to understand how gay men interact in gay districts, and why they access them. Standard methods of anthropological inquiry, including interviews and participant observation were used. Through analyzing the cultural practices that happen amongst gay men in gay districts, the findings of this thesis describe how gay men form community and re-enforce their identity as gay without contradicting their sense of self as Korean.

Preface

This thesis is an original intellectual product of Elias Alexander, based on fieldwork conducted by the author, Elias Alexander, from May to August 2019. Drafts of this thesis were reviewed by his supervisor, Dr. Millie Creighton, and committee members Dr. Carol Blackburn and Dr. Ross King as well as an external reviewer. The fieldwork discussed throughout was approved by the University of British Columbia (UBC) Behavioral Research Ethics Board (BREB) under the title “Elias Alexander Graduate Thesis,” BREB number H19-00274. Portions of the thesis have been previously published [Alexander, E. 2019. “Chong-ro: A space of belonging for young gay men in Seoul” in *Boyhood Studies*. 12 (2), 11-28. doi: 10.3167/bhs.2012.120202]. The author, Elias Alexander, was responsible for all major areas of concept formation, ethnographic data collection and analysis, as well as manuscript composition.

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A Note on Romanization

Romanization of Korean words follows the McCune-Reischauer Korean Romanization System. This includes place names and names of administrative districts such as Chongno. City names such as Seoul and Incheon are Romanized following the South Korean government's spelling of these areas. Interlocutor s names that appear in Korean have not been Romanized, rather they retain the spellings that the interlocutors have wished to use to identify themselves.

1. Introduction

Fieldnote Entry - May 31st 2019:

I had just arrived in Seoul to do my fieldwork. Naturally, I contacted many of my friends to let them know that I was back. My friend J.¹ responded quickly with an invitation to grab a drink. I had known J. for around four years and he had always been a good *hyöng* (older brother)² to me. I knew I couldn't turn down his invitation despite still struggling with jet lag, having only just arrived the night before. Unsurprisingly, the place we were to meet was in Chongno at J.'s close friend's bar. I had been there once before during my previous visit to Seoul; at that time the bar was brand new.

I arrived at the entrance to the bar at 10:50 p.m. It was located on the third floor of a building accessible through a narrow doorway that opened into a staircase. J. appeared at the foot of the staircase door and led me in. He was already there, waiting. We ascended the stairs moving beyond the second floor, passing a typical Korean-style restaurant selling *samgyet'ang* (a type of chicken soup with a whole chicken stuffed with rice). Upon entering the bar on the third floor, I was directed towards a set of two tables arranged in an "L" shape. Both were filled with men. It became apparent that J. had organized a *moim* or group get-together.

J: You remember S.B. right? I think you two have met before.

Elias: Yeah... if I see his face, I am sure I will remember him.

I did know S.B. He was thin as a rail and wore round glasses rimmed in black, and although he looked slightly intimidating, I recalled how kind he had been to me in the past. He made room

¹ For the purpose of anonymity, I have replaced names in this section with pseudonyms chosen by me. Further names of interlocutors who participated in interviews for this study (see Appendix A) have been obscured upon their request. Interlocutors, in these cases, have chosen the names they wish to be identified by.

² This term is a title used by younger men when speaking to older men. Though it is used within the context of kinship, it is also commonly used within close relationships that lack a biological or genetic connection.

for me to sit next to him. Looking across the table, I didn't recognize many faces. S.B. poured a shot of *soju* into a glass and placed it before me. I took the bottle and poured *soju* into his glass.

I didn't know many of the people drinking and talking around me. S.B. told me that he didn't know anyone else at the table either, but J. had invited him out for drinks tonight as well. This seemed to be the case for others at the table too. As I looked down the row of seats, I recognized a familiar face. It was Y.H.. I had known Y.H. for as long as J. Being the same age, the two were friends, as is common in Korea. Both would often be at the same group gatherings in Chongno that I would attend. Y.H. saw me, pointed in my direction, then held up a pack of cigarettes. I took this as a cue and followed him into the small smoking room at the back right corner of the bar. We chatted while he smoked.

When we returned to our seats, S.B. introduced me to K.S., who was now sitting across the table. He was extremely tall and broad but looked very young. The splash of freckles across his face and his bleached hair only added to his youthful appearance. As is necessary in these situations, we started by introducing ourselves, stating our names and how old we were. He was 19, as were the rest of the people at the table from which he had moved. After introductions, conversations could begin in earnest. Discussions revolved around a multitude of topics. People talked about how being gay affected their family relationships and work, but they also talked about everyday work stress, and more mundane topics like the latest K-pop girl group.

As the night wore on and people began to slowly leave the gathering, a number of people began to discuss moving to a different bar for a second round; a common practice. As the people slowly left the bar, the remaining individuals in J.'s group and those from K.S.'s original group had all gathered at a single table. At this point the bar owner, J.'s friend and an acquaintance of mine, came out to join us. We all continued to drink well into the morning.

At the time of this fieldnote entry, I had just set out to produce an ethnography that would ascertain gay men's interactions with space and place in Seoul. While I understood the importance of certain gay districts in the lifeways of gay South Korean men, I was unaware of just how pivotal these places are in gay men's development of identity and community.

In this thesis, I present a common pattern of entrée into Seoul's gay places. I highlight the importance and limitations of the online space and how online space necessitates the development of relationships with individuals who also identify as gay offline. Following this, I explain how gay places work as conduits for solidifying relationships and a sense of community that further reinforces a self-identification as "gay." I then highlight how in one of Seoul's gay places, Chongno, social interactions mirror culturally normative patterns of social behavior that occur anywhere in the South Korean context. This contrasts with Seoul's other most popular gay district, It'aewŏn, where interactions mirror more "globalized" queer culture. I argue that interacting in a place like Chongno allows individuals to create community and affirm self as gay while not dissociating from various other intersecting identities, in particular, a cultural/ethnic identity as Korean. I end by highlighting how Chongno as a place is spatially transformed and embodied as a product of social relationships.

Context: Being LGBTQ+ in South Korea

In the South Korean context, historically and contemporaneously, there has been a paucity of information about non-hegemonic sexualities in the cultural framework and public discourse (Pettid 2008; Seo 2001; Yi and Phillips 2015). Information that exists is often limited or negative (Arnold 2016; Kang and Ha 2005; Im 2019). Since the 1990s, human rights organizations in South Korea have worked to bring topics surrounding non-heteronormative

sexualities into the public conversation, particularly into the realm of political discourse. This has often been done by promoting a shared identity or culture among South Korean LGBTQ+ individuals (Sö 2006). Scholars working in the Korean context have noted that South Korean activist groups' engagement with identity-based human rights discourse has been moderately successful in shifting the Korean perception of LGBTQ+ individuals from nonexistent or fringe group to a minoritized group.

In recent years the cultural discourse in South Korea has seen a shift with regard to LGBTQ+ individuals (Kang 2015: 5-6). Yet, while shared popular attitudes towards sexual minorities seem to be becoming more positive overall, this is often superficial (Kang 2015: 6). Nonetheless, the heightened visibility of LGBTQ+ individuals as a unique category of person has, in South Korea, also brought heightened negative associations with non-heteronormative behavior, such as an association with AIDS and pathologized sexual deviance. These associations have negatively “socially branded” South Korean LGBTQ+ individuals in the popular social consciousness (Kang 2015; Sö 2006). In addition, the precedent of little to no political protections or rights being afforded to sexual minorities (Bong 2008; Sö 2006) still holds strong (Im 2019). The negative outlook on sexual identities that differ from the standard of South Korean heterosexuality is compounded by a system of education that institutionalizes Confucian-based values that emphasize patriarchal relationships (Moon 1997) and reinforces standards upheld by hegemonic forms of masculinity (Moon 2001). The highly visible and vocal anti-LGBTQ+ movements spearheaded by the Korean Protestant right only make this worse (Nami Kim 2016).

Context: Gayness in South Korea - Problematizing the Identity

Gay identity is sometimes asserted to exist a priori cross-culturally, resulting in the idea of a globalized gay identity. However, the gamut of anthropological literature and ethnographic data that focuses on sexual behavior and sexualities that lie outside of the heteronormative pattern shows us that rather than the existence of a single homosexuality, there exist varying homosexualities. The way people think of and express their sexuality depends on their social, cultural, political, and economic context.

Within academic discourse the idea of a “Global Gay Identity” is highly contested. The “Global Gay” was first mooted in Dennis Altman’s work on the emergence of a transnational gay identity attributable to the forces of globalization (Altman 1996, 2001). While critiques of his work are widespread (see Boellstorf 2003; Gitzen 2012; Puri 2008; Rofel 1999), I align myself with Timothy Gitzen’s critique (2012) of Altman. Like Gitzen, I also find it advantageous to view gay identity through the work Tom Boellstorf (2003). For Boellstorf in the Indonesian context gay identity is produced by a unique amalgamation of factors. He states (2003: 226), “Gay... subjectivities do not originate in the ‘West’ (they are not perceived as diasporic), nor are they a hybrid of ‘West’ and ‘East’; they are a distinctively Indonesian phenomena, formed through discourses of nation and sexual desire as well as a sense of linkage to distant but familiar Others.” For Gitzen (2012: 154), in the South Korean context then, “Gayness is understood and negotiated in conversation with other identities and norms in a specific cultural context providing the possibility of transnational flows of cultural influence....” It is important, however, to note that at present, gay Korean men assert a vividly clear understanding of self vis-à-vis a non-heteronormative sexuality.

It is further of note that all of my friends, interlocutors, and most other individuals that I have interacted with in gay places in South Korea, self-identify using the term “gay” (*kei*). The understanding of this word within the South Korean zeitgeist has seen radical transformation over time, from one more concerned with representing shifts in gender expression to one that is instead focused solely on sexual identity (Seo 2001). It is evident that at this historical juncture men in South Korea have adopted an understanding of the term “gay” that is congruent with how “gay” is defined in the so-called West, transferred to South Korea through channels of academic and political discourse, as well as through public media (Cho 2011; Seo 2001). While it is undoubtably true that non-heterosexual patterns of behavior have existed across Korean history, “gayness” as a unique social category of being, is bound up in recent contemporary understandings of said identity. I find it undeniable that Western ideas of what it means to be gay, encapsulating certain ways of being, have affected South Korean understandings.

The deliberate use of the word *affect* is key. While South Korean gay men, and LGBTQ+ South Koreans in general, often embrace Western terminology and seemingly align themselves with a neoliberal ethos favoring an emphasis on individuated identity, they are also continually forced to negotiate what it means to be part of a globalized LGBTQ+ community (even if only imagined) while simultaneously engaging with the cultural/ethnic identity of being Korean (Gitzen 2014). Individuals negotiating such a reality often find that they are never fully able to align with the requirements of either (W. Han 2018: 47). Gay men in South Korea embracing an understanding of self that is couched in Western gay discourse dominated by Americentric ideology (Sutton 2007: 57), are continually navigating complex power structures of global, national, and cultural origin. It is difficult for South Korean gay men to find both physical and social arenas where they can interact with others and express their identity fully.

Arnold (2016) corroborates this assertion. In addition, similar to critiques of gay identity existing cross-culturally and trans-historically, Arnold also speaks to how gay Korean men uniquely embody and interact with an identity that, while seemingly similar to Western notions of gayness, openly challenges popular narratives that surround “gay identity.” He explains that unlike Western notions of “coming out”, “coming out” in the South Korean context is less important than maintaining discretion. Gay men find little benefit in sharing their identity with others, as cultural standards do little to make space for such identities to socially exist.

Socio-cultural and political realities in South Korea discourage the indiscriminate proclaiming of a gay identity. The repercussions of engaging in such an act of public proclamation, though varying by personal situation, include the threat of job loss and further excommunication from the job market through blacklisting, the rejection of the individual’s identity by the family, discharge from or inability to enlist in military service (the importance of which cannot be understated) (see Moon 2005), and the risk of ostracization by peers. These factors contribute to a deliberate selection of when to assert one’s gay identity in order to avoid potential loss of social and economic capital. These potential losses are exacerbated when considering, the minimal visibility of LGBTQ+ Koreans, the lack of legal protections for LGBTQ+ peoples, and the paucity of critical cultural discourse surrounding LGBTQ+ peoples (Bong 2008: 98), as well as the complex power structures at the global and national level that require constant negotiation in the context of individual identity.

Interactions with identity for gay men in South Korea are often highly situational. Take for example, Lim Kwangdashian, a close friend and interlocutor from my own ethnographic research. He chose to come out within his department at his university. His explanation for doing

so was clear – he felt comfortable due to his field of study, fashion. He explained that the majority of his male classmates are also gay. He stated,

It depends on what kind of people I am with. When I am with my gay friends, I am overacting more [acting more feminine]. I feel comfortable to come out in my school because there are other gay boys in my school. I met them because of my major. There were higher grade guys [guys ahead of me in years] in my major who I knew were gay because I saw them online. But I didn't message them on dating apps such as *Grindr* or *Jack'd*. But a [first year student] texted me on an app... Because I study fashion, there are more gay [guys] in my school, so I feel more comfortable.

Though Lim's case is an example of a situation where one can declare a gay identity, operationalizing this identity at the level of quotidian life is not always possible. In Lim's example, his coming out was further situationally bound; he has not come out to his parents, other peers, or individuals that exist outside the boundaries of his university department. This strategic declaration of one's gayness is not unusual. In order to contextualize such phenomena, Arnold (2016) suggests that coming out in any context is done via a "cost benefit analysis". Taking this further, I would assert that in the South Korean context, the process of divulging one's identity also takes place on the axis of relationships.

Therefore, discretion is favored and employed via the careful consideration of the relationally bound situation. Although individuals may feel comfortable in coming out to their entire family, as is the case with another interlocutor, Sung Jun, they would not think of discussing their identity with co-workers:

If it's not my co-workers, then I don't have a problem if others know about me being gay. If my co-workers know, rumors can spread. Still, in Korean companies, younger people might be okay with me being gay, but as you know, people in higher positions are usually older, and they are very conservative so issues could arise. Companies also have relationships with one another. This company and that company have a connection, so I wouldn't be able to move companies if people found out I was gay.

This leads to an important point. Insofar as identity work is something that is done not only at the locus of the individual self but additionally at the level of public discourse, the

question of how and where young gay men are able to interact freely with their identity as gay men presents itself. Arnold (2016:154) notes; “Finding an accepting community becomes, in this context, an essential task for the well-being of most queer Koreans”.

Perceptions of belonging have repeatedly been shown to be an essential factor in young people’s social and emotional health (Haslam et. al 2009) and to be contingent on the existence of feelings of community (Kearns and Parkinson 2001). However, maintaining a sense of belonging can be particularly difficult for those who perceive themselves as outside cultural norms (Marchbank and Mydrahl 2019). Finding community as a key factor in the lifeways of gay South Korean men, however, is contingent upon places where that community can form, as the importance of space and place in solidifying a sense of belonging cannot be overestimated (Muir and Gannon 2016). For gay individuals in the South Korean context, who are often not allowed to engage with their sexual identity openly, locales where they can express their sexual identity are undoubtably crucial. Such places where gay men come together and socialize have existed historically. These “gay districts”³ have worked as places in which men embodying a marginalized identity can engage with their self as gay, form relationships with other gay men, and create a sense of belonging to a wider community.

³ It is important to note that while these areas could be considered gay districts, this meaning does not directly correlate with the meaning of a gay district as discussed in various other parts of the world, in particular the West. This is because rather than a mix of residential and gay-owned business, these areas of Seoul are purely consumer-driven. Cho (2011: 41) details how these areas center around businesses that gay men frequent only on the weekends, returning to a more heteronormative pattern of life when exiting these areas.

2. Research Methods

Methods

Research for this thesis was grounded in an ethnographic approach. I conducted fieldwork in Seoul between May to August of 2019. Standard ethnographic methods were applied and included participant observation (Bernard 2014; Spradley 1980), written field notes (Emerson et al. 1995, 66–107; Wolf 1990), semi-structured interviews (Bernard 2014; Gee 1999; Spradley 1979), and analysis of interview transcriptions (Agar and Hobbs 1985; Gee 1999). I also asked my interlocutors to draw their own mental maps, as per the work of Laura Nelson (2000), of Seoul's gay districts including places frequented (for examples, see appendix B). Doing so, I was able to ascertain interlocutors' knowledge of each district and their understanding of the boundaries of these locations, as well as cross-references that indicated individual's identification of places of importance and the number of establishments frequented.

During 2020, I again spent a year in Seoul attending an advanced Korean language and research program at Sungkyunkwan University. While direct research was not conducted at that time, I was able to engage more deeply with relevant Korean-language research in order to form a more comprehensive foundation of analysis for this research.

However, my own engagement with the gay community in Seoul goes beyond the fieldwork for this project and my time at Sungkyunkwan. My first experiences with Seoul's gay community came about during time spent at a Korean language institute in Seoul in 2014. During this time, I formed connections as I began to interact with the gay community in Seoul. I frequented Seoul's gay districts and created my own social network. In addition, I have previously engaged in ethnographic research with this community during my time as an undergraduate student. Experiences I have had as both a researcher and as an individual within the gay community of Seoul have allowed me to approach this topic from a varied perspective.

Participants and Interviews

Previous connections made within the gay community were used to locate participants. In addition, snowball sampling techniques (by which interlocutors recommended other potential interlocutors) were used (Bernard 2014). This approach allowed for a wider cross-section of individuals. In total I collected interviews and maps from fifteen self-identified South Korean gay men ranging in age from 22 to 41. Interlocutors range in socioeconomic status; two individuals were unemployed, seven had full-time jobs, three were attending college, and four owned businesses. (For interlocutor information see appendix A).

Interview questions assessed individuals' understandings, perceptions, and modes of interacting with gay places and spaces in Seoul. Questions also ascertained interlocutors' sense of self as gay within the South Korean context. I conducted thirteen interviews in Korean and two in English, based on interlocutor request. Interviews were semi-structured, lasting from 45 minutes to two hours, and were conducted in cafés or at interlocutors' residences or businesses. Locations for interviews were determined by interlocutors.

Participant Observation and Analysis of Fieldnotes

I conducted 53 field observations spanning twelve weeks in various locations that gay men frequent in Seoul. Fieldnotes were analyzed for various themes: in particular, space, identity, and belonging.

3. A Condensed History of Seoul's Gay Places

Historically, physical places where gay men could meet have existed in contexts where gayness cannot openly be expressed publicly. Often these spaces exist in secret or as closed-off areas that allow for a level of anonymity. It has often been the case that within such areas, ideas about personal identity can take shape and community can form.

Yi Söjin (2007) notes that this is no different in South Korea. In the mid-twentieth century, many of these places were focused around bars and movie theaters in Seoul. In the 1950s the markets of Myöngdong, in particular the department stores that carried foreign products, attracted a variety of people to the area, including individuals of varying sexual orientations. The frequenting of this area by these individuals eventually led to the creation of movie theaters that catered to a homosexual clientele (Kang 2015). Historical evidence suggests that female prostitution occurring in these areas also associated them with other forms of sexual behavior not sanctioned by norms and mores of the cultural discourse, including homosexuality (see Taehyön Kim 2019).

By the 1960s similar movie theaters began to emerge in the neighboring areas of Sindang-dong in southeastern Seoul. It is here where the first bars catering to a similar clientele began to emerge, and Seoul's first "gay community" began to take shape (Yi Söjin 2007). At the same time a pattern of northward movement of these theaters was also taking place. In Ŭlchi-ro Printing Alley (Ŭlchi-ro Inswaeso), not only did such theaters begin to emerge but a collection of bars began to appear as well, with at least twenty bars catering to those with non-heteronormative sexual orientations (Kang 2015).

Similarly, the Pagoda movie theater, located to the north of Ŭlchi-ro's Printing Alley in the Nagwön-dong area of Chongno, appeared in the 1960s. Interestingly, the emergence of

Pagoda in the Nagwŏn neighborhood aligns with the aforementioned theory linking female prostitution and areas where homosexuality was practiced. In 1968 crackdowns on female prostitution by Seoul's mayor directly targeted the brothels of the Chongno area. By the mid-1970s a collection of gay bars emerged in the Nagwŏn neighborhood of Chongno, filling the void that was left by the now empty brothels, thus transforming the physical and social landscape, more or less working to form a "gay community" (Taehyŏn Kim 2019). Pagoda functioned as an anchor for these newly emerging businesses, and Chongno became dotted with *tchimjilbang* (bathhouses) and gay bars patterned after Japanese-style karaoke rooms (Yi Hŭi-il 1998). The theater and subsequent businesses grew in popularity and, according to Cho (2011: 30), "it was within this neighborhood that many of the contemporary notions of homosexuality and homosexual culture seemed to coalesce". Although this area worked as a hub for men to express their sexuality in ways they could not elsewhere, it was not a place that one sought out intentionally but rather, as Cho (2011) describes it, a place one would "fall into".

Im's perspective (2019), however, further contextualizes and illustrates how gay men seeking interactions with other gay men would come to hear of Pagoda and find their way into the Chongno area. The influx of gay individuals into the area, drawn there by the Pagoda theater, worked to transform the Nagwŏn neighborhood from an area based around mere practice to one based around shared sense of self (Im 2019: 265). At the same time, it is important to note that it is not until the beginning of the 1990s that conceptions of gayness as an identity came into the mainstream consciousness of sexual minorities (Sŏ 2005). Further, by the early 1990s the prevalence of the internet led to an increase in readily available information about LGBTQ+ identities. Message boards that catered specifically to gay men and lesbian women facilitated the formation of online communities and allowed for individuals to share and provide information.

These online interactions would lead to in-person meetings, and the It'aewön area soon became a nucleus for a newly burgeoning community (Cho 2011: 42).

It'aewön was uniquely capable of housing this new community. As Cho (2011: 39) points out, It'aewön has long existed in the popular frameworks of South Korean consciousness as an area seen as a “foreign space”. Its proximity to the US military base in Yongsan has contributed to this characterization within the popular consciousness. The activities of the 1980s, from the Asian games to South Korea’s hosting of the summer Olympics, also linked It'aewön as a hotspot for foreign tourists, constructed around consumer-driven markets and hotels that could cater to this surge of foreign clientele. The influx of migrant workers into the area throughout the 1990s further positioned It'aewön as a diverse and multicultural space—a space that in many ways was more open to minorities within South Korean society (Han Yusök 2013: 257). Much like Myöngdong in the 1950s, It'aewön’s association with “foreign” activities included those which catered to gays and lesbians. Since the 1980s, It'aewön has housed various gay- and lesbian-targeted businesses. During this time, It'aewön’s bars often found economic success, but with government crackdowns on businesses catering to gay and lesbian clientele, this was often short-lived. Even with the transitory nature of gay and lesbian bars, and despite the as-yet-nonexistent internet promotion, gay and lesbian individuals of the 1980s and 1990s would flood into It'aewön on the weekends (Han Yusök 2013: 258).

However, the rise of the internet and readily available information for LGBTQ+ individuals did add to the growth of It'aewön’s already existing position in the frameworks of queer life. The bars and clubs of It'aewön became more popular for gays and lesbians, and with this, the phenomenon of gay individuals populating the clubs and bars of It'aewön on the weekends grew (Han Yusök 2013: 258). Gay South Koreans returning from abroad began to

open clubs and bars that resembled those in the West. These bars and clubs targeted “foreign” clientele and were often frequented by the gay and lesbian youth attracted to the area. These Western-style bars and clubs provided a unique outlet for gay Koreans, effectively creating a localized gay community in the area (Cho 2011: 242). Thus, It’aewŏn became a bastion of Westernized gay culture in Seoul.

The rise of It’aewŏn’s popularity correlated with the fall in popularity of Chongno for some gay men (Yi Sŏjin 2007: 31). However, Chongno persisted within the frameworks of gay life. While It’aewŏn catered to the youth, a demographic of older, often married, men would continue to find their way to the hidden alleys and closed off bars of Nagwŏn-dong (Cho 2011). Pagoda would close by the 2000s, leaving the area centered around the Korean-style bars and karaoke rooms that populated the neighborhood.

While the bars and theaters of Sindang-dong and Ŭlchi-ro disappeared before the 1990s, Chongno and It’aewŏn continued to persist as “gay districts” and their evolution as gay districts has continued. Christopher Sarasin (2018) describes how It’aewŏn currently functions in popular frameworks of queer life. He notes that It’aewŏn provides a place where gay South Koreans can meet a broader range of LGBTQ+ individuals. The gay clubs and bars are centered on a small strip of road affectionately deemed “Homo Hill.” Given its adjacency to “Transgender Alley,” it allows gay South Koreans to enter a world that contrasts starkly with their heteronormative day-to-day life. In this way, It’aewŏn works as a space reflecting Western queer culture. Sarasin (2018) explains how, through the medium of art, including artforms such as drag, conversations often take on a lens of activism that challenges heteronormative standards vis-à-vis the venues that It’aewŏn and its adjacent areas provide.

Additionally, Sarasin provides detailed and thoughtful insight into how new avenues for

queer visibility are arising in Seoul via the intersections of art, performance, and activism in and around the It'aewŏn area. While his evaluation of It'aewŏn presents nuanced insights, his characterization of Chongno is less favorable. He states that he has heard from gay Korean men that the bars of the area have started to close down. Sarasin attributes this to the redevelopment of the adjacent area to the north of Nagwŏn-dong as well as the continued growth in popularity of It'aewŏn (2018: 24-25). Although Sarasin notes that his interactions in the area were limited, he suggests that Chongno is losing popularity and that, other than a few bars that cater to a younger crowd, Chongno is often populated by men in their thirties and forties. This assertion matches with Cho's (2011) and Yi Sŏjin's (2007) description of the area during the early 2000s. Yet my own ethnographic engagement points to a different reality. In my observations, the current state of this area is much different—it is not a “hold out of the past” waning in the shadows of It'aewŏn but instead works within the frameworks of contemporary gay life as a physical place that enables and facilitates the ability to engage with gay identity and formulate community.

4. Findings

The First Steps into Seoul's Gay Places

When I asked interlocutors to recount their first experience of stepping out onto the streets or into one of the bars of Seoul's gay places, a common theme emerged. Many interlocutors described their first experience as *sin'gihada* (amazing, miraculous, or awe-inspiring). The idea that such a large number of gay men existed was beyond their scope of imagination. The congruency between the explanations provided by all interlocutors when recounting their first experiences within *itchok saenghwal* (gay life)⁴ of Seoul is telling.

Most of the men I spoke with (thirteen out of fifteen) said that the internet led to their realization that they were attracted to men. Further, all interlocutors said that they used the internet to gain information about the gay community. In the South Korean context, gay men's use of online spaces, as well as the existence of gay chat rooms and homepages, has been well documented (see Cho 2011; McGuire 2018; Pettid 2008). These online sources work as caches of information about gayness, and attest to the existence of a community bound by this commonality that is otherwise not readily available via other mediums.

In Korea, gay men live in a cultural context that revolves around heteronormative patterns of patriarchy. In these contexts, heterosexuality exists as the standard for sexual desire and interaction. Further, patriarchy codifies heterosexuality, and the obligation of participation in this practice is all-pervasive. Any way of being that disqualifies an individual from such practices creates feelings of unease. Desire or interactions that disrupt the in-place standards can

⁴ This term directly translates as follows: this way (*itchok*) life (*saenghwal*). *Itchok* is a colloquialism used by members of the gay community when referring to themselves or other gay individuals. Rather than using the term gay (*kei*), the use of *itchok* is often favored as individuals outside of the gay community would not identify it as meaning "gay" (*kei*).

threaten individuals' positionality within a web of social relationships. This is expressed by one interlocutor in the following exchange.

June: I have come to feel more anxious when it comes to my identity. In Korea marriage is really important. Unlike America, Canada, or Thailand, Korea is not as open. Because of the mix of Confucian culture, it's very closed in that way. It's very closed. In this situation, in our society, how can – you have to hide as you continue to live life. So, I have become a little anxious... now. When I was in middle or high school, I didn't feel any of those feelings.

Elias: So then did you perhaps at that time tell anyone about yourself?

June: It's actually exactly the opposite. I didn't tell anyone about being gay until after high school.

Due to the threat of the disruption of relationships, my interviewees explained that they could only explore their sexuality in isolation. Yet, feelings that contradict the implicit norm of heterosexuality require contextualization. In this way having access to such information is, I would argue, imperative. This is especially true within a context that renders non-heteronormative patterns of behavior invisible.

Elias: You mentioned that when you were younger you knew nothing about gay people. In Korea what kind of information was there about gay people?

Kiss: There was no information.

The internet provides this access to information without the necessity of social interactions at any level. Furthermore, the internet aids in the procuring of information and facilitates contact with other gay individuals while simultaneously providing a layer of anonymity. This is often cited as a reason why gay men favor its use (Arnold 2016; McGuire 2018). In this sense the internet becomes a valuable resource for gay men throughout the process of identity work.

Expanding on this idea of identity work is important. However, in order to begin to understand one's self vis-à-vis a sexual orientation along the lines of self-identification, an

understanding of “gay” as an existing discursive category⁵ in the frameworks of social life must first exist. Twelve interlocutors said that before getting information online, they had not really grasped or thought of gay as a category of being.

Once individuals learned about “gay” as an existing social category, this understanding could then transform the dispositional reality of sexual orientation into a form of self-identification. Brubaker and Cooper (2000: 14) speak of self-identification as follows; “to characterize oneself, to locate oneself vis-à-vis known others, to situate oneself in a narrative, to place oneself in a category”. Though this process is noted to be situationally bound, it requires the interplay of the self and others. Nebulous desire, while existing as a dispositional reality, cannot manifest as a form of identification (intrapersonal or interpersonal) when incomprehensible.

Thus, “sexual identity” cannot exist in a vacuum. Self-identification must be negotiated at the level of social interaction because as May (2011: 368) puts it, “our sense of self is constructed in a relational process in our interactions with other people as well as in relation to the more abstract notions of collectively held social norms, values and customs”. Such a process of identity formation is inextricably connected to, and reinforced by, a sense of belonging that further allows the individual to relate to the social (Stahl and Habib 2017; May 2011). This explains why, rather than merely accessing information online, interlocutors subsequently began to formulate relationships via online spaces⁶.

⁵ Brubaker and Cooper (2000: 14-17) call for a new approach to deployment of the term ‘identity’. My discussion and use of language throughout this thesis follows along their terms. Here I follow their discussion of identification and categorization and employ the term ‘category’, rather than ‘identity’, when speaking about gayness.

⁶ It is important to note that the websites that provide information do so in a way that goes beyond providing merely static information. These sites are multifaceted. They often revolve around online message boards, or in their more contemporaneous form, connect people to chatrooms that are now accessible through mobile phone chat applications. In this way the information provided via online sites is dynamic in nature.

The men I spoke to told a similar story that contained this common theme. After online contact with gay individuals with whom self-identification could occur, interlocutors would seek to affirm these relationships by meeting in person. While the internet provides a layer of anonymity which is often cited as desirable for gay men within the South Korean context, the necessity to interact with others in physical reality is nonetheless real. The move toward interactions in offline settings may be explained by the following reasons.

First, the internet is a liminal space that disinhibits variances in cultural and social norms (Fox 2004). I argue that the processes of online identity work alone can be limiting because of this. The liminal characteristics of the internet are diametrically opposed to “concrete networks of interaction, in which a continual negotiation over the nature of practice is a constituent feature of everyday routines” (Bottero 2010: 17). Following along the lines of a Bourdieusian analysis, embodied social practice is an essential factor in the structuring of identity. However, as Bottero points out, a consideration of situated subjectivities is critical for an analysis of the manifestation of embodied social practice. Bottero (2010: 20) writes:

Practice is the negotiated outcome of intersubjective coordination, in which dispositions to act are shaped by ‘calls to order from the group’, ...it is necessary to attend to the patterned nature of such intersubjectivity: the concrete interaction which shapes ‘calls to order’.

While an argument can be made for the ability of the internet to work as a productive space in the realm of identity work, and this may very well be the case in certain contexts, it does not work in isolation and rather produces varying possibilities alongside the negotiation of identity in physical reality (see Arends and Hordijk 2016). Simply put, accessing one’s sexuality through an online space does not bring identity into *reality*.

Second, communication that takes place on the internet may be inherently inadequate. This is notably true for individuals within the South Korean context. Kim and Ju (2019), in

discussing the effects of cultural context on patterns of internet usage, note that communication that takes place in South Korean culture tends to be high-context (HC). Citing Hall, they explain that HC communication is communication that relies on information that is “internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message” (Hall 1976: 91 in Kim and Ju 2019: 704). They suggest that what they assert to be the homogeneous nature of the ethnic and cultural heritage of the population, and the cultural dimensions of collectivism within the South Korean context contribute to this style of communication. As they point out, “online communication, in comparison to face-to-face interaction, is limited in the ability to convey non-verbal context cues including facial expressions, body languages, and inflection,” (2019: 706) or the tacit information that HC communication requires. Additionally, especially useful in contextualizing gay men’s move to offline spaces would be to apply Kim and Ju’s use of Dunbar’s assertion surrounding digital media to the context of gay individuals in South Korean society. Dunbar states (2012 in Kim and Ju 2019: 706):

The quality of communication has also been highlighted as a potentially limiting factor that might make it difficult to build strong, emotionally intense relationships over digital media. By comparison with face-to-face interaction, most digital media are relatively impoverished ... they typically involve only one sensory modality.

Although the internet may provide information and helps facilitate initial contact between individuals, it cannot provide tangible interaction. In this way, a move towards offline meetings between individuals begins to make sense. To help illustrate this process I show the example of one of my interlocutors, Kims.

Kims first visited one of Seoul’s gay places, Chongno, at the age of fourteen. After making friends through an online portal for gay men, he decided to meet them in Chongno. Not of legal drinking age, he was unable to access the bars at night when most gay men frequent Chongno. Instead, he met friends at the *CoffeeBean* located on the northwest end of Chongno’s

Nagwŏn-dong neighborhood. Affectionately referred to as “GayBean,” this coffee shop stands as a local landmark and an iconic meeting point for gay men before they start their night of drinking in the area. Kims continued to meet these friends regularly at GayBean throughout his time as a high school student:

Kims: I slowly made friends through online communities, and as we became close, I learned about Chongno. I went there for the first time when I was in middle school. I went out to Chongno during the afternoon with those *kkisuni-dŭl*— other sissies [said in English]—and we chatted at coffee shops. For the most part, they were all older than me, in their early twenties. At that time, it was so *shin’gihae* [amazing]. In my school, I was very feminine; I thought I was the only person who was this way in the world. But I realized that there were so many different types of people out there like me.

Being 22 at the time of the interview, and employed full-time at a department store, Kims still frequented Chongno and continued to make new connections with individuals by setting up or participating in group meetings at local bars via online chat groups on mobile applications.

Though Kims’s example exemplifies a common pattern of entrée into Seoul’s gay places, it also stands out as unique. Kims’s interfacing with Chongno happened at a much earlier age than others. Most of the individuals I interviewed (thirteen out of fifteen) engaged with Chongno first in their late teens to early twenties. Although these interlocutors said they had inclinations of an attraction for the same sex from a young age, four explained that the necessity to focus on academic studies in their teens meant that they delayed exploring their sexuality and accessing gay spaces. For another six, questioning and exploring facets of their sexuality began later because until then they had never considered it a possibility.

Later exploration of sexual identity, however, does not mean that sexual identity work in the South Korean context takes place outside of cited standards for explorations of individual sexuality. Martin Holt and Christine Griffin’s (2003) understanding of identity negotiation, in general, extends past what is typically deemed adolescence. This notion puts these experiences

into perspective. As Holt and Griffen (2003: 404) write; “Social changes in consumer culture, education, employment, and the family mean that ‘youth’ can now extend well into a person’s mid-twenties”. This fits alongside Gill Valentine’s (2003) definition of “youth” or “young people,” classifying both categories between the age range of sixteen to 25.

Yet beyond such semantic categories, this reality for South Korean gay men aligns with current ideas of sexual identity formation. Sexual identity formation is no longer thought to be a lineal process; rather, as Kranz and Pierrard (2018: 284) discuss, current conceptions of sexual identity formation see the process as multidimensional and multidirectional, and involving continued in-depth exploration. Sexual identity, therefore, is not stagnant but rather is a process of continued reflexive negotiation vis-à-vis the prevailing discourse, temporal and relational context, and individuated feelings of self.

The realization of attraction towards other men, the seeking of information via online resources, the making of contact with individuals who share a similar sexuality, consequently accessing a gay place to meet with others in the real world, and the subsequent exposure to the existence of other gay men on a scale larger than previously thought, all create a common pattern for interlocutors. A connection to a physical place becomes the critical fulcrum that leverages a young man’s interaction with the self as gay. A place, as a point in physical reality where interactions with individuals of a like identity occur, undoubtedly aids in a person’s ability to navigate an identity that is not allowed to be expressed or engaged in the day-to-day.

This process of identity navigation that becomes entwined with and reinforced by the structures of a particular locale ultimately mirrors the work of Garth Stahl and Sadia Habib, who see modes of identity construction as intrinsically connected to the process of belonging for young people. Stahl and Habib (2017: 271) write; “We conceptualize belonging as part of the

continuing identity-work involved with stabilizing a sense of value within the pathologization of their locale”. Furthermore, identity and belonging are psychosocial benefits that arise from community, with community being contingent on levels of comfort that individuals feel in the spaces that foster it (Kearns and Parkinson 2001). This assertion is manifested in the South Korean context for gay men. I asked my interlocutors during interviews to identify on a scale of one to ten their level of comfort in regard to expressing or engaging with their sexual identity when accessing gay places and when accessing places outside of gay districts. All interlocutors scored gay places higher than other areas, identifying that such places are where they feel most comfortable expressing and embodying their gay identity.

Place, Community, and Belonging

As I have shown, physical places where gay men can interact with other gay men are pivotal. Matthew Rowe sees gay men’s ability to interact and create relationships with role models as critical in affirmations of self. Rowe (2014: 439) writes: “Mutual identification is a skilled social practice that serves as the foundation for all other forms of belonging”. Though Rowe works in the American context, and as I am hesitant to compare directly the experiences of gay men cross-culturally, field observations and the words of my interlocutors align with Rowe’s findings. This is illustrated by the response of Dongwon when I asked him to say how comfortable he feels in Seoul’s gay districts on a scale of one to ten:

Dongwon: The score is different in your early twenties and your thirties. In your early twenties, 8, 9, or 10. If you’re talking about expressing your sexual identity in places that are not gay districts, it’s got to be 0... During your thirties, Chongno or It’aewŏn, the score is 3. That’s why I don’t go out very much anymore ... In Korean society, you can’t talk about your identity. For that reason, when you realize this, you can become very depressed or you desperately want to tell someone. You become so concerned with other people hearing your feelings, you don’t even consider listening. So, when I think of Chongno now, it seems like a *kamjŏng ssŭregit’ong* (emotional trashcan)... So, there are two reasons you go, to drink and play, or tell others about your problems ... rather than listening. But for me—when I was in my twenties, I also drank and played a lot, but now

I make a concerted effort to listen. But when going out to Chongno, if all those [younger people] are feeling depressed or frustrated—for me, listening to everyone’s problems can be tiring. When you begin to age, you can’t keep up playing with those that are younger ... but you should listen to their problems.

Dongwon’s words clearly speak to how interactions with others provide psychological benefits.

With few other outlets available for young gay individuals to work through the problems that arise when navigating gayness, such interactions are a necessity.

However, it is important to note that such interactions are only possible within invested relationships. As another interlocutor notes:

MJ: Everyone [who is gay] has been or will go to Chongno at some point, at least once. But nobody goes alone. You can’t spend time in Chongno if you are alone. You have to be with people you know.

This sentiment, that individuals find it difficult to access these spaces alone, was identified and echoed by other interlocutors. This statement by MJ presents itself in an interesting way in his explanation of his first experience in Seoul’s gay places:

MJ: The first time I went to Chongno, I went alone. I had been to It’aewŏn before when I was younger, when I didn’t know I was gay because there aren’t only gay clubs there. Since I went there, I didn’t want to go to It’aewŏn again. So, I went there [Chongno]. I went into a gay bar – I knew it was a gay bar right away because I saw a rainbow on the outside. So, I went in and talked with the owner and a worker who happened to be my age. It felt really comfortable because they knew about all the things I had heard or felt. I could talk freely there. After that I didn’t go back often. When I started to be friends with someone in my neighborhood, they were younger and had just come back from military service when we first contacted each other online. But there was nowhere to go to hang out, so we went to Chongno together. After that I started to go more often.

It is worth noting that while MJ did not first go to Chongno with people he knew, he expressed that he came to utilize the space when developing new relationships with others. Accessing Chongno in this way effectively allowed for the solidification of relationships that subsequently facilitated his ability to continue to engage with the space beyond his first visit.

This example illustrates how accessing these gay places effectively re-enforces a network of relationships. This results in an interesting phenomenon: interactions that gay men have with each other work to spatially transform gay locales from a space in which gayness can be expressed and embodied, into a fixed place in physical locality for accessing gayness and community. Low (2014: 32) discusses this, writing: “It is the spatial location of subjectivities, intersubjectivities and identities that transform space into places”. In this way, meaning is co-created through an amassing of like individuals. This follows along the lines of Doreen Massey’s (2005) understandings of space and place as continually being constructed through the social world via relationality. Paradoxically, it is through accessing these fixed locales that relationships can form, and identity can crystalize through fostering a sense of belonging to a wider community.

Brubeck and Cooper (2000: 20) demarcate categories of identification to a larger collective through the use of “commonality” and “connectedness,” defining the two as follows: “‘Commonality’ denotes the sharing of some common attribute, ‘connectedness’ the relational ties that link people”. Although, affirmation of “commonality” through the visibility of individuals can create “connectedness,” subsequently fostering a sense of belonging, such processes are additionally contingent on the social practices that take place to facilitate the forming of networks.

This point requires further exploration. When I asked interlocutors to identify gay places in Seoul, they gave a variety of answers. In the interlocutors’ maps of Seoul, the number of delineated gay places ranged from two to nine⁷. All interlocutors delineated Chongno and

⁷ Seven interlocutors delineated the existence of just two places. Four interlocutors delineated four places. Two interlocutors delineated five. One interlocutor delineated eight, and one interlocutor delineated nine.

It'aewŏn on their maps, with other answers varying. Interlocutors also included demarcation of places such as “my house” and areas of Seoul including Hongdae and Sinch'on (both contextualized by interlocutors as places in which lesbian women congregate). The fact that all interlocutors included Chongno and It'aewŏn is worth note. While other locales were cited during the map-making process, initial inquiries via interviews revealed that all interlocutors singled out Chongno and It'aewŏn as Seoul's primary gay places. All maps similarly reflected the boundaries of gay places. Ideals and understandings of demarcation in territories is a common marker that punctuated people's experience in and with community (Hopkins 2010). However, while Chongno and It'aewŏn hold relevance, a clear difference and preference between the two places was cited by interlocutors. Such a preference was based on the social practices that took place in each area

Chongno vs It'aewŏn: Customary Interaction That Normalizes

When I asked my interlocutors about the difference between Seoul's two main gay places, they made a clear distinction between them. They said It'aewŏn is for dancing, clubbing, and *nun-t'ing* (checking out others), while Chongno is a place where people can sit down, drink, chat, and get to know each other. This was given as the reason why many preferred a night in Chongno to a night in It'aewŏn⁸. The words of Hyori make this clear.

Hyori: For me, Chongno is like a mother's womb. When it comes to my sexual orientation, I can reveal it at its level [as it is] while being in both places [Chongno and It'aewŏn], but ... when I am in It'aewŏn, I tend to be more pretentious. I try to be a person unlike myself, well ... the real me is like a real sissy, real pussy. Someone with full femininity within me. But ... I feel like I should lessen that part of myself in It'aewŏn. I can't talk that much there because it's a club setting basically. Of course, I do some choreography for some girl group dances or something. But compared to being in

⁸ It is further important to note that interlocutors depicted Chongno in greater detail and located more points of interest during their mapping of Seoul's gay districts. Interlocutors identified an average of eleven establishments often frequented or areas of importance when mapping Chongno, as compared to an average of four establishments often frequented or areas of importance noted when mapping It'aewŏn. This speaks not only to the diversity of places individuals interact with while accessing Chongno but also to the importance of this locale in the lifeways of interlocutors.

Chongno, it feels more of a limited setting per say. Eighty percent of the reason is It'aewŏn is for clubs, and 20 percent is ... a ... it's It'aewŏn.

While Hyori clearly notes a difference in the areas, he explicitly cites the limitations of Itaewon's club setting as his reasoning for preferring Chongno to It'aewŏn. Mr. Lee further contextualizes this by stating that his reasoning for preferring to access Chongno is due to its ability to provide the proper *punwigi* (atmosphere, mood) and *sulchari* (drinking occasions).

Mr. Lee: Well, rather than a location I feel comfortable in, it really is about those I am with. Other than *sulchari*, there doesn't seem to be a situation in which I feel comfortable sharing my identity. To be honest, It'aewŏn is a little uncomfortable for me. With it being considered a kind of Mecca, I guess there is that kind of vague comfortability, but the reason I go to Chongno is, first of all there are a lot of bars, there are a lot of gay people there, and because I know a lot of people there, it is that kind of *punwigi* that makes it most comfortable for me. When people are young usually, they will go to regular get-togethers in Chongno, then as some kids grow they might get bored of Chongno and might cross into It'aewŏn a couple times, I'm sure that could happen – but first the transportation to Chongno is the easiest, and it's easy for people to get together because there are as many bars as one can fathom. So really, there is some kind of get-together anywhere you go. When you are drinking you get to know the person next to you and as you drink you get to know the people around you.

This sentiment was shared by the majority of interlocutors, indicating a need for further investigation.

When visiting Chongno, gay men often pack into bars and karaoke rooms as well as frequent *p'och'a* (outdoor food vending carts surrounded with stools). While drinking shots of *soju* (Korean rice alcohol) and glasses of beer accompanied by shared plates of food, Korean men visiting Chongno interact with each other via social customs that are normative within the wider South Korean context. Other than the fact that these bars are owned by gay men and cater to a clientele of individuals with the same identity, the bars, *p'och'a*, and social interactions that take place are all what one would expect in a typical *soju* bar or *p'och'a* within the urban

landscape of Seoul. In this way, a typical night of socializing in Chongno follows a rather unremarkable pattern.

Gay men will pop into bars in Chongno with groups of friends to celebrate a special occasion like a birthday party. Gay men might also meet in a bar to discuss stressful work or family issues. They may also gather with friends for the mere purpose of socializing. If a *moim* (group gathering) is taking place, there will often be various “rounds” as the night progresses. Round one (*il ch’a*) might start at a *p’och’a* or bar, round two (*i ch’a*) will be visiting another bar, and round three (*sam ch’a*) will usually usher in the sunrise at a karaoke⁹ bar. Such meetings are often organized through online portals or through group chats on smartphones. Patterns of moving from one venue to the next while engaging in drinking are typical in South Korea. On occasion, a night of drinking in Chongno might result in a subsequent visit to It’aewŏn to engage in clubbing. This is usually a preplanned pattern, and Chongno is often the first meeting point of the night because It’aewŏn does not offer many venues that allow for individuals to engage in the aforementioned customary patterns of social interaction. In his explanation of how gay men engage with each other when accessing Chongno as opposed to It’aewŏn, Sarasin (2018: 66) notes this as well when he writes: “Their behavior can be seen as more consistent with the behavior of the greater Korean population, as well as interacting much less with the foreign population in Korea”. The aforementioned social interactions are described as unremarkable because such interactions can be understood as culturally sanctioned within the South Korean context.

⁹ The use of the word karaoke is intentional here. The Korean word for karaoke is *noraebang*, which directly translates to “song room.” This can also be translated as “singing room”. *Noraebang* vary from karaoke bars in Korea. A *noraebang* is often a closed off room that is available for rent by the hour for individuals or small groups of people. See Creighton’s discussion of *noraebang* and karaoke in South Korea (Creighton 2006). While *noraebang* populate the cityscape of Seoul, in Chongno karaoke bars are more common. A karaoke bar in Chongno does not provide private rooms for rent by individual groups. Rather they are a bar with an open stage where all those accessing, regardless of connection to each other, may participate in signing and listening.

The importance of drinking within Korean culture cannot be overstated. Studies of drinking habits of South Koreans have repeatedly shown that drinking for Koreans is most often participated in for the purpose of fostering relationships (Ko and Sohn 2018: 54). The participation in drinking in order to build relationships with others becomes codified as an obligatory practice that extends into the professional and academic lifeways of South Korean individuals (Im 2017; Kwanghwan Kim et al. 2011). From an anthropological perspective, alcohol is referred to as an embodied piece of material culture and a constructive agent within the frameworks of cultural practice and social life. Further, the drinking of alcohol and the accompanying rules, norms, and rituals, can be seen as skilled social practices that work to formulate and construct identity (Dietler 2006; Douglas 1987).

The normative practices of drinking in South Korea are worth explanation. Drinking in Korea is encoded in cultural rules of conduct and etiquette. Tacit messages of status, often along the axis of age, are communicated and re-enforced vis-à-vis comportment during the pouring and ingesting of alcohol. When in a social setting, one must adhere strictly to these rules. The most ubiquitous and frequent form of alcohol consumed in Korea is *soju*. Though surrounding cultures across time have also produced and ingested similar rice-based alcohol, for Koreans the variance in taste and production style positions *soju* as a unique piece of *their* material culture. The method of drinking *soju* comfortably fits within the rules of drinking etiquette.

Observing such rules of etiquette is particularly important in group settings where connections are not strong. Therefore, rituals of drinking not only reify age-based systems of rank, but also work to communicate the relationships that individuals have with one another. But rituals of drinking *soju*, or drinking in general, not only communicate messages of relationality between individuals; they also work as a transformative practice. Ko and Sohn note this in

discussing patterns of (often obligatory) drinking that occur after work amongst co-workers. Ko and Sohn (2018: 54) write:

... more than half of the initial sessions of drinking are accompanied by subsequent (secondary or tertiary) sessions of drinking. It has to do with the Korean cultural concept of 'jeong' [*chǒng*] which makes people more generous to those who are close to them, even in the professional world.

This phenomenon is directly transferable to those who go to gay places. The consumption of alcohol in this manner for gay men becomes a primary group activity that promotes and strengthens ties between participants. As relationships between individuals deepen, the regulations and adherence to the cultural standards of etiquette in drinking practices often loosen, based on the preferences of those in higher positions of status based on age. My field experience repeatedly showed that those who regularly engage in drinking together intentionally withdraw from certain aspects of drinking etiquette in order to promote bonding. It is important to note that alcohol is accompanied by shared plates of food in these contexts. The *soju* bars and *p'och'a* all serve *anju* (food that goes with alcohol).

Practices of eating in Korea traditionally revolve around the sharing of dishes. This is no different when engaging in eating *anju*. Single plates of food that sit in the middle of the table are shared by all in the group. In the same way that the ingestion of Korean alcohol works as a piece of embodied culture to effectively strengthen the bond between individuals, so too does partaking in a shared meal. Through an anthropological lens, practices of commensality work to strengthen bonds and to further transform understandings of self in regard to what is being consumed and with whom it is being consumed. Fischler (2011: 533) notes, "If eating a food makes one become more like that food, then those sharing the same food become more like each other".

Moreover, food and consumption of alcohol extend beyond the bars and *p'och'a* that

populate the constellation of businesses that make up Chongno and move into the karaoke rooms as well. Karaoke itself as a venue where gay men interact and socialize, is pertinent. Singing is a critical focal point of Korean cultural and a social practice. Millie Creighton (2006: 135) notes this in particular in her discussion of Korean karaoke-style singing as “a contemporary extension of existing Korean social singing practices” and emphasizes the “social importance placed on singing in groups or in front of others”. The emphasis on the sociality of practices of singing further speaks to its ability to solidify relationships and create cohesion between those who partake in it together.

Therefore, interactions in Chongno revolve around culturally important facets of social practice within the sociocultural frameworks of Korea. These include consumption of alcohol, practices of commensality, and culturally important modes of socialization such as singing. Patterns of interaction that take place in Chongno effectively work as a conduit to solidify relationships. It is important to reiterate that these interactions are not unique to gay men who interact with each other in Chongno; rather, such forms of socialization are common in various other spheres of social life, including a critical sphere of life for South Korean men, that of the professional world. Participating in such activities requires the performance ideals of masculinity embedded within contemporary Korean culture.¹⁰ Gay individuals often find discomfort in these practices when pursued outside of their “gay” social circle (Im 2017).

Dominant sociocultural frameworks are rooted in hegemonic masculinity (see Nami Kim 2016; Moon 2001). As such, it can be said that the social interactions that are considered appropriate in the South Korean context are behaviors that reinforce hierarchical order based on age, gender, and status embedded in a system of patriarchal dominance. Expressions and

¹⁰ Han and Ling (1998) characterize South Korea as a prototypical hyper-masculine developmentalist state.

standards of masculinity in South Korea differ from those in other cultural contexts (Creighton 2016; Suh 2017). Stephen Suh (2017) notes that while such expressions differ from what we see in the North American framework, the necessity for men to align themselves with the ideals of South Korean masculinity is imperative. This is of vital importance for gay men who embody a sense of self that lies in opposition to culturally deemed structures of masculinity. I suggest that Chongno allows for the melding of these two processes to take place. If we analyze Hyori's previous statement through this lens, we can see how such ideas hold wider resonance in the context of Chongno.

Hyori cites his embodiment of femininity as natural and inherent, and says that he feels most comfortable displaying this femininity in Chongno. His expressions of self as feminine blur traditional binary systems, effectively re-characterizing masculinity in this space. I am not seeking to classify individuals' actions or "performance" of gender (Butler 1999) as either masculine or feminine; my interlocutors' descriptions of their personal displays of femininity/masculinity provide insight into these realities. Any attempts to classify actions may prove problematic. Gender identity, sexual identity, and expressions of femininity and masculinity have a symbiotic relationship, creating an interesting web of connection where one aspect may affect the other, be dependent on the other, or even contradict the other. In this way, gender expression can vary without challenging an individual's claimed gender identity (male in Hyori's case) (Angelides 2006). However, discrete examples of the blurring of normative patterns of gender performance can be taken from the linguistic markers that gay men use in gay spaces. The examinations of gender and sexuality through the lens of language can prove fruitful (Mills and Mullany 2011).

The specific example of gay men's use of linguistic markers that I would like to discuss is their deployment of polite terms of address/reference. In Korean, individuals address each other based on age rank. When individuals are at a level of closeness, they may move to address each other by their given names. However, a younger individual must add a polite term of reference when addressing an older individual. Additionally, the given name is commonly dropped, and this term of reference may be used alone. This process is also gendered. Women call their older male counterparts *oppa* (older brother) while they refer to their older female counterparts as *ōnni* (older sister). Men, on the other hand, refer to their older male counterparts as *hyōng* (older brother) and their older female counterparts as *nuna* (older sister)¹¹.

When frequenting gay places, I have often observed gay men referring to older male counterparts as *ōnni* or *nuna*. This method of addressing individuals at first seems incongruous with their status as men. In my observation, employing female terms of address appears dependent upon the situation and further dependent on the relationship between individuals. In some instances, referring to someone by a female term may be done in jest. In other cases, this occurs at the instruction of the older individual. The preference of the use of a female term of address may be based on the level of "femininity" the older individual embodies, the individual's discomfort with being referred to by the male terms, or, most commonly, the position the individual prefers in sexual encounters¹².

However, there are two important points. First, the choice to be referred to by the other gender's term of reference is personal. Second, the use of female terms does not challenge an

¹¹ While these terms are also used by individuals to signify kinship relations, they are also used to signify closeness or friendship between individuals who have no kin relationship.

¹² Older gay men were not observed referring to younger gay men in this way. This is the case because older individuals never refer to younger individuals by these terms of reference. Rather they may refer to a younger individual as *yōdongsaeng* (younger sister) when referring to them in the third person.

individual's gender identity as male. I find this use of language similar to Hideko Abe's (2004) observation of lesbian Japanese women's employment of first-person pronouns. Abe notes that while lesbian Japanese women may choose to use masculine first-person pronouns, their doing so does not speak to a desire to be seen as men, and instead it speaks to their desire to disassociate from particular forms of femininity associated with the use of feminine first-person pronouns. In the case of gay Korean men, however, it is important to note that I only observed them using the female terms of reference/address when in gay places or in private.

It seems contradictory that the areas in which patterns of interaction follow hegemonic masculinity would also afford those on the periphery of such discourses to engage in practice and language use that stand in contrast. However, it is pertinent to remember that in many circumstances, individuals are required to exist while navigating multiple worlds (Anzaldúa 1987). Identities are often multivalent and require negation along contours of power (Jenkins 2004). Feminist theorists have long pointed out that identities are intersectional in nature (Crenshaw 1989).

The gay men in this study were simultaneously engaging in, and dissociating themselves from, dominant modes of social interaction and expressions of gender (which are connected to sexual identity expression). This amalgamation presents itself as a nuanced interplay between realities. Gay men desire to engage in forms of social interaction that adhere to the standard of hegemonic masculinity while simultaneously embodying modes of being that are inherently positioned as opposed to it. Applying Michael Ward's idea of "chameleonisation" is useful here. Young gay men in the context of Chongno can be seen as what Ward (2015: 218) says is "having the ability to display multiple masculinities at different times, and not as the bearer of one all-encompassing masculinity that is always, and everywhere, the same".

Yet such an interplay between realities is not only taking place on the axis of masculinity but rather is taking place within the context of the intersectional amalgamation of identities that gay men embody as a whole. Individuals do not only exist as gay, but as male, and as Korean simultaneously. Affirming each identity through establishing a sense of belonging vis-à-vis each point of self is imperative.

Eva Youkhana (2015) articulates that a sense of belonging is produced at different points of being through a particular framework. Youkhana (2015: 16) writes:

The material-semiotic and space-sensitive study of belonging reveals activities ... [that] produce belonging on different temporal and spatial platforms and within more or less institutionalized (repeated, performed, etc.) everyday practices, (imposed) rituals, and 'regimes of belonging'.

If belonging is further understood through Linn Miller's concept of "belonging *qua* correct relation," Chongno's facilitation of belonging to various, and in some cases, contradicting points of self can be more deeply contextualized. According to Miller (2003: 223) belonging is,

... related to the common spheres of our belonging (community, history and locality) and thus to whom and what we are ... Thus, the struggle for belonging can be understood as the task of becoming selves that have both transparency and authenticity in regard to where one comes from and who one is.

Involving oneself in the norms and mores of cultural practice not only effectively creates social cohesion, but further creates a sense of belonging to the cultural framework in which one finds oneself (Gammeltoft 2014: 225–236). In this sense, the necessity for gay men to find belonging via their expression of gayness is as important a requirement as finding a sense of belonging to the larger cultural context. The power of engaging in cultural norms is profound in its ability to create a sense of belonging for individuals who inherently embody difference.

Therefore, I assert that, while (as Sarasin (2018) suggests) a place like It'aewŏn provides areas where gay Korean men can engage with the more diverse LGBTQ+ community of Seoul,

Chongno provides a location where young gay men give birth to an affirmed way of being, formulate relationships, and invest in deeper connections with peer groups. This process normalizes otherness and helps foster a sense of belonging not only to peer groups of like individuals but to “Koreanness” as well. This process is made possible because unlike the “foreign space” of It’aewŏn, where overtly queer behavior may mimic a Western ideal, Chongno is more authentically South Korean in the sense that the interactions that take place in Chongno mirror those that happen in the larger cultural context. It provides a place where young men can engage in social activities replicating cultural norms while expressing variant identities such as “gay.”

Beyond Chongno?

As established, scholars have noted that gay men in South Korea negotiate public and private spheres vis-à-vis their gayness in order to ensure safety within social settings (see Arnold 2016; Bong 2008; Gitzen 2012, 2014; Pettid 2008; Yi and Phillips 2015). Though places like Chongno exist in physical reality, these locales are often thought to fall under the category of the private. The landscape of these areas exists as a constellation of businesses that cater to a clientele of gay men. In his evaluation of Chongno, Yi Sŏjin (2007) makes particular note of how gay men actively bring Chongno into being through the ways they use it. He explains how businesses that form Chongno’s gay district strategically advertise to potential gay patrons and are further bound by temporality¹³. This, combined with Chongno’s physical landscape, characterized by crowded streets and hard to navigate alleyways, aids in gay men’s ability to visit Chongno in secret.

However, on any given weekend, gay men of all ages populate Chongno, packing into

¹³ Gay men are characterized as accessing Chongno late at night and on the weekends (Yi Sŏjin 2007).

bars and *p'och'a*. Such large gatherings of almost exclusively men can be striking. Out in the open street, gay men show no qualms about presenting themselves in a manner that is not always congruent with hegemonic gender and sexuality. Gay men may kiss on the street, act like a *kkisuni* (effeminate person), and/or use linguistic markers associated with women. Furthermore, gay men's use of Chongno is not strictly relegated to the weekend alone; rather, the bars and karaoke rooms of Chongno are continually accessed throughout the week¹⁴.

In addition, the places gay men frequent in Chongno are not limited to the closed-off bars or karaoke rooms that specifically cater to them. Rather, gay men also use the *p'och'a*, coffee shops, convenience stores, restaurants, and streets that make up the Chongno neighborhood. Such places serve all individuals who find themselves in the area. This is more apparent in recent years as the neighborhood adjacent to Chongno has begun to undergo the process of gentrification, becoming a hot spot for heterosexual couples. This amassing of gay men, as well as displays of practices that are associated with homosexual behavior, defy "public space" as inherently heterosexual (Valentine 1996) and seem to challenge the idea of Chongno being accessed through exclusively secretive means. This may occur because Chongno is thought of within the collective consciousness of gay individuals as a "gay space." The production of imagined territories for sexual minorities has been noted as important in their development of a sense of community and self (Giesecking 2016; Kang 2015). However, I believe that something more is happening. A common theme that emerged in interviews was that even outside of Chongno, interlocutors noted that as long as they were with their gay friends, they felt comfortable expressing their identity.

¹⁴ One may consider the constraints of work schedules to be a critical factor affecting when men visit Chongno. Business culture in Korea often requires working until late hours and habitual participation in overtime work. In addition, as socialization in these areas revolves around drinking and eating, later hours are often seen as times when such interactions are acceptable.

Dongmin: It is not about what location I feel most comfortable in expressing my identity. Rather, the important thing is who I am with. Of course, Chongno or It'aewŏn are where my gay friends, or where gay people, gather, but they aren't the only places we prefer to go. In gay places, other gay people looking at me or catching my eye can feel burdensome as well. So, it is more about whether the people who I am with share the same consciousness as me; when I'm with my gay friends, my closest gay friends, I am the most comfortable. That can be anywhere.

Dongmin's statement articulates the importance of established relationships or networks.

The dynamics of an individual's network of relationships influences the frequency that an individual may visit Chongno. Further relationships with others change across time. Six of my interlocutors said they went to Chongno less as they got older. Reasons varied from person to person. Dongwon, in speaking about the difference of going to Chongno in his twenties and thirties (see page 24), linked his reason to entering a new position in the social hierarchy, while others noted that work life was taking up too much of their time. Other interlocutors even noted that they go to Chongno less often now because they like to try eating at new places with friends.

Jay: I feel that when I was younger, I didn't really have a fear of meeting new people. Now I have a stable job, and now I have more straight friends, so it is actually a little scary to go to Chongno. Because nowadays many straight people actually know about that area so it's a little daunting. That is the first reason. The second reason is because when I was younger it was a lot of fun meeting other gay people. But now, this is me, it's me, I am gay. So really in other areas ... that are not Chongno, I am comfortable in being gay. So now there isn't as much of a reason to go. I don't need to go there to talk with gay friends... I mean, we are talking here right now and it's not uncomfortable, right? Now I am not scared to talk about these things in other areas because this is me. I think it's because I am older, and it's got to do with my personality.

The diversity in my interviewee's responses about why they go to Chongno less is such that we cannot draw any generalizable conclusions. This is especially true in considering interlocutors' descriptions of how often they frequented Chongno. Descriptions did not necessarily align with the reality of how often I and others observed them doing so. However, recall that Chongno works in the framework of gay life as a vehicle for crystalizing relationships

and identity for those accessing it. At the time of their interviews, all interlocutors were already a part of established webs of relationships with other gay men. Additionally, their ideas about their own sense of selves as gay were clearly expressed and embraced.

As I have previously explained, spaces are transformed into places that are fixed to a physical reality that crystalize points of identity. This process would seem to produce a unique form of what many scholars refer to as “situated knowledge” locked in by particular spatial realities. Feminist scholar Cindi Katz (2001: 353) points out, “Situated knowledge assumes knowledge at a single point, the knowing subject, and the particularity of that subject’s vision is both its strength and downfall”. Yet, recall that this process is only made possible by dint of social interaction. Augmenting this via an understanding of an embodied space (Low 2017) provides further insight. Embodied space sees the individual as a mobile spatial field. This denotes that social interactions are transforming ‘spaces’ into ‘places’ fixed in a certain locale resulting in fixed points of identity, while also always taking place through multiple mobile spatial fields. Or to put it differently, space is a happening of social relations between individuals. Contextualizing this argument through Jiménez’s understanding of space sheds light on the words of my interlocutors. According to Jimenez (2003: 140),

Space is no longer a category of fixed and given ontological attributes, but a becoming, and emerging property of social relationships. Put somewhat differently, social relationships are inherently spatial and space an instrument and dimension of people’s sociality. Space is no longer ‘out there’, but a condition or faculty – a capacity of social relationships

In this sense, Dongmin’s statement as well as the expressions of homosexual patterns of interaction on the open streets of Chongno become possible. Sexual identity can be expressed and embodied outside the places in Chongno that provide a layer of anonymity as long as doing so is within the context of relationships that aren’t threatened by that knowledge.

5. Conclusions

Places where gayness can be expressed and embodied are important for young men who are navigating gayness within a context where non-hegemonic sexualities are marked as other, and where there is a paucity of information about gayness. Further exacerbating this reality is the fact that a sense of belonging, which is a critical factor in people's social and emotional health (Haslam et. al 2009), is inextricably connected to identity construction (Stahl and Habib 2017), and contingent on the existence of feelings of community (Kearns and Parkinson 2001). Both community and belonging are reinforced by space and place.

For many individuals in this context, initial contact with others of like identity, and access to information about gayness, takes place through the internet, an important space providing a necessary layer of anonymity (Cho 2011; McGuire 2018; Arnold 2016; Pettid 2008). Although understanding categories of social being may allow for the transformation of the dispositional reality of sexual orientation into a means of "self-identification" (Burbank and Cooper 2000), identity must be negotiated at the level of social interactions (May 2011). Social interactions that take place on the internet alone do not bring identity into reality; ways of being are articulated through intersubjective practice acutely dependent on social norms (Bottero 2010). Therefore, gay individuals need to access physical places where social interaction can take place.

Seoul's gay districts allow for such interactions to happen. Chongno and It'aewŏn stand out as places where gay men congregate because of their unique historical position within the frameworks of gay life in Seoul. Once interactions with other gay individuals take place in physical reality, self-identification as gay can be reinforced through the process of identification with group "connectedness" (Burbank and Cooper 2000). In addition, interactions that gay men

have with each other work to spatially transform locales (see Low 2014; Massey 2005) from a space in which gayness can be expressed and engaged with in relationship to others, into a fixed place for accessing gayness and community in physical reality. This process reinforces Chongno and It'aewŏn as gay places within the collective conscious of the gay community.

However, while both Chongno and It'aewŏn are places where interactions situate gayness as an embodied reality, there are nevertheless many differences between the two. It'aewŏn, thought of as a “foreign place” by most South Koreans, houses a gay district built around clubs and cocktail bars. Those who frequent this location are not limited to Korean gay men alone, but a host of queer individuals and a broader cross-section of the population of South Korea including foreigners. Interactions in this space often mimic a broader ideal of “globalized queer culture.” While going to It'aewŏn may aid in the crystallization of a sense of self as gay, accessing this space alone may further separate one's other points of identity.

Gay individuals exist with a collection of intersectional identities. Exclusively affirming one's gay identity creates dissonance, as its embodiment challenges other identities, such as one's cultural/ethnic identity. The requirements of day-to-day life allow for gay individuals to affirm a connection to their sense of self as Korean but do not allow them to interact with facets of their sexual identity. Interacting in a place like It'aewŏn allows for an embodiment of sexual identity but fails to reinforce a sense of self as Korean. Therefore, a physical place where the amalgamation of intersectional points of self can be embodied at once stands out as extraordinary and necessary.

Chongno accomplishes both tasks. The social interactions and patterns of happenings that take place in Chongno reflect those that happen within spaces across Seoul's urban landscape. Engaging in normative patterns of social interaction allows for gay men to invest in peer groups

and develop relationships while interacting with all facets of self, even those that are anathema to hegemonic discourse. The result of this is a deepened sense of belonging to those of like identities and to wider cultural frameworks simultaneously; both are inextricably important in the processes of belonging (Miller 2003). Once identity is reinforced and brought into reality through habitual social interaction, and relationships are formed within these established networks, identity can be articulated outside of such places. In this way space becomes embodied (Low 2017) and an “emerging property of social relationships” (Jiménez 2003: 140).

In this thesis, I have attempted to shed light on the ways that Chongno, one of Seoul’s oldest gay places, still continues to endure in the frameworks of gay life for men as an important physical place to express and engage with their sexual identity, create networks of relationships, and foster a sense of belonging. However, that is not to say that the urban landscape of Seoul remains unchanging for gay men. More and more, bars and karaoke rooms that effectively allow for the same processes to become manifest are coming into being outside the boundaries of Chongno. Within the last few years up to six gay bars have appeared in Sillim, an area that finds its allure in its cheap real estate prices, precipitating an influx of youth from around South Korea. Perhaps the emergence of these bars speaks to the transformation of identity interaction amongst newly coming of age youth. However, the emergence of a new constellation of bars in Sillim does not reflect the processes by which Chongno or It’aewŏn emerged and solidified within the frameworks of gay life. Perhaps this is reflective of the changing perceptions of LGBTQ+ individuals in South Korea. Whatever the case, it is certain that gay men will find ways to navigate their identity across this changing landscape.

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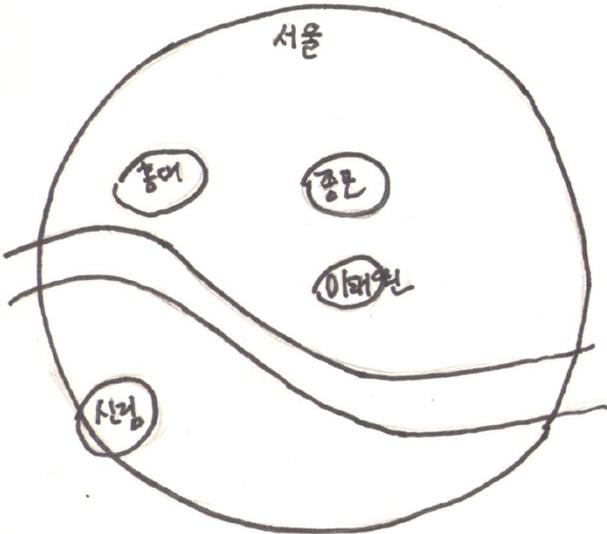
Appendices

Appendix A: Interlocutor Information

Interlocutor	Age	Employment Status
Dongmin	29	Employed – Full time
Dongwonn	32	Employed – Full time
H.S.	26	Job Searcher
Hyori	31	Employed – Full Time
June	29	Job Searcher
Jay	28	Employed – Full time
Kang Ho	34	Business Owner
K.C.	41	Business Owner
Kims	22	Employed – Full time
Kiss	33	Business Owner
Sungjun	28	Employed – Full Time
Lim Kwangdashian	26	Student
MJ	28	Employed – Full time
Mr. Lee	28	Business Owner
Pak	25	Student

Appendix B: Example of Maps

Kang Ho's Map of Seoul's Gay Districts



Kims' Mental Map of Chong-Ro

