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The Homophobic Call-Outs of COVID-19: Spurring and Spreading Angry Attention From *Girregi* Journalism Online to YouTube in South Korea

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Abstract

South Korea's gay community received heightened public attention in May 2020 when a news agency reported that a COVID-19 patient had visited several gay clubs in the multicultural district Itaewon, Seoul. Following this announcement, a plethora of news content was published across various online media platforms. Through a case study of how the news on the Itaewon outbreak spread from online news to YouTube, we investigate the modalities of homophobic discourse and its circulation across different online media outlets. By examining the interplay between the Korean online news media (derogatorily called *girregi* journalism) and YouTube news channels in spreading the Itaewon story, we discuss how the nationwide homophobic call-outs against the gay community were instigated within an attention ecology. We argue that news media and YouTube news channels work together as affective mechanisms that define the dominant feeling rules about nonnormative subjects as a way of engaging with the pandemic crisis, through the accumulation of affect and attention toward gay bodies.

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Breaking the downward trend of COVID-19 in South Korea (hereafter Korea), a new cluster of COVID-19 cases broke out in early May 2020 in Seoul's multicultural district Itaewon, also known as a gay village (informally called "Homo(sexual) Hill"). On May 7, 2020, at 7:21 AM, *KukminIlbo* released an exclusive article titled "A Person Infected With COVID-19 Visited a Famous 'Gay' Club in Itaewon" (Y. Yoo, 2020). *KukminIlbo's* reporting of the Itaewon case is not surprising considering its affiliation with the conservative Yoido Full Gospel Church and its long-standing antiqueer stance— evidenced in its annual homophobic coverage against queer parades and frequent negative reporting of the yet-to-be legislated antidiscrimination law (Jeon, 2017). Following the initial news, *KukminIlbo* produced a series of articles about the Korean gay community as the superspreader of COVID-19, instigating homophobic public reception. Examples include the following: "We need to know the activity log of gay men to prevent COVID-19" (Baek, 2020); "What is the 'Bathhouse' the COVID-19 patient from the Itaewon outbreak visited?" (M. Choi, 2020). The news of this domestic case spread rapidly across various social media platforms (e.g., Twitter, Instagram, YouTube) and portal sites (i.e., Naver, Daum). The keywords in the *KukminIlbo* article, including *gay* [게이], *Itaewon* [이태원], *gay club* [게이클럽], and *Yongin-66-beon* [용인 66 번, "Patient #66 from Yongin" (anonym referring to the first reported patient linked to the Itaewon cluster), trended on social media for a week.

Subsequently coined as the "Itaewon outbreak," the new domestic cases directed unwanted attention to the Korean gay community and sparked homophobic backlash. Social media users accused gay people of risking the health of Korean citizens (e.g., WookTube, 2020), and news media intimated that gay people would remain untested to avoid being outed, raising unwarranted fear (J.-H. Lee, 2020). The discourse of the Itaewon outbreak reinforced the stereotype of gay men as "sexual predators" referring to the "AIDS=gay disease" discourse (e.g., Rainbow Returns, 2020), legitimizing the public's homophobic reception of the outbreak. Following the news reports, hate speech targeting gay people spiked in May, with 90% of social media posts about gay men and the gay community being negative and hostile (National Human Rights Commission of Korea, 2020).

Through a case study of the media coverage of the Itaewon outbreak, we investigate the modalities of homophobic discourse and its circulation from online news media outlets to YouTube. We explore how the production, consumption, and sharing of news about the Itaewon outbreak mediate the ways people engage with the pandemic. By online news, we refer to free online articles accessible via the country's biggest news aggregators such as Naver and Daum, including online news articles from traditional news outlets (e.g., *Chosun Ilbo*, *Hankyoreh*) and online-only news agencies (e.g., OhMyNews, Money Today). We choose YouTube for its increasing importance as a news mediator in the contemporary mediascape, where the boundaries between traditional legacy media and digital media have been blurred. Video-streaming platform YouTube has served globally as an alternative media platform to consume news, as various actors—from "professional" media industries to "ordinary" content creators—participate in the production and dissemination of news in a more accessible manner through the platform's participatory affordances (Yang, 2020). In Korea, the percentage of people using YouTube for news consumption has increased from 6.7% to 26.7% over the last four years (Korea Press Foundation, 2019, 2021).

In this context, we first examine how the homophobic discourse around the Itaewon outbreak emerged and evolved on the Internet in tandem with attention-seeking online journalism in Korea. Then, we explore how feelings of anger and fear circulated through the consumption, sharing, and production of videos about the Itaewon outbreak on YouTube. We finally argue that the circulation of affect reconstitutes online attention ecologies, which shape how people engage with the crisis in line with existing anti-queer sentiments. We provide conceptual understandings about online news media ecologies on three levels: online news media outlets' *designation* of what to feel in the production and spread of clickbait content; attention-seeking YouTube news channels' *intensification* of the feelings in their mediation of clickbait content through raw aesthetics and social media practices; and the online news–YouTube nexus as an *affective mechanism* wherein the individual practices and platform algorithms work together to shape dominant discourses and augment the confirmation of feelings within the attention ecology.

Call-Outs, Attention Ecologies, and *Girregi* Journalism in Mobilizing Networked Affect

Since December 2019, the world has turned into a "crisis" mode in response to the global spread of COVID-19. To monitor and control the spread of the pandemic, many countries have intensified their health surveillance systems by introducing test-trace systems to

investigate patients' location data (French & Monahan, 2020). Many people also participated in shaping surveillance systems by shaming those who failed to abide by COVID-19 social distancing measures or those who tested positive for COVID-19 (Murphy, 2020).

Social media shape "social surveillance" where Internet users gather information about their peers through the ongoing act of "eavesdropping, investigation, gossip and inquiry" on social media (Marwick, 2012, p. 382). Andrejevic (2006) calls this "lateral surveillance," which has been made easier and encouraged by the participatory affordances of social media that invite users to act as "little brothers" by "keeping an eye on those around them" (p. 397). Notably, social surveillance, enabled by fun-centered social media (e.g., gamified design; see Whitson, 2013), can be playful and even empowering for users because social media's online networking is anchored in surveillance practices (e.g., monitoring, registration), offering new ways of socialization and identity construction (Albrechtslund, 2008). This playful aspect of social surveillance can give rise to surveillance as entertainment, mainly in "call-out" cultures.

Originally developed as acts for social justice, call-out cultures "publicly name instances or patterns of oppressive behavior and language use" (Ahmad, 2015, para. 1). However, call-outs are not always thoroughly calibrated for social justice, but are often misused for toxic pleasure and fun in public shaming, ridiculing, and garnering attention (Brooks, 2019; Lee & Abidin, 2021). Especially within social media's attention economy where attention (e.g., views, likes) functions as a currency in economic transactions to measure popularity, cultural importance, and marketability (Goldhaber, 1997, 2006), calling out one's misbehavior in a scandal becomes an easy way to join viral trends and to garner attention from watchdog users of the highly networked social media surveillance system. Thus, media practices of calling out COVID-19 patients should be examined within the contexts of surveillance and attention ecologies of social media.

In this attention-driven environment, online journalism pursues virality and attention through clickbait news content (Bazaco, Redondo, & Sánchez-García, 2019). Focusing on flows of attention that organize the mediascape, cultural studies scholar Citton (2017) suggests extending the notion of "attention economy" to the idea of "ecology of attention," where various actors are connected through and moved by attention. Not only is attention monetized online, but it also directs people to certain things, based on

what people are paying attention to (e.g., trending topics on Twitter) and how media algorithms work with collective and individual attention (Citton, 2017).

As a key actor of the attention ecologies, clickbait journalism has been globally discussed (Bazaco et al., 2019). In Korea, journalism's close working with news YouTube influencers (or simply called YouTubers) for attention and virality has become a serious issue since the mid-2010s. Unlike traditional legacy media that are regulated by government bodies and relevant laws and policies, YouTube has been celebrated as a "better" space where people can broadcast their interpretations of social issues free from censorship (Yang, 2020). In this unregulated space, those with a significant number of followers rise to fame as influencers, exercising their "influential" power in shaping and spreading social discourses by creating social news, sometimes in the form of misinformation and fake news (Lewis, 2018; Yang, 2020).

Responding to the increasing popularity of YouTube, traditional TV news broadcasters such as MBC and SBS have launched their official YouTube news channels (e.g., MBCNEWS, SBS News) and "social media news" channels on YouTube (e.g., MBigNews in 2017, VIDEOMUG in 2015), where they deliver news "stories" in a more friendly manner (Oh & Lim, 2021) by using vernaculars of YouTube. However, by doing so, Korean legacy news outlets have pandered to attention-seeking sensationalism and served as messengers of fake news produced by political-news YouTubers (Kim & Hong, 2020; Yang, 2020). Notably, political-news YouTube channels often reinforce sensationalism by establishing strategies of propagating conservative and far-right content for attention (Jeung, 2018; Lewis, 2018). For legacy news outlets, relying on the content of these political YouTubers warrants views and clicks on the Internet, which appears to be a cost-efficient business model to sustain their news production system—even though this results in low-quality clickbait journalism (Yang, 2020).

Degraded quality of journalism is encapsulated in the Internet vernacular *girregi* [기레기]. This neologism is a portmanteau that combines *gija* [기자, reporter/journalist] and *sseuregi* [쓰레기, trash], derogatorily referring to journalists who write trash-quality news and propagate fake news by reciting and reproducing low-quality news based on "trends" on social media (Yang, 2020). To garner clicks, journalists in Korea frequently employ *abusing* [어뷰징], a practice of writing the same news articles by repeating keywords on social media to generate clicks on the portal

sites (Cho, Yoo, & Han, 2015). Korean media scholars warn against clickbait journalism as it directs people's attention to viral issues on social media and leads readers to easily chime in on viral controversies (Yang, 2020), such as public shaming and calling out people with misbehaviors (Ham & Lee, 2018). In the pandemic, online news agencies and news YouTubers sensationally called out COVID-19 patients and countries with a high number of COVID-19 cases and encouraged online hate speech (Hong, Seol, & Lee, 2021; Pyo & Jeong, 2021). Through their emotionally charged call-out contents, the news agencies and YouTubers tell people what to feel (i.e., anger, hate, fear). These feelings become intensified and often lead to networked online harassment (e.g., trolling, doxing), as the news outlets and YouTube channels aggregate and spread the call-out discourse by adding information through gossiping and reciting each other within attention ecologies.

Media studies scholars have introduced concepts such as "networked affect" (Hillis, Paasonen, & Petit, 2015), "affective publics" (Papacharissi, 2015), and "affective networks" (Dean, 2010) to explain how affect is mobilized in networked media environments and how it sustains a sense of community for movements. Since affect works as a key vehicle in leading users to certain directions and feelings, the mobilization of affect often involves media practices to maximize virality and visibility of media content and messages, such as hashtagging (Bruns, Highfield, & Burgess, 2013) and optimizing social media algorithms and data (Gutiérrez & Milan, 2019). Notably, such mobilization can be held in "the feedback loops," where users are entrapped within an ongoing loop of clicking, liking, and sharing to generate and amplify enjoyment on social media (Dean, 2010, p. 21).

In attention ecologies, social media and news media work as "a circuit of communicative capitalism" that feeds our drive for information and enjoyment, draw our attention to the news, and keep our engaged attention to the news by (re)producing the news across media platforms (Dean, 2010, p. 21). We have seen how movements such as the Arab Spring rose on social media through the mobilization of affect and emotions (Bruns et al., 2013; Papacharissi, 2015). Networked affect can also be exploited and manipulated by various actors, including states and "ordinary" users, through astroturfing and trolling for surveillance (Johns & Cheong, 2019) and manipulating facts through conspiracy theories (Payne, 2018, p. 285). These engagements and processes of directing affect to particular bodies lead to the accumulation of affect that sticks to bodies who become targets of justified shaming and collective hate (Ahmed, 2015).

The complex ways in which various actors, including users and media, interact with attention lead us to ask what kind of networked affect emerged in the pandemic and how the attention and affect of the public are mobilized within social media cultures (e.g., call-out cultures) and systems (e.g., social surveillance). Through the case of the Itaewon outbreak, we examine how attention ecologies developed in the pandemic in line with sociocultural conditions, facilitated by the working of online journalism and social media.

Methodology

We conducted a qualitative networked content analysis of the news articles and YouTube news videos on the Itaewon outbreak. Networked content analysis involves a systematic reading of sampled content, based on conceptualized analytical constructs, to identify patterns of networked and dynamic information and interaction online across platforms (Niederer, 2019; Rogers, 2017, pp. 95–97). To understand the interactive spread of the news across the different media, we focused on the ways media content on the Itaewon case, along with the news coverage and comments posted to the news and YouTube content, was shared, recited, and reproduced.

We collected two datasets: online news media coverage of the Itaewon case and YouTube videos. Firstly, using a news-scraping bot built with Python, we collected 250 news articles published on Naver between May 7, 2020 (the date when the first case was reported) and May 13, 2020. Korea's biggest portal website Naver is the most prominent and popular news digital intermediary used by Koreans to access free news reports from different news agencies (Kwak, Lee, & Lee, 2021). Although news coverage on the Itaewon case continued until the beginning of June 2020, we focused on the first week from *KukminIlbo*'s report to see ways in which the news media initially set the tone and the frames of interpretation on how to feel about and respond to the Itaewon outbreak. We used a combined set of keywords, "이태원 클럽 코로나" [Itaewon club Corona], which had been frequently used in the headlines and titles of media content during the outbreak, functioning as the physical and symbolic identifier of this new domestic case.

Informed by critical discourse analysis methodology that views discourse as a social practice situated in a "dialectical relationship" between "situation(s), institution(s) and social structure(s) which frame the discourse" (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997, p. 258), we

looked for identifiable patterns in the news reports and their relationship to social contexts, such as pandemic surveillance and Korean society's heterosexual norms. Since many news reports (re)cited each other's news articles in their reporting of the Itaewon case, we wanted to examine how the "story" of the Itaewon case was shaped within the networked interactions between different news media outlets. We organized our collected news data by title, publication date, tone, and public engagement metrics (likes, emojis, and comments). We identified how different news reports shaped each other's reporting, generated similar reactions from the public, and gave birth to the public discourse of the Itaewon outbreak.

Our networked content analysis was extended to YouTube news channels, including YouTube channels of legacy news outlets (e.g., KBS, YTN, MBC, SBS, MBigNews, VIDEOMUG) and news YouTubers, to understand how the Itaewon news was spread across different media platforms. YouTube serves as a locus where social discourses emerge, evolve, and become challenged as news, gossip, and opinions about social issues are blended in the vast space of video content produced by individuals (i.e., YouTubers) and organizations (e.g., news agencies; Burgess & Green, 2018). With its increasing popularity of video-streaming feature, personalized video-recommendation system, and wide pool of content from official news to individual YouTubers' content for entertainment, education, and social networking, YouTube is replacing existing news portals and search engines (Smith, Toor, & Kessel, 2018). When social issues like the Itaewon case happen, various actors, including news agencies, content producers, and viewers/subscribers, discuss the issues and shape the narratives by producing, consuming, and sharing YouTube news content.

After *KukminIlbo*'s first report on May 7, 2020, 76 videos were posted on YouTube within three days, and the number of videos increased as the government proceeded with its epidemiological investigation (see Figure 1). To trace this flow of news from an online news portal to social media and to understand the shaping and evolution of social discourses, we used Rieder's YouTube Data Tools (2015) and collected 515 videos published over a course of a month since the first *KukminIlbo*'s report. In analyzing the YouTube data, we reordered them by highest view counts and identified (1) themes and tones of content, (2) viewers' engagement (comments, likes, dislikes), and (3) networkedness (e.g., hashtag, recommended content, reposts, sharing of other news/content). Incognito mode was used to minimize the algorithmic impacts of our past Internet histories. Our analysis of YouTube data was focused on the interactions

between content producers, viewers, and contents within the broader social media mechanism, which is run by the co-work of various actors and algorithms.
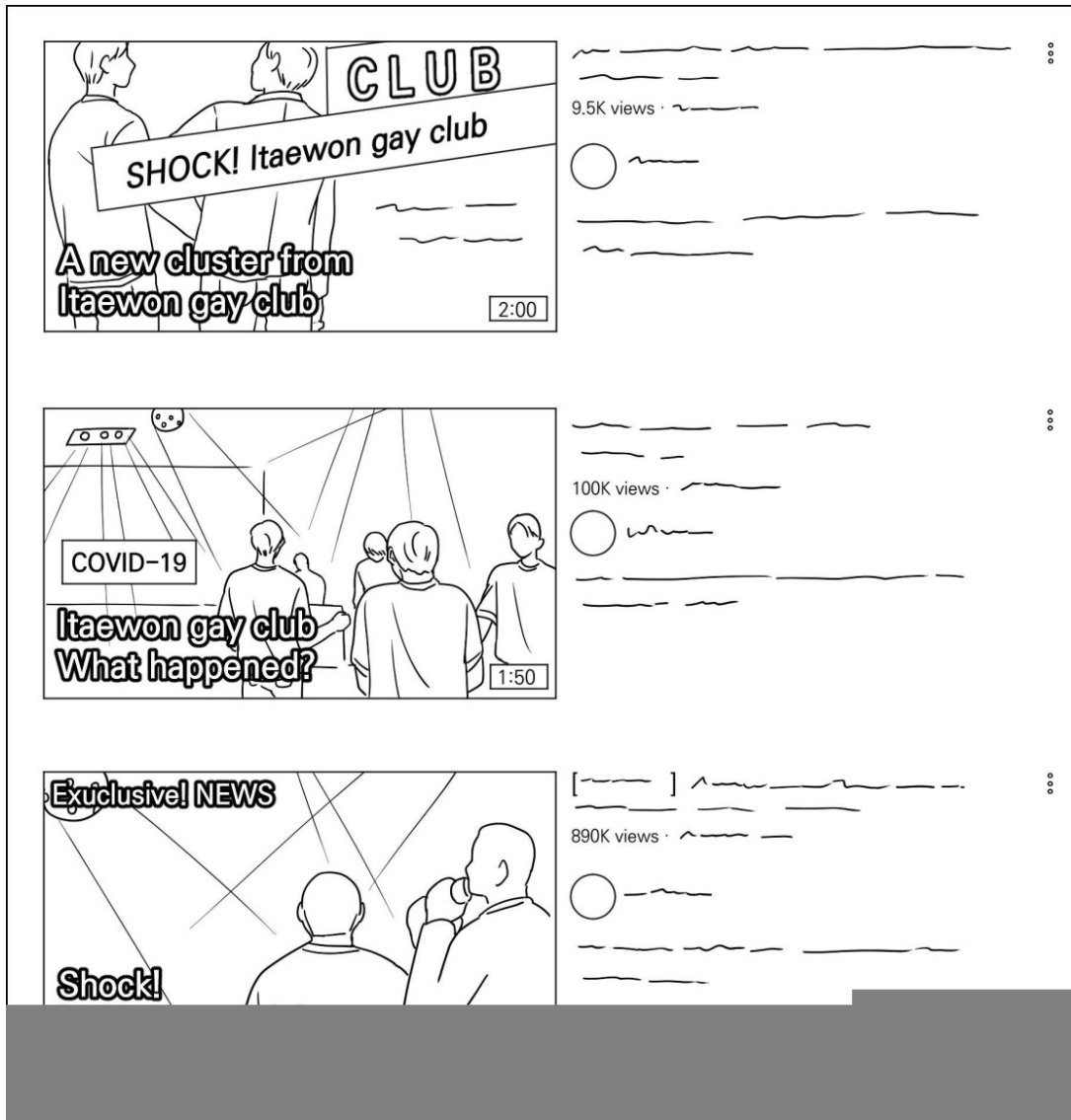

Figure 1. Artist impression of YouTube search results of "Itaewon Outbreak" in incognito mode. Art provided by RYU (2020).

In the next section, we first present our analysis of the news media's coverage of the Itaewon outbreak. We explore the emergence and development of discourses around

the Itaewon case by looking at how online journalism shaped a particular way of narrating the Itaewon domestic outbreak within the attention-seeking journalism environment in Korea. Then we turn our focus to YouTube to understand how "stories" of the Itaewon case, shaped by online journalism, spread across the platform and ignited online call-out cultures in tandem with antiqueer sentiments in society.

Making and Spreading Homophobic Attention: Online News Media

Shaping a News Story

Within the span of 15 hours since *KukminIlbo*'s exclusive news on May 7, 2020, more than 420 articles were written about this new domestic case, with an emphasis on the Itaewon gay club and the infected person's personal information, including their[1] occupation, area of residency, age, and location data. While the location data were made public by the government to inform the citizens about the potential spread of the virus and to protect their "right to know" about the pandemic (Kim, 2020, para. 7), the news media's coverage of the individuals' location data evoked nationwide fear and stigmatization of the club visitors and the Itaewon clubs. Two themes were noticeable in the news coverage: (1) fixation on the gay community and (2) spatial expansion of the pandemic.

Firstly, the news articles fixed the gay community/place as the epicenter of the new domestic case while presenting other location identifiers as supplementary. The chronological order of the first patient's location data reveals that the person had visited the outskirts of Seoul and several restaurants in the city before visiting Itaewon. However, *KukminIlbo* and other subsequent news articles set the Itaewon gay club as the main location identifier of this new domestic case: "Yongin 66 patient, visited an Itaewon gay club . . . What will happen to the 500 people [in the club]" (Jeong, 2020). This de-emphasizing of other location identifiers at the onset of the reporting contributes to the knowledge construction of the new domestic case as rooted in Itaewon. By sexualizing Itaewon—the district known for multiculturalism (Yun, 2017)—as the district of gay clubs, the news reports framed the domestic case as a gay problem. This way of confining the new COVID-19 cases to gay places continued, as evidenced in the subsequent news reporting on new COVID-19 patients' histories of visiting *black*

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[1] Throughout this paper, we use non-binary and gender-neutral pronoun "they/them" for the people who were mentioned in the news coverage of the Itaewon outbreak.

sumeyonbang [블랙수면방, gay bathhouse] in Gangnam, another district in Seoul. News reports sexualized the bathhouse by engaging in the sensationalized speculation of the use of this place: "What really happens in the bathhouse?" (MBN, 2020), "Interview clip: Bathhouses are . . . Sexual minority K's take on the Itaewon outbreak controversy" (Lee & Moon, 2020). By focusing on the gay community as the epicenter of the domestic outbreak, the news media established the nationwide call-out of the gay communities as the dominant framework to read the crisis.

Secondly, the news media directed attention to the secondary location data and personal information of the first patient and other club visitors who tested positive for COVID-19 by accentuating specific aspects of their data that could be deemed as problematic by the public. In particular, the news media spotlighted many of the club visitors who are nurses, soldiers, and many others working in high-risk industries (Kim, 2020). These articles focused on the spread of COVID-19 from Itaewon to other spaces of intimacy and safety, including family homes, hospitals, and after-school programs. On May 11, most articles focused on a young man who visited the Itaewon club and spread COVID-19 to their 80-year-old grandmother over Parents' Day dinner (Ji, 2020). Since COVID-19 is especially dangerous for the elderly, comments scathingly criticized the young man for their "selfishness" (Ji, 2020). On May 13, another person who received great public scrutiny and media attention was the private tutor from Incheon province, who tested positive after visiting the Itaewon club. When it was revealed that the tutor had lied about their employment status during the government's epidemiological investigation, subsequent news articles endeavored to call them out by revealing their personal information, including their residence and age, while continuously implying their presumed gay sexuality (K. Lee, 2020). Comments under these articles ranged from public shaming of the patients for putting all Korean citizens at risk and homophobic tropes that reduced all gay men to selfish people who could not tame their sexual appetite even during the pandemic (K. Lee, 2020). This homophobic story was continuously reproduced by news media for clickbait, with news agencies including *NEWSIS* (Jeong & Byun, 2020) and *KBS* (Park, 2020) to name a few, focusing on the tutor's lie, instigating public shaming of the individual.

Spreading the Story for Clickbait

Queer "images" have been widely and favorably sold in Korean cultures, as seen in the K-pop industry's adoption of queerness in media products and the related subculture

among young women (Kwon, 2019). Nevertheless, Korean society has a long history of discriminating against sexual minorities (Bong, 2008). The Korean government has put back the legislation of an antidiscrimination law since 2007 because of backlash from conservative Christian groups (Jung, 2020). This ambivalent climate toward LGBTQ+ issues has made the Korean mainstream media (e.g., news, TV shows) present LGBTQ+ issues as erotic and exotic objects for show ratings (Park & Lee, 2013). Online journalism's report on the Itaewon outbreak conforms to this convention of eroticizing gay bodies for virality, but more severely in the attention-seeking online media culture, by evoking anger and fear.

Bazaco and colleagues (2019) define variables of clickbait news articles, including repetition of news frameworks, incomplete information, and soft news that use personal and emotional frameworks to sensationalize the news. This is also the case of Korean *gireggi* journalism, as seen in the aforementioned "abusing news" practices that simply repeat the keywords trending on social media to attract clicks (Ham & Lee, 2018; Yang, 2020). Following *KukminIlbo*'s first article, many news agencies readily used the term "gay club" or implied "gay" in their titles and articles to generate Internet traffic (e.g., Yim, 2020). While a few comments under the news articles critiqued the news media for casting blame on a single individual for the domestic outbreak (e.g., Oh, 2020), most comments defended the news media's calling out of the gay community for presenting "factual" data and protecting the public's right to know. This call-out was exacerbated by misinformation and fake news spread by *girregi* journalism. For instance, online-only news agency *Asia Business Daily* stated that the first patient in the Itaewon case was already showing symptoms when they visited the bar, conflating the dates when they went to the club and when they first started showing symptoms (D. Choi, 2020).

While the mainstream news agencies encouraged call-outs of the gay community through their sensational reporting, smaller news agencies took this a step further. A notable example is their reporting on the gay bathhouse. Many of the smaller news agencies engaged in the sexuality-focused story more provocatively, with some calling the bathhouse "animal kingdom" (T. Lee, 2020), a metaphor used to describe the promiscuous nature of the place. Comments under the articles were heavily loaded with homophobic tropes, equating homosexuality with sexual promiscuity, impurity, and filth. One comment that received 524 likes wrote: "Bathhouses are where gay men go to have group sex. It's a place where AIDS is spread the most! Men with AIDS are susceptible to COVID-19 and will become superspreaders" (Lee & Moon, 2020). Many

other comments echoed this claim outrageously, arguing that Korea would be now ridden with not only COVID-19 but also AIDS (Lee & Moon, 2020). In this manner, the online news media demarcated the Korean public from the alleged gay community and shaped homophobia as the dominant feeling rule of the pandemic (Gitzen & Chun, 2021).

Sociologist Hochschild (1983/2012) developed the concept "feeling rules" to discuss emotional reactions that are often governed by societal expectations of normalcy. By "articulat[ing] people in relation to others and orient[ing] the possibilities of interpreting information" (Boler & Davis, 2018, p. 78), feeling rules direct people to certain precipitated feelings of the social normalcy, such as antiqueer sentiments in Korea. A possibility of nationwide spread of COVID-19 due to "unruly" behaviors of gay men, which was highlighted by online news media, made a sharp contrast with the nationalist discourse around the pandemic that proudly lauded the country's success in controlling the pandemic as a global leader (Yi & Lee, 2020). In light of this, online news' framing of COVID-19 as a gay problem anchors homophobic feelings in the Itaewon outbreak story. The online news narrates the Itaewon outbreak story where gay populations are perceived not just as "dirty" and "abnormal" but also as "immoral" and "dangerous." Their presence puts the entire country and society at risk, threatening the country's "global leader" position in the pandemic, and thus their citizenship needs to be reconsidered.

These public sentiments against the gay community echo what Youngrim Kim and her colleagues (2021) define as "structures of vilification" (p. 9), which categorize people into "deviant" and "ideal" subjects of pandemic surveillance. The moralization of the pandemic construes citizens as moral subjects and their provision of pandemic data as "moral currency" (Lee, 2022, p. 11), legitimizing homophobic surveillance as an exercise of civic duty with deviant subjects being rightfully stripped off their privacy. Not only do the news media contribute to the moralization of the pandemic, but they also flourish from the moral infrastructures' capacity to direct anger at deviant gays, constructed as innately malevolent, by producing attention and mobilizing the affective public to homophobic call-outs.

Intensifying and Networking Homophobic Anger: YouTube

Anger and moral outrage against the gay community were further evoked and intensified on YouTube, contributing to the working of the attentional mechanism for production,

amplification, and confirmation of homophobic call-outs. After *KukminIlbo*'s first report, videos on the Itaewon case exploded on YouTube. Traditional TV news outlets, such as mainstream broadcasters MBC, SBS, KBS, and news channel YTN, also posted their TV news on their YouTube channels. Other YouTube channels, including these broadcasters' social media news channels (e.g., VIDEOMUG, MBigNews) and (aspirational) individual news YouTubers joined this "move of attention" by producing content about the Itaewon case. Notably, these different types of YouTube channels consisted of the broader YouTube news ecology, wherein the homophobic story on the Itaewon cluster developed more vividly, using the platform's technological features: video-streaming with narratives and networkedness. This is evidenced in how one video of the "inside club scene" became a center of the attentional mechanism in the amplification of news and videos about the Itaewon case.

On May 8, 2020, YouTube user YJ with fewer than 10 subscribers and with no history of video posting before the Itaewon case uploaded a video titled, "Real footage of COVID-19 infected person at Itaewon gay club" [코로나 이태원 클럽 게이클럽 확진자 당일영상] (YJ, 2020).[2] The video looked like a reposting video of someone's Instagram story that recorded a vignette of the club on May 6, 2020, wherein about 20 men were dancing to a song by ITZY, a female K-pop idol band. The video only showed a group of young men copy-dancing the "cute" girl group, far from the promiscuous gay stereotypes. Nevertheless, the video pivoted in the formation and amplification of the Itaewon story on YouTube, firstly shaped by YouTube news channels, as it was recited in other YouTube news videos as an "authentic" and "exclusive" news source revealing the inside of gay communities. As connoted in the video title, the video delivered the "realness" of what was assumed to be happening on that day, propped up by raw aesthetics, such as an amateurish unstable camera movement, presumably recorded with a phone.

The "realness" of the video helped the video record high views (154,154 views as of November 05, 2021) from not just the audiences but also other YouTube channels. Granting some extent of credibility to the video, other YouTube news channels reused it in their content. Notably, other YouTubers' status as "influencers" granted them power to make and spread the video further as "news" by adding stories. For example, YJ's

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2 In our translation, we anonymized the club name in the title of the video to minimize any potential negative reactions to the club visitors.

video was reappropriated by news YouTuber DESORDRE CHANNEL—the channel collects various videos (e.g., Internet memes, clips of TV celebrities, news clips) while describing itself as a channel for social issues (DESORDRE CHANNEL, n.d.). In reposting YJ's video, DESORDRE CHANNEL made the video into a news content by adding a description, "1500 visited the Itaewon club at that night" (DESORDRE CHANNEL, 2020). Since this channel acted as a news YouTuber with 77 videos and 3,049,400 views in total, as opposed to YJ as a YouTube "user" with no other YouTube content, DESORDRE CHANNEL's reposting was perceived and consumed as news, exceeding the view counts of original YJ's video with 522,141 views (as of November 05, 2021). Within the YouTube ecology, these individual news YouTubers and the official YouTube channels of news outlets mutually benefited from each other, shaped the publics' reading of the outbreak, and intensified the homophobic feeling rules.

Individual News YouTubers

Many individual (aspirational) news YouTubers also participated in covering the Itaewon outbreak. In their content, they explicitly added an affective intensity to their storytelling of the outbreak, which elevated the dominant storytelling frame of the outbreak to angry homophobia. *YouTube Wreck-Car* [유튜브렉카] or *Cyber Wreck-Car* [사이버렉카, tow truck on YouTube or in the cyberspace] is an online vernacular term that derogatorily calls YouTubers who, during times of controversial issues, produce YouTube videos and amass view counts by gossiping about the issues, as if tow trucks on highways are waiting for car accidents (J. Yoo, 2020). These YouTubers comprise today's "attention ecology" (Citton, 2017) as news sources and key actors in leading people to collective attention and propagating news stories in a more informal and vivid manner by evoking curiosity and emotions with provocative titles, profanities, and vulgar expressions, including sexism and homophobia. By stimulating people's emotions, these YouTubers "sell them on" controversial topics including far-right ideology (Lewis, 2018, p. 4).

Such individual Wreck-Car YouTubers animated viewers to homophobic anger by editing YJ's original video and combining screengrabs of online news articles and TV news with their voices narrating their raw feelings:

What the fuck are these faggots doing without masks? Does your freedom mean harming others? Then I also have my freedom to knock the stuffing out of these

assholes . . . I request every detail of these fucking assholes' private information!!! DM me if you know anything about'em. (WookTube, 2020)

By highlighting "gay" in their video titles and inserting images implying sexual promiscuity in video thumbnails and content, these YouTubers repeated online news media's homophobic framework that framed the outbreak as a gay problem (see Figure 2). Their call-out of the entire gay population was, however, practiced in a more networked manner, such as their use of hashtags for virality (e.g., #게이 [gay], #게이클럽 [gay club]), driving YouTube's algorithms to recommend similar contents and shape an affective network (Dean, 2010).
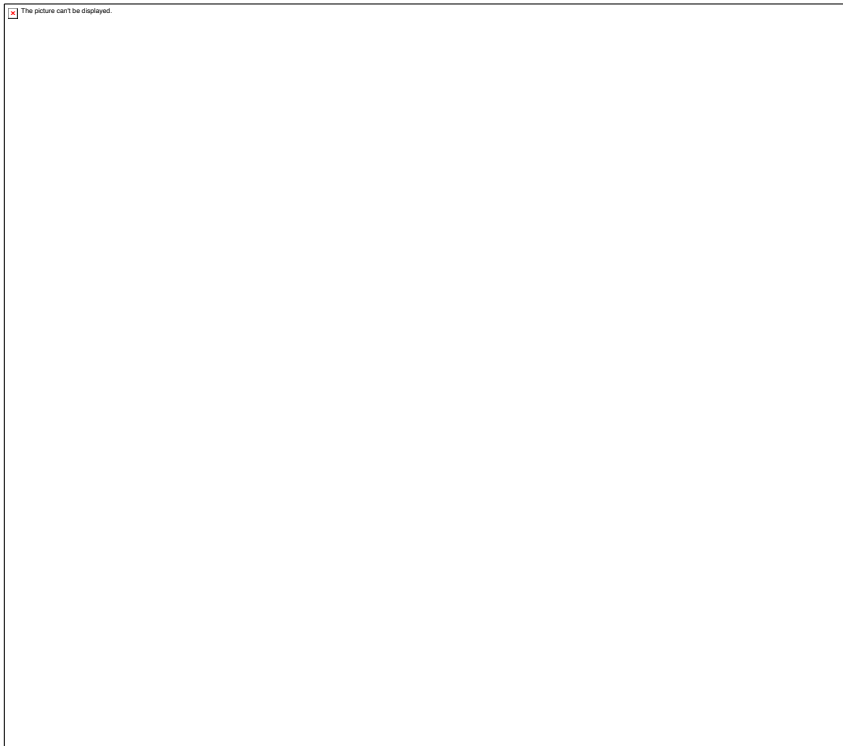

Figure 2. Artist impression of a YouTube video's thumbnail investigating gay bathhouse culture, featuring view counts. Art provided by RYU (2020).

These LGBTQ+ specific hashtags can lead people to other queer-related stories and discourses that are connected and accumulated via the hashtags. Using this feature, antiqueer groups also amplified homophobia, linking the "uncitizenship" of gay people to their sexuality. When online news reported the gay bathhouse in Gangnam,

homophobic Christian YouTube news channels like Rainbow Returns also produced videos of the gay bathhouse culture by recapping the news about the infected case in the bathhouse. For example, Rainbow Returns posted a video of the YouTuber sneaking in gay bathhouses disguised as a gay man. The video denigrated gay sexuality as dirty and unhygienic, implying gay place as the epicenter of COVID-19: "Unhygienic environments where sperm and other secretion are all over the walls in the room [. . .] Gay places like this are spreading COVID-19 in our country" (Rainbow Returns, 2020, 2:08).

Despite the homophobic onslaught, these videos garnered more than 80,000 views. They evoked fear of and anger toward gay men, targeting them as the biggest threat to public health and the country's global reputation, by highlighting uncontrollable, unhygienic, and selfish sexual desire as the essence of gayness, which was confirmed again by social media news channels that were recommended by YouTube algorithms. The discursive construction of gay bodies as deserving of suspicion justifies the news YouTubers and YouTube users' lateral surveillance of sexual minorities—through clicking, sharing, and amplifying news content about the Itaewon case—as an exercise of their responsible citizenry. Individual YouTubers and the news media channels alike capitalize on the lateral surveillance of gay bodies within attention ecologies. By moving attention to the gay community and building affective networks against gay bodies, the YouTubers intensified the news media's homophobic stories where gay bodies were presented as dangerous and depraved objects to be controlled.

News Channels on YouTube

Many "mainstream" news outlets on YouTube further expanded affective networks and circulated the sentiment of homophobic anger with "news credibility." Many news media outlets posted their video news to their YouTube channels, but remade their original news to "soft(er) news" by changing the original titles in an emotion-provoking manner—e.g., "Real shock itself: Inside of the Itaewon club on that day" [이태원 클럽 당시 상황 봤더니 . . . 충격 그 자체] (YTN, 2020)—and by editing their original news for their entertainment-centered social media news channels like VIDEOMUG and MBigNews. By combining the "factual" news and social media lore about the event (e.g., tweets, Facebook posts, videos of individual YouTubers, like DESORDRE CHANNEL's video), these social media news channels put feeling rules to the front, inviting "affective gestures" that help individuals articulate, read, and connect the events

(Papacharissi, 2015). Using languages explicitly pointing to rage, such as the hashtag #빡침 [*ppakchim,* pissed-off] (MBigNews, 2020), these channels built affective publics in the name of delivering news in a friendly and intimate manner. For example, MBigNews in a news video of the Itaewon outbreak narrates as if they represent the voice of "ordinary citizens:" "Citizens are furious! Are you human? [. . .] Going to clubs is not a sin. Hiding is a sin. Before every citizen explodes in anger, admit yourself [to disease control authorities]" (MBigNews, 2020, 0:00–4:32).

Using sentiment has been an effective convention for online journalism to draw people's attention (Bazaco et al., 2019), and is perhaps more important on YouTube, where the attention toward the content is monetized (cf. Morreale, 2014). However, more importantly, these channels facilitate the mobilization of homophobic anger, through the "networked processes of gatekeeping and framing" (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 50) in the broader attention ecology. Following the online news media's attention to the Itaewon case, YouTube works as a networked gatekeeper that controls and selects information to consume by recommending videos, based on its algorithms and users' previous search history. Prominent actors in this system, including news YouTubers, YouTube Wreck-Cars, and social media news channels, provide frames to judge the case by affectively narrating the stories, which are networked to each other via hashtags, keywords, and comments. In consuming YouTube videos, people engage with comments under the videos, which also amplify the sentiment narrated in the videos. Comments under these videos received numerous likes, such as these: "Medical staff here . . . Please get tested . . . I'm really exhausted and want to cry" (MBigNews, 2020). "I'm a high-school student. Please behave. We really wanna go to school . . . We're too tired and lonely to take classes on Zoom. Please don't dismiss others for your hedonic pleasure . . . Please don't mess up Korea with your instinct" (VIDEOMUG, 2020). These comments support the network framing function of YouTube news content on the event.

When we used incognito mode to map out how the stories of the Itaewon case was networked by YouTube algorithms, we noticed that videos on the Itaewon case were linked to each other. After we clicked individual news YouTubers' videos, YouTube continuously recommended videos of the traditional news channels and similar social media news channels such as MBigNews and other content on the Itaewon issue, including YouTube Wreck-Car content. Although the list of recommendations can be varied depending on users' previous digital footprints, YouTube certainly plays a role in

spreading *lore* about the Itaewon news, turning the news story into an event and mobilizing the affective public to other related videos. When online news media "make" collective attention (Citton, 2017), social media like YouTube serve as affective mechanisms in mobilizing the public affectively to the attention by providing a place where opinions, (mis)facts, lore, and gossip are blended via affect. This nexus between online journalism and YouTube is supported through collaborative work of online media news agencies, social media news channels, news influencers, and Internet users by "collectively crowd-sourc[ing]" (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 54) each other in the attention ecology through the acts of consuming, commenting, and spreading news media contents. In the networked environment of YouTube amalgamated with emotions, technology, and various actors, the Itaewon outbreak was reconstructed into a homophobic story across the media. As this homophobic anger is spread further to other social media in this manner, sexual minorities are pushed away to more marginal spaces, feeling vulnerable in both offline gay villages like Itaewon and online queer communities, and having to live in anxiety out of the fear of being outed from the nationwide call-outs.

Conclusion

Through the case study of the Itaewon COVID-19 outbreak, we illustrated how news media and YouTube news channels work together as affective mechanisms that confirm the dominant feeling rules about nonnormative subjects and shape peoples' engagement with the pandemic. The news media coverage and social media engagement surrounding the Itaewon outbreak treated the new domestic case as a moral crisis highly dependent on the morality of citizens. Through this storytelling process of the Itaewon outbreak, stakeholders of the news media's attention economy commodified the publics' moral surveillance, while projecting blame toward the gay communities. Their practice of moral surveillance through the circulation of affect produced surveillance knowledge that marked queer bodies as public health threats that mandate heightened public scrutiny, disempowering the subjects through the confirmation of homophobic affect.

While the Korean news media and YouTube channels thrived on the public's attention and anger, the cost of the news coverage fell squarely on the shoulders of the gay community. The repercussions of the news media's framing of the Itaewon outbreak caused serious consequences, violating the privacy and human rights of social minorities (Gitzen & Chun, 2021). For instance, the Incheon tutor was hospitalized because of

severe depression after the nationwide call-outs for being a "liar" (Ko, 2020), and many other gay men reported to have been outed at their workplace and social groups after the news of the Itaewon outbreak (Choi & Park, 2020). While COVID-19 has been called the "public shaming pandemic" (Max, 2020), not all citizens have been subjected to the same moral infrastructures, as historically marginalized people receive heightened scrutiny and policing. When vilification of those who purportedly threaten the nation's health is spread within attention ecologies, socially vulnerable beings become scapegoated on social media, encounter backlash, and have their citizenry questioned and denied through the lens of social normativity. This not only hampers the well-being of our society but also eventually backfires on every citizen in the form of human rights infringement, with people being policed through social surveillance online and offline.

This study sheds light on one of the common patterns of social media call-out cultures in the pandemic within the contemporary attention-seeking mediascape. We emphasize the importance of understanding how attention ecologies shape and capitalize on the affective attention and call-outs directed at minoritized bodies to intervene and challenge the socioeconomic structures that give resonance to the crisis in line with social norms and inequalities. We conclude this essay by asking media users, media industries, and governments to take action to protect social minorities who have been doubly discriminated against in the pandemic. An urgent need lies in amendments to the public health systems, the development and the adoption of news report guidelines in online journalism, and the introduction of appropriate and practical measures to monitor and bar attention-seeking harmful content of doxing and bullying on social media in the pandemic.

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