

SPECTACULARIZING THE HOMOSEXUAL BODY: THE SECRET RENDEZVOUS  
AMONG GLOBAL GAY MEDIA, LOCAL STRAIGHT WOMEN, AND THE MEDIA  
INDUSTRY IN SOUTH KOREA

BY

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DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Communications  
with a minor in Gender and Women's Studies  
in the Graduate College of the  
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2014

Urbana, Illinois

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the relationship among global gay media, local straight women, and the media industry in relation to the current popularity of gay popular culture in South Korea. While the homosexual body in Korea is currently pervasive in popular media, negative attitudes toward homosexuals are also common. Despite media attention to this discrepancy between the appearance and reality of gay visibility in popular culture, there has been little scholarly interest to date. I seek to provide a fundamental explanation of the popularity of same-sex themed films in Korea, whilst exploring and delineating relationships among the transnational flow of cultural artifacts (gay mediated texts), local audiences (young Korean women), and the local media industry (Korean film corporations), the result being the spectacularization of the homosexual body. The popular visual cultures of homosexuality are eagerly consumed by young women, but the lives of gay people remain largely unknown.

In the first chapter of my dissertation, I historicize the consumption of global gay media by young women, predominantly from Japan and the United States, and the production of their own online/offline gay texts, such as *Yaoi* or fanfic. In the second chapter, I examine the current status of women in Korean society as they enter their 20s and 30s and become increasingly influential in the public sphere, both as citizens and consumers. In the third chapter, I investigate the processes by which globalized media corporations commercially co-opt gay culture for consumption by young women. In the fourth chapter, I analyze an assemblage of gay film images and narratives, reflecting on the marketing strategies employed by producers of same-sex content to illustrate the

issues underlying representations of the homosexual body. Each chapter includes interviews conducted with fanfic writers/readers, young women, producers and marketers of same-sex cultural texts, and Korean male homosexuals.

I hope to make a strong academic contribution in several areas. First, my work revisits the relationship between the global and the local. Second, through actually meeting with and listening to them, I explore the positioning of postfeminist women as global prosumers in a neoliberal age. Third, my research examines youth digital subculture and the cultural industry in the digital era by exploring the commercialization of young people's exploitation of digital media technology. Finally, this dissertation contributes to providing an opportunity for Korean homosexuals to voice concerns about their visibility.

Keywords: Young Korean women; Korea; homosexuals; gay men; fanfic; yaoi; slash fiction; same-sex film; queer film; Korean media industry; globalization; postfeminism; representation; audience.

*To my family*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

While completing my dissertation, I felt that I was fighting against my inner self. Sometimes I lost a battle and suffered frustration, but it seems that in the end I won. This victory would not have been possible without the help of countless people. I would like to express my gratitude to some of them.

Kent Ono, my respected adviser, improved my clumsy writing, made me a better scholar, and inspired me to meet my full potential. His constructive, sharp, yet respectful feedback improved and refined my dissertation. Furthermore, he encouraged me whenever I whined or lost my way. Truly, he is a great scholar, supportive academic adviser, and amazing mentor.

I was blessed to have wonderful committee members who cared deeply about my project and challenged me with insightful and critical questions. Cameron McCarthy taught me how to frame questions of critical/cultural and postcolonial studies within a broader context with interdisciplinary approaches. Sarah Projansky, I was inspired by Sarah Projansky's excellent work in girls' studies and postfeminism to be a better feminist media studies scholar. Isabel Molina-Guzman helped me clarify and formulate the theoretical and methodological framework for commodification studies. I was honored to work with these exceptional mentors.

Faculty members outside of my committee supported me in many ways. John Nerone and Angharad Valdivia were particularly supportive and helped me through academic issues. Thanks to them, I could focus on my studies. Additionally, I would like to express appreciation to Lilya Kaganovsky, Lisa Nakamura, James Hay, Julie Turnock, Inger Stole, Siobhan Somerville, Mimi Nguyen, and Nancy Abelmann for sharing their knowledge through classes, workshops, and seminars.

I was fortunate to belong to ICR Nation, whose innumerable intellectual and convivial members included Ergin Bulut, Meijiadai Bai, Ryuta Komaki, Alicia Kozma, Dennis Redmond, Owen Kulemeka, Darren Stevenson, Molly Kim, Cheolgi Bae, and Myra Washington. I appreciated our cordial, wide-ranging conversations in the grad lounge, the quad, Espresso Royale, and Esquire. Their great insight and warm advice guided and nurtured me. Beyond the ICR community, I met wonderful and brilliant friends on the University of Illinois campus. I was especially lucky to get to know Soo Mee Kim, Heather Greenhalgh-Spencer, Eileen Lagman, Peter Campbell, and Caroline Nappo.

Although all of my friends are precious, I would like to express special appreciation to some. I am lucky to have Jiyeon Lee in my life. Since we met in 2005, we have witnessed each other's life transitions. Her good judgment has tempered my imprudence, and her cheerful and humorous energy has enlivened my life. Robert Mejia helped me acclimate to grad school in the United States. His consistent support and friendship contributed to my successful completion of the doctoral program. I also want to thank Mel Stanfill. Although we were cohorts, she was more than that. From our first semester together at UIUC, she gave me tremendous practical support in my private life, my

teaching, and my research. She introduced me to a fan studies writing group that greatly improved my writing. This intellectual community also includes Alicia Kozma, Andrea Ruehlicke, Stephanie Brown, Brittany Smith, and Megan Condis, all of whom generously read my early drafts and gave me constructive comments. Matt Crain and Steven Doran had major impacts on my pedagogy and mentoring philosophy. TA-ing the New Media, Culture and Society class with and for them for two years was a memorable and pleasant experience. Their approaches to teaching, along with their critical perspectives on current issues, taught me many valuable lessons in my early days at UIUC. Steven always teases me, saying that I am gullible, but he is one of the most caring, considerate, and warmhearted people I have ever met. Wenrui Chen is another solicitous, affable, and wise friend. We both come from East Asian countries, and we enjoyed discussing the differences between China and Korea. Alice Liao, who sadly passed away in 2013, was another member of our small East Asian circle. Alice was so sweet, bringing us small gifts whenever she returned from her visits home to Taiwan. Her intellect dazzled us in class. She is missed.

I am deeply grateful to my interviewees, who took the time to sincerely answer my never-ending questions. Their openness and courage lent depth and richness to my dissertation. I thank my friends and Facebook contacts for introducing me to interviewees. Although these friends and collaborators are too numerous to list, I am particularly indebted to John (Song Pae) Cho, Chae Yoon Han, and Kyeong Mi Lim.

My achievements would not have been possible without my family's boundless emotional support. Bong Hee Ko, a devoted mother and teacher, has always been my role model. She believed in me whenever I made big changes in my life and has never doubted that I could accomplish my goals. Hyuk Dae Kwon, a dedicated father and teacher, has constantly pushed me to pursue loftier goals. His modesty, frugality, integrity, and righteousness showed me what kind of a person I should be. His wisdom taught me life lessons that I could not have learned from anyone else. My little sister, Jimin Kwon, is a lifetime best friend whose continued support and heartfelt advice shaped me as a better sister, daughter, wife, mother, friend, and human being. She is small in this physical world, but very substantial in my world. I want to express my gratitude to my family-in-law: Duck Nam Lee, Kyeong Hui Kim, and Kibum Lee. Without their warmth, empathy, and thoughtfulness, I could not have concentrated on my work. My tiny boy, Elijah Jiheon Lee, also deserves acknowledgement. I began writing this dissertation when he was just a fetus. His rhythmical movement made me more dynamic and energetic. After he was born, his gentle personality—and good sleep habits—allowed me the time to write. Many people worried that I would not be able to finish my dissertation while caring for a baby, but Elijah boosted my efficiency and productivity.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge my husband, Ki Sung Lee, who has been a dedicated partner, inspiring colleague, and trustworthy friend. Whenever I struggled with writer's block or suffered from conflicted feelings, his breadth of knowledge, sharp reasoning, and unanticipated yet critical questions helped me unravel the complicated threads. Moreover, his keen sense of humor and sharp wit made me laugh and enjoy my research. I love and admire him, and I owe the success of this dissertation to him.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

At least since the mid-2000s, representations of same-sex relationships, in particular gay relationships, have appeared in South Korea's (hereafter Korea) mainstream popular culture (Y. G. Kim, 2009). Perhaps surprisingly, movies focusing on gay people and gay lifestyles have been well-received by Korean audiences. Ever since the release of the same-sex themed film *King and the Clown* (*Wangui Namja*, 2005) (which was a huge commercial success), there has been a surge in the mainstream production of films that explicitly deal with homosexual characters or same-sex topics, such as: *No Regrets* (*Hooehoehaji Ana*, 2006), *Antique* (*Seoyanggoldong Yanggwajajeom Antique*, 2008), *A Frozen Flower* (*Ssanghwajeom*, 2008), *Boy Meets Boy* (*Sonyeon, Sonyeoneul Mannada*, 2008), *Just Friends* (*Chingoo Sa-ee*, 2009), *Hello My Love* (2009), and *Life is Peachy* (*Changpihae*, 2010), just to name a few. In recent years, television has also started to produce same-sex themed dramas, including: *Private Taste* (*Gaeineui Chuihyang*, 2010), *The World That They Live in* (*Geudeuli Saneun Sesang*, 2010), *Life is Beautiful* (*Insaengen Areumdawo*, 2010), and *The Daughters of Club Bilitis* (*Bilitis-ui Ddaldeul*, 2011). Today, it is not hard at all to find in Korean mainstream media representations of the homosexual body.

While mainstream media representations of homosexual life and experience appear frequently, real-life homosexuals in Korean society do not necessarily lead the happy lives depicted on screen (Pikulthong, 2002). There are regular reports of sexual minorities in Korea, particularly homosexuals, confronting daily, merciless teasing and harassment

because of their marginalized sexuality. According to Pikulthong (2002), Koreans mostly agree that homosexuals have had to struggle to live in Korea since first coming out.

Scholars like Bong (2008) have noted that homosexuals, for the most part, have remained hidden and that homosexuality has commonly gone unmentioned in Korean society. It is rarely discussed; it is not a topic of scholarly research, and many homosexuals choose to “pass,” their sexual identities remaining cloaked.

This discrepancy between homosexual presence in mainstream media and the reality of life for Korean homosexuals sparked my curiosity and research interest, as one of the consumers who enjoys gay spectacles in media. Interestingly, in my preliminary research, I found that some young women, who mostly self-identify as non-homosexuals, play a pivotal role as both consumers and producers of popular culture about homosexual relationships, making them a highly interesting focus of my study. Thus, my project is centered not on homosexuals in media, but rather on the young women in their twenties and thirties who enable same-sex visibility in Korean-mediated texts.

In this project I examine four aspects of these young women. First, I explore a group of girls who enjoy watching and consuming global media about homosexuals and their lifestyles. These girls actively view gay manga and animation called *yaoi* or BL (boy’s love) culture.<sup>1</sup> This genre was imported from Japan even before the Korean government lifted the ban on Japanese cultural exports to Korea (S. J. Park, 2005).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Zanghellini (2009) defines and explains *yaoi* as “an acronym for a Japanese expression meaning ‘No build-up, no foreclosure, and no meaning’ (Kinsella, 1998, p. 301). It refers to a genre of anime (cartoons), manga (comics), and fan art whose subject matter is erotic and romantic relationships between males. The producers and consumers of both *yaoi*, and the closely related genre ‘boys’ love’ (BL), are predominantly women.” (p. 279)

<sup>2</sup> The consumption of *yaoi* culture is not limited to the girl groups in Japan and Korea. *Yaoi* culture is also found in other Asian countries, such as China and Singapore, as well as Western

Around the same time that the import ban of popular artifacts from Japan to Korea was lifted, American programs with same-sex themed content, such as *Will and Grace* (1998-2005) and *Queer as Folk* (2000-2005), or gay or lesbian characters, including *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) also gained popularity with Korean female audiences (Hong, 2005; Y. C. Kim, 2007; Song, 2007).

Second, I look into the fact that not only do these women consume global gay cultural products, but they also produce their own local same-sex texts, as well as Korean versions of *yaoi*. These texts are commonly named “fanfic” (fan fiction), which combines the *yaoi* theme with male celebrities in Korea. The girls share their own creations through paper publication or online cyberspace blogs, Listservs, and similar outlets (Ahn, 2003; M. J. Kim, 2002; Kim & Kim, 2004; J. E. Lee, 2005; S. Park, 2003; Ryu, 2008a; Ryu, 2008b). In essence, these are fabricated stories often about homosexual relationships between two real male singers—singers who, in reality, are not gay people. This subgenre has many things in common with slash fiction—fanfic produced primarily by heterosexual women about male-male homoerotic relationships, such as between the characters Kirk and Spock on *Star Trek*. This theme was researched by early scholars like Camille Bacon-Smith (1992), Constance Penley (1991, 1997), and Henry Jenkins (1992). Kirk/Spock relationships may have ruled television fanfic, but with the spread of the Internet, the distribution of new slash fiction based on such films as *The Lord of the Rings* and, more contemporarily, on television series, such as *Lost* and *Heroes*, became possible and extended the prevalence of slash narratives. Likewise, with the development of digital media, Koreans more actively produced and distributed same-sex fanfic. What

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countries (Jung, 2010; Levi, 2008; Pagliassotti, 2008). It is now regarded as one of the most popular global gay texts.

deserves attention is that the girls within this local subculture appropriate and reterritorialize transnational media content in a way that redirects gay texts away from pleasure-seeking and toward meaning-oriented.

Third, I examine the significant and growing power these women have in Korean popular culture (Kwon, 2008). Thanks to an increase in their social, political, and economic statuses, these women are spotlighted in Korean society. New appellations began to circulate, such as *Doenjang-nyeo* or Gold Miss, and Korean society started paying more attention to them. As these women are becoming more financially empowered, the industry is scrambling to describe this new female generation. And the homoerotic body these women once were, or still are, interested in producing/consuming becomes both spectacularized and consumable (Han, 2008). By spectacularized, I mean the homosexual body becomes a fancy commodity that young females are eager to consume. Still, the realities of homosexual lives are ignored.

Finally, as mentioned above, I hope to analyze media representations of gay people, especially representations that say that the Korean society does not discriminate against homosexuals, though in reality homosexuals face daily prejudice and discrimination. I argue that the inconsistency between media representations of homosexuality and homosexual life is attributable to the empowered and commercially targeted females. They spend their resources consuming gay media content without having any significant personal knowledge of real-life homosexuals and their lived experiences in Korea. Given these points, a historical examination of the practices of these young women with respect to the same-sex cultural products they produce and consume, and an elucidation of the relationship between them and the media industry, provide a fundamental explanation of

the emerging gay body in Korean mainstream media. In brief, I assert that this female subculture has contributed to making the gay body tasteful and glamorized for mainstream consumers.

To explore and delineate the relationships that exist among the transnational flow of cultural artifacts (same-sex themed texts), local audiences (young Korean women), and the local media industry (Korean film companies) and examine the result (spectacularization of homosexuals), I pose three research questions: First, how have young Korean women consumed globally-distributed same-sex media content and appropriated it into their subculture? Second, what are the processes and results of the Korean media industry's commodification of young women's subculture (the consumption of gay media content)? Last, how do Korean gay men embrace and/or dismiss this co-opting that originates in female fantasy, desire, and dream about male homosexuals?

I sort these issues into four stages. The first stage explores the consumption of transnational same-sex media (which predominantly originates from within Japan and the United States and has been consumed primarily by female youth in Korea since the 1980s) as well as the production of their own gay texts—i.e., the fanfic subculture. The second stage examines the current status of these women in Korean society as they enter their twenties and thirties and become increasingly influential in the public sphere. The third stage delineates the processes by which media corporations become commercialized under the auspices of globalization and finally co-opt the gay subculture of young females for consumption. In the final stage, I investigate fabricated images of gay people in several Korean films and listen to gay voices about media representation to disclose

the issues that are beneath the media's visibility of the homosexual body. At every stage I include interviews with 1) previous or current female same-sex content producers and consumers (Chapter 2), 2) young women in their twenties and thirties (Chapter 3), 3) media producers and marketers of same-sex content in the Korean mainstream film market (Chapter 4), and 4) Korean gay men (Chapter 5).

### Theoretical Framework

In order to answer my research questions, I intend to develop a theory that sheds light on my research subject. The theory I wish to discuss is based on a blend of critical and cultural theories and the political economy of communication. When used together, both of these fields provide a framework that can be used to explain the complex relationship among globalization, girls' subcultural practices, and the production of contemporary gay commodities and their circulation. Although there has been an "unhappy marriage" between critical and cultural studies and political economy, many researchers confirm that critical and cultural studies have not rejected political economy per se (McLaughlin, 2002). They have always recognized the importance of political economy, particularly in the analysis of communication and culture, sometimes urging critical and cultural studies scholars to understand political economy better than political economists do (Grossberg, 1997; McLaughlin, 2002). Furthermore, Eileen Meehan and Ellen Riordan (2002) note that "the integration of feminism and political economy" (p. x) is necessary for media studies in an emerging global economy. My approach that integrates both critical cultural studies and political economy reaffirms the important

alliance between the two as approaches to understanding social and communication phenomena.

In order to shape the specific theoretical framework used to examine girls' subculture, I find Dick Hebdige's study of youth subculture in England particularly useful. Turner (1990/2005) considered this study to be "the most influential deployment of subculture studies within the mainstream of cultural studies" (p. 91). By decoding the meanings of subculture in his book *Subculture* (1988), Hebdige aimed to prove that a subculture could be subversive enough to challenge hegemony. Building upon this position, I likewise argue the fannish behaviors of describing homoerotic relationship among young female fans are rebellious enough to disrupt the existing heteronormative structure in Korea but not so rebellious as to be able to dismantle heteronormativity altogether. In spite of Hebdige's contribution in drawing us in to cultural activities in the real world, some feminists, such as Angela McRobbie, suggest that the subcultural research undertaken by Hebdige was male-centered. According to her, Hebdige ignored "the conspicuous oppression of female punks as revealed in fashion and dance" (Dworkin, 1997, p. 179). However, I believe that, despite this gender bias, the way he approached his research provides numerous theoretically and methodologically sound conclusions.

Yet, in order to address McRobbie's feminist critique of Hebdige, I also consider the importance of girls' studies, because they provide a template for understanding the ways in which local girls consume and produce gay media texts. Numerous ethnographic works examine girls' subculture (see Currie, Kelly, & Pomerantz, 2009; Driscoll, 2002; Harris, 2003, 2004; Inness, 1998; Kearney, 2006; McRobbie, 1994, 2008a; Zaslow, 2009). In particular, much scholarly attention has been paid to issues of the relationship between

media and girls: for example girls' accessibility of media products resulting from inexpensive media technology, and the spread of media education for girls, which allowed them to engage their lives with media (Kearny, 2006; Reid-Walsh & Mitchell, 2004). Regarding the contemporary importance of media in girls' lives, Lipkin (2009) noted: "As technology has become more widely accessible and the computer and Internet have become commonly available tools, girls have found new ways to forge community with each other, locally, across the country, and even the world" (p. 167). Indeed media technologies played a critical role in local girls' producing and consuming glocal gay texts in Korea. All of the works mentioned above are useful in framing my methodological approach to Korean girls' subcultural activities regarding the homosexual body. Furthermore, I find it important that scholars of girls' studies point out the commercialization of girls' culture. Sarah Projansky (1998, 2000) examined media discourses around girls and showed how media power attempts to co-opt and at times reterritorialize girls' power to appeal to a men-centered system. I witness a similar commodification process taking place in Korea, though it does not necessarily function to reinforce the patriarchal system.

Research about postfeminism in media also figures significantly in the theoretical toolkit for my dissertation. Postfeminist studies provide important background for understanding the contemporary socioeconomic attention to Korean young women in their twenties and thirties and the relationship between them and Korea's contemporary media industry. The discussion of consumerism among postfeminist females is crucial for examining the direction in which the popular culture of female adolescents in Korea is heading. Specifically, I rely on Brooks (2003), Genz (2006, 2010), McRobbie (1994,

1998, 2006, 2008b, 2011), Negra (2008), Phoca and Wright (1999), Projansky (2001), and Tasker and Negra (2007) to delineate the socio-cultural background of postfeminism and related issues. Yet, in spite of its usefulness as a way of explaining what is happening in media with regard to young women, I ultimately aim, by investigating what is happening in reality, to complicate postfeminism and postfeminist research so that they become more grounded and established in the field.

In order to analyze the marketization of girls' subculture, I use research by all (1887/2010) to understand the commodification process, as well as the works of Vincent Mosco (2009), who explained commodification using a neoliberal framework. Mosco argued communication and its technologies make a contribution to the general process of commodification—production, distribution, and sales; the process likewise permeates into communication processes and institutions. As an example, the advertising and mass media industries normally play an important role in translating human values into commodities. This is a crucial point in my research, as the Korean media industry does function to translate young women's activities into media commodities. I employ the work of Guy Debord to explore the commercialization of homosexuals in film productions: in other words, how gay people are made into a *spectacle*. In *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967/2002), Debord's fourth thesis is "The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images" (p. 6). This implies that the spectacle symbolizes and/or materializes human relationships by which meanings are produced, exchanged, and consumed. Indeed, the gay spectacle in Korean mainstream media emblemizes the dynamics among local women, the media industry, and, necessarily though less explicitly, homosexuals. In conceptualizing commodification, by

no means do I conclude it is condemnable or unilinear. Rather I emphasize its simultaneity and multi-dimensionality as a cyclical process in which three developments, (1) incorporation into a market, (2) resistance to it, and (3) new exploration concurrently take place (Appadurai, 1986/2005; Banet-Weiser & Mukherjee, 2012; Chasin, 2005; Ertman & Williams, 2005; Radin, 2005; Sassatelli, 2007).

To look at how homosexuals are described in cultural products, Hall's (1997) theory of representation is employed. He defined representation as "essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture" (p. 15). Put simply, meaning in representation is not inherent but extrinsic to texts, and products. To understand the concept as "the production of meaning" (p. 27), I take particular notice of his argument about stereotyping, which is a signifying practice that divides inside/normal and outside/abnormal, perpetuates the differences between them, and marginalizes the other through representation.<sup>3</sup> What's important in this stereotyping process is that it eventually leads to "symbolic violence" of the marginalized group, especially when power intervenes in the signifying practice (p. 259). I attempt to use this conceptualization in my research to argue that the homosexual body is stereotyped by mainstream media representation in Korea, which may exert symbolic violence against homosexuals.

### Theoretical Contribution

My project makes several contributions to interdisciplinary media studies, as well as gender and sexuality studies. First, it revisits the relationship between globalization

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<sup>3</sup> Hall (1997) put it this way: "Stereotyping reduces people to a few, simple, essential characteristics, which are represented as fixed by Nature" (p. 257). He particularly claimed stereotyping plays a central role in representing racial difference.

and the local, a subject that has received significant attention, especially in the 1990s, in global/local (i.e., “glocal”) theoretical discussions (e.g., Wilson, 2003). It has been discussed more recently in relation specifically to research on globalization, as a response to theorists like Hardt and Negri (2001). Here, people like Saskia Sassen and Anita Chan have remained high theorists of globalization who argue that local contexts matter and that investigating those contexts is critical to greater understanding of processes of globalization. Thus, I do not reaffirm the traditional perspective on the relationship between transnational media and local consumers that implies globalization is unidirectional or one-sided. That is, culture does not simply unidirectionally flow from the U.S. empire to Asia (Ono & Kwon, 2013). Rather, I aim to elucidate the complexities and interventions that local consumers make in the process of appropriating transnational products as their own (Ang, 1985; Appadurai, 1996; Chadha & Kavoori, 2000; Choo, 2010; Kwok-bun, Walls, & Hayward, 2007).

Second, my research examines youth culture and the cultural industry in the neoliberal era and digital age. In an era when an environment of ubiquitous monetization becomes taken for granted, subcultures are not exempt. In the process of being co-opted, subcultures change and, at times, resist [See Klein (2002)]. The digital media technologies give more power and possibilities to subcultural activities (Currie, Kelly & Pomerantz, 2009; Garrison, 2000; Lipkin, 2009). I attempt to keep subculture studies updated in terms of their relationship to industry and digital technology.

Third, I attempt to discover where postfeminist women are situated in the neoliberal era. I do this because it is this era that best reveals the current situation and limitations these female adolescents face. In so doing, I aim to find a potential locus for resistance.

According to Grewal (2008), who examined the movement of transnational corporations to more liberalized local economies, feminism was one of the cultural formations that were influenced by the flows of goods and capital in the market of liberal subjects.<sup>4</sup> Now, as soon as young females begin to establish themselves within the public sphere, marketers and advertisers identify them as consumers and target them as a segmented target group. However, narrow-cast marketing does not entirely negate their potential in terms of cultural agency. Even when they and their culture are co-opted and commercialized by capital, they can still challenge, change, and benefit from the commodification process (Kearney, 2006). By examining commercialization and its relationship to the subculture of young women as audiences, fans, consumers, producers, and capitalists, I support the assertion that they are not simply passive consumers but “prosumers” actively and critically engaged in the process of commodity production, distribution, and circulation. In other words, in examining this subcultural group, I pay special attention to and examine the cultural agency of girls using theoretical concepts drawn from cultural and critical studies, as well as examine girls as an audience within commodification processes by employing theoretical concepts drawn from the political economy of communication.

Fourth, I intend to lay the foundations for Korean queer media studies in such a way that it does not dismiss Korean sexual minorities. Western queer theories have been received and employed in Asian countries and, as a result, Asian queers have ironically rarely been spoken of in the Asian-produced research of Asian queers. Recently, many

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<sup>4</sup> Grewal (2008), making reference to the Barbie doll being in the global market, argued that identity politics that are based on markers of identity such as gender, race, class, sexuality, and ethnicity have become strongly connected to consumer culture in the United States. This movement is not geographically limited to one country.

Asian researchers have been trying to redirect queer studies in Asia in order to place their own history and the lived experience of Asian queers at the center of studying queers; for example, the (re)historicization and (re)identification of queers in Singapore (Lim, 2005), Filipino immigrants' diasporic and transnational identity (Manalansan, 2003), and the new paradigm of queers in Asia called Queer(N)Asian (Martin, Jackson, McLelland, & Yue, 2008; Yue, 2000).<sup>5</sup> These attempts focus on the study of contextualities and situatedness that critical and cultural studies highlights. By employing similar perspectives and applying them to Korean gay men, I claim that the Korean media should better understand Korean homosexuals by concentrating research on diverse aspects of their lived experience, something that the critical study of media production, reception, and culture can help elucidate.

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<sup>5</sup> Yue (2000) indexed how this concept has been formulated in the analysis of queer film *Happy Together* (1998). She explained: "Queer(N)Asian expresses how diasporic media interpellates diasporic queer formations. Queer(N)Asian is constituted in the disjunctive new 'scapes' informed by Arjun Appadurai's global cultural flow. Characterized by three features, it is an emergent horizon that critically deploys the instabilities of 'queer' and 'Asian'. The first feature is that it contests the orthodoxy of East and West. Hong Kong cinema between the transitional years, 1984-1997, highlighted this contestation as a globally popular and post national screen for diasporic interpellation. During this period, the post-Declaration cinema expressed the identity-crisis experienced by the colony. [...] The consumption of Hong Kong cinema as a travelling technology in the queer Asian-Australian diaspora, for example, has produced a new self-conscious Asian and queer visibility constituted in such a tactical deployment. The urban emergence of gay and lesbian Asian-Australian culture(s) in Melbourne in the last five years attests to the second feature of Queer(N)Asian as that which supports a transnational Asian queer connectedness. [...] (Queer Asian-Australian films) strategically deploy Asian, Australian and queer normatives to narrate new desires that simultaneously inscribe both a 'sticky rice' and a transnational imagination. [...] The third feature suggests that a transnational Asian queer connectedness produces an identity that disrupts the post-Stonewall, Anglo-Saxon model of coming out as a narration of sexual identity. [...] Unlike most Anglo-Saxon post-Stonewall cultures where 'coming out' involves a process of leaving the blood family and joining alternative communities, the process of 'coming out' in most neo-Confucian postcolonial Asian cultures surfaces as a problem within the networks of kinship and its obligations that make up the blood family, and contains the individual into it. Here, visibility appears as something that is lived in marginal spaces and, for the most part, these spaces are not alternative, but mobile communities." (pp. 252-253)

Lastly, my project is dedicated to contribute to Korean media studies. Although it has been frequently pointed out that media and communication studies in Korea need more interdisciplinary work to respond to the complexities of contemporary Korean society, scholars have been more or less reticent about addressing this need (W. Kim, 2008). My research requires interdisciplinary work that cuts across transnational media studies, critical and cultural studies, feminism, political economy, and LGBTQ media studies. However, my preliminary research demonstrates that interdisciplinary Korean media research is either explored fragmentarily or is devoid of generic academic explication, elaboration, and amplification, even as there are many media discourses and many topics relating to media that could be studied. By providing an overview of the relevant and significant themes through an interdisciplinary approach, I am more fully able to account for contemporary trends for same-sex themed media as they are represented within Korean media: How gay visibility becomes possible in Korea, which subjects and/or institutions are engaged in this phenomenon, and what kind of issues are derived from the trends all become possible to describe, analyze, and discuss as a result of my research.

#### Homosexuals/Queers/*Ibans*: Different Terms, Different Meanings

There is no fixed, official, or widely agreed upon name for Korean homosexuals. Presumably, this is because Korean homosexuals have mostly concealed their identities and are not widely studied, discussed, or understood in the broader culture. They have not been definitively and denotatively defined within Korean society. Even though some historical literature records the existence of homosexuals, they disappeared from the

public sphere when the Chosun Dynasty (1392–1910) was influenced by Confucian culture (see Chapter 3). It was not until the mid-1990s that Korean homosexuals started revealing themselves and are now, little by little, being recognized by Korean mainstream society.<sup>6</sup>

Having not been securely identified, over time they have been called many things. Society used to call them derogatory terms and perhaps some members still do—“homos,” from an English word, homosexual, or “homosexual lovers” [*dongseong yeonaeja*] (Bong, 2008). These words represent the idea of homosexuality as pathological and sexually perverted. But, as social recognition of homosexuals began to change, “homosexual” [*dongseongaeja*], “gay,” or “lesbian” were substituted for the earlier highly offensive and degrading terms. Recently, particularly in popular culture, “queers” [*kui-eo*] is being used without any translation into Korean as an umbrella word for most types of sexual minorities such as gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transsexuals, and transvestites (S. Y. Kim, 2012). The usage is not at all intended to imply any negative or derogatory meaning; it is essentially considered neutral, a foreign word imported praxiologically into the Korean language because of use.

Korean homosexuals do have their own name for themselves: *pogal* and *iban*.

*Pogal* is the reverse of the word “*kalbo*,” which connotes the most vulgar term for a

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<sup>6</sup> It was a time when democratic regimes finally defeated the authoritarian powers and society was being pluralized in Korea. At the same time, Korea’s economy was booming. Based on political openness and economic resources, a variety of cultural practices emerged. These social conditions gave rise to a new generation. Unlike their parents, these individuals expressed themselves beyond social restrictions—even their sexual orientations. Additionally, the discussion of sexual politics and the formation of homosexual communities began to rise. Furthermore, the Internet is said to have played a pivotal role in same-sex manifestation. J. H. Park (2008) posited that cyberspace offered a safe place where anonymous homosexuals gradually came out, and it also provided information about the lives of homosexuals.

prostitute in Korea. Seo (2001) explained why Korean homosexuals use this self-derogating term: “Korean gay men, denied access to traditional wedding vows or the norms of romantic love, are forced to resort to casual sex. *Kalbo* is thus a term of self-degradation. However, the term is no longer used due to its odious nuances” (p. 69). Indeed, this term is rarely used today. Rather, most homosexuals use *iban* when they identify themselves. *Iban* is a neologism produced within Korean same-sex community contexts. It connotes a very similar meaning to “queer” in the United States (Berry & Martin, 2003). Presumably, the term originates from the word “*ilban*” which means “normal” in Korean. “Il” [pronounced eel] means “number one” or “the first”; “I” [ee] means “number two” or “the second.” By using “I” [ee], they distinguish themselves from the “*ilban*,” or ordinary group and challenge normative heterosexuality (Berry & Martin, 2003). In short, “queer” is a relatively popular term used by non-homosexuals while “*iban*” is the term preferred among homosexuals. For instance, the biggest online queer community is “*ivan* (the same pronunciation as *iban* in Korea) City.” But when queer communities have festivals aiming to publicize themselves, they use “queer” (Kim & Kwon-Park, 2002). My interviewees confirmed this. For the interview questionnaires, I only used the terms “same-sex” or “homosexual” when referring to popular culture that includes same-sex themes or homosexual characters. Interestingly, gay informants often answered with the term “queer” for media texts, although referred to homosexuals as *ibans*.

I reviewed how academic research and media articles have used the terms “homosexual,” “queer,” and “*iban*.” When referring to homosexuals and homosexuality, researchers use the terms “homosexuals” [*dongseongaeja*] and “homosexuality”

[*dongseongae*]. But when they point to same-sex media content, they often mix their use of “homosexual” and “queer.” To demonstrate, I present several titles from the literature (emphasis added):

*Homosexuality*, expected controversy? (Baek, 2001).

[Shooting a Star] *Homosexuals*, bisexuals, transgenders...The current stage of Korean *queer film* (Baek, 2006).

Three periods of Korean *queer cinema*: Invisible, camouflage, and blockbuster (Kim & Singer, 2011).

Remembered branches: Towards a future of Korean *homosexual film* (J. Lee, 2000).

Imagining nation, imagining *queerness in contemporary South Korean films* (J. Lee, 2012)

Mapping the vicissitudes of *homosexual identities* in South Korea (Seo, 2001).

It seems that “homosexual” and “homosexuality” are more general terms, and “queer” is used only in relation to cultural products or public events.

In consideration of all of the historical and socio-cultural usages of these different terms in Korea, I adopt both “homosexual” and “same-sex,” and use them interchangeably, both for individuals and for media content so as to be specific. By doing so, I do not associate myself to a certain community or stance. In the cases where gender may need clarifying, I use the terms “gay” for male homosexuals or “lesbian” for female homosexuals. However, I make a few exceptions for using “queer” as follows: 1) when I quote; 2) when I mention foreign cultural artifacts widely regarded and referred to as “queer”; 3) when I indicate an academic discipline, i.e., queer studies; 4) when “queer”

has a specific meaning in the Korean context, for instance, “queer” *manhwa* (Korean version of manga), “queer” fanfic, or “queer” film, implying that a text pays attention to identity issues or addresses political and/or economic hardships for homosexuals (see Chapter 2).

### Methodologies

To untangle the complicated relationship among the global flow of gay-themed popular culture, young Korean females, and the Korean film industry, I have employed a multi-layered methodology that includes historical research, textual analysis of media content, and qualitative interviewing. I have integrated these diverse methods because the increasing representation of the homosexual body in media has a long history and several stakeholders; thus, it cannot be explained via a single method.

Historical research helps us to understand why a specific social phenomenon occurred and how it developed (Llobera, 1998). In doing so, it helps us contextualize and denaturalize and thus have more situated knowledge. In my dissertation, I historicize female fannish activities for the “glocal” gay body and the globalized structures of the Korean media industry. For analyzing Korean gay films, I undertake textual analysis and look carefully at texts, meanings, structure, form, narrative, and the like. I have chosen this method to interpret how female desires and fantasies are embedded in gay-themed films.

The method of interviewing is also critical to my project, since they are included in every chapter of my dissertation. As a media studies researcher, analyzing and interpreting media texts or discourse has always been my primary focus. As I continued

my project, I realized there were many lacunae in academic literature and media discourses with respect to the study of current gay spectacles. It seemed these gaps could be filled by meeting with interested groups to have full and complex discussions about the phenomenon. Seale (1998) suggested that many qualitative researchers have found the interview format useful in helping to “to gain authentic accounts,” more so than other methods (p. 205). In order to gain access and to understand the interpretations from insiders’ perspectives, I decided to have qualitative and in-depth one-to-one interviews (Fetterman, 2010).

I interviewed four different groups: 1) eleven fanfic writers/readers, 2) fifteen women in their twenties to early forties, 3) three film producers and marketers of same-sex themed media, and 4) five gay men. All of the interviews were conducted in Korean. I then translated the parts of the interviews that appear in the dissertation into English for English readers. I started by interviewing the second group and using a snowball method from within my own friendship networks. I tried not to be subjective with regard to the interviewees I selected so as to approximate as random a sample as possible, which, as Fetterman (2010) claimed, is more “useful to depict a representative picture” (p. 8). I was only discriminative of age in order to have diversely aged informants ranging from their twenties to early forties because I hope my category of *young women* in this project is representative of a variety of women from all ages within the age group. I met all of them in Korea in August 2012 except for one woman whom I interviewed in September 2012 in the United States. Next, with some help from my friends who have experience and contacts in the film industry in August 2012 I was able to meet two film directors and one marketer who were involved in producing same-sex themed films.

After analyzing my conversations with these individuals, I realized the necessity of interviewing the first and fourth groups. Unfortunately, it was by no means easy to recruit interviewees for the two groups through my own social networks. Therefore, for the first group, I contacted several famous fanfic writers/readers whose pieces had been widely circulated in cyberspace, and I was able to have eight people I interviewed through electronic mail communication in October through November 2012 as they wanted to remain anonymous. Indeed, they use aliases generally for purposes of online publication. Since three of the female interviewees from the second group had experiences in fanfic production/consumption, I included them with the first group as well.

Finding gay interviewees was the hardest part of the recruitment process. None of my friends had a gay friend who was Korean (or if they did, they were unaware of their acquaintance's sexual identity). This, perhaps, directly indicates how difficult it is for homosexuals to come out in Korea, even though we are able to find abundant consumable gay relationships represented in media, as my dissertation illustrates. I finally enlisted the help of a lesbian activist from the Homosexual Rights Organization in Korea, to whom I was introduced by my non-Korean gay friend. She put me in touch with a gay individual. This allowed me to find other informants through the snowball technique. This resulted in the recruitment of five gay interviewees. This is not a large sample size, but it is sufficient for my purposes, because the small number allowed me to have in-depth communication and as a result interview results were "information-rich" and diverse (Patton, 1990, p. 184).<sup>7</sup> Therefore, using the concept of "saturation" in determining the

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<sup>7</sup> Patton (1990) argued that size does not matter in a qualitative study: "*There are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry* [emphasis added]. Sample size depends on what you want to

number of interviewees, which means “the collection of new data does not shed any further light on the issue under investigation (Mason, 2010, para. 2),” I concluded that the number was appropriate. E-mail interviews were appropriate for this group because they could conceal their identity if they so chose.

I audiorecorded all of the interviews, and, with the permission of the interviewees, translated the conversations into English.

## Chapter Overview

### Chapter Two: Global Gay Texts and Local Straight Girls

In Chapter 2, I attempt to historicize the consumption of transnational gay media products among young Korean females since the 1970s. I provide a review of the literature that examines the ways in which these girls participate in, consume, and produce gay cultural texts transnationally, such as homoerotic manga and anime called *yaoi* culture, as well as consume U.S. same-sex themed programs. I also explore how female audiences construct their own subculture based on a global gay imagination. This chapter specifically delves into the subculture of fanfic and boy band fandom. I also explore how Korean girls’ local subculture differentiates itself from its global counterparts by asking what kind of modification and interventions these female subjects

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know, the purpose of the inquiry, what’s at stake, what will be useful, what will have credibility, and what can be done with available time and resources. Earlier in this chapter, I discussed the trade-off between breadth and depth. With the same fixed resources and limited time, a researcher could study a specific set of experiences for a larger number of people (seeking breadth) or a more open range of experiences for a smaller number of people (seeking depth). In-depth information from a small number of people can be very valuable, especially if the cases are *information-rich*. Less depth from a larger number of people can be especially helpful in exploring a phenomenon and trying to document diversity or understand variation. I repeat, the size of the sample depends on what you want to find out, why you want to find it out, how the findings will be used, and what resources (including time) you have for the study.” (p. 184)

have made and what the implications of them are. I draw on numerous literatures, ranging from ethnographies of the girls to content analysis of their fanfic texts. Moreover, I investigate the ways in which the subculture of gay romance narratives influences young women regarding their attitudes towards other genres of gay representation by analyzing my interviews with local readers and writers of gay texts.

### Chapter Three: Korean Women's Consumerism and Beyond

The aforementioned female subculture has a history of at least thirty years. I ask: Why didn't it meet the capitalists' eyes earlier? Among several potential speculations, I point to the growing position of these women in Korean society. Chapter 3 examines how the young female generation, who have an enthusiasm for homoerotic novels, have grown up and to what degree Korean society has paid attention to them. I explore socioeconomic discourses about these women, and concentrate on figures such as *Doenjangnyeo* and Gold Miss that highlight the generation's consumerism. I examine this subculture's increased visibility in the media industry, and review anthropological generation studies of this specific group. Lastly, I analyze my interviews with Korean women in their twenties to early forties to explicate their social, cultural, political, and, most importantly, economic lives. By doing so, I seek to view what media discourses about this group—such as postfeminist ones—are missing.

### Chapter Four: Commodifying Subculture: Globalization, Korean Media, and Local Women

Upon realizing the (consumptive) power of young women, Korean media corporations became interested in Korean girls as prospective consumers of media. To investigate this process, this chapter first asks the ways in which globalization has influenced the Korean cultural industry and contributed to the transformation of the Korean film industry, which I historicize by providing a literature review relating to the policies of the Korean government and the “Hollywoodization” of Korean film studios. Then I investigate the process by which media industries target young females and monetize what these women enjoy consuming. I add interviews with film directors and marketers of same-sex themed films to explore their decision-making processes in relation to gay-themed film production.

#### Chapter Five: Rethinking Korean Gay-Themed Film: How Gay Koreans Negotiate Desire and Anxiety

Given that the emerging representation of the homosexual body originated in the female subculture for gay eroticism and the gimmicks of the Korean film industry, I finally ask: where are Korean gay people situated in this dynamic? This chapter first shows how the Korean mainstream film industry produces and reproduces particular configurations of the homosexual body and then, second, explicates how female fantasies relate to such representations. I analyze two different groups of same-sex themed films in Korea: pre-2005 movies and post-2005 movies, demarcated by the release of *King and the Clown* (2005), the first hit film featuring a same-sex theme. The pre-2005 movies are *Broken Branches* (Naeilo Hurunun Kang, 1995), *Bunjee Jumping of Their Own* (Bunjee Jump-rul Hada, 2001), *Road Movie* (2002) and *Camellia* (Dongback-kkot, 2004). The

post-2005 movies are *King and the Clown* (2005), *No Regret* (*Huhoehaji Ana*, 2006), *Antique* (*Seoyanggoldong Yanggwajajeom Antique*, 2008), and *A Frozen Flower* (*Ssanghwajeom*, 2008). By comparing these two groups, I aim to learn how the female subculture of producing/consuming *yaoi*, U.S. same-sex dramas, and fanfic has affected the transition. Furthermore, I present what Korean gay spectators think about these post-2005 films and this female group, and explore their content and discontent about the contemporary visibility of the homosexual body.

In this introductory chapter, I have presented the current visibility of gay people in Korean mainstream media and addressed that my projects was conceived from looking at why the visibility needs scholarly attention. I suggested that behind the newly emerging consumable body of homosexuals is the complex dynamics among globalization of cultural products, desires, and fantasies of young Korean women, and the Hollywoodized film industry in Korea. In order to investigate the dynamics, I have explained my theoretical background such as critical and cultural theories and political economy of communication—more specifically, subculture studies, girls’ studies, postfeminist research, commodification studies, and representation theories. I have also introduced methodologies including historical research, textual analysis of media content, and qualitative interviewing. By using these theories, research, and methods in the next chapters, I ultimately aim to reveal that the spectacularized homosexual body stems from the dynamics among global gay media, local young woman, and the Korean media industry and thus find the possibilities and limitations of the currently gay popular culture in Korea.

## CHAPTER TWO

### GLOCAL GAY TEXTS AND LOCAL STRAIGHT GIRLS

Attitudes toward homosexuality have been evolving rapidly in South Korea (hereafter Korea) over the last few decades. One group that is included in this shift toward more positive views about homosexuality is young people, and Korean young women are certainly part of this trend (Bae, 2007). One newspaper reported that the majority of young Korean women even wish to have a gay friend (Ryoo, 2009). Presumably, many factors have led to the increasing open-mindedness about homosexual couples among South Korean society, including among girls. Among such forces, I pay particular attention to the subcultural practices of Korean young women in their consumption and production of global and local gay media artifacts.

One such practice is the consumption of global same-sex texts like *yaoi* (a genre of Japanese manga) and dramas created in the United States, dramas that include narratives about homosexuality and characters who are homosexuals. In Korea, the consumption of *yaoi* has a history tracing back to the 1980s. Despite Korea's ban on the circulation of Japanese popular culture in Korea, *yaoi* texts reached, via the underground, Korean manga audiences. Enjoying Japanese *yaoi*, they gradually began creating their own version of *yaoi*. The same female generation was exposed to Western, in particular the U. S., popular culture, including gay media products. The increase of cable channels and the development of the Internet in the late 1990s provided a tool with which female consumers could enjoy U.S. dramas, which functioned to usher in unfamiliar characters, cultures, or lifestyles to Koreans such as gay lifestyles. Another practice I examine is the consumption and production of local gay media: fanfic (fan-produced fiction) culture. It

has been nearly 20 years since same-sex themed fanfic emerged as an important online subculture of fandom in Korea. As a subculture of fandom for Korean male singing groups, fanfic storylines, usually written by female fans, involve homosexual romances featuring members of these bands (Ryu, 2008a; Ryu, 2011; So, 2008).

In this chapter, I suppose this authorship/readership for glocal gay spectacles among young Korean women influenced their generous attitudes toward homosexuals or homosexuality. Furthermore, I posit that their cultural practices and gay-friendly perspectives functioned as the basis on which a local mainstream market concluded gay people to be a sellable commodity and began including homosexual characters, a notion I investigate further in Chapter 3. As a result, the mainstream same-sex content in Korea is meant to be like the glocal gay media to target young women, which will be discussed more in Chapter 4. In essence, this chapter serves to bridge the present gay spectacle in Korean popular culture with the past local gay texts in Korean female subculture. As such, the purpose of this chapter is to investigate and historicize the process by which young women have, since the 1980s, enjoyed gay media representations from Japan and the United States. In doing so, I index the historical literature about the consumption of gay men globally by Korean girls and young women in their twenties and thirties. Next, I pay attention to the appropriation and modification that local Korean women have made in embracing global gay media; furthermore, I aim to illuminate how they have, in Korea, pioneered and territorialized their own gay-consuming culture. Through these works, I eventually argue that studying the female subculture of producing and consuming glocal gay content texts should accompany the understanding of the current gay visibility in Korean mainstream media.

At the same time, I seek to explore another aspect of fan-produced homoerotic romance that has been relatively neglected: the effect of creating/reading it. While there has been much discussion about heterosexual women homoeroticizing heterosexual texts (Bacon-Smith, 1992; Berger, 2010; Isola, 2008; Jenkins, 1992; Meyer, 2008; Pagliassotti, 2008; Penley, 1991, 1997; Stanley, 2008; Tan, 2008; Thorn, 2004), far less literature has examined the consumption of homosexual texts by heterosexuals, particularly by straight women for our interests here. Seminal early works about slash fiction by Camille Bacon-Smith, Constance Penley, and Henry Jenkins drew attention to why female writers enjoyed reading/creating *homosexual* romances and conceptualized such fan activities as subversive and rebellious. These early studies have remained central to discussions of fan consumption practices; however, new approaches do exist, though (as yet) they have gotten far less attention than the earlier theories. For instance, Tosenberger (2008) claimed that “the influence of the resistance model of the first wave of fan studies waned,” and that in its place “pleasure and affect became more central to scholarly understanding of fandom” (p. 190). Berger (2010) emphasized the importance of new media technology shifting interest away from the political aspects to the playfulness of fans’ production. Scholars like Keft-Kennedy (2008) altered course from *why*-research to *how*-research, investigating the description of erotic relationships between men, not just why viewers were watching them.

I would also suggest scholars need to approach this subculture differently. Specifically, I aim to redirect our attention to what impacts the production/consumption of homosexual romance media have had on producers/consumers. In other words, I want to examine the relationship between the producer/consumer of homosexual romance and

her attitude toward other types of same-sex content and real-world homosexuals. As a result, I concentrate less on internal characteristics of such texts or on the relationship between the texts and the producer/consumer and more on the influences of producing/consuming gay romance. Thus, I ask a question: What impact does this fandom have, in particular, in relation to whether female producers/consumers develop in an intimate manner to broad homosexual texts and homosexuals? To answer this question, I have conducted interviews with ten fanfic writers/readers who used to create/read or are still creating/reading self-produced same-sex texts in Korea. The interviewee list is given in Table 2.1:

Table 2.1. Fanfic interviewees

Interviewee	Age	Gender	Sexuality	Occupation
A	21	Female	Heterosexual	Undergraduate student
B	24	Female	Heterosexual	Undergraduate student
C	30	Female	Heterosexual	Cook
D	-	Female	Heterosexual	-
E	22	Female	Heterosexual	Undergraduate student
F	19	Female	Heterosexual	Undergraduate student
G	33	Female	Heterosexual	Company staff member
H	22	Female	Heterosexual	Undergraduate student
I	35	Female	Heterosexual	Graduate student
J	41	Female	Heterosexual	Activist at NGO
K	21	Female	Heterosexual	Undergraduate student

This chapter is structured as follows: First, I trace the inflow and consumption of global gay media (U.S. popular culture and *yaoi*) in relation to Korean women audiences; second, I examine locally created gay texts by the women; and last, I suggest the global

and local same-sex content has played a role in generating females' positive attitude for gay visibility in other genres. In the next section, I begin by exploring the spread of U.S. gay cultural texts in Korea.

### Gay Spectacles from the United States

The U.S. same-sex content that allowed Korean women to enjoy gay spectacles was introduced through mainstream media such as films or television dramas. Although the influx of U.S. popular culture into Korea has gone unabated since the late 1940s, it was not until the late 1990s that same-sex media products arrived. A few reasons account for its late arrival (Seo, 2007; Song, 2007).<sup>8</sup> First, few popular products in the United States dealt with sexual minorities. Not until the 1990s did homosexual characters or issues emerge in mainstream texts (Peters, 2011; Shugart, 2003).<sup>9</sup> Therefore, it was not until the 1990s that Korean viewers witnessed Western representations of homosexuals.

Since their establishment, Korean cable stations have arranged for the viewing of many foreign programs. Kwon (2008) claimed that the establishment of the cable business was not market-oriented but grounded in an artificially constructed environment by the Korean government. This could not help but lead to distortion in the development of the industry. Around 2000, the governmental deregulation of cable TV caused a rapid

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<sup>8</sup> Please see Chapter 4 for more details.

<sup>9</sup> Shugart (2003) pointed out: "By the 1990s, the representation of gay men and lesbians in the popularly mainstream media became *de rigueur* for film and even obligatory for television fare. Major box-office hits like *Philadelphia*, *The Birdcage*, *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newman*, and *In & Out* featured sympathetic gay protagonists and the gay secondary-but-permanent character became a staple of the majority of mainstream television dramas and situation comedies, including, for example, *NYPD Blue*, *Chicago Hope*, *ER*, *Mad About You*, *Roseanne*, *Spin City*, and *Friends*. This television trends ultimately culminated in prime-time shows that featured lead gay protagonists in dramas like *Melrose Place* and *Dawson's Creek* and, more prominently, in the situation comedies *Ellen* and *Will & Grace*." (p. 69)

increase in cable subscribers and a variety of program providers got into the business. However, the cable industry was not able to resolve systemic issues related to the sudden growth, and, as a result, the industry's profitability deteriorated. Because of not only this financial situation but also the imperfect production systems, cable channels were for years unable to produce their own programs. They had little choice but to import and air foreign programs from Japan and the United States, which were cheaper than the cost of making their own products (Jeong, 2006; D. H. Lee, 2007).<sup>10</sup> Although a few programs were produced early on in cable TV history, the cable companies tended to prefer to rely on media texts from overseas. For instance, in 2006 Onstyle, a female-targeting cable channel, scheduled 41 global products out of 56 programs ("The Very Broad Female Channel, 'Onstyle,'" 2006): 38 from the United States and 3 from Japan. It was their ninth violation of a law regulating the ratio of programming self-produced and foreign programs.

Another reason for the preponderance of foreign products in the South Korean media marketplace was their popularity, having enjoyed higher audience ratings than locally produced, South Korean content since 2000 (M. J. Kim, 2009; Noh, 2010). In 2007, one media survey reported that 40.1% of Korean adults regularly watched *Mid* (American Drama in Korean; Kang, 2007) and another survey announced that 34.6% of informants were into *Mid* and 44.5% watched one season of a U.S. drama twice (Noh, 2010). The popularity of the shows even enabled some cable channels to schedule drama days, such as *CSI* day or *Sex and the City* day, where they showed every episode from one season of that particular show. In fact, this environment gave rise to an interesting

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<sup>10</sup> According to D. H. Lee (2007), the cable TV industry increasingly chose to schedule dramas from the United States that already turned out to be popular in the United States since they avoided producing new content that did not guarantee high rating.

form of subculture—“*Mid Tribes*,” consisting of groups of young avid watchers of American drama (J. H. Lee, 2005, p. 43).

The popularity of U.S. media content was made possible by the rapid growth of new technology. According to Y. C. Kim (2007), “the proliferation of *Mid* across the Korean media scene owes a great deal to the technologization of Korea” (p. 144). Thanks to ultra-high speed Internet, die-hard fans of American dramas as *Sex and the City*, *CSI*, *Desperate Housewives*, and *Prison Break* could download episodes of their favorite TV series and upload them to file-sharing sites. To supplement the content, fans even inserted their own Korean subtitles and interpretive comments to the shows (Y. C. Kim, 2007). Since online fan communities would upload dramas as soon as they aired on American TV, Korean audiences were able to see them practically as soon as the dramas were released in America. In a nutshell, through a confluence of events, access to global popular culture for Koreans became quite easy (J. H. Lee, 2005).

Among the products actively imported from the United States, same-sex media texts were absolutely one of them. Dramas featuring homosexuals such as *Will and Grace*, *Queer as Folk*, *The L Word*, and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* received high audience ratings. Moreover, equally popular were programs that included homosexual characters, even in supporting or minor roles or dealing with same-sex issues like *Friends*, *Sex and the City*, *Grey’s Anatomy*, *Desperate Housewives*, *Gossip Girl*, *Modern Family*, and *Glee*. As such programs grabbed the public eye, audiences gradually became familiar with homosexuals and their lives. Not only dramas, but also reality shows such as *Project Runway* and *America’s Next Top Model* in which *real* sexual minorities sometimes made appearances likewise enhanced the depth of intimacy between Korean viewers and

homosexuals. Since many U.S. popular cultural products were introduced through TV, films, or Internet download, Korean heterosexual audiences of these media texts were (and still are) naturally and frequently exposed to homosexuals. For this reason, Shin-Yoon (2010) claimed that “Korean viewers learn homosexuality through media” (para. 3).

One particular demographic that enjoyed these U.S. same-sex themed programs was women in their twenties and thirties. Therefore, cable channels hoping to target this segment made sure to televise such programs. In particular, gay characters such as Stanford and Anthony in *Sex and the City*, a drama beloved by this group of women, awakened among female audiences a yearning for TV characters who served the role of gay friends. One newsmagazine wrote: “In the beginning, there was *Sex and the City*. It became a lifestyle textbook for mature single women all over the world. The main protagonist, Carrie, has a gay friend, Stanford. Whoever idolizes and admires Carrie and her life wishes to have a gay friend. This trend covertly spreads over the Korean society” (Shin-Yoon & Kim, 2009). In the end, this aspiration for and fantasy about gay friends led one Korean network to produce the drama *Private Taste (Gae-inui Chuihyang 2010)*. The show portrays the relationship between a heterosexual woman and a “fake” gay man, who makes comments on her romances and lifestyle.

#### Reading and Writing *Yaoi*: Korean *Yaoi*, Making its own Road

*Yaoi* is another global same-sex content that Korean female viewers enjoy. It is an acronym taken from *yama-nashi* (no climax), *ochi-nashi* (no point), *imi-nashi* (no

meaning).<sup>11</sup> It is a narrative that takes an existing heterosexual story and uses characters within that story to retell the story as a queer one. This rewritten homosexual romance is normally “by and almost exclusively for” female fans (Sabucco, 2003, p. 70). It originated in *shōnen ai* (boys’ love), one of many Japanese manga (comics) genres, which is now widely referred to as BL (boys’ love) or *yaoi* (Welker, 2008). In the early seventies, printing and photocopying machines enabled manga writer/readers to create and share their own publications easily. Finally, in 1978, *June*,<sup>12</sup> the first *shōnen ai* (boys’ love) magazine was published (Sabucco, 2003). This kind of amateur manga magazine is called *dōjinshi*. Thorn (2004) explained that “these works are self-published manga by amateur fan-artists, working either alone or in groups, producing what are inspired by, in tribute to, or a takeoff of popular commercial manga series” (p. 170).

In the mid-1980s, *yaoi* appeared as a genre similar to *shōnen ai* (boys’ love). By that time, a group of Japanese young women artists started portraying homosexual love between two young male protagonists in the popular boys’ soccer manga *Captain Tsubasa* (Thorn, 2004). Despite their original, textual masculinity, these characters are, in *yaoi* texts, usually, to some extent, feminized. Welker (2008) explained a *yaoi* character as being “androgynous and sexually ambiguous figure with twinkling eyes whose femininity allowed readers to identify with him and escape to his distant world, most often a romanticized and historic Europe” (p. 46). According to McLelland (2000), androgynous characters allow female readers to leave “the sexist roles assigned to her by the family system” (p. 79). A story of these androgenized males progresses in the concept

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<sup>11</sup> As to why it has no climax, point, and meaning, Welker noted, it is “because their work was usually comprised of a collection of scenes and episodes lacking any overarching structure” (Welker, 2008, p. 46).

<sup>12</sup> Sabucco (2003) wrote that *June* “is now used as an umbrella term for the whole boys-love genre” (p. 72).

of the *seme/uke* pairing: The *seme* (Japanese for *attack*) is the one who leads a relationship and the *uke* (Japanese for *receive*) is the one who follows. According to Tan (2008), these notions often reflect corresponding gendered roles: “*uke* are usually shorter (the “height rule”), prettier, and more vulnerable than *seme*; in other words, presenting physical and emotional attributes socially constructed as feminine or female” (p. 133). However, “power is negotiated between two masculine characters” at times even though their roles in a pairing are “usually fixed” (Tan, 2008, p. 133). Generally, their love story is fantasized and romanticized. In many cases, however, it includes graphic depictions of homosexual intercourse, and sexual violence such as rape or incest. Furthermore, with androgynized males, *yaoi* writers attempt diverse gender bending.

Many scholars have sought to explain why *yaoi* is written and read. Explanations vary. One explanation holds that the motivation of writing/reading *yaoi* stems from discontent with the existing male-to-female romance genre. Referring to Snitow, Tan (2008) argued that heterosexual novels have limitations such as the hackneyed love/marriage cycle or the passive female character who fears losing her virginity. In *yaoi*, male homosexuals are free of the concerns that entangle heterosexual couples, such as “deflowering” before marriage, marrying, and taking care of a baby. Still, gay couples have their own hardships to go through, struggles that are actually refreshing to female readers. And the main characters, as males, are equal; their relationship reflects no imbalance of power that exists between males and females in both reality and heterosexual romance novels. Second, women can enjoy the male body with their female gaze (Stanley, 2008): they can look at *two* beautiful male bodies at the same time. Moreover, they are free to control and manipulate the bodies. This is in opposition to

mainstream media content in which the female body is usually seen and objectified. Third and correlationally, *yaoi* functions as pornography for women (Paglissotti, 2008). The existing culture of pornography is centered around men and their sexual desires, making the female body an object. Writing their own gay erotica was one way women could manifest their desires and express and enjoy aspects of their sexuality. Fourth, *yaoi* culture itself provides fans with a community where they can avoid social constraints or patriarchal obligation and support one another and network (Tan, 2008). For these reasons, Tan (2008) regarded *yaoi* as “a vehicle for fans to imagine a utopian world unconstrained by biological sex or gender roles as well as a way to critique society’s oppression of women” (p. 140).

In any discussion of *yaoi*, one might be reminded of slash fiction,<sup>13</sup> a subgenre of fan stories from Western culture that concerns homoerotic affairs of male characters (Jenkins, 1992; Penley, 1991). The two genres are “almost identical” (Thorn, 2004, p. 171): fan-written texts, gay romance, and female producers. Slash fiction started from the “regular” fandom of *Star Trek*, a popular television show in the 1970s. Henry Jenkins discussed this “slash” fiction as it pertained to *Star Trek*’s duo Kirk and Spock, *Starsky and Hutch*, and others. The term “slash” comes from the use of the punctuation mark, “/” to identify the male protagonists, Captain Kirk and his First Officer Spock, whose deep friendship motivated female fans to imagine an erotic relationship between the characters

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<sup>13</sup> Slash fiction, a Western version of *yaoi*, is conceptualized in various ways: “a form of escape from the pressures of daily domestic and work lives [...] the expression of individual creativity” (Penley, 1991, p. 143), “a reaction against the construction of male sexuality on television and in pornography” (Jenkins, 1992, p. 189), a transformation of men “into people with whom women can coexist more comfortably” (Bacon-Smith, 1992, p. 248), “a subversive form of appropriation where the source text is opened up for the purposes of a ‘carnavalesque’ sexual and political agenda, [...] a critical reception of mainstream television texts, in the queering of such texts by online communities” (Berger, 2010, p. 173).

(Jenkins, 1992; Keft-Kennedy, 2008; Penley, 1991; Tosenberger, 2008).<sup>14</sup> As *yaoi* was shared through *dōjinshi*, amateur manga magazines, slash fiction was shared through amateur fanzines or zines. Camille Bacon-Smith found in the mid-1980s that slash fiction's authorship and readership, like *yaoi*, was maintained mostly by (heterosexual) women, not only in the United States, but also in Britain, Canada, and Australia (Bacon-Smith, 1992; Jenkins, 1992; Keft-Kennedy, 2008; Penley, 1991). Thanks to the Internet, this subcultural activity has expanded its fandom and grown in popularity among young fans. For example, widely produced and consumed among its fans is slash fiction that uses characters and pairings from contemporary sci-fi series<sup>15</sup> or other genres of mainstream media content (*Xena: Warrior Princess*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Twilight*, *The X-Files*, *CSI*, *Lost* and *Heroes*, Dhaenens et al., 2008; Keft-Kennedy, 2008; Tosenberger, 2008).

There are some differences between the *yaoi* and slash genres. First, Malone (2008) and Thorn (2004) pointed out that the scale is different. *Yaoi* is one of the mainstream popular culture forms and its fans openly enjoy reading it. Slash fiction, in contrast is marginalized and its fandom is relatively closeted.<sup>16</sup> Second, Levi (2008) claimed that characterizing male protagonists and building up a story are far easier tasks when

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<sup>14</sup> About the use and function of slash, Penley (1991) added: "The 'X/Y' model indicated that the major romantic pairing was homosexual; stories of heterosexual *Star Trek* romance were labeled 'ST' or 'adult ST'" (p. 102). According to Tosenberger, "although later fandoms adopted the slash punctuation mark for all romantic pairings (i.e., Hermione/Ron), the term "slash" stuck, retaining its original meaning of homoerotic romance" (p. 186).

<sup>15</sup> The reason why slash fiction writers usually use sci-fi genres, according to Penley (1991) is that, "the slash premise, however, seems to work exceptionally well with science fiction couples because of all the possibilities opened up by locating the two men in a futuristic universe full of scientific and technological wizardry" (p. 102).

<sup>16</sup> Thorn (2004) assumed that this is because of "Western homophobia, slash fans are both scorned by others and compelled, it would seem, to justify their hobby to themselves and to the world. [...] Many fear outside persecution, including being sued for copyright infringement." (p. 173)

creating *yaoi* than slash fiction. Indeed, the latter uses “already-existing characters” and “refers to a rich storyworld and character history” that discourages readers less knowledgeable of original texts to create a narrative (Pagliassotti, 2008, p. 77).

As Pagliassotti (2008) concluded, however, despite some internal differences, both *yaoi* and slash fiction basically provide writers/readers very similar pleasures—“shifting point of view/multiple identifications, androgynous protagonist, egalitarian love relationships, and graphic depictions of sexual activities” (p. 71). In fact, according to Levi (2008), the two genres have influenced and been influenced by each other. Interestingly, more than two out of three *yaoi* readers (68%) have reported that they read slash as well, and there are a large number of *yaoi* fans in North America<sup>17</sup> and Europe (Levi, 2008; Pagliassotti, 2008). Not only has *yaoi* circulated to Western countries but throughout Asia as well. Japanese anime and manga are widely consumed by Asian fans; in 2005, 42% of manga exports went to Asian markets (Cooper-Chen, 2010). In Asian countries, *yaoi* stories have motivated many derivative media products such as films and TV dramas, which will be discussed later in this chapter (Dasgupta, 2006; Meyer, 2008).

A strong fandom for *yaoi* has persisted in Korea into the present. Since the 1970s, some Koreans have enjoyed Japanese comic books; since there were no legal constraints applied to the publication of them, the comic books could be circulated earlier than other cultural products.<sup>18</sup> Choo (2010) stated that among Korean girls a black market of

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<sup>17</sup> In the United States, as of 2010, approximately 500,000 were core Japanese *yaoi* readers. It is easy to find *yaoi* fan websites, communities, commentaries, and posts in cyberspace as well as to buy *yaoi* book in commercial bookstore like Borders. (McHarry, 2010)

<sup>18</sup> Reportedly, teenagers had a chance to approach Japanese popular culture, in the case of publication, 84.3 %; game, 63.5%; video, 50.4%; film, 49.6%; broadcasting, 37.4% and the twenties, publication, 64.4 %; game, 39.0%; video, 47%; film, 41.1%; broadcasting, 40.7% (H. M. Kim, 2003). This proves that publications have been the most widespread Japanese cultural artifact.

Japanese comic books had exploded. This group enjoyed Japanese *shōjo* manga (girls comics), including *yaoi*, by reprinting and reproducing them. In particular, *Zetsuai*, written by Minami Ozaki in the late 1980s, captured a huge fan base (J. E. Kim, 2013). Korean *yaoi* fans in their late teens to early thirties even organized *dong-in-gye*, an amateur underground comic book club and wrote/read *dong-in-ji*, a *yaoi* magazine. These two terms took their name from *dōjinshi*, the aforementioned Japanese amateur manga magazine (Park, 2006). The Korean *yaoi* writer Lee Jung-Ae admitted that “my heavy consumption of Japanese *yaoi* directly led me to be a *yaoi* creator” (2013, p. 22). As communication technology developed, this *yaoi* culture grew in the mid-1990s and burst onto the scene with the advent of the Internet. The number of fans mushroomed. The consumption of Japanese *yaoi* gave rise to a robust Korean *yaoi* subculture.

Meanwhile, Korean females started their own *yaoi* creation and it was in the 1990s that Korean *yaoi* flourished in the *manhwa* (the Korean name for manga or comics) market. Noh and Nam (1998) reported: “homosexual love themes between males became popular among both professional and amateur female *manhwa* writers beginning in the 1990s” (p. 227). According to J. E. Kim (2013), the first Korean *yaoi* was *Has Spring Come to Mr. Lewis? (Lewis-ssi-e-ge Bomi Wanneunga?)*, published in 1990 by Lee Jeong-Ae. The piece portrays “emotional/intellectual friendship and clandestine romantic tension among men” (J. E. Kim, 2013, p. 23).

Following the establishment in 1998 of the open door policy for Japanese popular cultural artifacts such as film, performance, and all kinds of Japanese publications, *yaoi* began to be more imported and broadly circulated in Korea. This measure, according to J. E. Kim (2013), brought about the emergence of a second generation that adopted *yaoi*

topics in their writing. These fledgling writers serialized their products in *manhwa* magazines, such as *Wink*<sup>19</sup> and *Issue*. J. E. Kim (2013) noted that this second generation began including serious sociopolitical issues in relation to homosexuality and differentiated its generation from Japanese *yaoi* producers as well as their Korean forbears which primarily focused on romantic or sexual relationships. She made an example of *Let Die* by Won Soo-Yoen, a gay teen romance *manhwa*. In the work, although some scenes were so overly graphic and violent that it often stirred up debate, the author sought to deal with social or family issues such as juvenile violence, attitudes toward homosexuality, teen's school life, and adolescence, generally. Based on this transition, in line with J. E. Kim (2013), Noh and Nam (1998) distinguished homosexual *manhwa* from *yaoi*. They explained that, at some point, homosexual *manhwa* indicated what mainly described daily and serious issues of homosexuality in Korea while *yaoi* placed its focus on unrealistic and vivacious love stories between pretty gay boys. In a word, Korean *yaoi* writers chose to be more conscious of homosexual reality in their creation, pioneering the Korean homosexual *manhwa*.

The third generation, however, turned back the clocks meaning that they only paid attention to homosexual relationship again like Japanese *yaoi* writers. J. E. Kim (2013) attributed this to the fact that writers of this group had read more Japanese *yaoi* during their youth than had the second generation and, therefore, never gained the experience of being apprentices like the prior generation, which had incorporated social concerns into their productions. For this reason, most of the pieces included in *Youth*, a Korean *yaoi* anthology, illustrate “light-hearted and playful homosexual relationship,” resembling earlier, first generation, traditional *yaoi* (J. E. Kim, 2013). This tendency continued to be

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<sup>19</sup> *Wink* is still issued, although it has to transform from paper-based to web-based.

intensified, especially after the *Peak (Jeoljeong)* series by Lee Young-Hee debuted in 2005 (J. E. Kim, 2013). This series faithfully followed Japanese *yaoi* styles and contained very erotic scenes. It became hugely popular and was introduced and sold in mainstream bookstores in South Korea in spite of its clearly being *yaoi manhwa*. This occurred around the time that the Commission on Youth Protection removed homosexuality from its list of harmful media.

In the mid-2000s, webtoon, a digitally created and distributed *manhwa* in cyberspace, brought about a change: the resurgence of homosexual *manhwa*, which Noh and Nam (1998) had once conceptualized. J. E. Kim (2013) called it “queer” *manhwa*.<sup>20</sup> According to her, the first webtoon that included issues of homosexuality was *Welcome, Room 305 (Eoseo-ose-yo, 305 ho-e)* in 2008, which “visualized the reality of sexual minorities and advocated their rights and interests” (J. E. Kim, 2013, p. 38). As a result, some commented “we could get rid of prejudices towards sexual minorities after reading the webtoon” (J. E. Kim, 2013, p. 39). The webtoon further satirizes female readers who enjoyed homosexual *manhwa*, yet in reality disdained gay people (J. E. Kim, 2013). By including real life hardships that sexual minorities have to confront, this strain of *yaoi* webtoon alerts readers to the pitfalls of fantasizing about gay men. This attempt may not be a dominant trend; however, it is, in a small way, a very meaningful transformation and form of appropriation that local fanfic producers can make whereas their global counterparts cannot or do not.

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<sup>20</sup> The position of a “queer” movie is very similar. “Queer” movie in Korea is considered to connote a film dealing with political or economic issues that concern queers.

## Korean Fanfic: From Idol to Queer

Fanfic in Korea established itself as one of the same-sex narrative genres where young female fans are involved in the production and consumption. Studying fanfic in Korea requires knowledge of “idol,” a unique culture in the Korean entertainment industry. The Korean version of idol, imported from Japan, connotes (usually groups made up of) singers in their teens or early twenties who have been trained by their agency for a few years (Han, 2008). And fanfic is fictional writing that features idol stars and appropriates their backgrounds or situations for the purposes of telling a story about characters that usually already have popular cultural meanings and identities (Ryu, 2011; So, 2008). Fanfic primarily focuses on homosexual romance between idol stars who, in the real world, are straight, and its genres range over “romance, friendship, martial arts, fantasy, comic, horror, thriller” and so on (H. Y. Lee, 2012a, p. 47).

According to Park (2004), half of all female students in a middle school confessed to having read fanfic. My interviewees also suggested this level of participation. Interviewee K reported that “Fanfic is normally consumed by students at a primary or middle school. [...] It was a huge trend among most of female students.” Interviewee H suggested that “[Fanfic was] frequently read by my friends including me. It was extremely popular.” This suggests both the degree to which fanfic became a naturalized feature of girls’ everyday lives, as well as the pervasiveness of fanfic culture throughout Korean society. When in 2000 the Korean government declared that fanfic was “harmful to youth,” there was a remarkable turnout of female teenagers who rallied against censorship of fanfic by actively participating in online meetings and offline rallies (M. J.

Kim, 2002; Ryu, 2011).<sup>21</sup> According to Ryu (2011), these young girls contended that fanfic should be respected as its own literary genre. In essence, fanfic became a meaningful subculture among female adolescents. This chapter holds that these fanfic writers/readers are generally heterosexual women. Indeed, all of the fanfic writers that I contacted and met with were female and claimed that they and other close fanfic producers and consumers were by and large heterosexual (although they were [necessarily] not sure of other friends' sexuality).

These aspects—that is, straight female creators/consumers, the appropriating of the existing popular culture, and same-sex themes—demonstrate that fanfic's origin and background are never unrelated to *yaoi* and slash fiction. In particular, fanfic has been “under the heavy influence of *yaoi* as much as it can be categorized as a subgenre of *yaoi*” (Han, 2008, p. 29). For this reason, Han (2008) noted that in many cases producers/consumers of fanfic and *yaoi* overlap. However, as there are differences between Japanese *yaoi* and Korean *yaoi*, so also are there differences among Japanese *yaoi*, Korean *yaoi*, and Korean fanfic. Ryu (2011) pointed out three: First, *yaoi* protagonists in both Japanese and Korean versions are characters from existing comic books and animation; while fanfic is inspired by real celebrities whom ordinary consumers of Korean popular culture know about. This feature of fanfic contributes to its broader readership, as celebrities are usually more widely recognized than cartoon characters. Han (2008) argued that this difference between *yaoi* and fanfic requires “different ways to produce and interpret each” (p. 30). *Yaoi* readers consider the kind of story that unfolds to be more important; fanfic consumers emphasize the ways their

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<sup>21</sup> The clause related to homosexuality was removed in 2004 as it had the potential to abuse human rights.

favorite idol stars are described (Han, 2008). Second and correlationally, to enjoy *yaoi*, readers should possess some knowledge of the original texts such as characters, background, and broad outlines; fanfic readers need no prior information, inasmuch as they already like the stars. Third, fanfic groups are less cliquish, as they originate in establishing fandom, which is more open than *dong-in-ji* groups in which *yaoi* members agglomerate. In addition, methods of distribution differ. Fanfic is mostly circulated online; the transformation from analog to digital technology reinvigorated it and facilitated its diffusion. Indeed, the interviewees all responded likewise: they produced and read fanfic online and, eschewing their offline friends, shared their experience with friends whom they met in cyberspace. Distribution channels were usually fan or fanfic communities. Some popular fanfic writers published their writings through their own personal webpages. The main way to put *yaoi* into circulation, on the other hand, is via *dong-in-ji*, an offline publication.<sup>22</sup>

What draws in a researcher's attention is the fact that in Korean fanfic and fan fiction differ. In Korea, fanfic refers to fiction about homosexual relationships between idol group members; fan fiction means a fan-produced text that parodies popular culture characters from film, TV, or animation (Ahn, 2004; Ryu, 2011). That is to say, fanfic usually narrates a star-based gay romance, while fan fiction is a broader term referring to a derivative or re-constituted writing that is based on existing popular media products (M. J. Kim, 2002; H. Y. Lee, 2012b). Therefore, each has non-identical producer/consumer layers: teenage female students are central to fan fic culture; enjoying fan fiction has "general fans regardless of age and gender" (H. Y. Lee, 2012b, p. 176). A fan fiction

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<sup>22</sup> This is a general tendency. In some cases, well-known fanfic authors put out their works offline and *yaoi* writers share their creations online.

culture for TV dramas and films exists in Korea. However, this is distinguished from fanfic culture and not popularized as much as fanfic. Among the sub-genres of fan fiction, slash fiction bears the greatest similarity to fanfic. Yet, slash fiction and fanfic are distinct. Their dissimilarities echo those between *yaoi* and fanfic. Namely, slash fiction is to some extent limited to the characters or narratives in the original text, but fanfic is more open to creativity and consumers' imagination. Indeed, it has only one rule, i.e., idol celebrities must play the leading roles (So, 2008)

The origin of fanfic can be traced back to the mid-1990s, when two male idol groups debuted, and fandom for them formed (J. E. Lee, 2005; H. Y. Lee, 2012a; So, 2008). Before their debut, the members of these groups were thoroughly trained as singers and dancers and marketed such that “each member had a unique and strong character in the group” (J. E. Lee, 2005, p. 97). Using fabricated characters of the idol members, female fans in their teens and twenties, enchanted by the groups, began producing stories. At this time, indebted to the proliferation of dial-up services, numerous online fan communities were launched. As the demand and supply for fanfic increased, these fan communities opened sub-menus for both fanfic called *soseol bang* (a space for novels written in Korean) and fanfic *bang* (a space for fanfic written in Korean) to help the circulation of fanfic (M. J. Kim, 2002; So, 2008). Later, more and more idol groups, including Shinhwa, g.o.d, TVXQ, and SS501, appeared on the music scene, and as a result, fanfic culture expanded its territory to include more characters and stories (H. Y. Lee, 2012a).

The major plot device of fanfic is the homosexual coupling of different members into a singer group. Fanfic about heterosexual couples used to be written but was not

consumed nearly to the degree that homosexual-themed fanfic was (J. E. Lee, 2005). Many fanfic scholars have reported that there was more than five to six times more homosexual fanfic than heterosexual fanfic, and that three out of four readers (72.5%) read homosexual fanfic; 13.1% read heterosexual fanfic (H. Y. Lee, 2012b). Fanfic writers leave out female characters, because, according to M. J. Kim (2002) and H. Y. Lee (2012a), they would have to build a woman as perfect as possible for their beloved stars to fall in love with. But the dilemma is that “the perfect woman” would not be similar at all to the fans themselves and might inspire jealousy in fans and not identification and attraction to it. Additionally, homosexuality had not been taken up as much in other media, making it easy to generate novel story lines for homosexual characters. In other words, narratives about homosexuality did not necessarily fall in line with “stereotypical conclusions of heterosexual relationship in traditional romance such as the routinization of daily life after marriage and child care” (So, 2008, p. 358). This factor is in a similar vein to what we saw Tan (2008) point out with *yaoi*—its creators select homosexuality to avoid love/marriage cycle in heterosexuality because marriage, which is considered a final stage of heterosexual love generates not romantic moments any more but daily struggles in a domestic life.

The discussion above regarding why homosexuality is used to such an extent in fanfic generally reflect the conclusions reached by Korean fanfic researchers (M. J. Kim, 2002; Ryu, 2008a; Ryu, 2011; So, 2008). I discovered another interesting answer in my interviews as to why fanfic writers use same-sex themes. The informants commonly responded: “There were no female members in our favorite singer groups.” In the cases of *yaoi* and slash fiction, writers selectively cast male characters from original texts.

However, fanfic producers are without another option as their beloved groups members are typically all male. Actually, after the prosperity of idol groups in the music industry, mixed gender groups are starting to be seen. Recently, some fanfic producers picked a female from a female idol group and a male from a male idol group, but writers generally prefer coupling members from an adored male singing group. Put another way, it is possible that they chose the theme of homosexuality not out of a prurient interest, but because of the single sex within a singing group they ground their writing work on. Thus, given my interviews, I add another interpretation for homosexuality in fanfic: fanfic culture has less of an attachment to homosexuality than do *yaoi* or slash fiction. Fanfic highlights how celebrities are portrayed more than how gay romantic narratives unfold which *yaoi* and slash fiction are devoted to. Fanfic writers like Interviewee C recognize this difference:

I think fanfic and *yaoi* have slight differences. [...] For example, fanfic starts from male singing groups that exist in the real world. To make up a story between male members of the group, we focus on feminizing and romanticizing them. *Yaoi*, however, just tries to make homosexual couples so as to gratify sexual desires.

In a word, stars are central to fanfic; however, to *yaoi* the story is central. This claim about the differences between fanfic and *yaoi* may not be entirely true; the interviewee quoted in this passage may have exaggerated the purpose of *yaoi* writers. What is true is her point that fanfic and *yaoi* begin with two distinct purposes and goals.

Park (2004) noted that homosexuality is represented in fanfic in three ways. One main narrative in fanfic about homosexuality is social prejudice toward homosexuals. This narrative includes a subnarrative of romanticization and the dramatization of

homosexual love, without any particular political aim or focus. A second kind of narrative features the graceful emerging of beautiful homosexual love. A third narrative trajectory emphasizes the erotic relationship between homosexual couples. In this narrative, regardless of the main characters' ages, porn-like sexual scenes abound. Park (2006) described this erotic narrative: "Hardly believable is that a teenage girl writes extremely graphic and outward illustrations of gay sexual relationship. Hence, fanfic is called erotica sometimes." (p. 84-85). When I asked my respondents what their sources were for writing about gay relationship, some commented that they relied on their own imaginations based on celebrities' public images in the media.

Interviewee C: I create stories by using episodes about stars that originally were told on the air or in gossip journals.

Interviewee D: Solely my imagination (giggling). I made it all up based on [my favorite singer group] members' images.

According to M. J. Kim (2002), erotic fanfic writers gather information about sexually graphic parts from other fanfics or by reading books on homosexuality. These channels suggest that their gay romance writings are grounded in indirect experience and reproduce or expand existing products.

The appearance of gay fanfic is considered one way of satisfying sexual desires through popular culture texts, desires possessed by women in their adolescence or early twenties. As the Korean society dismisses their sexual appetite as undesirable and improper, the girls cannot explicitly evince it (J. E. Lee, 2005; Ryu, 2008a; So, 2008). Fanfic serves a space in which they can display it freely. M. J. Kim (2002) had this to say:

It is fairly meaningful that teenage girls, socially defined as asexual, depict and tell erotic relationships in that they breach what older generations expect them to do. Furthermore, interestingly, despite the fact that these girls are living in the heteronormative structure, they are actively engaged in producing homosexual cultural content. This engagement may have the potential to undermine the current dichotomous approach to sexuality. In brief, fanfic connotes politics of minorities' cyber culture as it offers a place in which girls' pent-up sexual fantasies against the norms of their society are addressed and have an impact as physical space as well as virtual space. (p. 8)

Perhaps fanfic ought to be conceptualized as pornography for Korean women in their teens and twenties. After all, as consumers of it they enjoy a voyeuristic gaze at physical love between beautified males. However, fanfic differs from general pornography, since the sexual fantasies of these women in fanfic are romantically illustrated and made more convincing through the plot twists of a romance novel (Ryu, 2011).

Even though some believe that fanfic can create a friendly and generous milieu for female sexual desires, others point out that fanfic is still insufficiently subversive. According to critics, the seemingly equal relationships among gay characters in fanfic are only a minor move from conventional gender roles (H. Y. Lee, 2012a). The *seme/uke* (attack/receive written in Japanese) pattern in *yaoi* is equally applicable to *gong/su* (attack/receive written in Korean) in fanfic writing. In the *gong/su* relationship, fanfic authors/viewers conceptualize *gong* as strong and charismatic while *su* as an androgynous beauty. Ryu (2008a) pointed out that this conspicuous quality of *gong* and *su*—qualities ascribed to a traditional man and woman respectively—functions to

diminish any aversion or repulsion to homosexuality. M. J. Kim (2002) further suggested this is because “fanfic reflects prejudice or stereotypes of female teenagers who do not have enough knowledge about gay people” (p. 61). Or, fanfic can be read as a signifier in which resides the female aspiration for both strength and softness and both masculine and feminine men.

Fanfic based on fandom started with the hope that fans would know more about and feel closer to their favorite stars (Ahn, 2004; Ryu, 2011). But, as argued earlier, it seems that, as fanfic developed, the motivation to produce/consume it went beyond this initial impetus. Therefore, fanfic should be treated as a phenomenon relating to women’s cultural practices more than as an instance of fandom. Ryu (2011) echoed this point when she studied fanfic as a new subculture of women, by noting “we might overlook the passion of creators and viewers for fanfic story if we only interpret fanfic as one of other general fannish behaviors” (p. 167). Unlike other fan activities, fanfic in some cases continues to be produced even after an idol loses his popularity or a singer group breaks up. Additionally, to diversify topics and backgrounds, fanfic writers come up with alternatives, such as including new characters or pairing members of other idol bands. In conclusion, as time went on, a craving for writing and reading star-themed gay romance as well as for idol celebrities themselves only added to fandom, which continues to grow into its own genre. This is confirmed by the fact that fanfic readership has gradually widened to include women in their late twenties and thirties who are not initially fans of idol groups (M. J. Kim, 2002; So, 2008).

With the growth of fanfic in Korea, its writers attempted appropriation within fanfic writing, what I call, a transition to *queer* fanfic. What happened to the Korean

version of *yaoi*—the political potential that queer *manhwa* presents—is likewise on the horizon for fanfic. Interviewee E has been writing fanfic for four years. In earlier productions, she created fanfic, because she liked a certain idol group, Big Bang. Now she writes because she enjoys the process and fears disappointing her supportive fans. Speaking of her fans, she unveiled a risk that fanfic producers like her might expose to readers such as misinformation, prejudice, or misrepresentation of homosexuality. She cautioned: “Our same-sex products that are a result of merely fun-seeking activities may damage homosexuals in real life, and hence we better stop producing such pieces about them.” In fact, she changed the theme and content of her fanfic from fun-oriented to meaning-seeking:

I once wrote, immaturity and irresponsibly, palatable and provocative stories that could stimulate readers’ curiosity. But for now, my focus is on correcting erroneous rumors about homosexuals—e.g., belief in the correlation between homosexuality and HIV/AIDS—as I became aware that my readers are relatively young and vulnerable to such information. As a result of merely pursuing fun and sensation in fanfic writing, less knowledgeable writers including me have a potential to offend real homosexuals [...] I never want my writings to hurt their feelings by twisting homosexuality.

Her evolving attempts demonstrate a positive yet rebellious trajectory that heterosexual fanfic writers can trace for themselves. Her transformation shows, even if only slightly, the potential that fanfic culture, which started from admiration for and curiosity about idol celebrities, has on homosexual subcultures. With her anxiety and consideration as a gay text writer, I suggest this transition of heterosexual women writers of *yaoi* and fanfic

may transform their same-sex content into a space in which gay men and straight women merrily encounter.

### Where Gay Romance Take Young Women

Thus far, I have examined the global trend—the consumption and production of gay romance among (generally heterosexual) women with examples including *yaoi* in Japan, slash fiction in Western countries, and fanfic in Korea. As discussed in the introduction to this chapter, many previous studies have been devoted to looking into why this trend is taking place and why women are so passionate about gay romantic narratives. Two questions that follow are: What is the effect of the glocal gay texts on their female writers/readers? How does it affect their relationship with homosexuality and their consumption of other genres of gay spectacles?

First, writing/reading gay-themed texts provides writers/readers with chances to (re)consider/(re)affirm their sexuality. Some women have identified their sexual identity as a homosexual after reading about boy love. According to Welker (2008), postings in online lesbian communities of such realizations were “not difficult to find” (p. 47).<sup>23</sup> In the 2000s, a similar group appeared in Korea; girls who wrote/read fanfics and affirmed they were lesbians were called “fanfic *iban*”<sup>24</sup> (Ryu, 2011, p. 182). My interviewees confirmed this trend.

Interviewer: Have you ever written and read fanfic?

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<sup>23</sup> In his writing, he quoted one lesbian’s confession: Lesbian activist, boy’s love fan and academic researcher, Mizoguchi Akiko, for instance has declared that she “became a lesbian via reception, in [her] adolescences, of the ‘beautiful boy’ comics of the 1970s” (Welker, 2008, p. 47).

<sup>24</sup> *Iban* is a neologism coined by the Korean homosexual community. See Introduction of this dissertation for more details.

Interviewee B: Yes, I once read fanfic when I was in middle school. Not often though. [...] Homosexuality was very popular (among peer group members) at the time. I, *too*, received a confession from a female friend.

This suggests that young fanfic writer/readers may have attuned themselves to a homonormative world described in fanfic. In respect to this fanfic *Iban* culture, Park (2004) expressed her concerns:

These girls understand homosexuality in the text as a beautiful love and as a result easily tend to equalize the text romance with homosexual love in the real life. It is a possibility that the belief leads them to be a quasi-homosexual at times. This can function to disseminate a false myth and aggravate social prejudice about homosexuals.” (p. 2)

J. E. Lee (2005b), in sympathy with Park’s worry, pointed out that the number of teenage girls who identified themselves as lesbian rapidly increased around 2000. Indeed this emerged as a social issue and became a TV documentary. On October 26, 2002, *The Its Know* (*G-Geo-si Algo Sipta* in Seoul Broadcasting System) aired the documentary “Two-faced Teen Homosexuality.” This episode problematized fanfic and created a sensation. Ryu (2011) stated, public schools sent out letters to students’ families aiming to ward off students from becoming a lesbian after reading fanfic.

Yet dispelling such “worries,” many fanfic consumers and prosumers separate their sexual identities from their fanfic related activities. In fact, it is hardly plausible to demonstrate any clear relationship between the reading/writing of fanfic and homosexuality. Notwithstanding, J. E. Lee (2005), after interviewing *Iban* girls, concluded that “many lesbians in their teens mentioned fanfic communities in which they

started exploring their sexual identity” (p. 39). Echoing this, one survey reported that girls who have read or written fanfic have twice as often reconsidered their sexual identity as those who have not (Park, 2004). That is to say, we should not disaffirm the possibility that exposure to fanfic in one’s adolescence could make one ponder one’s sexuality.

Second, experiences with homosexual romance are likely to alter perspectives about gender. In gay romance, protagonists are, in most cases, physically androgenized and gender-ambiguous. They reveal, in some cases, extremely traditional masculinity, or in other cases, too much conventional femininity. Possessing conflicting features, they blur the line between masculinity and femininity that a heteronormative society defines. Such maneuvers may be read as an attempt by female fanfic creators to intentionally/unintentionally fend off a patriarchal gender system. In constantly producing and consuming such characters, the female group, as an agency, dream and construct a new gender structure (J. E. Lee, 2005).

Some claim, however, that the consumption and production of gay media texts does not always result in the changes of one’s viewpoint toward gender consciousness. H. Y. Lee (2012a) announced that her interviews led her to assert an opposite influence—that one’s existing sense of gender dominates the interpretation of same-sex content. “Relieved” by her evidence, she wrote: “What my conclusion proves is that the cyber culture of adolescents discovered in fanfic is not headed for a downfall. Rather, the culture operates within the same range of how they express and communicate their gender awareness” (H. Y. Lee, 2012a, p. 151). To summarize the different studies, according to how one decodes the messages, gay romance is either a place where some

can experience a new gender imagination or a mechanism that reinforces the current gender system that one subscribes to.

These two positions reside in the studies not only on the relevance between gender consciousness and fanfic experiences but also on that of general attitudes toward homosexuality. Several scholars have found that the more exposed an informant is to fanfic culture, the more open to homosexuality she is (J. E. Lee, 2005; Park, 2004). In particular, Park (2004) identified that “those who have fanfic experiences tend to accept or encourage the coming-out of their friends over twice more than that of those who do not” (p. 69). As well as this positive formation of attitude for homosexuals, Ryu (2011) stated that the fanfic activities allow fanfic writers/readers to “obtain critical thinking abilities of social norms that ban homosexuality” (p. 178). In other words, one who frequently enjoys same-sex texts is more inclined to approve of homosexuals and homosexuality and to view more critically heteronormative structure. For instance, when asked a question as to whether they saw any changes in their recognition of homosexuality with same-sex contents, Interviewee F, a reader of fanfic commented that she had a better perspective on homosexuality: “I believe same-sex contents definitely contribute my open mind for friends’ coming-out.” A fanfic writer, Interviewee C, agreed: “I wouldn’t say fanfic writing had a huge influence on my attitude toward homosexuals. However, it did make me understand them slightly better as I am able to write only when I do so. [...] Writing same-sex novel must start from acknowledging their love.” This is the positive role played by the consumption and production of gay romantic narratives.

Yet, others suggest a need to adopt a different standpoint about fanfic consumer/producer's accepting homosexuality. According to Ryu (2008a), for instance, it is a very low possibility that the positive attitude of female readers/writers for gay characters in the fantasy world is assured of being conveyed also to gay men in real life or to lesbians. Therefore, she argued: "The fact that readers often enjoy same-sex fanfic does not guarantee that they have any rebellious or resistant ideas toward the central and superior position of the heterosexual framework" (Ryu, 2008a, p. 208). Ryu's (2008) comment on the consumption of same-sex texts as a fantasy makes a powerful point; young female readers/writers have fewer chances to meet homosexuals in their lives as they do in the texts they read. Most of my interviews, even those including same-sex fanfic writers, revealed that participants had neither homosexual friends nor encounters with any in their daily lives. Therefore, the possibility to fantasize real homosexuals remained open to them.

Nevertheless, I do not believe such a chasm negates the possibility that in reality fanfic readers/writers hold an open perspective on homosexuality. Put differently, although I by and large agree to Ryu's (2008a) discussion that fanfic reading/writing might cause a romanticizing of homosexuality, I reject as being always true discordance between the attitudes about gay people in media and in reality. Of course, we need to have more detailed and sophisticated research to see how the female consumers/producers of fanfic embrace and compromise the discrepancy between homosexuality as fantasy and as reality. But, it is not fair to conclude that the fannish behaviors lead necessarily to subversive behavior, challenges to patriarchy or heteronormativity, or social change. Interviewee E, a famous fanfic producer in cyber

space, was acutely conscious of this gap. She realized that her gay imagination was not congruent with reality and hence sometimes became skeptical of her own involvement in fan activities that merely (re)produced gay fantasies. Therefore, as noted in the previous section, she redirected topics in a way to correct false impressions of homosexuals.

As examined in the previous section, the Korean version of *yaoi* descended from its Japanese counterpart and accordingly placed its focus on merely fulfilling female fantasies of gay people. However, some Korean *yaoi* writers diverted their interest to pursuing political correctness in their fan creations, called “queer *manhwa*.” Similarly, fanfic producers once started writing to feel intimate with their favorite idol celebrities; nonetheless, fan activities enabled both fanfic writers and readers to realize that “homosexuality like heterosexuality is by no means abnormal” (Interviewee F) and offered opportunities for them to reflect anew on homosexuality (Interviewee E). In a nutshell, same-sex fanfic has provided a place where producers and audiences criticize heteronormativity and make changes in their own way. This is a desirable outcome of fanfic production and consumption, even though the positive attitudes may falter in a real world setting.

Lastly, other than the changes in attitudes about homosexuality that fanfic writing and reading have resulted in, I find something else quite important in this chapter. That is the ways that same-sex media texts mentioned thus far have influenced women’s views of other types of same-sex content. At present, gay romance, which was considered a subculture, looms large in mainstream media production. Therefore it is necessary and significant to explore the relationship between the dissemination of same-sex content and the production and consumption of global and local gay romance. Media discourse

usually attributes the trendy increase of gay spectacles in Korean media to global gay media and idol fanfic culture. Numerous media analyses have described the main audience of successful mainstream same-sex content as women in their twenties and thirties who have enjoyed *yaoi*, fanfic, and the U.S. dramas since their teenage years.<sup>25</sup> H. Kim (2008), a journalist, described the character of the generation in relation to same-sex media content:

Women in their twenties and thirties had grown up enjoying foreign popular cultural products such as drama, manga, and films from the United States and Japan and became a target of pretty gay movies in the local film market. They liked to read harlequin romances and *yaoi* about pretty gay couples and sexual relationship. Furthermore, they created fanfic by portraying homosexual love story between male idol members. (para. 4)

I concur with her that the current popularity of same-sex texts is rooted in the close relationship between young women and their production and consumption of foreign media artifacts in their teen years. To confirm this, I asked interviewees how their reception of Korean mainstream same-sex products was influenced by global and local same-sex creations including the U.S. dramas, Japanese *yaoi*, and fanfic.

The outcome of my conversations with interviewees produced a mixed picture. Some conceded their same-sex content experiences influenced their having an open mind about mainstream popular culture produced in the Korean media market. Others acknowledged little influence and others denied any. First, the production and consumption of global and local same-sex popular culture sparked the active enjoyment

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<sup>25</sup> See news articles such as S. Y. Kim (2011), J. S. Kim (2012), Y. J. Kim (2012), and Moon (2008).

of same-sex themed media content for several informants. Interviewee G is a fan of *Queer as Folk*, a U.S. drama about homosexuals and *yaoi*. She runs a blog to share her thoughts on media texts including same-sex themed ones. In her interview, she said that watching *Queer as Folk* triggered her paying close attention to same-sex content as well as related social issues. Interviewee H is an ardent consumer of same-sex media. She addressed that “I extremely like and enjoy any same-sex media only because it is about homosexuality. [...] The more a poster or a trailer of a movie highlights homosexuality, the more interested I become.” Her same-sex content consumption encompasses *manhwa*, fanfic, *yaoi*, novels, films, dramas, musicals, and plays. Although she identified herself as heterosexual and claimed to have no gay or lesbian friends, whenever she could she consumed media dealing with same-sex issues rather than other themes. For Interviewee G and H, gay spectacles, globally or locally created, not only suggested a different and critical perspective toward same-sex sexuality and overcoming traditional values, but also offered them a chance to get interested in other types of same-sex content.

Still, some commonly mentioned that their interest in same-sex content somewhat withered as they grew older and therefore they no longer actively sought it out as they once did. Yet, when well-reviewed same-sex media artifacts circulate, some of them go see it. Interviewee I, who used to be a fanfic and *yaoi* reader, reads less of it now than she did in her early years. But she is still interested in same-sex novels or films as long as they have good quality. That is, although her concern for same-sex texts diminished and is much less than that of Interviewees G and H, she cannot ignore same-sex themed media pieces. It is true that a couple of women in the interview rarely showed passion for

same-sex film or dramas being currently produced. They clarified that fanfic or *yaoi* products failed to pique their interest much.

In spite of the different degrees of consuming mainstream same-sex content other than U. S. dramas, Japanese manga, and local *yaoi* and fanfic, all the interview participants declared themselves to have open minds to homosexuality and sexual descriptions between homosexuals in the media. For instance, looking at sexual scenes between homosexuals, Interviewee E found no difference from those of heterosexuals and felt no natural aversion. I assume that this open attitude stems from their relatively frequent exposure to depictions of homosexuality and familiarity with description of same-sex relationships as they watched global same sex content and wrote and/or read *yaoi* or fanfic. Interviewee J mentioned, “I think my constant viewing of global content such as *Sex and the City* led me to a natural embrace of homosexuality.” In short, global and local same-sex texts enabled its female consumers to be accustomed to gay visibility and to be positive about homosexuality. Such an attitude is found in their accepting of mainstream same-sex media products. Interviewee G remarked, “As many films and dramas in recent days are seasoned with homosexual themes or characters, I do not see them with any loathing.”

One relevant and supportive survey (Bae, 2007) concluded that 20.5 percent of Koreans enjoy same-sex drama and film out of curiosity. Approximately half (50.2%) tended to not enjoy such content, suggesting that many Koreans are still negative about same-sex media. Two points are notable in the survey: the first is the ratio between women and men, 24.9 percent versus 15.9 percent and second, respondents in their twenties ranked first, just above those in their thirties. Taken together, the highest

preference for same-sex media appeared among women in their twenties and thirties. These women are actual viewers of such media products and some are at the same time primary fans of American and Japanese gay romances and Korean fan-produced fiction. Consequently, global and local same-sex content that women once produced or consumed has led them to pay attention to other types of same-sex popular cultures or at least has helped them to be open toward such cultures. And this trend among a group sought after by marketers led the Korean mainstream media industry to take note.

### Subculture Goes Mainstream

Enjoying mediated gay love is a transnational cultural phenomenon taking place in Asia, North and South America, and Europe (Isola, 2008). It is, in any form, quite resistant in that heterosexual women take pleasure in erotic romance between men, “revealing female desires to become a sexual subject and recognition of their divested status in the heteronormative gender structure” (Joung, 2008, p. 183). Young women in Korea are also a part of this female aspiration for gay love. They have embraced global gay media such as American same-sex dramas and Japanese *yaoi* and created and shared their own version of gay romance, that is, fanfic. Through these media fan activities, those female desires were expressed, shared, diffused, and amplified.

Since the late 1990s, this subculture began manifesting itself as a major market. According to Meyer (2008) and D. H. Kim (2011), this is a pan-Asian trend. Many films and television dramas targeting female audiences have been created: for example, *He's the Woman, She's the Man* and the sequel *Who's the Woman, Who's the Man?* (both out of Hong Kong, 1996), *Bishōnen* (Hong Kong, 1998), *Boys Love* (Japan, 2006), *Love of*

*Siam* (Thailand, 2007), *Bangkok Love Story* (Thailand, 2007), and *Hua Yang Shao Nian Shao Nu/ hanazakari no Kimitachi e* (both television series based on the manga *Hana no Kimi*, Taiwan, 2007 and Japan, 2007). Meyer (2008) pointed out that these media products appropriated *yaoi* plots and devices (Meyer, 2008, p. 252).

Around the mid-2000s, the mainstream media in Korea also got into the flow. Receiving public attention were films including homosexuals or the handling of homosexual themes. Such films included *King and the Clown* (*Wangui Namja*, 2005), *Regrets* (*Hooheohaji Ana*, 2006), *Antique* (*Seoyanggoldong Yanggwajajeom*, 2008), *A Frozen Flower* (*Ssanghwajeom*, 2008), *Boy Meets Boy* (*Sonyeon, Sonyeoneul Mannada*, 2008), *Just Friends* (*Chingoo Sa-ee*, 2009), *Hello My Love* (2009), and *Life is Peachy* (*Changpihae*, 2010). Even network television, considered more conservative than film and cable channels, broadcast same-sex motivated dramas like *The First Coffee Prince Store* (*Coffee Prince 1 hojeom*, 2007), *Hwawon* (*Baramui Hwawon*, 2008), *Anjell* (*Minamisineyo*, 2009), *Private Taste* (*Gae-inui Chuihyang*, 2010), and *Sungkyunkwan Scandal* (*Sungkyunkwan Yoosaengdeului Nanal*, 2010). Furthermore, Korean major portal websites, for instance, Naver and Nate, which serialize a number of *manhwas*, decided to publish queer *manhwa* (J. E. Kim, 2013). And last year, 2012, the film *Two Funerals and One Wedding* (*Doobeonui Gyeolhonsik Hanbeonui Jangryesik*, 2012) was modeled on one of the queer *manhwas* found on Nate.

In particular, fanfic is making its active way into mainstream media. The management companies of male singer bands try to exploit fanfic fandom (So, 2008); for example, a few years ago, SM Entertainment, one of Korea's main entertainment companies, held a public fanfic contest (Kang, 2006). The agency knew that fanfic

publications concerning its male singing groups were being written and circulated by many fans; the agency sought to maintain and build upon that existing fandom. A member of one such group, Super Junior, kissed his band mates during a concert, asserting later that it was just part of the show. But many fan-writers incorporated the event into their fanfic stories.<sup>26</sup> In 2012, Korea's equivalent of *Saturday Night Live* featured the fanfic couple Tony and Woo-Hyuk. The appearance of the two, former members of an immensely popular singing group H.O.T. from the late 1990s, allowed their fans to re-ignite their fannish behaviors.

All of this demonstrates that the status of same-sex themes in the media market has been elevated and that female fans of such content have played a pivotal role in its ascendancy. That is, the fandom should not be understood as a marginalized subculture of girl entertainment but rather as a force substantial enough to have inspired change in Korea's mainstream entertainment industry, a change to commercialize same-sex romance (Han, 2008).

In this chapter, I have read the production/consumption of same-sex texts among heterosexual women as subcultural activities in which they express sexual desire, resist heteronormativity and patriarchy, and pursue a new gender structure. In doing so, Korean young female writers/readers have negotiated with and appropriated global gay media in their local context and cultivated their own version of gay texts: queer *manhwa* and fanfic. The interviewees whom I met confirmed their fan activities led or might lead to changes in attitudes to other genres of gay cultural products than U.S. dramas, *yaoi*, and fanfic.

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<sup>26</sup> Ryu (2008a) wrote: "some images alluding homosexual relationship among stars influence girls' imagination and construction of same-sex fanfic. Perhaps, their positive viewpoint toward homosexuality originates in the looking-real homosexual relationship between their beloved stars. [...] fanfic writers addressed that they need to see some affectionate behaviors of stars of the same sex." (p. 208)

My goal here has been to historicize the subcultural fandom for glocal gay media in order to better understand the contemporary dissemination of same-sex themes in the Korean popular culture. This history will provide a basis for the arguments in the following chapters: women in their twenties and thirties who once were among the producers/consumers of glocal same-sex texts (Chapter 3), media industry that transformed the female fan subculture into consumable goods (Chapter 4), and mediated gay people in the films of the Korean major studios and real gay men, both of whom such women crave (Chapter 5).

In the next chapter, I pay attention to why the mainstream media suddenly decided to commodify female fandom. Before the commodification, the female subculture had consisted of themselves, by themselves, and for themselves; the mainstream market had ignored them entirely. Yet for nearly twenty years such material had continually been produced and shared more than any other genre of writing. To answer the question, I examine the advancement of the status of women who used to be or are a fan of same-sex content.

CHAPTER THREE  
KOREAN WOMEN'S CONSUMERISM AND BEYOND

In the mid-2000s, “*Doenjang-nyeo*” was at the center of a heated debate in Korean society.<sup>27</sup> *Doenjang-nyeo* is a neologism that initially described “the consumption pattern of female college students who were not economically independent yet” (Mo, 2008, p. 53) and soon expanded in meaning in such a way as to disparage young single women “who did not spend their own money, and instead relied on their partners or parents to purchase luxurious goods” (J. Lee, 2010, p. 235). The word became widely used after one Internet user left a message entitled “A Day of *Doenjang-nyeo*” which is a fictional story of a college woman’s daily routine, focusing on the brand products she uses. This is part of it:

In the morning, she washes her hair with a shampoo that a well-known female actress advertises, which gets her to feel like the celebrity. [...] She wears the newest dress and holds a brand tote bag (Big bags are not suitable for college girls) and a book for class. Waiting for a bus, she is reminded of her ex-boyfriend who owned a car. In front of the campus, she is eating coffee and a donut in a foreign franchise café, and staring at the outside. This moment gives her the feeling that she has become a New Yorker. She has lunch at a family restaurant with a male senior who usually treats her. [...] During her spare time, she window-shops at luxurious department stores or has a conversation with her friends about a potential partner for marriage. She hopes to meet a man who is a

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<sup>27</sup> *Doenjang* means a traditional Korean fermented soybean paste. Since its color is dark-brown and not hard, there is a saying “one is so silly that s/he cannot differentiate *Doenjang* from poop.” In such a sense, *Doenjang-nyeo* implies that she cannot judge correctly.

tall and stylish doctor, and of course, has a high-class car. The current boyfriend is just for “fun.” Sometimes she goes to gym. She runs on a treadmill as if she were one of the characters in *Sex and the City*. (N. K. Kim, 2006, para. 1)

Perhaps, this sounds somewhat analogous to the concept of the gold digger in Western culture. Korean young men commonly made sweeping denunciations of young single women, deriding those who “enjoy visiting Starbucks<sup>28</sup> or Western family restaurants like TGIFs or Bennigan’s, consuming foreign brand items, mimicking lifestyles of New Yorkers, and using men as a means” (Mo, 2007, p. 47), and this discourse irritated young females. The intense controversy between men and women and the media discourses that circulated around the newly coined term dwindled away after a few years; however, the term is still frequently used to criticize and derogate women who buy expensive goods or services, especially from Western countries (J. Lee, 2010).

Around the same time, another new term referring to young women in Korea was born: “Gold Miss.” It originated as a play on a commonly used term in Korea, “Old Miss,” which Korean people use to refer to, rather pathetically, an old maid, or an older unmarried woman. However, Gold Miss includes more positive connotations than Old Miss, in that Gold Miss women choose to, rather than are fated to, delay marriage, usually because they wish to complete careers or become more accomplished prior to being married (Son, Lee, & Lee, 2007). Essentially, if a woman in her thirties or forties is single, well educated, and professional in her workplace, earns a high salary, has many

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<sup>28</sup> According to Mo (2007), one television program critically suggested that the price of a cup of coffee at Starbucks (about 4-6 dollars in Korea) is similar to that of one meal in Korea. After this aired, men started blaming women for drinking Starbucks coffee that is more expensive than a meal.

cultural resources, and above all, enjoys spending what she earns, she is categorized as a Gold Miss.

These two neologisms, *Doenjang-nyeo* and Gold Miss, seemingly refer to different female groups, and may have mixed implications, as well. Nonetheless they do share common threads and suggest significant cultural changes are afoot within Korean society. That is, the society started paying greater attention to lifestyles and lifestyle choices, consumer behaviors, and the perspectives of young women in the 2000s, recognizing their rising status in social, cultural, and economic public spheres. And, in public discourse, people began expressing feelings that could be understood to be those of society in general, such as anxieties, frustrations, and worries about possible changes that were taking place in Korea relating to gender, particularly changes in women, and to some extent men.

The media have actively participated in (re)producing and fleshing out images of this new generation of women. The film industry initiated this trend: for instance, *Girls Night Out* (*Cheo-nyeo-deul-eui Jeonyeok Siksa*, 1998), *Singles* (2003), *Seducing Mr. Perfect* (*Mr. Robin Kkosigi*, 2006), and *Love Exposure* (*Okkae Neomeoui Yeonin*, 2007) all centered young women characters who were economically independent and living on their own. Unsurprisingly, many TV dramas had the very same focus, creating *Marry Me* (*Gyeolhon Hago Sipeun Nyeoja*, 2004), *Old Miss Diary* (2004-2005), *My Lovely Same-Soon* (*Nae Ireumeun Kim Same-Soon*, 2005), and *Dalja's Spring* (*Daljawi Bom*, 2006). Not only dramas, but also situation comedies and commercials portrayed the identities of younger women in a way that was markedly and explicitly different from that earlier representations of Korean women (Kwon, 2008). A reality show, *Gold Miss Diaries*

(*Gold Miss-ga Ganda*, 2008-2010), featured six single female celebrities considered to be “Gold Misses.” On the show, Gold Misses go on blind dates with men, in hopes of finding their “one true love.” The cable industry, too, jumped into marketing shows about single women, launching cable channels such as Onstyle in 2004 and Olive in 2005, channels that targeted women in their twenties and thirties. Beyond television, TU Lady, a radio channel for women, was founded in 2006. Print media followed suit; for instance, novels such as *My Sweet Seoul* (*Dalcomhan Na-eui Doshi*, 2006), *Style* (2009), and *Hello Lovely* (2006) all described women in their twenties or thirties paying attention to their jobs, love-lives, fashion, and lifestyles.<sup>29</sup> All the female characters in these media products embody what we have come to understand to be a postfeminist woman in Western popular culture. They take for granted the political accomplishments of previous feminist movements, and regard feminism more as a lifestyle than a politics. For them, then, feminism becomes a new gender regime “based on female consent, equality, participation and pleasure, free of politics” (McRobbie, 2006, p. 65).<sup>30</sup> Above all, along with the new types of women addressed earlier, *Doenjang-nyeo*, and Gold Miss, women have strong identities as consumers: they do not count pennies when upgrading their fashion styles, or when spending money on self-improvement products, and they give advice for how to consume products that have the greatest chance of enhancing their self-confidence. Put another way, the new appellations and the new postfeminist characters, overtly or covertly, are headed down a road to consumerism. And, this is central to what

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<sup>29</sup> *My Sweet Seoul* and *Style* were adapted for TV drama stories, respectively in 2008 and 2009.

<sup>30</sup> Lotz (2004/2007) pointed out that scholars such as Ann Brooks did not posit that postfeminism is apolitical, but rather believed that postfeminism is “fundamentally [...] a political shift in feminism’s conceptual and theoretical agenda” (p. 74, as cited in Brooks, 1997, p. 4). However, the approach of Brooks was not widely accepted by others and instead was interpreted as being similar to another type of new feminism, third wave feminism.

scholars have taken issue with in their studies of the new women, or postfeminists, in this age (Banet-Weiser & Portwood-Stacer, 2006; Genz, 2006; Goldman, Heath, & Smith, 2001; Mo, 2008; Riordan, 2001).

The purpose of this chapter is to examine how and why the status of these young women as consumers in Korea has changed in order to answer the question I mentioned in Chapter 2: Why did the Korean mainstream media become interested in the female subculture about same-sex media texts which had been unspoken in the public space for more than twenty years? To this end, I review academic discussions about postfeminist discourses regarding young women's empowered consumership in Korea since the 2000s. Additionally, to complicate postfeminist studies and to ground my research, I add interviews with fifteen Korean women ranging in age from their early twenties to their early forties. By doing so, I make the argument within this chapter that the economically empowered status of these women as well as their subculture of glocal gay texts which I explored in Chapter 2, facilitated the Korean media sector to spectacularize the homosexual body.

To understand why the media industry's and public attention has been (re)directed to this female group, and whether that overwhelming interest is justified, I ask specific questions. In what context did they begin gaining attention within Korean society? How are they different from previous generations, or from other demographic groups? What does it mean that they are "consumers" in the market? Is it justifiable to position young Korean women within the context of postfeminist discourse, a feminism which ironically places its focus on women as an economic subject? And, why or why not? To answer these questions, this chapter is structured as follows. First, I claim that consumership has

become equivalent to citizenship for young females, and review one of its results, postfeminism. Here, I discuss the works of scholars of postfeminism and introduce what my own research has to offer in order to complicate them. I then move on to describe the appearance of mass consumer society, both in Korea and globally, and to offer historical background about the way young Korean women appear, both as citizens and as consumers. I analyze the generational distinctions existing within this group, reading the existing literature about them. Last, I make note of the similarities and differences between the women described in such discourses and women in real life by including some interviews that I had with Korean women in their twenties to forties.

### Postfeminism and its Discontents

Purchases have come to occupy the center of individual lives in modern society. Consumption has widened and deepened its influence, from economics to politics and from culture to transnational relations. Within the framework delineated by consumption, people inevitably assimilated consumption into their lives, while being, on the one hand, merely passive consumers and, on the other hand, critical citizens. Increasingly, consumption came to play a crucial role in constructing identity, and consumers learned to reconcile their identities as both consumers and citizens. Little by little, consumers have come to take the logic of commodification for granted. Therefore, whether positively or negatively, inevitably, whenever we examine contemporary society, we necessarily have to factor consumption into our analysis.

The new citizenship that was linked with consumership granted a new status to women. In modern society, many women work for their own wages, and their social

position has improved. In fact, they are often still in charge of family finances and do most of the shopping for the family, hence acquiring most of the family's goods, which become assets. For a very long time then, women have, inevitably because they are domesticity's buyers, been the main target of consumerism. As the younger generation is also within the capitalists' cognizance, young females who have been less, or unequally educated as citizens, are now viewed as a market segment. Harris (2004, p. 166) wrote:

The reinvention of youth citizenship as consumer power has been largely enacted through young women. Girls have become the emblem of this consumer citizenship via a problematic knotting together of feminist and neoliberal ideology about power and opportunities, combined with some socioeconomic conditions that appear to have favored their rise in status over that of young (and older) men.

Young women are learning that they can be good citizens by recognizing and possessing their purchasing power and by leading and exhibiting a lifestyle grounded in consumption. Indeed, there have been many discourses about these young women, which primarily suppose and place focus upon their purchasing power. Girl Power in Western culture is one such discourse promoted by markets and even by the nation state. For example, according to Swauger (2009), girls in the United States are seen as active consumers as part of a global and capitalist economy. Scholarly discussions of Girl Power often mention Riot Grrrls, which at its inception was a girl-organized cultural convention, as well as a symbol of girls' rebellious dreams (Garrison, 2000; Harris, 2003; Harris, 2004; Lipkin, 2009; Swauger, 2009; Zaslow, 2009). Garrison (2000) understood Riot Grrrls as an alternative subculture of young feminists emerging out of the convergence of music, print, and information technologies. However, girls' desires and needs embedded in the

Riot Grrrl movement ended up being exploited by the media industry as media producers and advertisers realized the girls' market potential (Zaslow, 2009). The Spice Girls, a British pop band, is one of the media industry's biggest successes in commodifying Riot Grrrls (Lipkin, 2009). The Spice Girls' girl-power heroine was Margaret Thatcher, a former British prime minister (Harris, 2004); several of their songs were mega-hits, and the band and its members were featured on t-shirts, in motion pictures, cartoons, and television shows (Swauger, 2009). Post-feminism, commodity feminism, and Alpha Girls,<sup>31</sup> all confirm businesses' attempts to reconceptualize and/or reinforce young women's citizenship as fundamentally augured by consumer power. For these reasons, Tasker and Negra (2007) doubted the possibility of female adolescents' empowerment within a commercialized culture. They argued that girls are encouraged to participate as consumers in the name of empowerment.

Indeed, postfeminism identifies and positions young women as consumers. Let me give some background on the new feminism first before I investigate postfeminism. Until the 1970s, for the sake of the equality of the sexes, female movements presented feminism in a way that appealed to the universality of females. Combined with the achievement of women's suffrage, and the rise of gender equality, however, the advent of postmodernism signaled the paradigm shift for feminism from a politics-dominated and Western elite-centered movement to cultural and decentralized discourses. As for postmodernism, McRobbie (1994) mentioned in her examination of postmodernism and

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<sup>31</sup> Dan Kindlon, a Harvard University child psychologist, configured this new female generation in his book *Alpha Girls* (2006). He defined a new elite girl group as alpha girls and claimed that they outpace male counterparts in academic performance. Collecting profiles and conducting case studies, he characterized alpha girls as generally independent, self-confident, and motivated. Swauger (2009) suggested that this is an example of "how media packages some girls as part of the first generation reaping the full benefits of the women's movement" (p. 75).

popular culture that Western thinking and thought limited to a dichotomy are questioned in the contemporary age. Postmodernism has challenged modern epistemology and emphasized the deconstruction of existing orders and the differences in being. This transition has provided a chance to listen to the diverse and marginalized voices of feminism that used to be trapped in a Western and binary system (Brooks, 1997; McRobbie, 1994; Phoca & Wright, 1999). As a result, feminism could expand its territory and embrace minorities, so that the new version of feminism would take on various other forms such as postcolonial feminism,<sup>32</sup> ecofeminism,<sup>33</sup> third wave feminism,<sup>34</sup> girls' studies,<sup>35</sup> et cetera, which are by no means mutually exclusive.

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<sup>32</sup> Marchand (2009) explained postcolonial feminism, saying that it: “with its emphasis on decolonisation theory and discourse, provides us with a set of concepts to counter (and decolonise) the present ‘cultural war’ informed by the ‘clash of civilizations’ thesis. Such decolonising needs to occur through discourses and practices of difference, and not ‘othering’ or representation. [...] At the same time postcolonial feminism serves to challenge practices of using gender as a boundary marker and marker between national/ethnic/religious groups, by revealing such practices, and providing discursive space for silenced voices (of women and men alike) on these issues. For instance, wearing a veil does not necessarily mean that women are subordinated; it may also signify an act of resistance or a statement of identity. On such politicised issues as the veil, it is important to strengthen practices and discourses of difference which challenge dominant representations and ‘othering.’” (pp. 931-932)

<sup>33</sup> According to Gaard (2011), ecofeminism “emerged from the intersections of feminist research and the various movements for social justice and environmental health, explorations that uncovered the linked oppressions of gender, ecology, race, species, and nation through such foundational texts as Susan Griffin’s *Woman and Nature* (1978) and Carolyn Merchant’s *The Death of Nature* (1980)” (p. 28). She lamented that although the movement was intended to transform “the anthropocentric critiques of first- and second-wave feminisms with an ecological perspective, [...]. It is this human-centered (anthropocentric) feminism that has come to dominate feminist thinking in the new millennium.” (pp. 31-32)

<sup>34</sup> Scholars like Moore (2004) agreed that third wave feminism and postfeminism are not clearly distinguished. Lotz (2004/2007) suggested that postfeminism is “one version of third wave feminism” and was more concerned about the broader social and political movement, although “the political connotations of both third wave feminism and postfeminism remain contested and uncertain” (p. 75).

<sup>35</sup> Interestingly, society’s concern with girls, as Driscoll (2002) explored in her genealogical account of girlhood, is not new or even recent. Driscoll particularly posited that the representation of girls in cultural artifacts in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries influenced how we grasp female adolescence. Accordingly, understanding girls “as a universal and yet culturally specific category” from late modernity is important (p. 16). However, according to Budgeon (1998), girls’ major appearance in public discourses began in the late 1970s. Against the reinforcement of

In the contemporary discussion of these multifarious configurations of “new” feminism, postfeminism slipped into the conversation. And, it usually manifests itself in media representations. For example, the Bad Girl syndrome which stemmed from the German book, *Good Girls Go to Heaven and Bad Girls Go Everywhere* (1997), asserted female independence and subjectivity, while the notion of the Alpha Girl, conceptualized in *Alpha Girls* (2006), focused on the rise of female students who surpass their male counterparts in one way or another in school. The popularity of the mid-1990s chick lit, a romantic fiction genre aimed at “single, urban-based, white women in their 20s and 30s” (Gill & Herdieckerhoff, 2006, p. 488), points to the power and earned income of young women and a recognition of their role within public spaces and popular culture. Chick lit in Britain, perhaps exemplified best by Helen Fielding’s (1996) *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, attracted a global audience of readers and appeared on best-seller lists for many months (Ferriss & Young, 2006). Quite apart from *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (2001), many chick lit novels have been made into films or TV dramas, such as: *The Devil Wears Prada*, which was written in 2003. The film became commercially successful in 2006. Not only chick lit and films, but also TV series such as *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) and *Ally McBeal*

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gender stereotypes by male-centered research, scholars in the field of youth culture undertook to conduct a study of young women. Agreeing with Budgeon, Harris (2004) claimed that girl’s studies emerged out of the earlier overlooking of young women in research and policy, highlighting the role of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in the late 1970s. Mentioning key works and theorists in the field, Harris (2004) pointed out that the tradition of girls’ studies influenced by cultural studies “has established some fundamental issues for girls’ studies: the relationship between popular cultures, material conditions and gendered identities; the role of social institutions such as school and the media in shaping femininities, and the places and voices young women utilize to express themselves” (p. xix).

The influence of cultural studies has enabled researchers — in particular, early scholars — to adopt a variety of topics and methodologies in approaching girls and their lives (Currie, Kelly & Pomerantz, 2009; Harris, 2004; Innes, 1998; Way & Leadbeater, 2007). Since the turn of the century, as various social formations, such as the diffusion of feminism, the accessibility to inexpensive media technology, and the spread of media education for girls enabled them to engage their lives with media, much scholarly attention has been paid to issues involving the relationship between media and girls (Kearny, 2006; Reid-Walsh & Mitchell, 2004).

(1997-2002), both created in the United States, featured a new type of heroine, with stories that focused not on housework or familial relationships, but on economic independence, fashion and style, career and love, and, as ostensibly a result of these universal themes, gained global popularity.<sup>36</sup>

What, then, is postfeminism? Is it a media discourse? Is it a social movement? Or, is it merely an academic field? Speaking to this confusion, Genz and Brabon (2009) simply commented that “There is no *original* and *authentic* postfeminism that holds the key to its definition” (p. 5). Budgeon’s words resonates with Genz and Brabon’s, but went even further to argue that postfeminism “creates confusion because it is used inconsistently to signify very different things” (Budgeon, 1998, p. 129). There have been many attempts to figure it out by conceptualizing the term through a variety of other, related terms, such as antifeminism, pseudo-feminism, backlash against feminism, popular feminism, prime-time feminism, and third-wave feminism (Budgeon, 1998; Faludi, 2006; Genz 2006; Genz, 2010; McRobbie, 2006; McRobbie, 2008; Moseley & Read, 2002; Projansky, 2001). Due to the lack of clarity and the uncertainty surrounding the concept, L. S. Kim (2001)<sup>37</sup> categorized three kinds of postfeminism, and Projansky (2001)<sup>38</sup> went further, dividing the postfeminism discourse into five configurations.

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<sup>36</sup> Mo (2007) claimed that what is most highlighted in chick lit is fashion brand and style.

<sup>37</sup> Kim (2001) introduced three general approaches to postfeminism: “First, it refers to the era after second-wave feminism: that is, the 1980s and particularly the 1990s—in other words, our present context. Second, as some writers and feminists have observed, postfeminism signifies the backlash against feminism. In fact, it is the fulfillment of the backlash of the 1980s and 1990s such that we are now in a place where people—women, and young women in particular—declare that there is no more need for feminism because they believe equality (equal rights) has been achieved. Third, there are some writers, for example, Ann Brooks who would like to claim the term more positively “as a useful conceptual frame of reference encompassing the inter-section of feminism with a number of other anti-foundationalist movements including postmodernism, post-structuralism and post-colonialism.” (p. 321)

<sup>38</sup> Projansky (2001) argued five categories of postfeminist discourses: “First is *linear postfeminism*, the representation of a historical trajectory from prefeminism through to feminism

However, various definitions and conceptualizations of postfeminism have certain aspects in common: Many researchers pointed out that, in the postfeminist period, individual empowerment and independence in cultural spaces came to take precedence over both political and economic collectivization and social resistance against patriarchal structures (Banet-Weiser, 2007b; Genz & Brabon, 2009; Negra, 2008; Zaslow, 2009). Furthermore, it is argued that the impact of postmodernism in attacking universalism, foundationalism, and dichotomous thinking led to the collapse of demarcations between public/professional and private/personal (Dubrofsky, 2002; Genz, 2010; Moseley & Read, 2002; Zaslow, 2009), meaning that women's work and their private, social, and romantic lives came to be thought of simultaneously, not as separate spheres in women's lives. Last but not least, frequently mentioned are the issues of the commodification of feminism, and neo-liberal subjectivity in the market (Genz & Brabon, 2009; Zaslow, 2009). These features, assuming the achievements of goals of previous feminist movements, seem to locate postfeminism at extreme opposite ends of the spectrum from prior waves of feminism, which underscored rebellious actions of females in the public arena and political protest as a means to social change. In essence, postfeminism is not feminism but rather is a kind or period of feminism, one that combines prior feminist

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and then on to the end point of post-feminism. [...] The second category of postfeminist discourses is *backlash postfeminism*. Rather than simply declaring feminism over, these discourses aggressively lash back at feminism. [...] *Equality and choice postfeminism*, the third category of postfeminist discourse I identify, consists of narratives about feminism's "success" in achieving gender "equity" and having given women "choice," particularly with regard to labor and family. [...] The fourth category of postfeminist discourse I discuss is a more recent development, emerging first in the 1990s rather than the 1980s. This version of postfeminism defines feminism as anti-sex and then offers itself as a current, more positive, alternative (*hetero*)sex-positive postfeminism. [...] A fifth category of postfeminist discourse focuses directly on men. Here since feminism has been successful and women are now equal, *men can be feminists too.*" (pp. 66-68)

concerns (e.g., “the personal is political” and “the equal rights amendment”) in such a way as to merge with larger consumerist forces in society.

With specific respect to the last point—the commodification of feminism—, some scholars, agreeing to the argument about the close relationship between citizenship and consumership, have commented that postfeminist culture is nothing less than an attempt to incorporate women into capitalism by depoliticizing feminism in the guise of “personal choice.” On this, Tasker and Negra (2007) wrote, “Indeed, much postfeminist rhetoric is of a piece with the exhortations of the 1990s ‘New Economy’ and the displacement of democratic imperatives by free market ones identified by Thomas Frank as ‘market populism’” (p. 6). Namely, what is given to women is the freedom to choose not how they live, but what they buy. Freedom to exist, to act, to speak, and to function as an enfranchised and autonomous citizen-subject is, within postfeminist logic, reduced to the freedom to engage in capitalist consumption practices. In this sense, the language of freedom and personal choice is nominal. In addition, self-help or self-improvement projects imposed on each individual in a capitalistic society merely promote one’s self-regulation within a new version of a coercive system. Harris (2004, p. 11) and McRobbie (2006, p. 66) put it this way, “choice is a modality of constraint.” In a way, then, young women, as McRobbie (2011) claimed, “occupy a key position in the passage to a new form of neoliberal ‘governmentality’” which thrusts individuals into “competition, ambition, meritocracy, self-help” and their potential “comes to be attached to a new form of consumer citizenship” (pp. 181-182). Here, consumer citizenship is nothing but a euphemism for purchasing power. In spite of these critiques of the commercialized aspects of postfeminism, as well as its ambivalence as an academic field, intellectual and

cultural discourses about postfeminism and the postfeminist woman are ceaselessly being produced and reproduced.

Among the discourses, many have investigated issues regarding media representations of postfeminist women. The explication of postfeminism and postfeminist women, in an attempt to define postfeminism, to examine its theoretical background, and to discover features that distinguish it from other kinds of feminism (Genz, 2006; Genz & Brabon, 2009; McRobbie 1994, 2006, 2008; Phoca & Wright, 1999; Tasker & Negra, 2007), depends on a discussion of media in most cases. Scholars of postfeminism are primarily concerned with representations of the new generation, or consumer culture, supposedly embedded in their lifestyle (Arthurs, 2003; Genz, 2006, 2010; Gill & Herdieckerhoff, 2006; Goldman, Heath & Smith, 1991; L. S. Kim, 2001; Moseley & Read, 2002). For instance, L. S. Kim (2001) analyzed an American drama, *Ally McBeal*, to define how postfeminism is conceptualized. Positing postfeminism as a backlash response to earlier feminisms, she explained that the female protagonist, Ally McBeal, as a postfeminist woman, represents a product of the compromise between television and feminism, and thus is nothing but traditionalism and pseudo-liberalism feigning as feminism.<sup>39</sup> In the similar vein, Dubrofsky (2002) argued that the show ended up reducing the political to the personal by encouraging and reinforcing a political status quo. Genz (2006) analyzed the plot and narrative of *Bridget Jones's Diary* and argued that

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<sup>39</sup> In their examination of the same media text, Moseley and Read (2002) took an opposing position. Their argument is that the boundary between private and public space diminishes, and accordingly conflicts on the border disappear as well; in contrast with second-wave feminism where the two spaces used to be contradictory. In this sense, Ally McBeal is presented as a successful trial attorney who successfully combines a feminist position with female pleasure. Moseley and Read disagreed with L. S. Kim (2001), saying that feminism and femininity are not exclusive. It is notable that Moseley and Read (2002) first brought to attention the issues of feminism and femininity that are repeatedly examined in the study of postfeminism.

*having it all*—feminist achievement and feminine identity—is absolutely a demanding and complex undertaking. It is “an avoidable dilemma that the PFW (Postfeminist Woman) has to confront and struggle with” (Genz, 2010, p. 116). Regarding the same media artifact, McRobbie (2006), in resonance with Genz, argued that in this postfeminist context each woman is supposed to make the right choices, and is forced to be responsible for everything, since she chose it. McRobbie (2006) was, in fact, more critical of postfeminist women. The postfeminist woman, typified by Bridget Jones, merely represents a return to the past patriarchal system in the recognition that a man—whether a partner or a husband—is a main concern and goal in her life. Of this media representation, McRobbie noted, “These popular texts normalize post-feminist gender anxieties so as to re-regulate young women by means of the language of personal choice” (p. 68). Hence, choice is not truly choice. Rather, it is what Elspeth Probyn called “choiceoisie”<sup>40</sup>: women seem to be able to choose what they want without any constraint, yet the act of choosing occurs within limited options. Therefore, postfeminism is merely a manifestation of rising new traditionalism (Probyn, 1993).

Given this, the feminist critique of postfeminism in the popular culture is primarily directed at the condition’s neoliberal logic: equating the feeling of being empowered with consuming and consumption. Being depoliticized means being individualized and being marketed (Genz, 2006). According to Genz and Brabon (2009), postfeminism originated at “the intersections and hybridization of mainstream media, consumer culture, neo-liberal politics, post-modern theory and, significantly, feminism”

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<sup>40</sup> Probyn (1993) explained the term as follows: “choice in some situations is represented as already having been made, always and already chosen. In other words, the active quality of choosing is replaced by a plethora of nouns, of choices made.” (p. 258)

(p. 5).<sup>41</sup> Postfeminist women are supposed to enjoy what they want, and to concentrate on their own lives, encouraged to see consumerism “as the sites for self- expressions and agency” and to be entrepreneurs of their own image and lives (Genz, 2006, p. 339). In the postfeminist era consumption has become a virtue and a necessary element in the empowerment of women. Numerous media practices support this paradigm, such as: commercials, magazines, and reality shows.<sup>42</sup> Goldman, Heath, and Smith (1991) who delved into the relationship between postfeminism and consumerism, and theorized commodity feminism—mostly emphasizing the relationship between empowerment and consumption—also mentioned that magazine ads portray the body as the key area in which to express the self. Advertisers communicate that beautifying a body with the help of cosmetic products is “an avenue to empowerment” (p. 335). Essentially, then, the empowerment of the postfeminist women is celebrated because she is able to achieve a status not as a citizen but as citizen consumer. Harris (2003) argued, “Real capacity to have a voice, to participate, and to make social change is reinvented as the ability to make personal choices about consumer products” in a postfeminist era (p. 89). Harris (2003) questioned this manner in which the mass media present postfeminism—where self-empowerment is possible only through consumer practices—as not the vast majority of women have sufficient financial resources to purchase the items required for them to

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<sup>41</sup> Brooks (1997) took issue with the use of ‘post’ in postfeminism and postmodernism, in that these ‘post’ discourses do not actually “signal a complete break in a previous rage of usually ‘oppressive’ relations” (p. 1). This is very a legitimate argument considering that we still face deeply rooted patriarchal structures or male-oriented perspectives that feminism has been fighting, and in many places modernist discourses have not been replaced. Therefore, she suggested “the concept of ‘post’ implies a process of ongoing transformation and change” (Brooks, 1997, p. 1).

<sup>42</sup> Martin (2007), in her writing of *What Not To Wear* (2001-), aired on the BBC,<sup>42</sup> noted that lifestyle programs always underscore physical appearance rather than inner beauty, and she regards this as an important factor in postfeminist ideology; that is, “sexual attractiveness is a source of power over patriarchy rather than subjection to it” (p. 233). This is repeatedly echoed by other television programs, and other media genres, such as chick lits and films.

become *empowered*. Postfeminism is therefore intricately connected to those who can afford it. Freedom is tied to wealth; the ability to change and self-fashion oneself can only be accessed through money. Ultimately, as the media describe postfeminism as an ideology exclusive to those who can afford it, the argument that postfeminism is lifestyle feminism, or popular feminism, becomes very hollow. With regard to the purpose of postfeminist popular culture, McRobbie (2008) wrote that mass media:

constitute a new and expansive form of gender power which oversees and takes charge of an economically necessary movement of women, by utilizing a *faux*-feminist language of ‘empowerment of women’ so as to defuse, refute and disavow the likelihood of a new solidaristic vocabulary being invented which would challenge these emerging forms of gendered, racialised and class inequalities. (p. 135)

Coulthard (2007) is strongly in agreement with this. She criticizes harshly the lone leading female protagonists in action films, and concludes that while postfeminist women in media are powerful, enjoyable, and appealing, they are also apolitical, individualistic, and capitalistic. Going further, Tasker and Negra (2007) lament that postfeminist culture erases politics from feminism, and replaces them with lifestyle and consumerism.

So far, I have examined what postfeminism is through works of postfeminist researchers. They, in essence, conclude that postfeminism as portrayed by mass media connotes the depoliticization and commodification of female identity through the language of personal choice and self-empowerment. As claimed earlier, these scholars analyzed mediated texts which are believed to have postfeminist thought or characters so as to refute the main assumption behind postfeminism that feminism is no longer

necessary and to argue that postfeminism ultimately sets itself within the fetters of patriarchy and capitalism. In this respect, postfeminism is hardly an academic subfield of the field of feminism; it is rather a product of media discourse aiming to create a new market identity by strategically creating female protagonists in popular culture that appeal widely to a female consumer base.

As much as I deeply agree with these arguments by postfeminism thinkers, I assume that more complications and layers can be added to the ways in which we study it and help it pave its new direction, either as a media discourse or as a social movement, or as an academic field. Thus, I suggest most scholars of postfeminism have limited their analysis to mediated postfeminist women. What does postfeminism inform us about women in real life? Aren't women in everyday life and postfeminist women alike each other in any ways? Does a postfeminist woman only mean those illustrated in popular culture? If not, how do ordinary women contextualize, crystallize, negotiate, or contradict postfeminism in their lives? Unfortunately, thus far, research on real women and their life experiences makes up only a very small part of research on postfeminism. Some try to undertake such research, but it seems most of them do not accomplish as much as they hope. For example, Negra (2008) claimed that her book broadens research objects "beyond chick flick form" in discussing postfeminism, since "postfeminism is such a comprehensive discursive system" (p. 9). However, examinations in her study are still limited to the analysis of media productions. It is indeed noteworthy that she focuses on real women, such as female celebrities and critics of postfeminist culture, beyond the fabricated characters she primarily studies. Yet, her examination of these women still focuses on their mediated lives—that is, she studies films and TV shows about real

women, some of whom are celebrities. Angela McRobbie, one of the key scholars in postfeminist studies, has not extended the work of postfeminism outside media enough, overlooking many possible connections between glamorized postfeminist women in the age of *post-feminism* and ordinary women of the same age.<sup>43</sup>

What I suggest is necessary to answer the questions I ask above is to do what girls' studies does. Currie, Kelly, and Pomerantz (2009) declared, "one goal of our work is to interrogate the notion of 'future girl(s)' *through an exploration of girls' lived experiences* [emphasis added] of 'girl power' culture" (p. 19). Girls' studies scholars attempt to listen to girls' voices and thus produce a more grounded and complex account of girls and media in the contemporary society. I believe postfeminist studies should pay attention to mediated women's real world counterparts. It would be an important step to fulfilling the real potential of feminist media scholarship to offer the alternative of real subjects to existing postfeminist possibilities based on fictional media characters. This is what the following chapters mainly aim to do: to address young women.

### The Rise of Consumer Society in Korea

Before I present stories that I heard from Korean women, I provide background information about how consumption has occupied an important position in Korea in order to help understand Korean young women's consumer citizenship. Traditionally and historically, Korean society encouraged its citizens to foster the habit of thrift and savings (H. Y. Kim, 2004; J. S. Kim, 1998), because, when the new government was established,

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<sup>43</sup> In 1998, McRobbie discussed how British female designers from various backgrounds created their own enterprise culture in pursuing their careers. And the research is based on true stories that she was told from young designers. This methodology did influence my work; however, the work does not necessarily relate to her studies of postfeminism.

after emancipation from Japanese occupation, Koreans did not possess sufficient resources to purchase and consume. However, since the 1960s, the political leaders have launched government-driven economic plans, and, accordingly, the economy has steadily grown, with a gradual increase in both domestic income and expenditures over the years (M. K. Kim, 2006). During the initial period (i.e. throughout the 1960s until the early 1980s), exports overseas were brisk, supporting the economic progress and the rising level of domestic consumption. However, the authoritarian military regime at the time remained firmly opposed to allowing foreign investment, or the import of goods, and created a critical atmosphere for the purchase of global products, connecting consumption to nationalism (Mo, 2007).

In the mid-1980s, with the collapse of the military dictatorship and the appearance of a democratic government, the consumer culture began changing (H. Y. Kim, 2004; Mo, 2007). Mo (2007) explained that several factors expedited the appearance of a mass consumer society in Korea after the mid-80s: the continuing growth of its economy, a favorable balance in international trade, rising wages, the expansion of the middle class, and the successful management of the Seoul Olympics in 1988. In particular, she emphasized that the labor movements, which had been struggling for higher wages, bore fruit in the end under the democratic administration, and this led to an inflation of wages and the growth of purchasing power among middle- and lower-class citizens. To this, H. Y. Kim (2004) added another point, namely that the rapid increase of transnational products and services to Korea, and the over-production of the necessary items of life in the late 1980s, transformed consumer culture among Koreans. Given these economic

changes, Koreans embraced new lifestyles, leaving behind “values set in tradition” in order to keep step with the changed material activities of the 1990s (Hart, 1990, p. 18).

The IMF (International Monetary Fund) bail-out of Korea during the East Asian financial crisis depressed Korea’s roaring economy in the year of 1997. Among the measures taken to stimulate and support the domestic economy, Mo (2007) paid attention to the fact that the government promoted the issuance of credit cards, which did help the recuperation of consumers’ confidence, and thus the revitalization of the Korean economy. Around the same time, to broaden the buying public, luxury brands opened their secondary brands, called “masstige” products,<sup>44</sup> which were intended to persuade middle class consumers by saying that they could purchase designer items for less money. This successfully accelerated consumption and contributed to the formation of a consumer culture within the upper class (Mo, 2007).

Into the 2000s, Korean society successfully overcame the financial crisis<sup>45</sup>; consumption became an integral part of Koreans’ lives again. Accordingly, much scholarly attention has been devoted to consumer culture in Korea (Song, 2002). For instance, J. S. Kim (1998) unpacked several features of consumer culture in Korea. First is materialism: material value is considered more highly than moral values. Second and third, excessive and conspicuous consumption emerged, usually with the purpose of showing off one’s wealth. Fourth, Koreans believe in consumption in order to save “face,” which Kim explains refers to the fact that Koreans are more concerned about other

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<sup>44</sup> It is the combination of two words, mass and prestige products. Mo (2007) instanced Armani Exchange, a secondary brand of Giorgio Armani.

<sup>45</sup> I do not mean that the promotion of credit card usage and the popularization of luxurious goods primarily helped the recovery of the Korean economy, although they might have been supportive. To see what kinds of actions and steps were taken to overcome the crisis, see Kim (2004) and Mo (2007).

peoples' judgments of themselves than about their own actual needs when purchasing. Last, conformity through consumption is commonly found, which originates in the desire to belong to the group.

Some argued that the young generation showed excessive spending habits, which led to market competition and new consumer fads and trends (Jeong & Sohn, 2004; Mo, 2007; Wickliffe & Pysarchik, 2002). Jeong and Sohn (2004), in their research into the consumer culture of youth, specified the characteristics of the consumer habits among young buyers. They found that youth contradictorily pursued individuality while simultaneously hoping to be in vogue; they tended to emphasize both their emotions and their physical appearance; they decided to buy on impulse; and they enjoyed purchasing as an activity unto itself—buying for the sheer pleasure of buying. Interestingly, 44 percent of young participants in the survey answered in the affirmative that “a certain level of extravagance is necessary to have fun in life” (Jeong & Sohn, 2004, p. 212).

Mo (2007) investigated the emergence of new spenders after the 1990s, when the activities of the mass consumer society were in full force. It was at that time, according to her, that “the new generations who were very different from older ones began catching the public eye in terms of their consuming habits at the capitalist age” (pp. 21-22). Earlier generations that had drawn attention from society were generally defined by their political movement, or ideology in school (S. J. Lee, 2011).<sup>46</sup> The best example of such groups was the “386 generation,” which consisted of a group of young adults who were in their thirties (30s) in the 1990s, went to college during the 1980s, and were born in the 1960s. Unlike them, following generations were, however, described by their economic

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<sup>46</sup> See Whang and Kim (2003) for more introductions to the lifestyles and identities of different generations in Korea.

status, consumption patterns, cultural identities, or lifestyles (S. J. Lee, 2011; Mo, 2007). K. H. Lee (2010b) and S. J. Lee (2011) noted that this kind of naming of the young generation mirrored the goal of advertisers and marketers who sought to carve out a new market.

Unlike the 386 generation that was ideology-oriented, “Generation Orange”<sup>47</sup> emerged as the first generation whose consumer culture was widely talked about, and this was discussed for several years in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Young people who belonged to this generation were usually considered quite rich, privileged, and were sometimes educated overseas. They created an upscale consumer space: *Apgujeong-dong* of which Rodeo Street<sup>48</sup> is “famous for imported sports cars, top-class foreign brands, exotic entertainment spaces, and high-class apparel and accessories” (D. Y. Lee, 2004, p. 124).

Generation X was another appellation for the newly debuted young Koreans in the mid-1990s. The term got taken up as a result of the novel, *Generation X* written by Douglas Coupland in 1991, and represented the new generation whose members were born in the 1960s or 1970s in the West (Mo, 2007). The Korean version of Generation X, born in the 70s, was regarded as well-educated, rich, single, and most importantly, consumption-driven; they were very different from their parents’ generation, a generation that grew up in poverty after the Korean War (S. J. Lee, 2011). The Korean marketplace took up this new generation as a target consumer group: numerous commercials were

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<sup>47</sup> Mo (2007) proposed three possible reasons why the group was called the “Orange Generation”: First, orange at the time, in the 80s and the early 90s, was not a common fruit and thus expensive in Korea, so it was used to symbolize the rich group. Second, young owner drivers toyed with oranges when they waited for women to date. Lastly, young men ordered orange juice in cafés for the women in whom they were interested. In fact it is hard to assume one correct origination of the term.

<sup>48</sup> This name is from the fashionable street in Beverly Hills, in Los Angeles (Mo, 2007).

produced, using and targeting Generation X in the 1990s—for instance, Twin X, the male cosmetic brand featuring two male celebrities.

Other than Generation Orange and Generation X, many new groups or generations were perceived in terms of their consuming patterns or cultural activities, such as the Yuppies (Young, Urban, and Professional), highly paid professionals (Choi & Ha, 2005) which is similar with its counterparts in the United States; Missys, newly married women in their twenties and thirties who constituted a new consumer group in the fashion industry (Kim & Lim, 1995); and the N (Net) Generation, came from the U.S.,<sup>49</sup> adolescents skilled in handling digital network technologies, like the Internet, and spending as much as their parents (S. B. Lee, 2004).<sup>50</sup>

Among the members of these new generations, the consumer culture of young women has been more in the spotlight than that of their male counterparts. T. Kim (2003, p. 98) confirmed that the female body has “taken on new meaning as consumer bodies” in the post-industrial Korean consumer society. In the next section, to explain why this is so, I provide specific social, economic, and cultural background to the status of young women in such a society.

### Consumer Bodies: The Korean Young Women and their Lifestyles

Lee and Hwang (2003) investigated the lifestyles of single and working women in their twenties and thirties, under four categories: food, living, culture, and perspective. I introduce specific aspects of each category briefly. First of all, this group enjoys variety

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<sup>49</sup> Its first appearance was in the book *Growing up digital: The rise of the Net Generation* by Don Tapscott in 1999. He conceptualized the generation as children of the digital age who are familiar with digital technologies.

<sup>50</sup> Digital devices including MP3 players or cellphones targeting this generation poured out into the market (Mo, 2007).

in their dietary life. They eat out at top-notch restaurants but also get take-out food. However, this does not mean that they eat “anything.” In choosing food, they are very concerned with health and beauty. For them, home signifies a private shelter where they can relax after working hard. During their free time, they study languages, do exercise, or join diverse communities relating to their own interests. They find these extra activities important, and essential to enjoying a single life. They tend to focus far more on the present than on the past or future. To them a job is not only for earning a living, but also for displaying and using their abilities and imaginations. Therefore, unlike the older generation whose members tended to adhere to the norm of having just one career, they seek to diversify their occupations and workplace. Overall, according to Lee and Hwang (2003) single female workers lavish effort and money on fulfilling themselves in the public sphere, both emotionally and materially.

Attention to women’s specific identities as consumers is important, as well. According to Kim, Won and Ha (2005), women, ever since the early twentieth century, have led consumption and cultural trends, and have had a large influence on the consumer culture in Korea. It was in the early 2000s, however, that women in their twenties and thirties loomed most large as consumers in the market because of their participation in society, and as a result of their growing purchasing power (Mo, 2007). In other words, as women gained educational opportunities, and as they entered the workforce they transitively gained greater economic power in the process. This resulted in a gradual increase in the age at which women marry, and, also, in a reluctance to marry. Many social scientific statistical surveys demonstrate this movement. The average age of marriage rose, from 24.8 years old in 1990, to 29.1 years old in 2011 (E. J. Lee, 2012).

Meanwhile, it was reported that the percentage of single women aged 25 to 34 years old skyrocketed from 26.6% in 1995 to 50.2% in 2004 (M. J. Lee, 2008). As Table 3.1 presents, the more educated women are, the less willing they are to marry.

Table 3.1. The ideal age of marriage for single women aged 20 to 44 viewed in relation to education (Researched in 2005)

Age Academic Background	Less than 27	28 ~ 29	30 ~ 31	32 ~ 34	More than 35
Below Junior High School	57.9%	21.1%	21.1%	-	-
High School	36.1%	33.4%	26.1%	2.9%	1.5%
Community College	32.3%	38.0%	23.9%	5.3%	0.4%
Over College	21.3%	37.5%	32.4%	7.7%	1.1%

Source: National Statistical Office (<http://kostat.go.kr/>)

Single women who have a career and a high income are open to marriage, but tend to choose to marry later (See Tables 3.2 and 3.3). Sattayaphongphan (2012) suggested that these Korean single women are more likely to spend money on themselves than married women do. After marriage, there is a tendency for a number of women to quit working, or their wage goes down after coming-back to work. In Korea, the most highly paid age group among women is made up of those in their middle to late twenties and early thirties (Mo, 2007). This group of single, working women has only formed since the 1990s, and for this reason the Korean society started, specifically, to keep their eyes on them.

Table 3.2. Attitude toward marriage among single women aged 20 to 44 years old, viewed in relation to employment (Researched in 2005) (Kwon, 2008)

Attitude Employment	Must marry	Better marry	Neutral	Better not marry	No idea
Employed	8.2%	33.5%	49.7%	6%	2.6%
Non-employed	13.4%	40.8%	42.6%	1.8%	1.4%

Source: National Statistical Office (<http://kostat.go.kr/>)

Table 3.3. The age single women ages 20 to 44 plan to marry, viewed in relation to income (Researched in 2005) (Kwon, 2005)

Wage \ Age	20~27	28~29	30~31	32~34
Less than \$ 1000	35%	26.6%	28%	7.7%
\$ 1000 ~ 1500	25.6%	34.2%	26.5%	9.6%
\$ 1500 ~ 2000	14.2%	24.5%	29.2%	19.8%
More than \$ 2000	13.4%	17.9%	26.9%	25.4%

Source: National Statistical Office (<http://kostat.go.kr/>)

Social and historical changes during the 1980s and 1990s help scholars understand the reasons why the market started to target these women actively. Women are considered to have experienced the democratization of Korea in the 1980s and the globalization in the 1990s. M. J. Lee (2005) argued, “the former brought ‘individualization’ to them that repudiates a group-centered ideology in Korea and the latter, in particular, the IMF bailout, taught them to internalize ‘market rationalism’ against the intervention and regulation of a nation-state in economy” (p. 49). Therefore, this young group, as Lee pointed out, became very market- or capital-driven, and their consumption became more focused on themselves. This is demonstrated in the research into consumer patterns of single women in their 20s and 30s, undertaken by Mo (2007). Young single women spend money within five primary areas: physical appearance (fashion, beauty, or hair), food (restaurants or cafés), overseas travel, self-improvement (workout or other interests), and cultural activities (films, musicals, performances, books, or museums). According to Mo (2007), the female participants interviewed said that consumption is a part of their life, and functions as an effective escape from daily

routines. Industries sensed this tendency among young citizens, and sought to cultivate their consumerism through a variety of marketing tools (Choi, 2004). This generational research suggests that the Korean women in their twenties and thirties are very similar to postfeminist women in media. In what follows, I present more complex pictures of the generation.

### Negotiating Values: Multilayered Lives of Korean Young Women

In this section, I examine real women who live in the same age as postfeminist women in media. In particular I unveil the ways in which young Korean women understand themselves and the discourses surrounding them, and what “consumption” means for them. In my investigation I sought to find out how Korean young women, who have been discursively named as *Doenjang-nyeo*, Gold Miss, or postfeminist women by society or media, perceive themselves as citizens and consumers. In short, my questions of them aimed to find out whether or not what postfeminism and postfeminist scholars have said about women in the media held true for these real women, as well. The interviewee list is given in Table 3.4:

Table 3.4. Young women interviewees

Interviewee	Age	Occupation	Majors	Marital Status
A	37	Graduate student	English Education/Journalism	Single
B	21	Undergraduate student	Law	Single
C	33	Researcher (PhD)	Urbanology	Married (1 child)
D	31	PR professional	English/Business	Married (1 child)
E	20	Undergraduate student	Food and nutrition	Single

Table 3.4 (cont.)

Interviewee	Age	Occupation	Majors	Marital Status
G	41	Activist at NGO	Media	Single
H	29	Stock analyst	Statistics	Married
I	35	Manager at an Internet service company	International Relations/Mass Communication	Single
J	35	Researcher (PhD)	Business	Single
K	23	Editor at a textbook company	Painting	Single
L	32	Film marketer	Mass communication	Single
M	32	PR professional at a game company	Earth and environmental science	Single
N	32	Editor at a publishing company	Photography	Single
O	24	Undergraduate student	Industrial Design	Single
P	26	Editor at a publishing company	Education	Single

Although the ages and occupations of interviewees have a diverse range of age, education attainment is not diverse: all of them hold a four-year college degree or are currently college students. I did not intentionally select interviewees based on demographic background except age as I explained in Introduction of this dissertation so as to have a random yet diverse representation of the group. Yet, the demographic information of my interviewees indicates that my informants are not very different categories of Korean woman and therefore I admit the interview outcome is potentially biased. Notwithstanding, I believe it explains a certain part of Korean women considering 63 per cent of high school graduates go on to higher education (Y. Kim, 2012).

## General Perspectives

When asked how they felt about the status of women today, most of them agreed that it had definitely improved, and pointed to education as having played a pivotal role in the improvement. Respondents reported they rarely experienced discrimination in school or at work, specifically because of their gender. This, however, does not necessarily mean they felt they lived a gender equal existence. A few interviewees, and in particular those who had worked for longer, such as Interviewee I, were annoyed by the fact that it is still uncommon for women to occupy top positions of businesses and corporations. Furthermore, Interviewee J, currently a doctoral student majoring in human resource, criticized the fact that the appointment of female members, whether in the public or private realm, is merely political spin, and is not an outcome of applying the same standards to both genders. This suggests, as Interviewee A, a former high school teacher, lamented, that social structures are in many ways still lagging behind female consciousness. That is, women in real life still experience the glass-ceiling in social life, although they feel they have many opportunities that their mothers' generation did not. This is what Y. Kim (2012) debunked: many Korean female graduates end up getting a job for non-managerial and secretarial positions and receive 76 per cent of male wages. This suggests that the images of women being equal, being able to buy what they want, and being able to *have it all*—a family, a successful career and happiness—was significantly limited by structural economic factors.

Not only unequal gender structures, but also women's larger interests in politics emerged. When I asked if she was interested in any kinds of political issues or politics in

a broad sense, Interviewee P, a top national university graduate whose parents are active members of teachers' labor union, answered: "I am very interested in those because politics has many things to do with my daily life and the quality of life. I don't think politics and my life can be exclusive." For similar reasons, Interviewees C, an urbanology Ph.D., and Interviewee G, a NGO worker said that they regularly consume political news, and debate through diverse media technologies, while Interviewee M, a PR professional, subscribes to a left-wing political magazine, *Hangyere 21* and financially supports a few alternative Internet media. Regarding political activities, a law school student, Interviewee B, has been a member of a community related to the United Nations, and Interviewee P used to participate in many types of political rallies against the Korean government while in college. Interviewee M wishes to be an active rallier but isn't able to due to time constraint. Instead she is sponsoring an animal protection group because she has a cat. Now she is working at a start-up game company but planning to work in a non-profit organization (NGO) sooner or later. Interviewee G is a very interesting case. She worked in a film marketing company for years and got fed up with the seemingly fancy industry and showy people. Therefore, she quit the job and started working in an NGO, which she found to be more meaningful both for her and for society. These examples imply that being apolitical and valuing individualism, which I introduced earlier as one of the reasons why Coulthard (2007) and McRobbie (2008) criticized the portrayal of postfeminist women in the media, are not always typical characteristics of young women in real life.

During their spare time, interviewees try to do something other than work- or do family-related labor. They meet friends or partners, dine out, travel, and exercise. The

most frequently mentioned activity is watching films, which signals the important point of the following chapter, namely that the main audience of films is women in their 20s and 30s. Other than general pastimes, most of them do things that are unique to them, and they do them on their own. For example, Interviewee G, a social worker at NGO, enjoys participating in seminars on the weekend, and plans to learn to play a musical instrument soon. Interviewee I, aged 35, likes to see various performances, and does physical recreational activities, such as climbing mountains or running a marathon. Interviewees C and K study foreign languages (Chinese and Japanese, respectively); impressively Interviewee C, a mother of a child goes to a private language institution in the early morning in order to learn Chinese, although married women in a Korean familial system are traditionally supposed to be more engrossed with taking care of their child and husband than doing something for themselves. Interviewee H told some stories about her friends:

Interestingly, my friends got very adventurous and aggressive in trying new things. Some recently started paragliding and others left their jobs and went overseas to study or travel [...] (Interviewer: Why such changes?) I guess they want some refreshments in their lives as they started their careers earlier than men. In old days, it might have not been common to quit a job, but now it is not, and they have enough money with which they can do what they would like to do.

As most of them had sufficient financial resources to survive without worry they did not spend time cutting costs when engaging in their favorite activities. Interview I, who addressed she is called as Gold Miss at times but she hates the naming, agreed: “I tend not to be frugal for attending cultural performances [...] I enjoy investing money for

myself such as going to a hair shop or traveling. I believe the cost usually pays off considering it gives me some sort of rest.”

These perspectives are not irrelevant to their attitude toward marriage. Informants over 35 years old, such as Interviewees A, I, and J, affirmed that, although they have not been opposed to marriage, they will never rush themselves until they find Mr. Right for them. Interviewee A said: “I assume that marriage means my sacrifice. Therefore, I wouldn’t marry unless I get confident of loving someone as much as I can sacrifice myself for him. I am a huge craver of freedom. [...] If there is nothing to gain in marriage, why would I do it? [...] *I am capable enough to get by alone.*” This statement suggests that marriage is not seen as essential for some single women, especially, those with economic means. They say they would rather choose to enjoy single life than marry if they have to sacrifice their own pleasure and desires for a husband. By the same token, having a baby is also an option for these women. Interviewee H, who is just married to a long-term lover, explained:

I believe marriage is necessary. Not to feel lonely when I am old? (Interviewer: How about a baby?) Although I had thought I would have a baby, I realized, after I got wedded, that giving a birth and parenting would limit my own life. I would buy clothes not for me, but for a baby. (Interviewer: How about your friends?) They are in line with me regarding a baby issue. Many of them confessed that they would not like to have a baby.

She furthermore added that she used to buy whatever she wanted to when she was single. But after marriage she can’t purchase items as many as she wants due to her familial position as a wife. On the other hand, Interviewee C maintains her purchasing habit even

after marrying and having a baby: “I do not spend much money on my child. I still keep the amount of money for myself; eating-out books, fashion items, and language learning. The income from my husband is all invested to family-related costs. My consuming patterns are the same as before marriage.” Probably, she insists this because having and using her financial power on her own is a signifier of her status in a family and society.

Although these women might not be completely free from a traditional gender and the social structures does not fully support the new status of women, it seems fair to conclude that they differentiate themselves from previous female generations in many ways, as I have illustrated thus far. In sum, they tend to focus attention on themselves and take advantage of their economic resources to empower themselves. For these reasons, most interviewees claimed they would not stop working after marriage or childbirth, expressing a strong determination to maintain their careers.

Interviewee H: I think many women tend to continue their job. (Interviewer: Why?) for their ego? I don't think housework or parenting can improve satisfaction of my life. They are not for my self-realization. Even though I deliver a baby, I will keep working.

Interviewee I: (Interviewer: What if your future partner wants you to give up your career?) I will persuade. I do have a plan as a working person as well as a wife and mother. My future partner can't choose instead of me. I will talk to him again and again.

## Thinking Postfeminist Women in Media

How then do these women understand the media representation about their generation? In what ways do the visualized women resemble them or not? Most interviewees indicated that, as anticipated, media texts generally do not reflect their reality. Many are dissatisfied with the frequent portrayal of a Cinderella-type woman as a female protagonist in the media, which they believe is far from their reality. Even though they recognize the new attempts that some media producers are making to include new images of women who are active, who lead men, and who are aggressive, they still find it problematic that even newly created female characters are too simplified and unrealistic—not worrying about money and work at all—or their glamorous and fancy lifestyles are emphasized too much.

Interviewee B: Media embellish my generation. They do not hesitate to buy something, which only high-class people can do. And they romanticize our life and relationship. I know that's what media usually do, but it is too much these days.

Interviewee C: I do not think there are many characters that I can identify with. I think I feel this way because I do not like trendy popular texts. (Interviewer: Don't you see dramas about love and career of women in their thirties?) No, because I think characters are too strong. Too exaggerated for me to feel resonated with them.

For these reasons, they do not have special interests in popular cultural products that claim to deal with the love lives and careers of women in their thirties modeling *Ally McBeal*, or *Sex and the City* (SATC) in the United States. On the launch of a drama, *I DO*

*I Do* (2012), featuring Kim Sun-A, who is popular for playing roles in dramas that represent the desires of young, single, professional women in Korea, one media article commented:

In American dramas, which attracted young Korean women in their 20s and 30s, female characters usually enjoy a gorgeous lifestyle or are workaholics. [...] Now, young female audiences do not need to pursue American dramas because *I Do I Do* being aired in MBC (*Munhwa* Broadcasting Company) can satisfy what they want to see. [...] Can the female protagonist succeed in achieving both love and career and be the perfect “Alpha Girl?” (Son, 2012, para. 1-8).

The last line of the above quote hints that *I Do I Do* emulated postfeminist dramas in the United States that are widely and passionately consumed by Korean female viewers. Capturing only ten percent of the viewing audience, unfortunately, the drama failed to draw the attention of young women away from the American dramas. Most of my interviewees did not watch the drama as well as other similar cultural texts, for the sole reason that the media only advocated trendy and spectacular women. That is, the postfeminist culture portrayed in media does not resonate with women in the everyday work world. Even when they pay attention to that type of popular content, what they focus on is not only the lifestyles, fashion styles, or the physical appearance of the “postfeminist women” in the media texts, but their personalities, attitudes and perspectives about themselves and relationships (J. Y. Park, 2007). In fact, this goes against what the postfeminist media products emphasize: physical appearances rather than inner beauty (Martin, 2007). Several interviewees were avid fans of *Sex and the City*: their focus on the show was usually how show characters negotiate internal

perspective in a given situation. Interviewee I, single, economically empowered, and 35-year-old, also enjoyed watching SATC because it describes “career and love” in a resonating manner, saying these are the important to women. Interviewee J found it fun as the female protagonists pursued their lives according to their own well-established viewpoints.

Interestingly, this viewing philosophy, i.e. concentrating less on physical appearances than on inner values, does not negate the influence of the media on their consumption patterns. Although none of them overemphasized fashion and style, all of them were certainly aware of fashion trends and products. Thus, they were educated consumers about these trends and products, even as they did not spend tremendous time purchasing products or enhancing their own styles and fashion. When asked if they have ever purchased items that they saw in media, one third were positive.

Interviewee D: Yes, for example, a bag that Go So-Young (a Korean actress) carried at the airport. (Interviewer: How about your friends?) Similar. Most of my colleagues are also like me.

Interviewee H: Yes, I have if I could afford them. [...] I don't like nail polishing but when I saw the pretty color that Shin Min-Ah (a Korean actress) has on her nails, I talked about it with my friends and sometimes recommended.

Interviewee K: Many friends of mine have. One watches all the dramas every day and purchases similar items that she sees in the media.

Interviewee O: Yes. I bought a bag that one actress used in a drama and Tiffany from Girls Generation (a girl singing group in Korea) carried. I care about people's attention and I tend to follow my friends or the trend.

That is, although they do not actively consume media products presenting postfeminist characters, or are not very concerned about the material aspects of cultural texts, at times they said they would imitate what mediated women do, or buy media presented products consciously or unconsciously.<sup>51</sup> Probably it is not the media content so much as peer culture or secondary media discourse that had an impact on their choices of what to purchase; they become informed of, or realized the popularity of the items from their friends or from fashion news, not from dramas or other media specifically about postfeminist women. In either case, media representation is influential in their consumption, if not directly, then indirectly. Put it another way, the Korean version of postfeminist dramas, like its U.S. counterparts, play a role in boosting consumerism among its appealing audience group and several female viewers practice it within their available resources.

*Doenjang-nyeo*, Gold Miss, and you?

After asking about the relationship between media representation and their own consumption habits and choices, in my interviews with them I focused on their recognition and interpretation of media discourse regarding their consumption. I questioned their general ideas about terms such as *Doenjang-nyeo* and Gold Miss. I did not define those terms for them, specifically so that I might find out how they, themselves, conceptualized the notions. Their answers suggest that they understand these words basically to be related to money, income, and luxurious brands, that is, to consumption. Most of them understood the neologisms to be negatively coined by men who “aim to

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<sup>51</sup> Therefore, many brands targeting young women advertise their sponsorship for actresses and ask celebrities to use their items (Park, 2012).

suppress women” (Interviewee B) or who “can’t satisfy women with their economic ability” (Interviewee O) or by “marketers who urge women to spend more money” (Interviewee G). Despite the derogatory or sarcastic origins, the behavior itself that *Doenjang-nyeo* and Gold Miss represent is not negatively perceived. Rather, they asserted that the consuming pattern of *Doenjang-nyeo* or Gold Miss should be respected by others in so far as *Doenjang-nyeo* or Gold Miss would not cause harm or inconvenience to others.

Interviewee D: I believe it is wrong to blame women for liking luxurious items because it is just their personal preference.

Interviewee J: Well, it is their life. [...] People have their own way of life. It is acceptable if they don’t do people damage. Whatever they do, it is their money.

Both of them recognize consumption as a matter of an individual, therefore others cannot judge. This attitude is more or less contradictory: On the one hand, they underline their interest and partaking in public issues; on the other, they do not call economic class into question. For these women, politics is public while economy is private and these are separate. This is unfortunate as they are not at all. This might cause bewilderment or ambivalence when they realize politics/public and economy/private are in fact entangled.

Moreover, their awareness of the terms is very different from what their male counterparts thought. As addressed at the beginning of this chapter, men created the term *Doenjang-nyeo* to mock young women and their purchasing habits, and kept using it to make fun of women. Women, however, consider the attack as unreasonable; furthermore, they criticized back that men are no exception in this area.

Interviewee A: There are *Doenjang-nyeos* very into designer products. But it is also true that many men are as well. One of my friends married a man who has been working in Samsung (well-known for high salaries in Korea) for three years, yet did not save any money. My friends realized that her husband is a luxury products addict. Men too adorn themselves and follow trends. [...] I guess men in their forties who are the dominating group in society worked up new phrases to make women look irrational and silly.

Interviewee B: It is not only women but men. I guess materialism and excessive consumption are prevalent in our society, and these cases are not merely limited to women.

This perception is equally applied to the Gold Miss discourse:

Interviewee J: I do not like the word Gold Miss because there are plenty of Gold Misterys who waste money. However, no term is for men because it is natural and taken for granted for men to do such a thing. That is, our society admits that men deserve waste financial resources and enjoy social status while it does not that women do the same thing. Because women have never done it before.

They appreciate that it is the Korean patriarchal society which marginalizes the status of women as a consumer. As a result, my interviewees were somewhat antagonistic to the fact that “men” made up such terms to name women’s behaviors, which they themselves found unproblematic. The relatively open attitude toward the new appellations for them led a couple of them to confess that they belong to, or hope to be a *Doenjang-nyeo* or Gold Miss.

Interviewee N: I guess men think I am *Doenjang-nyeo* sometimes.

Interviewee O: I would love to be if I am able to do so. (Interviewer: How do you feel when you hear women are subordinated to marketing strategies or overly into consumption?) I think it is right. As women are more capable, they want to buy more items and to spend more money. [...] I believe I am the case as well.

Presumably, their non-negative attitudes for *Doenjang-nyeo* or Gold Miss stem from their assumption that being a *Doenjang-nyeo* or Gold Miss symbolizes one's financial resources. In other word, if one is called either *Doenjang-nyeo* or Gold Miss, it is because others think she is affluent, though it is not necessarily a negative connotation. And there is no reason to refute it since being considered affluent is not a bad thing at all.

Interviewees D, I, and K, despite their disapproval in the beginning, as the interview progressed signaled that their consuming habits are open to social interpretation that they, themselves, might be considered *Doenjang-nyeo* or Gold Miss. Unlike these interviewees, many did not say they identified with *Doenjang-nyeo* or Gold Miss. Nevertheless, all of them admitted that *Doenjang-nyeos* or Gold Misses exist around them, or they have heard about *Doenjang-nyeos* or Gold Misses from acquaintances.

Interviewee C: Only a very small minority. I do not have such characters around me. But my friends told me that there are some. [...] I guess there are some, that's why such a word is popular. But not for me.

Interviewee H: Some people around me. But they consume because they can afford it. [...] At my workplace, there are so many Gold Misses. They earn a lot. With their income, they study languages, play golf, drive (expensive) imported cars.

In short, no one thinks she, herself, is either *Doenjang-nyeo* or Gold Miss but others think she is. Perhaps, interviewees are reluctant to use *Doenjang-nyeo* or Gold Miss for themselves because they define the words as having negative connotations, such as materialism, overspending, or obsession with luxury goods.

Consumption? Joy!

According to my interviewees, when they define *Doenjang-nyeo* or Gold Miss, consumption, and in particular, excessive consumption, is a keyword. Because of the “excessive” part, most of interviewees maybe refuse to apply the words to themselves, although they do think that there are *Doenjang-nyeos* or Gold Misses around.

Nonetheless, their refusal to identify themselves with *Doenjang-nyeo* or Gold Miss does not mean that they reject “consumption” itself. Rather, it is regarded as one of the most important behaviors in their lives.

Interviewer: What does consumption mean to you and your life?

Interviewee C: Somewhat. Investment for me?

Interviewee D: I love shopping and get rid of tons of stress by doing so. This should be respected and speaking ill of it is bad.

Interviewee E: Joy!

Interviewee K: De-stressing. Sometimes, I buy what I didn't plan to do, or go shopping to relieve stress. Consumption for me. Not indispensable but still needed.

Interviewee M: Consumption is very, very important. It is a way to liberate me.

Interested items may vary but consumption does not stop. I do not think women can stop consuming.

Interviewee N: Consumption decreases stress. It is a truth.

Interviewee O: It is something that cultivates me.

Quite interesting is that they consider consumption as a tool to release stress rather than as purchasing products for their living. Its meaning seems to have become extended. This perspective might be different from that of previous female generations. Interviewee K is a recent college graduate and started working as a book editor at a small publishing company, making a low income. She believed consumption is not indispensable but still needed. Her description of consumption signifies that the meaning of consumption has expanded from a necessary behavior for basic living to one of the ways of investing in order to express “me” and enjoy life.

Yet, it doesn't necessarily mean that these women overspend beyond their ability; rather, they usually avoid buying unplanned items. However, they are very open to reasonable and useful consumption by their standards, and are unlikely to save on costs when a decision is made following reasonable consideration, and is clearly beneficial to them. That is to say, even though they cannot, or do not want to be glamorous or splendid, like the postfeminist women in the media, or they cannot or do not want to use excessive money, like *Doenjang-nyeo*, or live affluently with high salaries like Gold Miss, they do continue to consume in their own way. And, in doing so, they have certain items that they are devoted to purchasing. For instance, Interviewee D, a married PR professional, is a bag collector: “I love bags [...] I can't give up bags.” When she delivered a baby, she asked her husband to buy her a refined bag for a gift. Yet, she doesn't care about brands and buys cheap ones as far as she finds it cute. Interviewee J had not known about luxury goods until she went to a graduate school. She is not interested in adorning herself; she

always wears an old-fashioned backpack, which she wore on an interview day with me, even in a formal suit. She hates buying fashion items, which is “a waste of money” for her. However, she has her own burning products: “I am indifferent in luxury items. But I do not save money for buying equipment for mountain climbing because they need to be light and functional.” Put simply, climbing tool is her luxury items. Interviewee K is a Converse sneaker-holic. She owns a collection of every color and changes her sneakers everyday with the same clothes on. Interviewee M is into buying rock-climbing paraphernalia and occasionally orders overseas items paying expensive delivery fees. She defends her behavior saying “I spend my money on it (sporting equipment), that is, what I myself feel attracted.” These buying activities of ordinary women confirm *and* dispute those of postfeminist women in media. They do buy luxurious goods, but luxury has different implications to each of them and their consuming of the luxury develops around their own incomes, hobbies, or backgrounds. This may be equally applicable to other demographic groups; however, consumption means more to these women in their twenties and thirties as Interviewee C reveals:

All of us consume. The thing is where we spend our money. We (young women) are relatively a stable age group in a lifecycle and have enough time to use our economic resources. When we were students, we didn't have financial ability. When we are older than now, we may not have enough time to spend. But our group can balance between time and money. That is, a very good timing for spending our income for ourselves in terms of money, time, and physical strength. This observation is very insightful and, as a matter of fact, very true. As argued earlier, it is only in recent times that Korean young women have had economic power and the time

to use it. The earlier generation did not have the financial means or the chance to take advantage of it, as they usually married in their mid-twenties. The current generation has been embracing different circumstances: Most of them have the same education level as men and their work generally guarantees disposable income, despite the restricted opportunities of rising to a high place, as some interviewees pointed out above. This move-up in the social ladder contributes to their forming the viewpoint that marriage is optional, as it might threaten their current lifestyle including their consumer patterns. Some statements that they made in the interviews demonstrate how much they value both work and consumption in their lives, and what their worldview is regarding economic activity. When I asked how much consumption is important in their lives, Interviewee M responded: “Yes, extremely. I don’t know whether I work in order to make money or I work and thus make money.” Interviewee O, born into a well-off family, to the question, what kind of keywords could define her generation, assured that it would be “Money and capability to make it.” For this group of women, money is immensely important not because they just like to spend it but it enables them to do what they want.

Throughout the interviews, my informants showed similar attitude with postfeminist women in media when it comes to consuming behaviors. But each of them defines consumption differently based on their backgrounds and perspectives, and practice consumerism within their limits and in their own way. In other words, consumption, for these young women, is not materialism, or the identification with materials, but one of the significant and necessary activities that empower their lives and status. Additionally, they did not believe that feminism was done for their generation and become depoliticized. Rather they *are* political, though they possess the strong sense of

individualism. That is, they practice political perspective in the self-guided ways, which do not need to be in the form of collectivism. In essence, they pioneer their own lifestyles that neither media nor academy have examined before.

### Conclusion

This chapter began by introducing new appellations and discourses about young women in Korea, whose status as citizens and consumers has risen in recent years: *Doenjang-nyeo* and Gold Miss, and the media's corresponding texts. Additionally, I pointed out similar cultural phenomena in other countries, like chick lit and flicks, and American dramas. I then discussed what postfeminist researchers argue about postfeminism and its limitations. To disrupt and further amplify the academic postfeminist discussion that dismisses postfeminism as media representation, first, I traced the backgrounds and processes that young women have loomed large in the Korean society and, second, I included what real women say about themselves and about the postfeminist discourses, which have been veiled.

Michel Foucault debunked the concealed relationship between power and discourse: Power produces discourse under the name of knowledge, and discourse with institutional apparatuses contributes to the maintenance of the power. This discourse theory explains the current circulation of postfeminist discourses in Korea, as well as in other countries. Men feel fearful toward women who are achieving similar political, social, and economic status as men, and, as a result, strive to suppress the upgraded position of women by connecting it to consumerism. Kwon (2011) wrote the impending crisis of masculinity that men experience in the modern Korean society as the

transnational patriarchal structure is gradually challenged and crumbling because of female appearances in public sphere.<sup>52</sup> Aiming the (re)solidification of male-centered spaces, the power of Korean men produce and disseminate demeaning discourses about women such as *Doenjang-nyeo*, Gold Miss or mediated women internalizing new traditionalism. McRobbie (2011) unmasked this “governing strategy” to maintain the male-centered state hegemony which takes the best use of media and popular culture, what Louis Althusser called one of the ideological state apparatuses.<sup>53</sup>

Through my interviews, it turned out that young women obviously recognize the power structures and gender hierarchy between women and men as ingrained in the naming. Furthermore, women generally showed a very critical attitude to such discourses and its materialized form in media doing oppositional reading of the texts (Hall, 1997/2006). In fact, they did not show any tendency to return to the patriarchal system of the past or materialism that McRobbie (2006) harshly blamed in postfeminist popular texts. Instead, these women negotiated and intergrafted conflicting ideologies in their lives well such as political citizenship, individualism, consumerism, capitalism, and such. In this regard, the women whom I interviewed share affinities and dissimilarities with academically defined postfeminist women meaning that we can't thoroughly displace

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<sup>52</sup> Kwon (2011) pointed out the crisis of masculinity is a transnational discourse. She put it: “Heterosexual masculine identity, according to Cook (2006), is performed against the anxiety of ‘the (failed) repression of femininity that is central to the production of male identity’ (p. 48). In our contemporary society, this anxiety has ‘has been intensified by feminism’ (Cook, p. 50). Put simply, as the status of women rises, and conventional masculinity continues to be challenged, men experience a sense of impending crisis. The various manifestations of feminism have typically functioned as internal pressures to masculine authority; but, in addition, as Walzer (2002) argues, the advent of contemporary globalization and the subsequent cultural pluralism it brought about have functioned externally to undermine the notion of a ‘unitary national culture,’ which men so depend upon for their cultural authority (p. 221).” (p. 199)

<sup>53</sup> ISAs are practical forms, such as education, religion, family, media, or cultural industries, which inculcate dominant ideologies into people and reproduce the ideologies (Storey, 2006/1993, p. 78).

postfeminism as a merely media spectacle. Given this, it would be a matter of urgency that postfeminist scholarship implants more complexities based on down-to-earth observation of contemporary women in the notion of postfeminism in media and broaden the denotation of postfeminism from media-oriented to reality-grounded.

With the consuming culture of ordinary Korean women revisited, in the next chapter, I investigate how the consumerism and subculture of these young women have become targeted by the Korean media industry. Media companies, especially film studios, promptly read the changes and trends in young women, and began creating media products aiming to attract them. Same-sex content is included among these products.

CHAPTER FOUR  
COMMODIFYING SUBCULTURE: GLOBALIZATION, KOREAN MEDIA, AND  
LOCAL WOMEN

Koreans, and in particular young female fans of gay popular media, have been gradually becoming more open-minded to homosexuals. Still, much of the general public retains their negative attitudes toward homosexuality and homosexuals. Four recent newspaper articles in Korea are illustrative of contemporary attitudes toward homosexuality:

1. A company in the business of making high school textbooks categorizes homosexuality as a social problem. (*Nurisaem*, 2009)
2. A Korean male model and actor, Kim Ji-Hoo, kills himself after coming out as gay. He reportedly had a hard time dealing with criticism of his sexuality. (Seo, 2008)<sup>54</sup>
3. A mother commits her teenage daughter to a mental hospital after the girl came out. The mother reportedly wanted her daughter committed before others became aware of the teenager's "abnormal" sexuality. (J. H. Lee, 2008b).
4. Hardline conservative groups ran advertisements in newspapers declaring: "SBS [Seoul Broadcasting System] should take responsibility if my son, who became a homosexual after watching *Life is Beautiful* (*Insaengen Areumdawo*),<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> In 2007, Kim started his career as a runway model. As soon as he made his debut in popular media, he gained popularity as an actor. After he came out on a television show in 2008, he received a number of malicious comments. Furthermore, even his agency cancelled their contract with him. As a result, he suffered from severe depression. Finally, he committed suicide at 23.

<sup>55</sup> *Life is Beautiful* is a soap opera from 2010. It was the first drama dealing with gay figures as lead characters that aired in primetime. It deals with stories of a blended family comprised of

dies of AIDS!” The conservative groups such as the Association for Moral Gender Culture (*Barun Seong Moonhawrul Uihan Gookmin Yeonhap*) and the National Association of Mothers for Moral Education (*Cham Gyoyuk Eomeoni Jeongook Moim*)<sup>56</sup> also claimed, “The drama *Life is Beautiful*” (*Insang-en Areumdawo*) is promoting homosexuality without considering the fact that the probability of homosexuals being infected with AIDS is 700 times greater than heterosexuals.” (Heo, 2010)

In fact it is worth noting that attitudes toward homosexuality in Korea have not always been so antagonistic as the above descriptions would suggest. During the Silla Dynasty (B.C. 57– A.D. 935), according to J. Lee (2000), who traced the history of homosexuality in Korea, same-sex cultures were not found as objectionable as they are today. For instance, many songs and poems from that time period make clear that *Hwarang* bands, leaders of a male military group of the dynasty’s king, enjoyed intercourse with same-sex partners<sup>57</sup> (J. Lee, 2000). A king of the Goryeo Dynasty, Gongmin (1330-1393), kept a retinue of bodyguards comprised of handsome young boys with whom he had sexual relations (Kim & Hahn, 2006).<sup>58</sup>

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multiple generations. Yang Tae-Sub, the son of a couple in their second marriages, realizes he is homosexual when he happens to meet Kyung-Soo. Tae-Sub breaks off his engagement with his fiancée and comes out to his family. The drama received favorable reviews for describing homosexuals and their relationships with their family and society in a very realistic way for the first time on television. However, some expressed concerns about homosexuals being included in a traditional family narrative, and about the possibility that young people would be negatively influenced by such exposure.

<sup>56</sup> This group in particular is considered suspect.

<sup>57</sup> Kim and Hahn (2006) note that this is why the term *hwarang* in contemporary colloquial usage connotes sexually deviant behaviors. For example, the word *hwarang* means “a homosexually-oriented group” (p. 62) in modern times. *Hwaryangnyeon* currently means a promiscuous woman or prostitute.

<sup>58</sup> The film, *A Frozen Flower* (*Ssanghwajeon*, 2008), dramatized this story. It will be discussed in Chapter 5.

But during the subsequent Chosun Dynasty (1392-1910), when Confucian ideas were imported, visible homosexuality was treated differently. Confucianism is grounded in a male-centered, heterosexual, and hierarchical family system. For a Confucian, a central, if not the most central, concern is that a family requires the production of a male heir to carry on the family line.<sup>59</sup> This idea was dominant for centuries, and to a large extent still exists in much of East Asia. Most crucial was maintaining a family which was “not only an emotional and a physical unit but the prototype of social structure and life” (Kim & Hahn, 2006, p. 60) and which, of course, had a male to carry on the family line. Therefore, people simply took for granted heterosexual marriage, and birth resulting from heterosexual marriage.

Even with the advent of democracy in the 1940s, relatively little has changed in Korea with regard to public, mainstream sentiment about homosexuality. Confucian ideas have remained deeply rooted. Society’s patriarchal structure has only further legitimated the status and expectations for heterosexual marriage, and made having a male successor mandatory. The authoritarian military government has implemented this Confucian ideology in order to maintain the military and to promote industrialization, which, in turn, has reinforced heteronormative values in Korea (Bong, 2008).

As a result, Koreans have remained largely ignorant about homosexuality and homosexuals (Park-Kim, Lee Kim, & Kwon-Lee, 2006). No official mention of their

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<sup>59</sup> As for the mental anxiety that homosexuals feel in terms of their family and sexuality, Seo (2001) stated: “Indeed, most Korean homosexuals consistently see family as the biggest problem troubling them. Moreover, they see the discovery of their homosexual identity by their family as the greatest possible calamity threatening their future. More than society’s hatred and prejudice, these homosexuals fear the anxiety and stress that would result from the breaking of their familial bond. As a result of this psychological barrier, the Korean homosexual movement, unable to demand specific public activities from its members, must limit itself to private activities within the lesbian and gay communities.” (p. 77)

existence can be found within government records (Seo, 2001). Homosexuals have been ignored and thus “national or public authorities did not, strictly speaking, differentiate homosexuals” from the general society (Seo, 2001, pp. 66-67). As a result, Korean homosexuals have had little opportunity to produce counter-discourses, and are considered to be non-existent.<sup>60</sup> Therefore, until the 1990s, most Koreans were not even aware of the concept of homosexuality. The meaning of the word homosexuality was unclear because “it was confusingly used with other concepts such as transgender and bisexuality” (Na, 2009, p. 13). Even today, little awareness exists of what homosexuality is and how it relates to other sexual identities. Scholars have noted that homosexuals “have remained hidden, homosexuality has gone unmentioned” (Bong, 2008, p. 89), and that many homosexuals themselves lament the fact that revealing their sexual identity to their families and society is still difficult and often discouraged.

Media representation reflected the prevailing reality. It is indisputable that before the mid-2000s, homosexuals were rarely represented in Korean popular culture — as was the case in real life. There were, however, sporadic attempts made in non-mainstream films over the years. J. Lee (2000) considered *Ascetic: Woman and Woman (Kumyok: Yeoja wa Yeoja)*, released in 1976, to be the first Korean lesbian film. The movie is unquestionably centered around a tragic and erotic love story between two female protagonists. Its director, however, Kim Su-Hyeong, declared that he had aimed to make

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<sup>60</sup> Seo (2001) argued that in the West, “external pressures” contributed to the formation of the queer movement. According to him, Western countries had state-regulations and controls that considered queers as detrimental and illegal. As resistance to the discrimination intensified, the queer movement began to gain traction and insisted on their rights as a recognized group.

a feminist movie, not a lesbian one.<sup>61</sup> But for reasons that remain unclear, *Asceitic: Woman and Woman* is not popularly recognized as a same-sex movie.<sup>62</sup> *Broken Branches* (*Naeilro Hurunun Kang*, 1995), produced by Park Jae-Ho, on the other hand, is considered to be the first full-fledged Korean same-sex film. In the movie, Confucian values are challenged and ignored by a gay protagonist who introduces his male partner to his family (J. Lee, 2000). As for other films, many identify *Road Movie* (2002), directed by Kim In-Sik, as a classic Korean same-sex film. As the title suggests, it consists of many episodes that two men face on a road trip and fall in love. *Camellia* (*Dongbaek-kkot*, 2004) is another movie that has been categorized in the same-sex themed genre. This movie deals with the many difficulties faced by homosexual people, such as social discrimination, a failure to fall in love, and triangular love relationships. None of these same-sex movies became commercial successes.<sup>63</sup> A similar lack of interest greeted most of the television dramas about homosexuals, such as *Jazz* (1995), *Sad Temptation* (*Seulpeun Yohok*, 1999), *Lunch Among Lovers* (*Yeonindeului Jeomsimsiksa*, 2002), and *The Perfect Roommate* (*Wanbyeokhan Roommate*, 2004).

In 2005, *King and the Clown* (*Wangui Namja*) was released, marking a turning point for same-sex content in Korea.<sup>64</sup> A mega-hit, *King and the Clown* laid the foundation for the production of other same-sex films. As Bong (2008) noted about the

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<sup>61</sup> It is noted that “there was nothing apart from Western feminism which Kim Su-Hyeong could employ to approach issues of homosocial femininity in his film” (J. Lee, 2000, p. 275) since only feminism—not queer theory—was widespread among Korean artists at that time.

<sup>62</sup> This might stem from a variety of reasons. Firstly, the film was not identified as a same-sex film by the director himself. Also, it failed to gain attention from either audiences or film critics—that is, the film itself is unknown. The fact that most of the films that the director produced were erotic films for adults might have influenced the way in which the film was evaluated.

<sup>63</sup> I analyze *Broken Branches*, *Road Movie*, and *Camellia* in Chapter 5.

<sup>64</sup> In Chapter 5 I examine this film in greater detail.

movie, “mainstream mass media began to tap the rising public interest in homosexuality” (p. 93). J. Lee (2012) echoed this argument, stating that “various kinds of same-sex themed films were released” (p. 1) after the movie had become a blockbuster. Such films included *No Regrets* (*Hoohoehaji Ana*, 2006), *Antique* (*Seoyanggoldong Yanggwajajeom*, 2008), *A Frozen Flower* (*Ssanghwajeom*, 2008), *Boy Meets Boy* (*Sonyeon, Sonyeoneul Mannada*, 2008), *Just Friends* (*Chingoo Sa-ee*, 2009), *Hello My Love* (2009), and *Life is Peachy* (*Changpihae*, 2010) as well as a number of indie films. Kim and Singer (2011) have even suggested that *King and the Clown* ushered in a “Blockbuster Age” of same-sex cinema, on the heels of the earlier “Invisible” and “Camouflage” Ages. Several years after the movie’s release, television also began producing dramas<sup>65</sup> with homosexual characters, among them *Private Taste* (*Gaeineui Chuihyang*, 2010), *The World That They Live in* (*Geudeuli Saneun Sesang*, 2010), the aforementioned *Life is Beautiful* (*Insaengen Arumdawo*, 2010), and *The Daughters of Club Bilitis* (*Bilitis-ui Ddaldeul*, 2011). Other media content, including commercials and music videos, seem to be on the same track.

Homosexuals, who used to go unnoticed by the mainstream media as well as by ordinary Koreans, are now not so uncommon in Korean popular culture — despite the absence of real-live homosexuals and homosexuality in non-fictional culture. What caused this highly curious and interesting turnabout in the visibility of homosexuals? And what caused the inconsistency between the reality for homosexuals and the media representation of them?

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<sup>65</sup> Lee (2008b) pointed out that it is not uncommon to see homosexuals on television, which is a relatively more conservative medium than film. Nonetheless, television dramas, unlike film, tend to avoid portraying homosexuality as the main subject matter or including homosexuals, only employing them mostly as supporting material.

This chapter proposes that the turnabout and incongruity stem largely from the liberalization of the Korean media industry as well as its co-optation of local young women's subculture—the production and consumption of glocal gay media—and these females' increased substantial social and cultural power, which have been discussed in the previous chapters. In this chapter, I argue the role of the media sector in the transition related to same-sex themed content. The chapter is structured as follows: (1) To situate the process in a broader context, I explore previous works focusing on the commodification of culture and the relationship between global and local, and conceive of commodification as interactive, cyclical, and recurring practices, and of globalization as more multi-layered than unilateral. (2) I provide a history of the Korean media industry. In particular, I review the influence of globalization on the Korean media industry and the responses of local government and media companies since the late 1990s. (3) I focus on cinema, arguing that the conditions in which the industry found itself in the mid-2000s led to the acceptance of homosexual characters for young female audiences. (4) I investigate the ways in which the film sector paid attention to young women and their culture. I include interviews with Korean women in their 20s and 30s about their interest in homosexuals and homosexual culture. (5) I examine the production of same-sex content by referring to interviews with producers and marketers of same-sex content, and analyze relevant market results.

### Commodification of Culture

In his classic *Das Kapital*, Karl Marx defined commodity as “an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another” (1887/2010,

p. 26). The notion of a commodity was crucial and fundamental in Marx's work in explaining the development of a capitalist society, and even in this post-modern age, commodification processes remain one of the pivotal preconditions for such a society (Prodnik, 2012). But while Marx's version of the concept remains valid in many ways, it needs to be updated critically in others. Marx (1887/2010) seemed to limit the extent or application of a commodity and erase complexities in the commodification process:

In this sense, every commodity is a symbol, since, insofar as it is value, it is only the material envelope of the human labor spent upon it. [...] The intermediate steps of the process vanish in the result and leave no trace behind. Commodities find their own value already completely represented, without any initiative on their part, in another commodity existing in company with them. (pp. 62-63)

After the conceptualization by Marx, the idea about commodity-form has since been widely expanded. Prodnik (2012) argues that “the current phase of commodification goes much further than this; it starts to erode and change almost all human contacts and relations” (p. 298). Literally, everything is being commodified. In her research of contemporary consumer society, Sassatelli (2007) suggested that “there are very few things or services that can never be sold under any circumstances” (p. 139). Everything—works of art or sacred relics—has the potential to be monetized. Classic paintings are sold at auction and judged by the prices they fetch, and religious sites have become part of tour packages. Human experiences can likewise be transformed into commodities that are then sold back to us. As others have noted, babies, sex, the eggs of female models, human organs, and freedom have all been valorized and traded (Ertman & Williams,

2005). Jhally (2006) declared, “The logic of the commodity form of culture is not limited to any one sphere of social life” (p. 57).

With “commodification<sup>66</sup> having spread into all areas of life” (Prodnik, 2012, p. 297), people have become so accustomed to the market’s appropriation of our cultural practices that they have become desensitized even to the commodification of our identities and, correspondingly, that of our cultures. Today, our identities and cultures are heavily exploited by capitalists. Each category of our identities and cultures, from our gender or race to the subcultures with which we identify, is teased into a market segment and commodified. Among these segments, commercialized forms of gender or racial cultures are currently ubiquitous.

One such example is commodity feminism<sup>67</sup> (Goldman, Heath, & Smith, 1991), which refers to the appropriation of feminist discourses to be sold as products. It suggests that even the subversive and defiant movements that arise to argue against sexist discrimination can be transformed into a commodity. Recently, capitalists have begun paying more attention to other identities, such as sexual orientation and ethnicity. AIDS magazines targeting HIV positive gay people have been published (Sender, 2004), while in the United States television channels and films have been created for the Latina/o population (Molina-Guzmán, 2010). It seems industries are fully geared toward commodifying all the tangible and intangible markers of identity within society. Nothing

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<sup>66</sup> Radin (2005) conceptualized “commodification” as denoting “a particular social construction of things people value, their social construction as commodities” and referring to “the social process by which something comes to be apprehended as a commodity, as well as to the state of affairs once the process has taken place” (p. 81).

<sup>67</sup> Goldman, Heath, and Smith (1991) related the notion of commodity feminism to the relationship of female empowerment and the increased consumption power of women. They analyzed magazine advertisements and concluded that advertisers promote beautifying a body, which is the key locus for expressing ourselves, with the help of cosmetic products as “an avenue to empowerment” (p. 335).

is uncommodifiable. No idea is safe from being transformed into a product. Defining the notion of commodity as an object that satisfies human desires, Marx (1887/2010) might not have anticipated that the concept could be broadened to include the commodification of intangible ideas such as Latinidad, let alone even more rarefied and seemingly uncommodifiable notions such as freedom.

The process of commodification is necessarily undertaken by a system of production, and has a tight relationship with communication and technology. Scholars like Fuchs (2011), drawing on Marx's writings, argue that communication and technology are merely efficient tools for producing and circulating commodities that help minimize costs and maximize profits. Considering the conditions during Marx's time, this argument is not groundless; however, it does not represent the ongoing dynamic relationship between commodification and communication. Communication and its technologies make a contribution to the general process of commodification—through such processes as production, distribution, and sales—and the process likewise permeates other communication processes and institutions (Mosco, 2009; Prodnik, 2012). Not only optimizing but also transforming the process of producing, distributing, and selling a commodity, advertising and mass media companies, for example, normally play an indispensable part in translating human values into commodities. With its vast resources for visualizing, textualizing, and glamorizing, the communication and technology industry, driven by mass media, is quite successful at representing, creating, and manipulating our desires.

I have argued so far that commodification prevails in our society and that in the process business sectors appropriate our cultures, identities, and desires. By no means,

however, do I mean that commodification is always reproachable and incorrect, or that its process is unilateral from producers to consumers. Radin (2005), while admitting to defining “commodity” in a manner similar to Marx, refuted the Marxian understanding that commodification is always wrong and cannot coincide with noncommodified social interactions. Building upon Appadurai, who argued that commodities are political, Radin (2005) redirected the concerns of commodification from “the appropriation of cultural forms and knowledge by outsiders” to “a strategy for both economic and cultural growth” by claiming “cultural control requires some market control” (p. 19). This is because commodities, rather unintentionally, help the constitution and solidification of identity and social relation. Two such examples are Kwanzaa, an African-American cultural celebration observed at the end of the year (Austin, 2005), and the propulsion of the gay and lesbian movement by way of market means in the 1990s (Chasin, 2005). For this reason, Chasin (2005) insisted in her analysis of gay and lesbian markets and gay men and lesbians answering activism that “capitalism enables a political struggle for rights” (p. 214). Ertman and Williams (2005) sound a similar note, arguing that commodification can have diverse meanings in a variety of social contexts at the local and global levels.

Additionally, commodification is never a one-way process. Sassatelli (2007), the scholar referenced earlier who argued that everything is being commodified, did not favor a view that commodities were unilaterally influenced by a single state-sponsored ideology, as was argued by the Frankfurt School and parts of leftist American radicalism. Rather, she asserted that consumption should be understood as an active and creative practice. In this sense, consumption is also a form of production. Consuming allows consumers to produce their own meaning in the process. Similarly, Banet-Weiser and

Mukherjee (2012) examine the complexities embedded in contemporary consumers' political activism regarding the commodification process. Notably, such commodity activism can itself be colonized by a neoliberal capitalist economy; nevertheless, it still works to rupture neoliberal capitalism (Molina-Guzmán, 2012).

Based on these theories of commodity and commodification, and echoing Appadurai (1986/2005), who pointed out that commodification “lies at the complex intersection of temporal, cultural and social factors” (p. 38), I see the process of commodification as a cyclical one, in which three developments occur: (1) incorporation into a market, (2) resistance to it, and (3) new exploration. These three things are constantly happening, may affect and interanimate one another, and may overlap and take place simultaneously. I support the assertion that young women are not simply passive consumers but “prosumers.”<sup>68</sup> Prosumer is a popular concept in new media scholarship. The concept suggests the “DIY” (do it yourself) dimension of contemporary popular culture in which people write blogs, make films, upload them, and comment in discussion threads, hence flattening the sphere of cultural production. In contemporary culture, large numbers of prosumers actively and critically engage in the process of commodity consumption, production, distribution, and circulation. I claim that young females, as prosumers, contribute to and disrupt the process of commodifying homosexuality in Korea.

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<sup>68</sup> This term was introduced by Alvin Toffler, who defined it as the “progressive blurring of the line that separates producer from consumer” (Toffler, 1980, p. 267). Now the term is frequently discussed with the participatory culture that emerged with Web 2.0.

## Globalization and Local Culture

Until the 1970s, media content from the United States and several other Western countries, such as Britain and France, had a strong influence over consumers in less-developed countries, further intensifying their cultural dependence on the West (Chadha & Kavoori, 2000). Latin American and Asian countries imported a considerable number of U.S. programs, due to the low costs involved with importation and, relative to the West, a lack of resources. For this reason, many scholars from developing countries harshly criticized U. S. cultural imperialism, fearing that Western values were being “injected” into the Third World (Streberny, 2001). The discussion about media imperialism was, according to Straubhaar (1991), continually reproduced by media scholars as well. To explain this phenomenon, a media studies theory was developed, “dependency theory.” Such concerns lingered even into the 21<sup>st</sup> century:

At its most pessimistic, this global domination argument points to the omnipresence of First World multinational corporations, which seem to have made their way into every part of the world, absorbing the peoples and transforming their economies, politics and ultimately their cultures. This argument points to this omnipresence as fuelling cultural imperialism, and Westernization, or, more particularly Americanization. [...] The capacity of American economies of scale to produce large volumes of TV text at low profit margins enables the US to saturate overseas. (Lewis, 2002, p. 347)

Some theorists, however, had different ideas concerning the prevalence of Western popular culture. For instance, based on empirical research, Straubhaar (1991) claimed that local audiences, seeking cultural proximity, preferred domestic cultural

products and intraregional media texts over Western ones. Among dependency theory's detractors, postcolonial thinkers opposed the arguments associated with dependency theory. Appadurai (2001) questioned the argument that a preset order was embedded in the consumption of transnational media content. He noted the contextuality of embracing globalization: "The relationship of flows of persons, technologies, finance, information and ideology to one another as they constellate into particular events and social forms will be radically context-dependent" (Appadurai, 2001, p. 600). Like Appadurai, Morley (2006) argued for the possibility of reinterpreting contents in a localized way. There is an array of work offering studies of cross-cultural differences in the decoding of American television programs like *Dallas* and *Dynasty*. Such studies demonstrate how globally distributed media forms are often reinterpreted by audiences through their own local cultural frameworks (Morley, 2006). Other scholars, such as Ang (1985) and Oliveira (1993), have attempted to prove that the way an audience receives and processes media content is incompatible with the hypodermic needle model of media effects. Using detailed ethnographic cases, they concluded that audiences worldwide always made oppositional readings of the media they consumed (Morley, 2006).

In their reevaluation of media imperialism in Asia, Chadha and Kavoori (2000) argued that the involvement of transnational media corporations in the region was restricted "by the interplay of national gate-keeping policies, the dynamics of audience preference as well as the forces of local competition" (p. 428). The Korean case bolsters Chadha and Kavoori's (2000) argument. Although Korea has a long history of welcoming globally circulated media from developed countries, the result has not been a one-way flow. Rather, the imported culture has been complicated, modified and

appropriated by the local government, media sectors, and consumers.<sup>69</sup> I examine this dynamic in the following section by historicizing the Korean media economy.

### The Korean Media Industry in the Global System

Korea is among the Asian countries that have historically been most influenced by Western cultures. According to Song (2007), Korea has been eager to accept material or intangible goods from developed countries, foremost among them the United States and Japan, and the development of Korean popular culture has accordingly absorbed imported popular culture. Korea, therefore, is relatively vulnerable to the influence of globalization.

In fact, since the 1990s, a variety of factors have expedited globalization in Korea. As soon as President Kim Young-Sam was inaugurated in 1993, he strongly pursued globalization with the pledge of *Segyehwa*, Korean for globalization and his administration endeavored to bring about a small government (Jeon, 2004). For example, it loosened regulations for overseas financial influx to Korea for aiming a market-driven nation-state (Lee & Kim, 2010). The promotion of a neoliberal capitalist system worldwide resulted in an acceleration of the exchange of goods, culture, information and so on among nation-states. For instance, trade agreements between countries, such as free-trade agreements (FTAs), placed people in a globalized time and space. Korea concluded agreements with dozens of countries, including the United States, Chile, India, and Singapore, as well as the European Union. Today, throughout Korea, foreign goods, either material or immaterial, are ubiquitous. Likewise, Korean products are easily found in foreign countries.

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<sup>69</sup> In Chapter 2, I examined how young female fans in Korea reterritorialized global gay media.

Even though the basic rule of FTA calls for the free trade of all types of goods, most countries agreed in the 1990s to exclude cultural products from the list of goods to be traded. This is because they believed that the U.S.'s fully-fledged commercialized system in the cultural industry might hamper their cultural identity and diversity of languages (D. H. Kim, 2011). However, cultural products have eventually been included in FTAs, as the global media market has been growing through the development of communication technologies. Thus, to provide against local cultural industries being encroached by the U.S. companies, governments of nation-states sought ways to strengthen their own popular culture sector before diving into an intense competition in the media market.

Perceiving and embracing this transition and global trend, according to Jin (2011), Korean political leaders, including past presidents Roh Tae-Woo and Kim Young-Sam, pushed forward the reorganization of the Korean media industry in a way that has helped industries move toward deregulation, liberalization, and privatization. At the same time, the state system and society became more democratized and diversified away from the former military-dominated authoritarian regime. The Korean government became cognizant of the potential and significance of the culture industry, not for control and manipulation of public discourse, but for boosting domestic economy. A story recounted by Shim (2002) is illustrative:

In 1994, the report from the Presidential Advisory Board on Science and Technology pointed out that the revenue from "Jurassic Park," a Hollywood film, was equivalent to that of 1.5 million Hyundai car sales, which fundamentally contended that one film could be worth more than the export of Hyundai cars

during two years. The government used this paper to advocate its investment in the media industry persuading citizens<sup>70</sup> and expedited the development of “the high value-added audiovisual industry (*youngsang san-eop*) as the national strategic industry for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.” (Shim, 2002, p. 340)

In the promotion of the culture industry, Korean conglomerates enjoyed strong governmental support: tax breaks and loose regulations for the establishment of media companies. A 1995 policy report offers insight into the logic behind the support: “Korea needs to encourage vertically integrated media conglomerates. [...] While there is a concern for the projected monopoly of information, in order to cope with the large-scale TNCs, we need media conglomerates to match their sizes and resources” (Shim, 2002, p. 340). In such favorable conditions, major Korean conglomerates such as Samsung, Hyundai, Daewoo, and LG — which had been barred from investing in cultural industries and had based their business in the manufacturing sector — expanded their territory into the production of cultural goods. These conglomerates have since become primarily involved in production, distribution, and exhibition in all areas of media, including publishing companies, cable channels, film productions, the information and communication technology fields, and most recently, broadcast networks (Ryoo, 2008). Nam (2008) contended that deregulation of the media industry and ownership concentration in the current age germinated in this government-centered creation of the cable industry. Indeed, “the widespread corporate involvement in the media industry has caused concern about increasing commercialism” (Shim, 2002, p. 348).

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<sup>70</sup> According to Shim (2002), major newspapers reported on the importance of the culture industry to the national economy with frequent feature articles. By doing so, the discourse circulated throughout the country and persuaded Korean citizens.

National aspirations for the cultural industry were taken up by President Kim Dae-Joong who, upon being inaugurated in 1998 as the self-identified “President of Culture,” passed a law promoting the cultural industry and allocating far more funds to the media sector than previous administrations. He aggressively encouraged the spread and growth of the cultural industry and strongly supported the export of Korean media overseas. It was at that time then, that other Asian countries began taking note of Korean popular culture (Shim, 2004). With the rise of globalization and its impact on the policy changes in Korea toward liberalization, privatization, and deregulation, the Korean media industry has changed its orientation “from a state-led to a market-oriented system, mirroring the shifts in the overall Korean economy since the 1980s” (Jin, 2011, p. 85). Following the transition, transnational companies and their supporters in government aggressively introduced commercial media systems to Korean media conglomerates, in order to make inroads into advertising and programming that would promote consumerism (Mosco, 2009).<sup>71</sup>

The film industry deserves special attention because the Korean government considered it one of the core areas in cultural industry and strongly supported its development as one of the high value-added audiovisual industries (*youngsang san-eop*) aiming to create films like *Jurassic Park*. Before we look into why the government laid stress on films and what kind of policy it promoted to bolster films production, it is worth examining how government policy was pursued prior to embarking on the path toward greater globalization.

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<sup>71</sup> Mosco (2009) insisted that consumerism cultivated by the media system would create an atmosphere that favored consuming physical products, such as food, or services like health care and education.

The dictatorship between 1972 and 1986 severely controlled mass media, including film, because the authorities feared the possibility that media would propagate ideologies opposed to its rule. S. H. Park (2007) described the political atmosphere for the film industry at the time:

Like other media, cinema functioned to shape political opinion to favor the centralized government's designated political and economic goals. The censorship board operated as a means to block controversial narratives and representations that threatened political stability and unity, with support from the state that limited private competition in film production. (S. H. Park, 2007, p. 16)

In addition, in order to assure its stable reign, the dictatorial government regulated the import of foreign film. After 1986, when a civilian government took power, the governmental leadership repudiated such strong control of the film industry. This is because it was influenced by the wave of globalization and found it to be important to liberate economic systems from the strong hands of the government and to have a well-established and active media industry. Therefore, the authorities aggressively pursued trade agreements with foreign countries as addressed above and eased back on governmental regulation of cinema. As a result, the doors to the domestic market were thrown open. As soon as restrictions on importing movies were lifted, viewership of Hollywood films rose from 60 percent in 1981 to 70 percent in 1988 to more than 80 percent in 1989 and 85 percent in the early 1990s (S. H. Park, 2007; Shim, 2002). Several Hollywood films attracted more than 1 million viewers in the early 1990s. Korean films, by contrast, rarely drew more than 100,000 moviegoers. According to Lim (1997), Korea became the second largest importer of Hollywood films than other countries in the world

in terms of the number of the films. In short, as a result of liberalization and deregulation in governmental economic policies, Korea was in a position of vulnerability with regard to the larger global film industry.

As Hollywood movies flooded in, the Korean government implemented policies favorable to Korean media conglomerates, hoping to revitalize the domestic film industry and to compete with the dominance of Hollywood films being consumed in Korea (Ryoo, 2008). First, the screen quota system was reaffirmed as “the core of such protectionist measures” (Lee, Kim, & Kim, 2008, p. 335). The screen quota system is a legislated policy that enforces a minimum number of screening days of domestic films each year to protect the nation’s films.<sup>72</sup> Moreover, a number of government-backed film festivals were held to promote Korean films for sale to foreign buyers. For instance, the Pusan International Film Festival, held annually, was supported and funded with the goal of making it the “mecca of the Asian film market.” Today it is considered to have overtaken “both the Hong Kong and Tokyo international film festivals to become the preeminent festival in Asia” (Frances, 2007, pp. 3-4). Among the measures, what the administrative leaders mostly paid attention to was the establishment of a foundation for boosting the participation of existing conglomerates in film production. It enacted the Promotion Law for Moving Images to provide tax breaks for film studios; it also opened the School of Film and Multimedia in 1995 (Shim, 2002). The school’s motto was “Learning Hollywood [...] to match their size and resources” (Shim, 2004, p. 9). Korean companies

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<sup>72</sup> According to Lee, Kim and Kim (2008), the history of the quota system goes back to 1966. However, the strong regulation was absent. After Coalition for Cultural Diversity in Moving Images (CDMI) was constituted in 1993, it has been effectively undertaken. There are dozens of countries that operate the screen quota system. The Korean version is the most protective and imperative.

naturally followed, and took advantage of the Hollywood-style studio system. Shim (2004, p. 10) explained the details of the “Learning Hollywood” action plans:

The big business introduced sophisticated business know-how to the mom-and-pop Korean film industry, such as audience research in film production and marketing as noted by a film producer Cho Min Hwan: “Like Hollywood, we are spending a lot on marketing and research, so our data on the audience is very exact” (as cited in Chon 2001a, p. 49).

According to Shim (2002), these newcomers to the cultural industry rationalized their oligopolistic system through the guise of reviving the national economy based on the audiovisual industry (*youngsang san-eop*). These efforts by the Korean government and media conglomerates paid off in the market: the market share of domestic films and the number of moviegoers increased. In 2001, according to Shim (2004), “homemade flicks recorded 46.1% of the market share, up from 16% in 1992. Korea is now the seventh-largest film market in the world, with the total number of theater audiences nationwide in 2000 being 70 million” (p. 12). In other words, as the Korean government planned, the competitiveness of the Korean movie industry was fostered and the Korean film market began to thrive. Needless to say, the industry employed a lot of the commercial systems that Hollywood film studios had introduced. Ko (2012) wrote that since the late 1980s, the Korean film system has evolved from “a cottage industry” in which a director is in charge of every task such as scenario, cast, promotion, and marketing to the Hollywood system that has a long period for planning yet a short time for production by entrusting professionals with each job.

In the middle of the last decade, the oligopoly among media giants in the industry intensified; the competition grew fiercer. S. K. Kim (2011) found that three media conglomerates—CJ Entertainment, Orion and Lotte—quickly succeeded in integrating investment, distribution, and screening, and ended up dominating 80 percent of the film market. Many small- and middle-sized film companies either closed their doors or struggled to survive.

At the same time, the Korean film industry faced many changes. First, the United States, which had insisted that the screen quota system violated free trade rules and had for years strongly requested its abolition (Shin & Stringer, 2007), changed its position and made abolition of the screen quota system a precondition for any FTA deal. Many movie people remained strongly opposed to this idea, but the Korean government decided to meet the demands halfway. The number of days required by the system was reduced by half (down to 73 from 146 days) by July 2006. This led to fears of a crisis for the Korean film industry, as they assumed that Hollywood films would again thrive at the expense of the domestic market. Korea's market share gradually declined from 63.9 percent in 2006 to 49.8 percent in 2007 to 42.1 percent in 2008, as did the number of viewers (S. K. Kim, 2011). S. K. Kim (2011) read into this a victory of the neoliberal system in the film industry over protectionism for cultural diversity.

Second, Korean movies started gaining huge popularity in other countries, especially in Asia, along with television dramas and popular music. Korean films are “regularly listed among the top ten films in Japan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Thailand, and Taiwan” (Frances, 2007, p. 3), leading some to call Korea's film industry the “New Hong Kong.” Korean film studios, aiming at a broader market, have collaborated with foreign

companies in Asia, and hired actors based on their popularity in other Asian countries (S. K. Kim, 2011). Recently, Korean cinema has grabbed much attention in Asian countries and beyond. Hollywood occasionally remakes Korean films. Furthermore, well-known Korean film directors produce films starring Hollywood or other global film stars. This year two of them released their films worldwide: Park Chan-Wook's *Stoker* (2013) with Mia Wasikowska and Nicole Kidman and Bong Joon-Ho's *Snow Piercer* (2013) featuring Chris Evans and Tilda Swinton. With the popularity of Korean popular culture, called *Hallyu* or Korean Wave,<sup>73</sup> Korean film has spread around the world.

To maintain the booming market in Korea, compete with Hollywood cinema, and satisfy consumer demands from global markets, producers and marketers of film began aggressively looking for new material for movies and attempting to vary genres, narratives, as well as casts. It was at the height of such efforts that *King and the Clown* took the country by storm. The film's most ardent fan group caught the attention of movie industry professionals.

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<sup>73</sup> In the beginning, Korean dramas initiated the wave. Shim (2004), in tracing the popularity of Korean popular back to the late 1990s, argued that, "The Korean Wave is indebted to the media liberalization that swept across Asia in the 1990s. For the first time since the Communist Party took over power in China, the national China Central Television Station (CCTV) aired a Korean TV drama *What is love all about?* (*Sarang-ee mogilae*) in 1997, which turned out to be a big hit. [...] In 1999, *Stars in my Heart* (*Byeol-eun nae gaseum-e*), another Korean television drama serial, was a big hit in China and Taiwan. Since then, Korean TV dramas have rapidly filled the airwaves, with a considerable increase observed in the late 1990s on television channels in the region including Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Vietnam and Indonesia" (p. 2). Ryoo (2008) attributed the dissemination of Korean popular products to the development of technologies. He claimed that Korea "is the most wired country in the world and its popular media artifacts are now consumed worldwide" (p. 874). The Internet and other media platforms have helped the globalization of domestic media content such as drama serials, movies, K-pop music, and online video games. *Hallyu*'s popularity was previously restricted to Asian countries, but has since spread to Europe, the Middle East, Africa and the Americas. For instance, the music video Gangnam featuring Psy, a Korean singer, became the first video to reach 1 billion hits on YouTube and the singer Psy is well-known world-wide (Falkenthal, 2012).

## Filming Valuable Viewer's Needs

The enormous popularity of *King and the Clown* (2005) convinced film professionals of the potential of same-sex content. It ranked as the top Korean movie ever released at the time and as of 2013, according to the Korean Film Council, is the fifth-highest grossing Korean movie. During the film's 112-day run in theaters, more than 12 million people watched it, a large number considering Korea's population is just over 47 million (J. Lee, 2012). The movie is a historical fiction funded by one of the major Korean film production companies and directed by a mainstream producer, Lee Joon-Ik. Public reception was ecstatic: 33,000 filmgoers gave the film 9 out of 10 (as of March 2012; J. Lee, 2012). Indeed, the movie's production values are high. Its narrative was considered robust, and its major characters, with one exception—the character of Gon-Gil—were played by famous actors. But, what really captured the attention of movie professionals was the strength of fandom among young women, who had emerged as a central economic interest with regard to Korea's planned media globalization plans. There were reportedly many avid female fan groups, some of whom watched the film at least 10 times.<sup>74</sup> One 23-year-old female claimed to have watched the film 45 times (Seo, 2006). In particular, much of young women's fandom focused on the male actor Lee Joon-Ki, who starred as Gon-Gil, a character portrayed with what are understood in Korea to be gay characteristics—pretty, slim, tall, and androgynous. Previously unknown but fueled by the overwhelming fandom of young, Korean women, Lee Joon-Ki is now a famous, established actor.

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<sup>74</sup> Seo (2006) interviewed the creator of a fan cyber community for *King and the Clown*, and the creator admitted to going “to theaters for the movie nine times [...] some members of the fan community did more than 10 times, and most of them at least two or three times” (para. 10).

The physical appearance of Lee Joon-Ki exemplifies the female fantasy of the ideal gay man. Such viewers entertain fantasies and desires for gay people based on their (the viewers') production and consumption of glocal gay-themed content. I also wrote that glocal same-sex texts have led these women to pay attention to same-sex popular cultures other than U.S. gay drama, *yaoi*, or fanfic or at least have helped them to open their minds to such cultures. In Chapter 3, I noted these women emerged as an important audience group with socioeconomic powers in contemporary Korean society. Consequently a huge commercial market targeted them, trying to cultivate their consumerism. With the success of *King and the Clown*, the Korean film industry understood how helpful these young women were to the bottom line in the film market. The industry also realized the potential of the same-sex theme. In his discussion of queer content and valuable viewers in the United States, Peters (2011) argued:

Commercial and cable broadcasters are concerned with the size of a program's audience *and* the amount of disposable income viewers have to spend. Viewers are hierarchically ranked as "valuable" or not, based on their disposable incomes. [...] televisual representation prior to the 1990s suggests that gays and lesbians have not always been a valued demographic group. Becker (2004) dates a significant representational shift for gays and lesbians into new prominence to the 1990s when televisual network executives began to believe that their most valued demographic, 18-34-year-olds, were a "progressive" and "sophisticated" group of liberal-minded viewers who would embrace gay and lesbian characters. In a complementary analysis, Fejes (2000) argues that the discovery that gay men were an attractive consumer market because of their supposedly high-income

profiles helped to bring gay characters to the small screen. Channel 4's public-service mandate led to the production of a miniseries about gay men that mapped favorably onto the privatized free market model of appealing to "valuable" demographics, including gay-positive straight viewers and supposedly wealthy gay viewers. (pp. 197-198)

Put simply, a commercial television system progresses as long as it finds valuable viewers, viewers with disposable incomes. This is how American networks have chosen to include homosexual characters, targeting initially the young, affluent, straight, and open-minded population and next the high-income homosexuals. Equally applicable is this to the Korean film industry. The commercial success of *King and the Clown* opened the industry's eyes to the value of same-sex topics and their fans, this female group who consist of women who are young, straight, and affluent, or at least, willing to pay for gay representation that they once enjoyed or enjoy with subcultural same-sex texts. In brief, as Korean film professionals identified the women as valuable viewers, same-sex themes were suddenly no longer taboo in mainstream film production.

In fact, gay themes were hardly a bad choice for the topic-starved Korean film market (Song, 2008). Kim and Min (2013) put it this way: "Since 2007, the crisis of the Korean film industry had intensified. Film producers tried to find more provocative film topics. Homosexuality fitted in very well with the need in that it is related to a social taboo and sexuality" (p. 92). Additionally, homosexuality was rarely handled, thus relatively novel. For film professionals, same-sex themes seemed to have the potential to attract public attention because it was unconventional and sensational.

At the turn of the millennium, two milestone events took place in Korea that contributed to a less prohibitive milieu for sexual minorities, making easier decisions about including same-sex themes in the film production. In 2000, male actor Hong Suk-Cheon came out, followed a year later by the public appearance in popular media of Ha Ri-Su, a male-to-female (MTF) transgender model.<sup>75</sup> The events astonished most heterosexual Koreans, who had been ignorant of sexual minorities (Bong, 2008). Their coming out failed to make Koreans throw off their antipathy to sexual minorities. But it is undeniable that they paved the way for ordinary people at least to recognize the existence of homosexuals and other types of sexual minorities in Korea.

The Korean movie industry felt encouraged to include gay characters in films, aiming them at primarily young women considered valuable viewers. Their tentative steps in this direction were due to three factors—1) this public recognition of sexual minorities in the beginning of the 2000s, 2) exhaustion of film materials, and 3) most importantly, the discovery of female aspiration for gay visibility after the mega-hit of *King and the Clown*. As a result, it gradually touched upon gay materials or included gay characters, either as a main plot/protagonist or as a supporting narrative/role, to slake female curiosity about gay men. As the industry expected, these women were not opposed to paying to consume gay-themed commodities, whether media or otherwise.

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<sup>75</sup> After coming out in 2000, Hong was unofficially banned from nearly every television program in Korea (Kim, 2010). Ha, by contrast, was subsequently featured in a cosmetics commercial, and appeared in many television shows. Yoo (2010) stated that same-sex celebrities were generally marginalized by media, while transgenders were not. There have been several male-to-female (MTF) transgendered models and actors since Ha, whereas we hardly see any male or female homosexuals in the media. Yoo (2010) attributed the environment to the different attitudes of Koreans toward heterosexual and homosexual love. A relationship with a transgender, sex change aside, is one with which people are “familiar.” By contrast, same-sex love is considered “different” from their “normal” love. In short, the inconsistent approaches toward each sexual minority group stems from the heteronormative ideology embedded in Korean society.

The power and importance of these female consumers in same-sex film production is further clarified when juxtaposed with same-sex themed movies from the late 1990s and early 2000s. For instance, neither *Broken Branches* (1995) nor *Road Movie* (2002) was commercial successes (Oh, 2009). These films depict the harsh reality of homosexuals in Korea today — the kinds of inequalities and hardships that homosexuals, their families, and their acquaintances have to go through. The films did not attract widespread audience interest and failed at the box office. This stands in contrast to the reception given same-sex themed movies since *King and the Clown* (2005). Since the film, major film productions are less hesitant to include gay characters or themes. Unlike previous same-sex cinema, films started presenting the desires and interests of young women, describing gay people like characters from *yaoi* or fanfic, and the results captured female attention. Thanks to this strategy and female fandom, same-sex films after *King and the Clown* found success. These films include *No Regret* (2006), *Antique* (2008), and *A Frozen Flower* (2008).<sup>76</sup> In sum, what Korean young women would like to watch has little to do with the political or identity issues that homosexuals confront every day, but pretty, slim, sweet, sexually ambiguous gay people and their romantic relationship, which are compelling foci attractive to young female audiences.

Notably, many same-sex films, dramas and music videos followed this trend (J. H. Lee, 2008a). Hwang (2008) declared that same-sex material was among the most popular in the competitive media market. And same-sex themed films continued to be released: *Boy Meets Boy* (*Sonyeon, Sonyeoneul Mannada*, 2008), *Just Friends* (*Chingoo Sa-ee*, 2009), *Five Senses of Eros* (*Ogamdo*, 2009), and *Life is Peachy* (*Changpihae*, 2011).

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<sup>76</sup> I analyze these films in the following chapter.

Although not all of them received substantial public attention, the trend did prove that film directors and marketers were not shrinking from same-sex topics. It may be too hasty to conclude that the trend is indeed revolutionary. However, it is unquestionably a significant improvement in media representation of homosexuals in Korea. Recall that after he came out Hong Suk-Cheon had to leave all programs.<sup>77</sup>

Film producers have acknowledged that these transitions and the marketability of same-sex material are attributable to young women consumer audiences. Some Korean film producers and marketers that included gay themes in their film production publicly stated that their production was intended to appeal to a young female audience. Kim-Cho Kwang-Soo, a director of the gay love story *Boy Meets Boy* (2008), and who himself came out, declared that his target audience was women in their early to mid-20s. After all, gay couples could not watch the film in theaters because other audience members would dislike their presence in the public sphere (Baek, 2006). I interviewed Kim-Cho in August 2012, right after his new same-sex film, *Two Weddings and a Funeral*,<sup>78</sup> had been released. He confirmed that he specifically targeted a young female audience. Song Seo-Jin, who worked with Kim-Cho as a film marketer several years ago, also affirmed as much in interviews for this dissertation:

For *No Regret* and *Boy Meets Boy* that Kim-Cho directed, the audience was mostly female. Female fans were very active in participating in the film meetings and events. Kim-Cho considered the communication with fans as significant, so he held many gatherings with the women. [...] I assume that Kim-Cho knows who the main target of a gay film is, as he has experience in marketing, planning and directing.

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<sup>77</sup> See endnote 75 in this chapter for more details.

<sup>78</sup> This film is an adaptation of the namesake same-sex webtoon, a digitally created *manhwa*, which I explained in Chapter 2.

[...] Also, the fact that we know they are the important part of our fan body did influence our marketing strategies. We used the words for the advertising message that women commonly speak.

That is, female audiences are on the table for the gay-themed film production. A similar consideration of female fans is found in *Antique* (2008), which based its original story on the Japanese *yaoi* of the same title. It is a story about four men including one pretty, slim, fashionable, androgynous gay man. A representative from the film company said: “We aimed at young women in their teens and twenties whom we believe are less reluctant to homosexuality. If homosexuality is untangled not in a heavy and serious but in a bright and cheery way, it can arouse fans’ sympathy” (Ko, 2008, para. 13). And *Antique* achieved what the representative ordered. As a result, it was reportedly hard to find male moviegoers in theaters for the film; eighty-six percent of moviegoers who purchased tickets in advance were female (H. H. Kim, 2008). One moviegoer admitted to enjoying watching four “pretty boys” without knowing that it was a gay-themed movie. Another claimed that the film was just eye-candy for (heterosexual) women, and did not deliver any serious content relating to homosexuality. That is, the film straightforwardly appealed to female viewers with gay-looking protagonists and stories of romance. Other same-sex media genres operate with a similar expectation of female audiences. The musical *Thrill Me* cast two “pretty boy” actors to depict a homosexual relationship. Ninety percent of the audiences were women in their twenties and thirties (Park, 2010).

This phenomenon of the Korean media industry producing gay commodities for straight girls stands somewhat in contrast to the American market. Non-homosexuals in the United States, as Sender (2004) suggested, have difficulty running homosexual-

related businesses; they cannot fully understand the homosexual subcultural experience. In Korea, however, non-homosexual-identified business people have no problem in the “homosexual” market, because their consumers are, paradoxically, not homosexuals. Put simply, contemporary same-sex media content in Korea is, in many cases, a reflection of the desires and fantasies of heterosexual women, and is a commodity designated by the media corporations that profit from these spectacles.

### Commodification and behind the Scenes

According to Radin and Sunder (2005), among the hot commodities of the “Information Age” is culture.<sup>79</sup> Indeed, the commodification of culture is situated at the center of the spread of globalization. The logic of commodification is not limited to any aspect of social experience: it is commercializing most cultural domains, subcultures and, at times, alternative and rebellious practices. The logic has permeated Korean business: with the employment of commercial media systems, the subculture of young women became targeted and commodified.

I argue, however, that we need to pay continual attention to the role of young women in the commodifying process and their response to the commodified subculture. Some actively play a part in the commodification, helping decide content through their demands. They form a fan community and offer feedback to a film director or a producing company. Others continue doing what they used to do or seek an alternative subculture. As but one example, even after gay-themed movies went mainstream in Korea, women stopped neither consuming nor publishing *yaoi* and fanfic texts, thereby varying and widening their subcultural space, creating, for instance, fanfic about female

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<sup>79</sup> Knowledge and ideas are also noted as hot commodities.

singers or dramas,<sup>80</sup> which has not yet been territorialized by the market (So, 2008). Yet, this latest attempt at preserving territory also seems to be in the process of being commodified. Just as they incorporated gay material in the production of mainstream material, the cultural industry has recently started producing and reproducing fantasies about lesbian identity for young women audiences. Mainstream films and television dramas began creating popular products about lesbians such as *The Daughters of Club Bilitis* (2011), *Life is Peachy* (2011) and *Two Weddings and a Funeral* (2012). Entertainment companies have strategically included a gender-ambiguous woman in a girl group—Amber, “a tomboy icon” from the girl group f(x) (Song, 2009) — in order to encourage their fans to have homosexual fantasies about her, write fanfic content, and generally pay attention to the singing group. In a nutshell, this process of colonizing and rupturing (Molina-Guzmán, 2012) confirms that commodification is cyclical and is more “a phase than an innate quality” (Appadurai, 1986/2005, p. 35).

The aim here is not to avoid raising questions about the commodification process. Rather, I emphasize the necessity of problematizing this commodifying process, namely recognizing how gay visibility in Korea originated not from homosexuals’ desire and reality, but from heterosexual women’s cultural practices. Generally, a commodifying process to attract a certain consumer group is fulfilled by commercializing that group’s culture and identity. Nickelodeon creates and promotes kid culture in order to promote a youth market (Banet-Weiser, 2007a), and Onstyle, a Korean channel targeting women, objectifies women in their 20s and 30s in order to sell products to them (Kwon, 2008).

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<sup>80</sup> I argued the difference between fanfic and fan fiction in Korea in Chapter 2. I define fan fiction as a fan-produced text that parodies popular culture characters from film, TV, or animation while fanfic as a star-based gay romance. Now, fanfic and fan fiction are being merged by female fans that are looking for a new topic for their same-sex texts.

However, in the case of Korean same-sex media content, homosexuality is spectacularized in order to promote consumership among girls.

In Western cultures, gay and lesbian rights have long been a major issue, and much effort has been put into the struggle to gain visibility and representation in mass media as well as in other areas. Much of the same-sex media content from the West that has been programmed on Korean television channels are the outcomes of such efforts. One such example is the development, since the early 1970s, of the gay market. The consumers of gay business are gay people and lesbians. They are actually, as noted by Barnhurst (2004), “a sufficiently large and profitable group to warrant marketers’ attention, and signal a mature phase of the gay market” (p. 1). Non-queers are also consumers of such markets, albeit relatively minor ones. As Rushbrook (2005) stated, “Queerness is an object of consumption, both for queers seeking to constitute their identities through the accumulation of the appropriate combination of objects and for non-queers asserting a certain display of cosmopolitan chic” (p. 199). Stated simply, the queer market in Western cultures started with queers and moved into accommodating non-queers’ desires. By contrast, non-homosexuals are the primary target consumer group for gay commodities in Korea. This juxtaposition warrants further examination because there is a distinct possibility that heterosexual audiences misunderstand the gay reality by equalizing it with mediated gay images, and in doing so alienate “undesirable” gay men. It would therefore seem appropriate to research problems derived from the commodification of the homosexual body by analyzing media images and interviewing homosexuals’ responses, which is what I do in Chapter 5.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have unpacked how globalization influenced the Korean film industry and how, as a result, the industry became globalized, Hollywoodized and more commercialized. Its transformation commodified a young female subculture about gay media texts, which hitherto had not been sold in the mainstream market at all. Eventually, this commodification put a new complexion on gay visibility and functioned as a catalyst for same-sex themes appearing in media. It remains to be seen whether it will bring meaningful changes to Korean homosexual lives or positive attitudes among ordinary Koreans toward homosexuals. Indeed, homosexuality in the media is merely defined by the industry and female audience. To help it happen, the most urgent priority is to fill in the missing part in the commodification process: Korean gay people. In the following chapter, I investigate several gay-themed films and find out the images are based on young women's imaginings of male homosexuals. And I listen to gay voices that are missing in the commodification process of their representation.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### RETHINKING KOREAN GAY-THEMED FILM: HOW GAY KOREANS NEGOTIATE DESIRE AND ANXIETY

It was a bright and sunny afternoon in the spring of 2007 when I experienced a moment of enlightenment. Enjoying the sunshine, I was walking down a street with a male friend when he announced out of the blue, though rather hesitantly, that he was gay. Caught off guard, I did my best to show no surprise. The surprise I felt, however, came from two sources: first, up until that moment I had never met a homosexual, and second, he didn't fit my imagined mold of a gay man; in fact, he was just the opposite. He must have sensed how disconcerted I was. He purposefully asked: "You are surprised because I don't look like a gay man, aren't you?" Not knowing how to respond, I remained silent. He continued, "I know *you girls* believe all gay men are like Kang Dong-Won or Lee Joon-Ki." His point was right on the mark! I did assume all gay men were pretty, tall, slim, stylish, and somewhat "feminine-looking," traits exemplified by Lee Joon-Ki as the sexually ambiguous clown in the film *King and the Clown* (2005). But, as I found out that day and would later learn through study, the reality was quite different. My friend was short, overweight, unshaven, and paid no heed to fashion—far from my preconceived notion of how gay men looked. He went on to inform me of the disparity between the gay stereotype in my head based on media and how gay men appear in everyday life; he said he felt marginalized by the media images. That night I castigated myself, a media researcher, for being uncritically bound to media representation. I ruminated over my having a false image of gay people.

It was this incident that propelled me to write this dissertation. My hope, as one of “you girls”—straight young women—has been to identify the source of the prejudiced images I had in my head and to discover how gay people negotiate such images. So far in this dissertation, I have been concerned with “[us] girls”: the history of girls’ production and consumption of same-sex content, our socioeconomic status in contemporary society, and the process by which the entertainment industry and its creation of gay spectacles has targeted this specific consumer group. This chapter finally focuses on two gay groups: the spectacularized gay men in Korean media and gay Koreans in the real world. First, it examines gay images that the media industry has produced, images that play on female fantasies of how gay men should look. Furthermore, it explores how gay people in the real world accept such images. I do this work believing that gay men along with female fans and the larger industry sector, should be in the discussion about the current gay visibility in Korea. I argue that gay men should respond to contemporary producers and/or consumers of gay products and images and moreover become participants in (re)producing images about themselves, which at this moment are still lacking.

It is rare for media to represent or reflect the true experiences of the people being represented. In the encoding and decoding process of media messages, a variety of negotiations take place where reality is necessarily modified, exaggerated, or distorted (Hall, 1973/2006). Indeed, reality is necessarily altered through *r*epresentation, since representation requires a production process and the subjective content of its producer, a process which reality also requires. Yet, representation of people is necessarily contested when those representations impart in important political ways when producers and subjects’ visions of identity differ or contrast significantly. How the Korean media now

represent homosexuality is a great example. In fact, the issue of contested representations becomes even more problematic, because (as argued in earlier chapters) this gay visibility originates in the business strategies of the media industry to capitalize on desires of young women. In this chapter, by analyzing same-sex movies, I seek to address specific configurations of such business strategies and female fantasies. A film text can be read in many ways and through various frameworks. While all of them are useful, I aim to explore certain parts of several gay-themed movies that the female heterosexual viewership finds pleasurable.

As argued in Chapter 4, such movies emerged after 2005 when the (arguably) gay-themed movie *King and the Clown* (*Wang-ui Namja*) achieved box-office success. Films since then have tended to represent homosexuals differently than how they represented them prior to 2005. To highlight this difference, I briefly introduce four movies released before 2005. I then delve into post-2005 movies (including *King and the Clown* itself) to see how they are permeated with female fantasies and desires and also to figure out how industrial gimmicks are deployed. I catalogue several feature-length films that were released in theaters and that were directed at larger audiences. The pre-2005 movies include *Broken Branches* (*Naeilo Hurunun Kang*, 1995), *Bunjee Jumping of Their Own* (*Bunjee Jump-rul Hada*, 2001), *Road Movie* (2002) and *Camellia* (*Dongbackkkot*, 2004). The post-2005 movies include *King and the Clown* (2005), *No Regret* (*Huhoehaji Ana*, 2006), *Antique* (*Seoyanggoldong Yanggwajajeom Antique*, 2008), and *A Frozen Flower* (*Ssanghwajeom*, 2008). Since 2005, a number of same-sex themed movies have been released. I have excluded more recent films because these led the trend of homosexual media products and garnered wider attention than works that followed.

Some scholars have already studied Korean same-sex themed films. Aside from Kim and Singer (2011), who historicized and periodized Korean queer cinema, most scholars have primarily analyzed narratives and interpreted the queer signifiers of such films in diverse ways (Choi, 2008; Hartzell, 2002; Kang, 2004; K. T. Kim, 2011; Kim & Min, 2013; J. Lee, 2000; Park, 2008; Sin, 2006; Yim, 2000). Particularly, Cho (2009) and K. T. Kim (2011) read homosexual movies in terms of *yaoi* and Korean fanfic culture, where young females produce and consume texts featuring homoerotic love. These critical approaches to the visibility of homosexuality are immensely important and valuable. Since Korea is largely unaware and intolerant of homosexuals, non-homosexuals rarely have chances to get to know them. Mediated gay characters likely play a significant role in crystallizing the representation of gay images for heterosexuals. Larry Gross, who pioneered the study of LGBT media studies, put it this way:

The contributions of the mass media are likely to be especially powerful in cultivating images of groups and phenomena about which there is little first-hand opportunity for learning; particularly when such images are not contradicted by other established beliefs and ideologies. By definition, portrayals of minority groups and “deviants” will be relatively distant from the real lives of a large majority of viewers. [...] In the absence of adequate information in their immediate environment, most people, gay or straight, have little choice other than to accept the narrow and negative stereotypes they encounter as being representative of gay people. The mass media have rarely presented portrayals that counter or extend the prevalent images. (Gross, 1991, pp. 22-27)

Considering that the gay media spectacles in Korean media are mainly projections of how heterosexual women imagine homosexual men, the current version of gay representation may result in problematic representations of gay men. As to how gay audiences read homosexual media texts, however, scant analysis has been devoted to audience studies both in Korea and in other regions (J. S. Kim, 2012). Cooper (2003) and Schiappa, Gregg and Hewes (2006) analyzed audience reception of *Will and Grace* in the United States, and J. S. Kim (2012) interviewed viewers of a Korean drama including gay characters, *Life is Beautiful (Insaengeun Areumdawo, 2010)*. These scholars concluded that the texts positively influenced audiences' perceptions of homosexuals or at least offered an opportunity for viewers to rethink the social milieu of homosexuals. However, these studies did not exclusively focus on homosexual consumers. And, while there may have been positive results, these results might not ultimately be significant when it comes to the lives of gay people. In fact, I have found that *none of the existing studies have addressed how homosexual audience members read and evaluate representations about themselves*. Although same-sex media texts are about homosexuals, most scholarly attention has focused on heterosexual viewers, including the young women who create gay fantasies. There has been no significant attempt to hear what homosexuals have to say about these representations. Therefore, I interviewed gay men so as to provide an opportunity for academic scholarship to participate in popular culture and to give voice to homosexual ideas and concerns within the public sphere. I believe this theoretical stance is important, because it helps me uncover what other groups—media discourse in this case—do not mention about and to give equal space to homosexuals who otherwise would not have enough chances to speak out in contemporary Korea. My questions deal

mainly with gay men's consumption of same-sex themed media and their opinions of their mediated counterparts and ardent female fans of such media.

This chapter is organized as follows. First, I provide a short introduction to same-sex films that were released before *King and the Clown* (2005). And I sum up several general characteristics of the films so as to compare them with post-2005, gay-themed movies. Next, I conduct textual analyses of post-2005 movies. Among the many aspects of these movies that relate to same-sex topics, I concentrate on how they embody female desire for gay spectacle. Thirdly, I focus on gay people in real life. I aim to provide them a space where they can voice their opinions related to issues of the contemporary visibility of the gay body.

#### Pre-2005 Movies: Gay People in Struggle

“Homosexuality,” according to J. S. Kim (2012), “either did not exist in the history of Korean popular culture or was represented as alienated and marginalized” (p. 87). In the mid-1990s, Korean homosexuals witnessed many changes: communities for sexual minorities were emerging; their social movement was on the rise, and sexuality politics and feminism was spreading throughout academia.<sup>81</sup> These upheavals hastened the inclusion of same-sex themes and characters in Korean media, especially film. In 1995, *Broken Branches* was released and snapped “the chain of invisibility and silence about homosexuality” (Kim & Singer, 2011, p. 120; Oh, 2009). Many critics contend that

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<sup>81</sup> In 1994, the first homosexual organization called *Ch'odonghoe* was created in Korea. After one month, the organization was divided into the gay organization *Ch'in'gusai* (Between Friends) and the lesbian organization *Kkirikkiri*. Furthermore, communities for gay men and lesbians in universities appeared. In 1995, Yonsei University's Come Together and Seoul National University's Maum 001 were constituted. This attracted the attention of society and “for the first time, there were social mention of homosexual identity and attempts to look at this identity from the standpoint of human rights” (Seo, 2001, p. 71).

this film is iconic as it was the first to address directly straightforwardly the topic of homosexuality in Korea (S. Y. Kim, 2012; J. Lee, 2000; Yim, 2000).

The film itself is about a gay man who confronts the tangled relationship of his Confucian-rooted family and the dark reality of his generation. His story is told in three parts. The first introduces the large family belonging to Park Han-Seop, the father of Jung-Min (the film's narrator). Jung-Min tells of the conflicts between and enmity among family members following the Korean War. The second part portrays Jung-Min's struggles caused by his conservative family as well as the brutal social atmosphere that obtains even after the deaths of Park Han-Seop and the dictatorial president Park Jung-Hee. The third part is devoted to Jung-Min and his gay lover, Seung-Gul. The film concludes with Jung-Min introducing Seung-Gul to his family as his partner. J. Lee (2000) noted that this film portrays a process in which the old generation and new generation reconcile regarding homosexuality. The homosexuality of Jung-Min, perhaps the least acceptable member of his Confucian family, challenged the family system and proposed "a new alternative to family values, reconstructing them in terms more benevolent than standard heterosexism" (J. Lee, 2000, p. 278). The film drew critical and academic acclaim as the first piece of well-made gay cinema, blending homosexuality in the particularized context of Korean history (Yim, 2000).<sup>82</sup> It was not, however, successful at the box office.

After *Broken Branches*, gay-themed movies were rarely attempted as mainstream features.<sup>83</sup> In fact, the only one was *Bungee Jumping of Their Own* (2001). It is a romantic trilogy about In-Woo (a man) who falls in love with Tae-Hee (a woman).

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<sup>82</sup> *Broken Branches* was invited to several foreign film festivals.

<sup>83</sup> There was a film about lesbian love. *Memento Mori* (1996) illustrates an intimate relationship, more than friendship, between female high school students in a horror genre.

However, 17 years after Tae-Hee dies in a car accident, In-Woo, who became a high school teacher, finds Hyun-Bin, one of his male students, to be very similar to Tae-Hee. Hyun-Bin even seems to be in on secrets that were between only In-Woo and Tae-Hee. In-Woo comes to believe that Tae-Hee has been reincarnated and has come back in the body of Hyun-Bin. In-Woo and Hyun-Bin suffer people's judgment of their homosexual relationship. Ultimately, they decide to commit suicide together by bungee jumping with their feet unstrapped. When this film was released, there was a controversy as to whether it was a same-sex film or not (Baek, 2001). It might seem obvious to interpret the relationship between In-Woo and Hyun-Bin as a homosexual one. However, their relationship was not portrayed as sexual, and the narrative focus of the entire film was the love between In-Woo and Tae-Hee. Thus, the film's treatment of homosexuality was open to interpretation and thus became a source of controversy. Regardless, it was a commercial success thanks to what was widely accepted as great acting and a memorable storyline.

A much more overtly gay film was *Road Movie*, which was released in 2002, overt because it revealed its homosexual identity in its production and distribution. For instance, the subtitle in the poster of *Road Movie* was "A man loves a man." Seok-Won, a heterosexual male, and Dae-Sik, a homosexual male, were fellow travelers. Dae-Sik falls in love with Seok-Won at first sight, but Seok-Won is unaware that Dae-Sik is gay until he discovers Dae-Sik in a public restroom having sex with a stranger. On the trip, Seok-Won and Dae-Sik visit the home of Dae-Sik's ex-wife and meet Dae-Sik's son. Continuing their trip, Seok-Won realizes Dae-Sik's love and affection for him, which makes Seok-Won loath Dae-Sik. Finally, Seok-Won grasps the depth of Dae-Sik's true

love and falls in love with him. At the time, Dae-Sik is dying from a terminal illness brought on by an industrial accident. At the film's conclusion, they make love for the first and last time. *Road Movie* captured enough media attention "to bring matters of male homosexuality into wider discussion" (Park, 2008, p. 206). And it received a number of awards from critics' associations and film festivals. Choi (2008) remarked that it was "a striking masterpiece and the first film that graphically described same-sex scenes" (Choi, 2008, p. 111). However, it failed to draw many moviegoers.

In 2004, a gay rights group, *Ch'ingusai* and a gay business corporation, *Ddan Saenggak* supported the making of *Camellia*. The film is unique in that it is the result of three gay directors working together with relatively unknown actors. It was released through the support of the Korean Film Commission. It is an omnibus movie that shows the love, separation, and encounters of three homosexual couples. Three short episodes lay out the many difficulties that (homosexual) lovers encounter, such as social discrimination, the fading of love, and triangular love relationships. The setting for this film is Bogil-do, a Korean island where camellias bloom. The gay protagonists in the film leave the city, a place for heterosexuals, and arrive in Bogil-do in order to travel with their own lovers, escape reality, and renew their love. In the first story, a teenage gay couple has to split up, as their relationship is accidentally "disclosed" to their minister at church. Nine years later, they reunite and go on a trip to Bogil-do with the young daughter of one of them. The second episode describes a gay couple who leave the city and settle down on the island to avoid prying eyes and the withering of their love. In the last story, a widow realizes, upon her husband's death, that he had a male lover. She decides to stay at the hostel the male lover runs with a young lover at Bogil-do and

observes the lives of the couple. Due to its low budget, the production quality is poor.<sup>84</sup> And, it failed to receive either public attention or favorable reviews.

These pre-2005 movies are mostly set in the present and depict homosexuals actually suffering because of their sexuality. Such settings necessarily include stories with the protagonists' families. As explained in Chapter 4, a Korean man is expected to have a (blood-related) male heir to carry on the family name, meaning he is expected to procreate and marry. Additionally, many of the younger generation live with their families until they get married, so Korean homosexuals confront daily conflicts with their parents except in the rare cases where the parents are tolerant of their sexuality. Therefore, tremendous obstacles—the greatest being the family—stand in the way of gay Koreans coming out. Hence, movie producers frequently take on themes that dramatize the troubles between homosexuals and their families.

Such a theme is epitomized in *Broken Branches*, a film that suggests Jung-Min's homosexuality is the result of his patriarchal family, in particular, his father's strong and stern fatherhood; it culminates with Jung-Min coming out in front of his family. *Broken Branches* includes another, more realistic story of a gay man who, under family pressure, has to marry a woman. Seung-Gul, Jung-Min's lover in *Broken Branches*, is married and even advises Jung-Min, his gay partner, to marry in order to come to grips with reality. Seung-Gul is not the only movie character to choose to become a "bat," a gay married to a woman.<sup>85</sup> A gay man in the first story of *Camellia* is also married and has a child but

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<sup>84</sup> The lead producer of *Camellia*, Lee Song Hee-II, lamented the poor conditions in the production environment: "We had only 2-3 days of planning a whole film, one month to create it, and 15,000 dollars budget. This situation made the production difficult." (Lee, 2005, para. 5)

<sup>85</sup> According to Cho (2011), in Korean society, the number of "bats" is increasing as "being married allows them to enjoy the 'luxury' of gay love from the security of their own families" (p. 168). It is similar with a concept of "downlow" in Western cultures.

still goes on a trip with his former gay lover. Likewise, the husband of a woman in the third story maintained, as a “bat,” both heterosexual and homosexual relationships. Although he got divorced, Dae-Sik, in *Road Movie*, had been married and fathered a child. However, his child calls Dae-Sik uncle, not knowing Dae-Sik is his father. The film alludes to the fact that Dae-Sik’s ex-wife was too afraid to let her son know that his father is gay. Dae-Sik accepts this, though it breaks his heart. As a heteronormative society forces homosexuals to conceal their sexuality, they seek escape from such a society. Gay couples in *Camellia* go to Bogil-do, which is a dreamy, utopian, and a secure place for their excursion. They do it to survive away from the heteronormative society. Not everyone finds such a space. Dae-Sik in *Road Movie* dies and In-Woo and Hyun-Bin in *Bungee Jumping* kill themselves at the bottom of a canyon in New Zealand. (Such tragic endings do happen in the lives of gay Koreans, as shown by the suicide of a young gay model and actor mentioned in Chapter 4.)

Accordingly, gay characters in pre-2005 movies are realistic and diverse. They range from high school students in *Bungee Jumping* and *Camellia* to a middle-aged man in *Broken Branches*. Their occupations are varied—a day worker at a construction site (*Road Movie*), mixed martial arts fighter (*Camellia*), a film director (*Broken Branches*), a high school teacher (*Bungee Jumping*), a stockbroker (*Road Movie*), a motel owner, and a taxi driver (*Camellia*). In these films, gay characters are part of everyday, quotidian life, not young females’ gay stereotype of the young, pretty, fashionista.

Although the movies try to portray gay life realistically, such films shy away from scenes of physical intimacy and sex. Aside from *Camellia*, displays of romantic feelings as well as erotic touch between homosexuals are hidden from view, quite unlike films

portraying heterosexual love. Presumably, the producers feared a public backlash. Furthermore, as Yim (2000) pointed out, homosexuality was usually depicted in relation to family, making it difficult to include graphic scenes.

So far I have examined stories and common features of pre-2005 movies, that is, movies prior to *King and the Clown*. It would be wrong to say that they are similar to one another only because they deal with gayness. However, they do share affinities and show certain tendencies. And these films are quite uncharacteristic of the post-2005 movies, a theme addressed in the next section.

#### Post-2005 Movies: Gay Men from Fantasy

In this section, I analyze post-2005 movies and compare them to those just discussed. The first post-2005 movie is *King and the Clown* (2005). It is a work of historical fiction. Gon-Gil and Jang-Saeng are talented street clowns who live during the *Chosun* Dynasty. They perform a skit satirizing their king, the well-known tyrant, King Yunsan (1476-1506), making a great deal of money in the process. A retainer of King Yunsan invites their group of clowns to the king's palace for the purpose of using their performance to eliminate King Yunsan's political opponents. The king enjoys the clowns' performances and even flirts with one of the male clowns, Gon-Gil. Concerned yet jealous, Jang-Saeng, another male clown, decides to exit the palace. Gon-Gil and Jang-Saeng argue because Gon-Gil, sympathetic to the king, is irresolute about their departure. Meanwhile, the king is gradually going insane due to his missing mother and the pressures of managing state affairs. Finally, a rebellion against Yunsan takes place and Jang-Saeng and Gon-Gil prepare for their final performance.

When it first came out, there was controversy as to whether it was a gay-themed film (Sin, 2006). Although the narrative and a few scenes connote the homosexual relationship between the king and Gon-Gil and Jang-Saeng and Gon-Gil, homosexuality is not so explicitly portrayed. It is assumed since Gon-Gil is a gay-coded man and the other male protagonists, the King Yunsan and Jang-Saeng, take very good care of him. Bong (2008) notes that though the film is:

considered an epochal cultural phenomenon embracing homosexuality, [it] is not primarily about homosexual love. Rather, its characters and story line are built around traditional Korean values. The movie's appeal hinges on the 'pretty male' characters and role-plays by a masculine clown and a feminine clown. The director, Joon-Ik Lee, himself denies the notion that his movie carries a gay theme. (p. 103)

On the other hand, the gay novelist Han Joong-Ryul averred that *King and the Clown* is a well-made same-sex movie (Sin, 2006). It is undeniable that there are many aspects that lead readers to interpret the film as gay-themed media content. Its title, first of all, suggests a homosexual love between the king and the clown. Here, clown is not gender-specific. Its Korean title, however, *Wang-ui Namja* translates as King's man, strengthening the suggestion of homosexuality (Sin, 2006). The movie is in fact an adaptation of a play by the same name. In the original play, homosexuality is more integral to the main plot than in the film (Sin, 2006). The director of the film, inspired by the play, solicited the playwright for its remaking as a mainstream film but was unable to uproot all vestiges of homosexuality from the original. It is noteworthy that he screened the film in foreign queer film festivals such as Verzaubert International Queer Film

Festival and 17th Melbourne Queer Film Festival in 2007<sup>86</sup> yet was careful in interviews not to confirm that it dealt with homosexuality. Presumably, he feared the loss of general audiences who might reject a gay-themed film. Or, perhaps he wanted to avoid attention being focused only on the homosexual storyline even though the movie encompasses many other themes.

In his study of Italian queer cinema, Malagreca (2006) queried, “What is queer cinema?” He suggested that a queer reading makes a queer movie. That is, notwithstanding the absence of any homosexual characters or issues, a film can be a queer movie insofar as readers read it as one. Doty (1993) likewise suggested queer position and queer reading in consuming mass culture. He conceptualized queer as something opposite of non-straightness and mutually influential with straightness. According to him, readers of mass culture can have alternative interpretations far from intended meanings. They can, in other words, *queer* texts. Taken together, I claim that no matter how a director defines his/her film, it is the audience in the end who interprets and judges it. Many viewers read homosexual feelings into the relationship between King Yunsan and Gon-Gil or Jang-Saeng and Gon-Gil and conclude that *King and the Clown* is a same-sex themed movie. Belonging to this group of viewers, I argue a gay theme runs throughout the movie and the film has ushered in a new era in the history of same-sex cinema.

*No Regret* (2006) is an explicit gay melodrama. Lee Song Hee-II,<sup>87</sup> the maker of the film, has come out and since produced a number of independent gay films. *No Regret* is an independent low-budget film about two gay men, one of whom, Su-Min, grows up

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<sup>86</sup> For more information, see <http://www.wang-ui-namja.com/events.htm>

<sup>87</sup> He is one of the directors of *Camillia*, a pre-2005 film that I discussed in the previous section.

in an orphanage. As an adult, Su-Min leaves the orphanage and works a variety of jobs in Seoul to save money to go to college. Eventually he takes a job at a gay host bar where he meets Jae-Min. Su-Min has earlier offered to chauffeur Jae-Min. Jae-Min, a rich man, tries initiating a romantic relationship but Su-Min, conscious of their class differences, spurns Jae-Min. Nevertheless, they get to passionately love each other. Jae-Min's mother discovers this and orders Jae-Min to marry his arranged (female) fiancé. Su-Min, desperate, plots with another man from the host bar to bury Jae-Min alive. After seeing his cohort throwing dirt on Jae-Min's body, Su-Min has a change of heart and takes Jae-Min to his car. While driving back home, Su-Min crashes into a tree and both men are knocked unconscious. When they come to, they silently confirm their love for each other.

The story represents a very typical romance narrative adopting the hostess melodrama genre. It was a very popular genre in Korea in the 1970s. It portrays a poor young woman and her degenerating life that has to choose to be an escort due to financial issues. The only difference here is this film's love interest involves two men. Lee Song, the director of the film, told his interviewer that he wanted to use the genre to create a new impression with gay characters (S. M. Kim, 2006). As an independent film, it had to be made on a shoestring budget: actors were inexperienced and the quality of film stock and background settings were, by and large, shoddy. Yet, the finished product garnered a great deal of attention. It drew in an audience of approximately 44,000 and took top ranking in the history of independent cinema in Korea in terms of audience number (Oh, 2007). Reportedly, most of the viewers were young females in their twenties and thirties who formed fan communities. Lee Song said he was surprised by this fandom: "The members of the fan community are primarily women in their twenties and early thirties. I

assume that *yaoi*<sup>88</sup> culture played a role. It seems that attitude for same-sex content has changed a lot as the box-office hit of *King and the Clown* and *Brokeback Mountain*” (S. M. Kim, 2006, para. 6). This film, it would appear, owes much of its popularity to the contemporary rise of female interest in same-sex media content.

*Antique* (2008) is a mix of drama, comedy, mystery, and, at times, musical. The film begins by being pervaded with a humorous and lovely atmosphere; as the film progresses, a somewhat strained and mysterious element enters as the plot retraces the protagonist’s, Jin-Hyeok’s, past in relation to a kidnapping.

Jin-Hyeok, a good-looking and rich man, opens a cake shop that he names *Antique*. In spite of his aversion to cake, he ostensibly runs the shop to attract many female customers and enable him to find his dream partner. He hires three men: Seon-Woo, an androgynous gay patisserie who used to love Jin-Hyeok but was insulted by him in high school; Su-Young, Jin-Hyeok’s bodyguard/friend; and Ki-Beom, an apprentice of Seon-Woo. The plot follows their gloomy memories. Jin-Hyeok is still traumatized by his kidnapping, the source of his aversion to cake. The real reason he opened the cake shop is to snare the kidnapper who greatly enjoyed cake. Seon-Woo, after witnessing his mother have sex with his first love, is gynophobic. Su-Young has suffered violence at the hands of his father and escaped with his mother to Jin-Hyeok’s house. Ki-Beom, a former boxer, quit his career due to a detached retina. The film narrates how each man overcomes and frees himself from his past. Same-sex themes appear again and again. First, Seon-Woo’s ex-lover arrives from France to fetch Seon-Woo. The film portrays their erotic relationship. Seon-Woo’s affection for Jin-Hyeok gives rise to several queer moments

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<sup>88</sup> In Chapter 2, I explain this genre in more detail. I define *yaoi* as “a rewritten homosexual, in most cases male, romance based on Japanese manga (comics) genres by female fan groups.”

between them. Moreover, Su-Young has a hunch about Seon-Woo's sexuality, which as a supporting story is portrayed with a light touch.

*Antique* is an adaptation of a Japanese *yaoi* manga, *Antique Bakery* (*Seiyō Kottō Yōgashiten*, 1999-2002). As the original was hugely popular among *yaoi* fans in Korea and touched upon homosexuality, the film generated conversation from its production. The film appeared to ride the tide of the continued success of gay-themed films and television shows. What is interesting is that the producer, Min Kyu-Dong, like Lee Joon-Ik, the director of *King and the Clown*, avoided discussing *Antique* as being same-sex themed in an interview with me. He wanted his audience to view the film as a story about four men overcoming past traumas. While it is absolutely such a story, it is also a story about homosexuality. Its origin is a widely read *yaoi* from Japan and its narrative follows closely the *yaoi* text. The film's marketing team emphasized that it was a film about pretty boys while including one gay character (See Chapter 4). It is doubtful that the film was directed and consumed entirely in the way the producer wanted (K. T. Kim, 2011). Of course, homosexuality is not the film's biggest theme, but it takes up sufficient time as a supporting topic and provides many sub-plots. Despite the producer's protestations, many viewers and academic researchers recognized it as same-sex themed content, taking queer positions (Doty, 1993). The overwhelming support of female fans contributed most to its success. Of advance ticket sales, women bought 86%, the highest in Korean cinema history. Many female visitors screamed *en masse* with the actors at the film's preview with celebrities and selected audience members before its public release (H. H. Kim, 2008).

The 2008 film *A Frozen Flower* is based on a few historical facts from the era of King Gong-Min (1330-1374) of the Goryeo Dynasty. The film opens depicting a secret yet passionate homosexual love between King Gong-Min and Hong-Lim, the military leader of the palace guards. The king is married to a princess from the Yuan Dynasty, but they are without children since the king has yet to consummate their marriage. The Yuan emperor and the subjects of the Goryeo Kingdom unceasingly pester Gong-Min to produce an heir. Finally, the king decides to have Hong-Lim sire an heir with the queen. After a few awkward moments, the queen and Hong-Lim fall dangerously in love and continue their trysts. The king, when he discovers this, tries to tear them apart. Hong-Lim is to leave to prove that he does not love the queen. However, the king unearths that the queen and Hong-Lim had a sexual tryst in the palace library. Outraged, the king has Hong-Lim castrated and confined. Thanks to the help of the queen, Hong-Lim escapes. He sees the queen's decapitated face on the palace wall and becomes infuriated. Hong-Lim attacks the palace by himself. He confronts the king and in a mixture of love and hate; they battle to the death. In the film's final scene, Hong-Lim sees that the queen is alive and that the king just wished to test him.

This film marketed itself, for the first time, as a same-sex film in the mainstream movie market and tried to appeal to audiences with its "taboo love story."<sup>89</sup> The major production invested heavily in the film's creation, casting several stars, a first for same-sex themed movies. Public controversy ensued, not only because of the high budget and all-star cast but also because of the film's thick eroticism—homosexual and heterosexual. The film was a box office hit, attracting over 3.7 million viewers.

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<sup>89</sup> The taboo love story in this film connotes two relationships: one is the homosexual love between the king and Hong-Lim and the other is heterosexual love between the queen and Hong-Lim.

In post-2005 movies, the homosexual body is highlighted in erotic scenes. All of them include explicit kissing and/or sex scenes. *No Regret* includes a couple of bed scenes involving Su-Min and Jae-Min, their bodies brightly lit by sunshine streaming through a window. *Antique* romantically describes the erotic relationship between Seon-Woo and Jean. *A Frozen Flower* featured graphic sex scenes between King Gong-Min and Hong-Lim that on the film's release led to widespread discussion. In the scenes, the camera fragments the homosexual body, offering close-ups of each part for the female gaze (H. S. Lee, 2009). The female audiences purportedly went to the film eager to see the exposed backside of Cho In-Seong (the actor playing Hong-Lim).

Conscious of public sentiment, previous producers of same-sex films avoided erotic scenes. However, post-2005 directors seemed to include such scenes purposefully to satisfy female viewers. As I noted in Chapter 2, these women are already accustomed to gay sex scenes through *yaoi* or fanfic that are sufficiently erotic to be labeled female porn. Put simply, post-2005 movies embodied female illusion about homosexual relationship, and, as a result, drew greater female viewership (Cho, 2009).

As well as having their physical relationships be portrayed, gay characters in post-2005 movies are offered an anxiety-free background. In *King and the Clown*, Jang-Saeng at the end satirizes King Yunsan for being a "sodomite." Until that point, however, no one except a queen criticizes or raises issues concerning the king's close and erotic relationship with Gong-Gil. The film is set in a time dominated by Confucianism, which banned homosexuality, so it is intriguing to imagine homosexual love in such a setting, in particular, a king's homosexuality. *A Frozen Flower* illustrates an intense same-sex love between King Gong-Min and his devoted manservant, Hong-Lim. No one opposes their

relationship, not even the queen. In the palace, it would seem there is general acceptance of homosexuality. This suggests that heterosexuality and homosexuality are treated less discriminatively in post-2005 films and mediated gay people in such films are not afraid of putting on display their same-sex affection (Cho, 2009).

Such a notion is salient in *Antique*. In the film's namesake cafe, no one minds Sun-Woo's homosexuality. Initially, Jin-Hyeok seems to dislike it, but he actually does not care about Sun-Woo's sexuality unless it comes to Seon-Woo making a romantic overture to him. When Jin-Hyuk interviews Ki-Bum to hire an assistant for Seon-Woo, Jin-Hyuk tells Ki-Bum that Seon-Woo, who will be Ki-Beom's boss, is a "homo."<sup>90</sup> Ki-Bum replies: "Whatever!" Moreover, same-sex physical touch in *Antique* is on full display. Seon-Woo and Jean Baptiste, Seon-Woo's ex-lover, declare their feelings whenever and wherever they like. Less realistic is their kiss at the airport, a very open place.<sup>91</sup> In her discussion of this film's sexuality, K. T. Kim (2011) remarked: "The cafe becomes a homosexual-friendly place filled with homophilic atmosphere where homosexuals are respected" (p. 29). The gay-friendly worlds illustrated in the post-2005 movies are in sharp contrast to the spaces where gay protagonists in pre-2005 movies suffer discrimination and have to choose to kill themselves. The post-2005 world provides an ideal background on which women project their gay characters from *yaoi* or fanfic.

In reality, such a homophilic world has never existed in Korea, at least not since the Chosun Dynasty when the Confucianism was introduced. These portrayals are just a fantasy. Unrestrained homosexuality must borrow a fictitious space. *King and the Clown*

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<sup>90</sup> As addressed in Chapter 1, "homo" is a derogatory term for homosexuals in Korea.

<sup>91</sup> In Korea, physical expression of feelings in public is uncommon among either heterosexuals or homosexuals.

and *A Frozen Flower* select a historical moment, and *Antique* adopts cinematic apparatuses such as animation and music to make the cafe surreal. By creating fantastical spaces where homosexuality is undeterred, post-2005 movies rarely offer a barren social milieu for homosexuals. Moreover, the family, which in the pre-2005 movies is the greatest psychological barrier for gay men's coming-out, disappears. These films no longer cover historical, social, political, and economic issues relating to contemporary homosexual living, issues that gay people in Korea deal with every day. Instead the films underscore the individuality of a single gay man and his romantic relationships. That is, sexuality in post-2005 movies boils down to a personal issue, offering no place for identity politics. Hong (2008) criticized this trend of single-character fictional narratives told outside of the context of sexual realities for gay people. For instance, in *No Regret*, Hong writes: "[more] public attention was given to the graphic sexual scenes of two actors than issues of gay frustration due to social taboo or human rights for sexual minorities. In this way, the film clearly reveals the limitation of same-sex cinema" (p. 172). Female fans of *yaoi* and fanfic played a big part in the transition from reality-oriented to fantasy-driven films. Their perception of same-sex love is a fantasy because they have learned of homosexuality through media. Ono and Pham (2009) discussed how the dominant media imagines and marginalizes Asian and Asian American community; as a result, non-Asians and non-Asian Americans, who perceive Asian-ness only through media, have particular stereotypical and controlling images such as exoticized women or asexual men. In a similar way, young Korean women fans of gay popular culture who do not know the complexities and specificities of gay lives create an imagined homophilic community in *yaoi* and fanfic, which has ultimately been incorporated into post-2005

films. For this reason, Cho (2009) conceded the role of these women in the higher quality production and circulation of same-sex themed representations; but noted that “serious reflexivity or agonies in daily life became undermined” (p. 257).

Where female fantasy based on *yaoi* or fanfic clearly manifests itself is in the physical features of gay characters. Film, like other media, generally tries to present physically attractive actors or actresses for lead roles, a practice that can isolate ordinary-looking viewers. The practice is equally deployed in same-sex themed-media. Gay characters in post-2005 movies are blessed with superior appearances (H. S. Lee, 2009). A certain tendency seems to dictate their portrayal. These films primarily highlight feminine, androgynous, or ambiguous gay protagonists. In the skit with his troupe of clowns, Gon-Gil usually plays a queen or a *gisaeng*, a Korean version of a *geisha*. His hair band and clothing are pinkish. He sits with his knees together while Jang-Saeng sits with legs astride. After the film’s success, Lee Joon-Ki, who played Gon-Gil, became popular as “a pretty boy” (Choi, 2008, p. 104).

*Antique* has a similar character, Seon-Woo, who is described as a *homme fatale* gay man to whom both men and women are attracted to. He is slim, pretty, fashionable, and feminine looking, a stereotypical gay figure who is prevalent in *yaoi* or fanfic texts. In the film, he is the only protagonist with long hair, which only adds to his androgyny. Also having much longer hair than other characters is Gon-Gil from *King and the Clown*. Like *yaoi* and fanfic, *gong/su* (attacker/receiver)<sup>92</sup> relationships between gay couples exist in post-2005 movies. Jang-Saeng and King Yunsan are typical *gongs*, taking care of and protecting the weak and emotionally supportive *su*, Gon-Gil. In *Antique*, the cynical

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<sup>92</sup> See Chapter 2.

and charismatic Jin-Hyuk is *gong* and Seon-woo is *su*, sweet and sophisticated, which connotes an issue of gender.

To address female audience's desires, post-2005 movies employ a group of "pretty and gay-looking boys." Four characters in *Antique* function as spectacles for women. Antique customers are mostly females, ranging from students to middle-aged women. When a woman looks over the cakes on display, four men side by side smile beautifully for her. Then, the woman buys more cakes than she had intended. Female students regularly visit the shop to gaze upon Seon-Woo, the pretty gay man in the film. All the gazes of these women are emblematic of female desire for gay men (J. S. Kim, 2012). *A Frozen Flower* has a larger cast: 36 members of the palace guard. A bathing scene in a wooded valley features all of them naked and playing in the water. The scene seems consciously designed for a heterosexual female audience (McLelland, 2000). The director confirmed as much (H. S. Lee, 2009).

The characteristics of these post-2005 films include displays of the homosexual body, graphic sex scenes, homophilic environments, the fantasizing of a homosexual time and place, feminine or androgynous gay characters, and a group of pretty young males. Such characteristics are absent from pre-2005 movies, which are grounded with down-to-earth characters and settings and are cautious about presenting erotic scenes. The post-2005 features are more akin to those of the glocal gay media that, as I argued in Chapter 2, young females in Korea produce and consume. Actually, post-2005 movies seem to be an incarnation of women's gay imagination. In other words, the transformation ushered in by *King and the Clown* from pre-2005 movies to post-2005 movies was shaped by female fantasy and desire based on glocal gay media such as *yaoi*, U.S. dramas, and fanfic.

Ultimately, the mainstream found the gay body marketable. These changes have raised concerns among some researchers. S. Y. Kim (2011) argued that both heterosexuals and homosexuals feel uncomfortable with these films, sensing that the current gay film production “disregards the oppressive reality for homosexuals and places a lot of focus on sexual aspects of homosexuality” (p. 12). H. S. Lee (2009) claimed that the commodification of homosexuality marginalizes homosexuals. Puar (2007) furthermore posited that this commercialized incorporation is nothing but a “superpanopticism,” which makes them stand between the “internalization of the gaze and the processes of administration, social sorting and simulation” (p. 116), still producing “effects of exclusion” (p. 115). That is, according to these scholars, the current gay spectacle culture reproduces heterosexism.

Such worries appear quite reasonable. These audiovisual representations of same sex love based on female desire could be distant from the everyday world of the vast majority of Korean gay people. The biggest issue is the fantasizing about and thus stereotyping of male homosexuals. Gay characters in post-2005 movies are “pretty boys” who seem to have just walked out of *yaoi* or fanfic texts (H. S. Lee, 2009). Romanticizing and stereotyping homosexuals in media are particularly risky ventures; heterosexuals in Korea who have fewer chances to socialize with gay people might buy into such stereotyped images. That is, they might lose sight of (if they ever saw) the line between mediated images of gay people and real gay people. Ono and Pham (2009) had a similar concern in their study of media representations of Asian American: “The illusion of close proximity may mask our actual lack of contextual knowledge and understanding of our material relationships with others” (p. 3). That is, non-gay audiences delude themselves

that they know homosexuals through what they view about gay people in media and thus do not seek out authenticity. In the way, media's imagined gay community dominates media consumers. Furthermore, gay people themselves are given few chances to counter-argue such representations and stereotypes. Thus, they feel uneasy about this gay visibility, choosing to be closeted rather than come out to people who might hold stereotyped images of gay people. In fact, this is what was going on with my aforementioned gay friend. Hall (1997) warned that stereotyping in representation plays a pivotal role in the exercise of "symbolic violence" (p. 259). Following this logic, we might ask: "Are the gay spectacles from post-2005 movies symbolic violence against gay men?" Many suppose so. Therefore I decided to ask gay viewers about gay representation in South Korean media. The next section documents their impressions of such representation.

### Reading Gay-Themed Films from Gay Perspectives

Peters (2011) noted that "representation is privatized and available to those who can afford it" (p. 197). In Korea "those who can afford it"—"it" being films about gay men—are young women already familiar with its spectacles. To appeal to this group who not only "can afford it" but are very willing to pay for it, post-2005 movies employed several strategies including beautifying the gay body, hence making it an attractive commodity and in this way more consumable. These movies also turned a blind eye to the tough sociopolitical surroundings that homosexuals confront every day. Such strategies are based on *yaoi* or fanfic. For this reason, *Buddy*, the first gay magazine in Korea, accused *yaoi* gay representation of "distorting homosexual reality" (Noh & Nam,

1998, p. 227). Several studies carried out in other countries likewise reported that gay men, feeling objectified and misrepresented, are offended by *yaoi* culture (Isola, 2008; McHarry, 2010; Tan, 2008). In Korea and elsewhere, gay voices speaking up about mainstream gay visibility (other than *yaoi* or fanfic) are largely absent. Here, by giving voice to gay interests or concerns, I seek to complement studies about current gay representation and eventually encourage conversations among same-sex content producers, consumers—primarily young females—and gay people to enable greater coexistence. The following responses demonstrate a range of ways in which Korean gay men accept, deny, and compromise with the mediated representations of gay people in post-2005 movies and embrace avid female fans of their images in media. The interviewee list is given in Table 5.1:

Table 5.1. Gay Interviewees

Interviewee	Age	Level of Education	Occupation
A	24	In college	Undergraduate student
B	26	In college	Undergraduate student
C	28	Master's degree	Unemployed
D	29	In college	Undergraduate student
E	27	Bachelor's degree	Designer

All of the interviewees were continually interested in diverse same-sex media including film, animation, *yaoi* manga/*manhwa* (Korean version of manga), magazines, musicals, and pornography. What is interesting is that they usually consumed Korean same-sex media products, although they lamented their low quality. For instance, Interviewee A embraces any same-sex content, regardless of quality, as he believes that the production itself is meaningful and he feels obligated to root for it. Interviewee B said,

“Somehow, we [homosexuals] naturally get to pay attention to same-sex themed media as they are about our identity.” That is, although the value, in many cases, of gay cultural products falls short of being satisfying, they keep consuming them, because they are curious about how they are perceived and portrayed. In this way, they also enjoy mainstream representation of homosexuals. Yet they do recognize that the current media take advantage of same-sex themes in some senses like post-2005 movies.

Interviewee C: I guess media producers encountered same-sex topics while they sought out a fresh subject.

Interviewee D: Homosexuality is neither very familiar nor very unfamiliar at this age. Therefore, audiences may consider it interesting and producers can have a unique character in their texts by including a homosexual. [...] Although my attitude varies with each film, I do not necessarily oppose same-sex themed cinema. I usually keep my eyes out for it and if same-sex code is appropriately used, I actively consume it.

Interviewee E: As I am gay, I naturally become interested in same-sex media.

Sometimes, I choose to consume a gay media text that has handsome actors [...].

These men do not strongly mind mainstream media’s commodification of their identity and culture. However, they do take issue with how they are sometimes depicted in media. For example, Interviewee D reported feeling offended if homosexuality is unconditionally romanticized or approached merely out of curiosity. He also hated that gay identity is described as dirty or non-existent. Interviewee C pointed out that a mediated gay world is far from the real gay one. According to Interviewee A, gay men are mindful that gay-themed content based on the ignorance of gay people perpetuates a

false reality among the general audience, which gives them the wrong impression about gay people and culture. So I questioned how they read post-2005 movies regarding the representation of homosexuals and what aspects of such movies potentially promulgate such perceptions.

For *King and the Clown*, gay informants commonly discussed the actor Lee Joon-Ki in the role of Gon-Gil. Thanks to Lee, a typical “pretty boy” of female fantasy, many women viewers welcomed the film. However, the film reinforced the stereotyped images of gay people (Interviewee E). Interviewee D resented the fact that the movie only intensified the fantasies that *yaoi-nyeo* (women who enjoy *yaoi*) have of gay men.

Homosexuals are afraid that biased images created by pretty actors, who are physically similar to male protagonists in *yaoi* or fanfic, generate more prejudice about real gay people and become a type of symbolic violence. Similar concerns came up regarding *Antique*. Interviewee C commented: “*Antique* is all about the prejudice that gay men are pretty boys. No more, no less.” Interviewee D was unimpressed by “the use of the gay code in *this way*” and his friends rejected the film as well. Here, “the use of the gay code in *this way*” connotes that homosexuals and their stories are merely glamorized so that actual gay men cannot empathize with it. *A Frozen Flower* could not elude the cynicism of gay audiences. Interviewee D found it meaningful that same-sex themed films could be produced in the mainstream with big stars and widely screened in theaters. Nevertheless, he still felt disrespected. Interviewee B said: “I assumed that the director of *A Frozen Flower* just wanted to film the naked body of Cho In-Sung [who played Hong-Lim]. It is true that it was eye candy for me. Yet it was the very archetype of a film that candidly demonstrates the limitation of how mainstream producers make use of gay

topics.” The description of homosexuality in the film, according to Interviewee C, becomes too simple. In a word, the main worry of gay viewers for post-2005 movies is that the movies only reproduced the stereotyped image of gay men without knowing *real gay people*.

*No Regret* likewise came under a great deal of criticism. Three informants (B, D, and E) commented that the film was by no means realistic. Interviewee B said: “Although it did depict dark aspects of homosexual life, I didn’t feel closer to it at all. It didn’t resonate with me. It was a very sad movie but I didn’t feel sad. I guess the film was a bit exaggerated and thus made me uncomfortable.” Among the post-2005 movies under discussion, *No Regret* is the only one set in the everyday world and produced by an openly gay producer. However, not even it or other post-2005 movies were found to be compelling by these gay viewers.

It is likely that heterosexuals, if asked, would also agree that any characters in media are unrealistic and that media representations of heterosexuals do not truly reflect their lives. Nonetheless, stories about heterosexual life are not only the norm but the expected and the naturalized narrative viewers expect to see. Stories about heterosexuals have always been available. As a result there is a wide variety of topics and characters about heterosexual people. The same-sex themes in the Korean mainstream media are still nascent. Therefore, homosexuals think gay representation is exaggerated (Interviewee B). Moreover, my gay informants were already aware that the current gay spectacles aim at mainstream audiences who are heterosexuals, more specifically, straight young women the so-called, *yaoi-nyeo*. For this reason, they feel more deprived and isolated in a heteronormative society (Interviewee D).

Then what do gay men think about the main target audience for films: those females passionate about gay-themed media? Perhaps surprisingly, none of the gay interviewees considered the female fan activities negatively. Rather, they saw those women as playing a positive role in gay visibility. That being so, they cared less about how gay people were represented but how visible they were in media.

Interviewee B: It is their culture therefore I can't say it is either good or bad. But I do believe their curiosity can help them understand and feel closer to sexual minorities. I guess that being a gay man is relatively better than being a lesbian because people have more positive attitude towards us. I have heard that it is only the lesbian group that consumes lesbian media content. It means that their market is small and the possibility of its expansion is very low. Viewed from this point, the power of young women can help gay-themed media get created, talked about, and understood more. In the end, this should contribute to gay rights. Therefore, I find the group helpful.

Interviewee C: The presence of a consumer group for same-sex media representations, other than homosexuals, is likely to open chances to create more representations in the future. [...] I think the more exposed same-sex themes are to the public, the better. Therefore, what's going on currently is the way I wish it to be.

That is, the gay interviewees believed in the possibility that in the end the female fan group functions to promote more visibility. This is actually how it has been working thus far. As claimed in the previous chapters, mainstream media producers follow the tastes of young women who increasingly have socioeconomic resources. Without these women, it

would have taken longer for same-sex topics to emerge in the mainstream market. The gay informants speculated that mainstream media would produce more media texts to satisfy the growing group of female consumers. This translates into more options in the market that gay viewers can enjoy. Interviewee D even said: “The gay visibility grounded on the fantasy of the women functions as a cushion by rendering greater circulation of homosexual images and thus making heterosexuals familiar with homosexuals. As well as human rights groups, these women take a big part in creating less discriminative atmosphere for homosexuals.” It is noteworthy that this informant regarded heterosexual females as a potential promoter of gay rights by increasing gay representation.

Concurring this position, J. Kim (2007), one of the organizers for Seoul Queer Films and Video Festival, went further. He knew that straight women have consumed homosexual cultural codes for a long time and have been consistent spectators at the festival over the years. He noted that this alternative male model “goes beyond the simple consumption of ‘gay images’ and has a potential radicality of creating crevices in heteronormative sexual discourses” (J. Kim, 2007, p. 630).

This stance is more or less naïve. Shugart (2003) also threw cold water on such a notion: “A number of scholars have cautioned that the increased visibility of gay men and lesbians in the mainstream media does not necessarily confer social legitimacy” (p. 87). It may be the case that the increased visibility is so misdirected that it merely keeps (re)producing and exploiting stereotypes, a stereotype that constitutes symbolic violence. Thus, it is absolutely essential to consider the ways in which they are portrayed as much as how much space they occupy in popular culture. And some informants expressed a similar concern.

Interviewee D: On the other hand, the stereotype is produced. The thing is it is not from the features of homosexuals but from the fantasy of a certain group. When the truth [gay people in reality] does not meet the fantasy, how this group is going to take it needs to be considered. For instance, a woman from the group would like to have a gay friend. However, what if her gay friend is not stylish, thoughtful of women, ugly, dirty, smelly, and does not have a job and money? Would she still want to befriend him?

Interviewee E: I do not care about [young female fans of same-sex content] because it is their tastes. However, I am afraid of the possibility that media texts will just follow their interests as they are the main audience group and become more unrealistic. Eventually this would lead homosexuals to turn away from the texts that are about them, which is very discouraging to me.

Therefore, it seems important to debunk stereotypes in mainstream gay-themed cinema which enhance a “social symbolic order” between heterosexuals and homosexuals, here, a straight woman and a gay man (Hall, 1997, p. 258).

Then how to break such stereotypes? Gay informants whom I met asserted the importance of diversity in gay-themed media. For example, Interviewee B said: “The number of gay cultural products is too small to expect a thoughtful piece. I feel a lack of voices that truly understand us and represent what we want. I wish it were better. Hopefully, the media will tell us a story that diverse groups of gay people exist.” That is, they believe that various media texts can offset the existing stereotypes. Who makes the diversity? Interviewee C and D emphasized the role of gay men:

Interviewee C: I don't necessarily argue that only homosexuals should create same-sex mediated content. But it should be homosexuals who lead it.

Interviewee D: We should be more active in both producing and consuming gay representation.

Similarly, Mundt (2007) proposed that homosexuals need to support media-related workers such as film directors, journalists, and program producers within a queer community. In doing so, they can produce content that can get the attention of the mainstream media so that they can eventually succeed in telling truer gay stories (Mundt, 2007).

Peters (2011) argued that same-sex media content in the United States started with having stereotyped comic characters such as *Ellen* (1994-1998) and *Will & Grace* (1998-2006). But it gradually broadened to cover diverse issues from love stories to the gay rights movement and to featuring demographically more various characters than in Korea. Hopefully, the same thing will happen in the Korean same-sex mainstream media. Although gay representation in mainstream at this moment is limited to showing "pretty boys," aiming at young female audiences, it should increasingly move forward in a way to be welcomed by gay consumers.

### Conclusion

Since the box office success of *King and the Clown*, the quantity of same-sex themed representations has been growing. Homosexual topics, once the purview of independent cinema only, now appear in mainstream productions more frequently. H. S. (2009) noted in 1998, the year the Hong Kong film *Happy Together* was banned and had

to delete from its Korean release certain scenes for merely containing same-sex stories. The change in the world of big budget cinema—and its willingness to show same-sex content—has been dramatic. And, Korean productions containing same-sex content and in which the primary content of the film and TV show is homosexuality is a particularly interesting and important case study. Notwithstanding these positive implications, the changes have not necessarily worked entirely for good. Post-2005 movies have (re)produced stereotyped images of homosexuals which originate primarily in female fantasy and desire for gay people. Gay interviewees, the object of representation, worry because they are beautified as pretty boys, and the mediated world is a far cry from their own. Yet they are pleased to find another consumer group of gay popular culture, a group that plays an indispensable role in producing and circulating same-sex themed texts in the mainstream media. They can only hope that the current trend advances in a way that embraces more diverse aspects of their lives.

In his research on Korean same-sex films, K. T. Kim (2011) argued whether it is desirable that we judge film, which is meant to be merely entertaining, with the standard of its respect to differences. I say yes, because media representation is “in itself power” (Gross, 1991, p. 21). As far as representation is related to power, the respect to and inclusiveness of differences should be considered in the process of encoding. However, this doesn’t necessarily mean that commodification should be avoided. In fact it is somewhat in need. Peters (2011) argued that, “While entering popular culture is undeniably an important political objective for a marginalized group in terms of visibility, it also marks a moment of commodification: identities have the potential to create profits for large media conglomerates” (p. 194). In short, media representation is double-edged:

It can empower you, yet simultaneously commodify you. Pre-2005 movies may be too politically correct to be entertaining, while post-2005 movies may be too entertaining to be politically correct. To be successful in the process of being represented, the result should be somewhere in between, where both factors of entertainment and political correctness are negotiated and neither is damaged. One way to achieve such a synthesis should be to make representation as plural as possible.

Hovey (2007) claimed that queer representation “is a powerful agent of change” (p. 163). At the same time, she commented that more visibility does not necessarily guarantee more truth. It is a quite meaningful and welcoming sign that gay people have entered mainstream media representation regardless of how that door was opened to them. Now it should be a goal to make mainstream gay spectacles more plural and become *a powerful agent of change*. Gay men, young women, and the media sector are all in charge. And I, belonging to that group my gay friend termed “you girls,” have tried to make their voices heard, including his.

## CONCLUSION

This study is about me: a 32-year-old, Korean, (performatively) heterosexual woman fond of same-sex themed popular culture. When my gay friend alerted me to my own captivity to a media illusion about gay men, I became zetetic about my personal interest in gay mediated texts (See Chapter 5). I had to ask myself: Why do I enjoy consuming gay representation? What aspects about gay topics make me (unconditionally) follow same-sex culture? Am I, by any chance, a homosexual? What do I know about homosexuality other than its fabricated images in media? I discovered that I was not alone, but had for company many female fellows of my age. Media discourses sketchily analyzed these young women, a group whom my gay friend referred to as “you girls,” as being so enthusiastic about gay people in popular culture that they would like to have a gay friend in the real world. Yet my interviews largely bore out this diagnosis. Whenever same-sex themed films are released or TV dramas aired, articles in the media repeatedly make this point. I wanted to know more: more about gay popular media, more about young people, more about male homosexuals, and more about myself. Thus, I began this project, which is deeply rooted in an authentic curiosity about my life.

At the outset, I wondered as to why I had desires for the homosexual body. I investigated, in Chapter 2, the female subculture of young female adolescents, like myself, who consumed global same-sex cultural artifacts and, influenced by their consumption, created their own local gay texts. The females inscribed their sexual desires into the gay body, manipulated it, and imagined the subversion of the previously held heteronormative structure through subcultural activities. What I unearthed in my

interviews was that these local women were seeking to redirect gay media. They criticized, appropriated, and modified the global gay popular culture, a culture of mere pleasure-seeking. For example, they blamed themselves for fantasizing about and eroticizing homosexual people in their texts or tried to correct the relationship between HIV and homosexuality out of consideration of their less knowledgeable readers. These attempts have meaning in that they alleviated the girls' self-criticism of having objectified and sexualized the homosexual body. Furthermore, such attempts potentially provide an alternative place in which homosexual men and heterosexual women achieve a common goal. For these reasons, I suggest this issue should get more academic treatment. As the current scholarship does not focus enough on the ways that same-sex romantic narratives by young Korean women are different from global counterparts and what the differences mean, I tried to work on such topics in this chapter. However, I realized that my study is incomplete and they need to be more detailed with rich analysis of texts and more interviews with female writers. In Chapter 2, I also examined the ways that the female subculture ultimately affected its members, concerning the attitude they formed about other genres of gay media. My interviews uncovered various standpoints but a tendency prevailed: the subculture of glocal same-sex media contributed to forming positive, or at least non-negative, positions for gay people and other same-sex products among young women. The important implication here is that these approaches ultimately functioned as a factor in gay-themed cinema being produced by the Korean mainstream media.

After querying the source of my desires for the homosexual body, I asked myself this: Why did the mainstream media industry suddenly pay attention to my interest in gay

romance narratives, narratives that had gone unnoticed for a couple of decades? I presupposed that the emergence of the female subculture of gay representation was due to the rising status of the females. In particular, the increase of this sector's socioeconomic power captivated the industry's search for new markets. Therefore, Chapter 3 shed light on the changes in the lives and statuses of young women who were or are fans of gay visibility in popular culture. In the mid-2000s, Korea had a discourse about the changed consumption patterns of young women. For instance, there was a surge in new appellations for them such as *Doenjang-nyeo* or Gold Miss, as well as media representation responding to it. I discovered a similar global discussion, that is, postfeminism. Academic concerns are that postfeminism is nothing but new traditionalism, so I sought to widen postfeminist interest beyond media by looking at Korean women. Like postfeminist women in media, real Korean women enjoyed individualized and consumeristic lives; consumerism in particular deeply permeated their lifestyles. However, in contrast to mediated women, real women were not depoliticized; rather they were highly conscious of patriarchal gazes at them. They dismissed such gazes and paved their own way, revealing their unique critical viewpoints. They were tolerant of over-consumption and considered it as an individual issue, while being critical of structural problems such as discontinuance of a critical magazine against a governing power. Notwithstanding the conflicting viewpoints, it was a meaningful movement that they included public issues to their personal lives and pursued individual practices. That is, they looked capable of negotiating public and private identities in their settings. My proposal is that future studies that contribute to the postfeminist discussion include these complex, multilayered configurations of women in their everyday lives and help

postfeminism shift from media analysis to in-depth research about a newly emerging type of woman.

After learning about myself, I scrutinized the industry that monetizes the object of my fantasy. In what contexts and ways did they decide to commercialize what for Korea was a long-time taboo—homosexuality? Chapter 4 then delineated the relevant issues to commodifying the subculture of consuming/producing gay mediated texts among the young women discussed in Chapters 2 and 3. Since the 1990s, the Korean government actively opened their doors to global material and intangible goods. Especially, the Korean film corporations adopted a planning-oriented Hollywood system, being swiftly capitalized. Additionally, it was a time when they ran out of fresh and eye-catching material despite facing severe competition with Hollywood and needing to fulfill the demands from a global film market. This conjuncture led the intensely commercialized film industry to pay attention to the fan activities of an emerging market, young women in their twenties and thirties, a group made salient by the great success of *King and the Clown* (2005). In the end, the mainstream film market dove into describing same-sex themes to appeal to these women who had economic resources. To support this argument, I interviewed film producers and marketers and confirmed that they gave consideration to the female group in the processes of film planning, directing, and marketing. Such information strengthened my opposition to the claim of Sonnet (1999), in her research of erotic queer fiction and its non-queer female readership in the United Kingdom. Sonnet (1999) claimed that the process was strictly unidirectional in transforming female citizens into cultural capital. She may be partly right but, instead of remaining mere cultural capital, young women continually maintained and expanded their interests in same-sex

media as active agents and tried to mirror their demands to the industry's commodification of their culture. In brief, the commodification process was interanimating, multilayered, and cyclical. In Chapter 4, I wish I could have investigated female roles in the cyclical process after commodification further, but doing so would probably have required a chapter-length study. I look forward to seeing deeper academic interest in the topic, one that is grounded upon ethnographic research.

On my journey to laying bare my interest in gay spectacles, I came to realize that gay people were nowhere to be seen in my project. What would they think of my (a straight woman's) fantasies and aspirations about them who have no reciprocal interest a woman of my type? My aim in Chapter 5 was to encourage homosexual participation in the commodification process or at least in the formation of discourse about gay visibility in the Korean popular culture. First off, I examined gay-themed films in Korea. I analyzed pre-2005 and post-2005 movies, with the hugely popular *King and the Clown* (2005) demarcating the watershed moment in gay-themed cinema. I concluded that the trends of post-2005 movies followed the arc of female fantasies and desires, desires that were projected onto the subculture of glocal gay media. I analyzed how exactly the fantasies and desires were crystalized into images. Moreover, I attempted to fill the gap, which had never been filled but, I thought, should be—that is, to be attentive to gay people in real life. Contrary to the media discourse or academic assumptions, gay interviewees did not firmly oppose the female subculture and its contribution to making same-sex topics visible in mainstream media. They acknowledged the women's role as well as the possibility of media offering a wide array of choices in gay-themed media products. Still, my interview subjects were not without ambivalence: they recognized and

were concerned by how distant the representations were from themselves. They conceded the necessity of their participation in the commodification process. In fact, the participation would not be at all an easy task considering how hard it is for them within Korean culture currently to reveal their sexual identities. But, I believe some are trying to undertake the job now and others hope to. This being the case, I suggest that future discussion include the current movement of gay people in media production so as to offer hidden identities a chance to take a direct part in media production. Additionally, the outcome of these efforts deserves attention.

#### Paradox of Representation and Commodification

I noted, in Chapter 5, my surprise at gay men's positive attitudes about heterosexual women's producing/consuming of same-sex content. I had assumed that they would be antagonistic toward the female fans about the gay spectacles. However, they in fact appreciated such representations, in part because they saw them triggering more media representation of homosexuals in Korean mainstream media. Granted, they did feel anxious about the potential for their lived experiences to be misrepresented, or exploited, or misunderstood. In fact, though, their welcoming yet concerned standpoints embody the ambivalence of commodification. When he wrote about the commodification of *American Idol* fan culture, Jenkins (2008) described such "conflicted feelings" as follows:

Here's the paradox: to be desired by the networks is to have your tastes commodified. On the one hand, to be commodified expands a group's cultural visibility. Those groups that have no recognized economic value get ignored. That

said, commodification is also a form of exploitation. Those groups that are commodified find themselves targeted more aggressively by marketers and often feel they have lost control over their own culture, since it is mass produced and mass marketed. One cannot help but have *conflicted feelings* [emphasis added] because one doesn't want to go unrepresented—but one doesn't want to be exploited, either. (pp. 62-63)

There is a slight difference between his discussion and mine, however: he argued the commodification of desires that a certain groups has while the representation of Korean homosexuals in my writing is about the co-optation of desires that local straight women have for gay people. However, his notion of conflicted feelings is still useful in the Korean case, because he ultimately asserted in the mass media market being represented necessarily entails being commodified. Therefore, one who wants public visibility must endure a certain level of exploitation. Yes, representation is a double-edged sword. Then, one is faced with a conundrum: Is it better to go unrepresented and be free from media or social stereotyping or to be represented and feel anxiety about the ways that they are described?

A matter of either unrepresented or represented is simple because, at least in the case of gay visibility in media, representation has led to (in)tangible, positive results in many cases. Gay people themselves admitted in interviews that they were glad to see their bodies in mainstream cultural products and have more options for media consumption thanks to the female fandom for gay portrayals. And, as addressed in Chapter 2, the production/consumption of *yaoi*, U.S. dramas, and fanfic transformed the attitudes of local female creators/consumers. Additionally, I introduced the audience

study by J. S. Kim (2012) wherein she interviewed viewers of *Life is Beautiful* (*Insangeun Areumdawo*, 2010)—the first family drama in prime time to include gay lead characters. Her informants found themselves thinking about the reality for gay men in Korea. She believed that representation positively functioned to publicize a topic that theretofore had been ignored.

In 2012, during the debate over President Barak Obama's comment and support about same-sex marriage, National Public Radio (NPR) discussed the relationship between media representation and audience attitude ("How TV Brought Gay People into Our Homes," May 12, 2012). In the program, Professor Edward Schiappa from the University of Minnesota argued that, among their viewers, gay characters in television programs such as *Will and Grace* contributed to reducing prejudices against gay men. In empirical research, he and his colleagues demonstrated, using the concept of "parasocial contact," that the presence of gay characters in media helped viewers be less biased about male homosexuals. Parasocial contact means "viewers form beliefs and attitudes about people they know only through television, regardless of whether such people are fictional characters or real people" (Schiappa, Gregg, & Hewes, 2006, p. 20). On the radio show, he commented: "These attitude changes are not huge. They don't change bigots into saints. But they can snowball." (para. 4). That is, media representation does play a role in changing a socio-cultural milieu for homosexuals, even if it does not bring a radical one. Additionally, it is possible that cumulative smaller changes may add up and ultimately be a bigger change in the end. Thus, one might surmise that if a person from a minority

group wants to see changes, these studies (including mine) suggest that representation can potentially help provide a viable route to a social visibility.<sup>93</sup>

However, even after we admit the necessity of representation, there remains an unsettled problem. Does representation always result in positive influence? Professor Schiappa pointed out on the show that whether gay visibility builds a positive attitude for gay people relies upon the described ways of being. Ciasullo (2001), in her study of representations of lesbianism and the lesbian body, questioned whether the lesbian body, made consumable and “tasteful,” is a new visibility or the old voyeurism (p. 582). As my

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<sup>93</sup> I assume that some Korean homosexuals might not necessarily want the status quo. This needs an explanation about differences between Western and Asian homosexual culture. Homosexuals in Asia do not have a common political and/or cultural memory like the Stonewall riots in the United States. The reason why homosexuals in western countries share a collective experience stems partly from regulations and controls by states and Christianity acting against homosexuality in mentioned earlier in this section. Resistance as a unified group against these “external pressures” has resulted in enhancing ties among homosexuals for decades. The “coming out” culture germinates from this history since, in the process of striving for equal citizenship, it is unavoidable to publicize their existence and thus their sexual orientation.

In most Asian countries, homosexuals face many different situations. For this reason, many scholars note that Western theories and concepts may not be applicable to Asian countries. For instance, Lim (2006) in particular argues that Asian queers have their own origins and practices that cannot be reduced to Euro-American queer models centered on the white gay male. Obviously, Asian queers have no long history of struggle and therefore are not familiar with the coming out culture. Rather than choosing the alternative groups, they prefer staying in the blood family and presenting their sexuality in marginal spaces (Yue, 2000). These spaces are recently conceptualized as Queer(N)Asian by some theorists (Berry & Martin, 2003; Yue, 2000). Queer(N)Asian is a diasporic imagination that “disrupts dominant representations to highlight the practice of identity constituted in the politics of self-enactment and self-representation” (Yue, 2000, p. 253).

Korean homosexuals are not different from other Asian counterparts. Patriarchy has dominated the Korean family and society. As a member of such a family and society, it is hardly probable to fail one’s duties (Kim, 2007). In the survey undertaken by Berry & Martin (2003), a majority of the homosexual respondents, mostly in their twenties and early thirties, reported that they were living with their parents. It is understandable that they intentionally conceal their sexual identity, despite all the agonies, in order to avoid confronting their parents with whom they live. Even if they do come out, parents insist on marriage to maintain the family system. At the same time, in the case of gay people, they are at times afraid of losing the benefits that they can obtain from patriarchy (Park-Kim, Lee Kim, & Kwon-Lee, 2006). Therefore, some homosexuals choose to marry, remain in the closet and find marginal places. For the reason, I cannot generically argue all homosexuals hope to see changes.

gay interviewees worried, the current mainstream version of gay representations primarily appeals to the voyeuristic female gaze. For instance, as argued in Chapter 5, erotic scenes abound and physical appearances of actors are underlined. Such patterns may have a potential for misguiding audiences. In this dissertation, I suggest what we— young women, the industry, and homosexuals—can do to offset such a risk. Radin and Sunder (2005) conceptualized “culture—and commodities—as interrelated, dynamic, and tainted rather than pure” and thus “commodified culture is culture nonetheless” (p. 21). That is, commodified culture *is* still culture that we, as cultural agents, have the power to intervene in and overwrite on so that culture can be multi-directed. In the next section, I discuss one of the things that female fans have done to add diversity to gay popular culture thus far and, in line with it, what can be done in the future.

#### Queer *Manhwa*, Queer Fanfic, and toward Queer Film and TV

In Chapter 2, I explained how local female writers of gay novels redirected their writing from pleasure-seeking to meaning-pursuing. In the initial stages, they merely produced *yaoi* or fanfic for fun. As some of them realized the power of their products and they began to worry the negative impact that fantasizing and sexualizing the homosexual body might have on readers. Thus they began trying to embrace gay realities that they once disregarded and/or did not know. This new direction made by local women was conceptualized with the term, “queer” *manhwa* (Korean version of manga) and “queer” fanfic. This movement apparently shows how culture ceaselessly evolves through intervention.

I hope to see this germinating attempt spread to other media such as film and television in a way to increase various kinds of gay visibility. Very recently, more and more filmic or televisual representations touch upon same-sex issues in ways to include secondary gay characters or deal with it as a subtopic. As they are in the United States, homosexual characters in Korean media are gradually becoming “*de rigueur*” (See Chapter 2, Shugart, 2003, p. 69). For instance, *Secretly, Greatly (Eunmilhage Widaehage, 2013)*,<sup>94</sup> a recently released film, and *School 2013 (Hakgyo 2013, 2013)*,<sup>95</sup> a recent TV drama, described ambiguous feelings among male protagonists in-between friendship and love, i.e., a bromance (S. D. Lee, 2013). However, their homo-social intimacy is straightened out in a way that some viewers fail even to notice but others including female fans can read as homosexuality. Moreover, lead characters are typical “pretty boys.” This is not necessarily “negative” representation, but continues to reproduce female fantasies for the gay body and thus not the direction that can be taken by “queer” media, which is grounded on gay reality in Korea. It seems that as of yet any impetus for a “queer” film or genre in the mainstream market remains out of sight.

I would argue that it is time for homosexuals to produce such impetus, not just lean back, critiquing the current presence of the homosexual body in media, and wait for others, either young women or the media industry, to make it happen for them. If they found media images about them disturbing, they better play a role by letting their voices

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<sup>94</sup> It is about three young male spies from North Korea who pretend to be an idiot, musician, and high school student, respectively. It is based on a namesake webtoon, a digitally produced *manhwa*. The film was a commercial success, attracting 6.9 million viewers (KOFIC). Homosexuality is described more explicitly in the webtoon. Featuring three “pretty-looking” actors, the film was particularly popular young women in their teens to thirties (Ahn, 2013).

<sup>95</sup> It aired in KBS (Korean Broadcasting System). It is a revival series of *School*, a drama about high schoolers’ puberty in a school setting. Unlike previous seasons, *School 2013* did not deal with heterosexuality allowing homosociality to be well accepted (Yang, 2013).

be heard and seeking changes. From my interviews, I concluded that they would like to do just that. Their actions could take various forms: directly participating in mainstream media productions, actively creating their own media to create alternatives to the mainstream representations that trouble them, supporting and funding such alternative media, publicizing their concerns about media representations, attending homosexual film festivals<sup>96</sup> and such. I believe some homosexuals are already doing this work and future research should yield even more detailed findings about the current movements among homosexuals as mentioned in Chapter 5. It seems to me, however, that redirecting mainstream representations about homosexuals would need for homosexuals in the real world to express their concerns more vociferously, as well as to take part and intervene. With such efforts, “queer” media could pave a solid way in mainstream Korea and the spectacularized homosexual body could become more enjoyable and meaningful for both homosexuals and heterosexuals. Meanwhile, I still believe that female fans and the media industry need to take their parts, as they initiated gay spectacles, in a way to realize the virtuality of the current gay body in gay mediated texts and to embrace the reality of gay people in Korea. Also, academic intervention such as my work is required to monitor and challenge gay-themed media representation, which Ono and Pham (2009) suggested in their analysis of media images about Asian Americans. With all of these efforts combined, we will be able to find plurality in gay representations so that homosexuals feel less marginalized.

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<sup>96</sup> There are several film festivals for homosexual movies such as Seoul LGBT Film Festival and Seoul Queer Films and Videos Festival. See J. Kim (2007) for more information about Seoul Queer Films and Videos Festival.

## Young Korean Women and Media

Korean society is rapidly changing, keeping in step with the globalized community, and so is the status of Korean women. And media is one of the keywords that define their everyday lives and lifestyles (Y. Kim, 2012). What then is the role of media in the lives of young women in Korea? How do they use media technologies? What is the significance of women in local contexts consuming transnational media texts? How do these women complicate, appropriate, and modify transnational popular culture within their media literacy? What possibilities and limitations do new/digital media technologies provide for young Korean women? I have explored these questions using the perspectives of transnational media and gender studies, examining such concepts as young women's consumption of global media artifacts, women's production of their own cultural texts, the relationship between young women and the media industry, and their contribution to the new mediascape. In doing so, I have examined specificities and complexities that exist in the relationship between women and media; I have adopted diverse approaches and qualitative methodologies, based on critical and cultural theories such as historical reviews, media discourse or content analysis, and interviews.

This task deserves attention. Local women, with media resources, can become empowered and imagine alternatives to an increasingly globalized and liberalized culture. One such example is the "flower pretty boys" (*kkonminam*) culture in media. This culture revolves around female viewers preferring pretty looking and androgynous male stars to their strong, masculine, and tough looking counterparts. Some argue that it is based on the Korean female fandom for homoerotic novels. Jung (2010) noted:

The popularity of pretty boys can be traced back to a larger *kkonminam* syndrome which has been sweeping Korea since the early 2000s. The Korean term, *kkonminam*, is coined from a combination of ‘*kkot*’ (flower) and ‘*minam*’ (a beautiful man). Although the word’s precise origin is uncertain, it is generally agreed that it first was used in relation to the pretty boy characters from girls comics who regularly appeared against backgrounds filled with flowery patterns. (para. 8)

That is, in Korean media the flower pretty boy syndrome is rooted in the female fantasy of pretty-looking gay men. Korean entertainment companies hire “pretty-looking” would-be actors to meet female eyes. In fact, the most famous young male celebrities in Korea—members of singing groups—are “so-called” pretty boys. Such singers as SHINee, Super Junior, or Big Bang help propel the dissemination of K-pop culture. In brief, one of the factors for K-pop’s global popularity is the flower pretty boy syndrome and its roots in the female subculture of the same-sex romantic genre. This is one evidence of the cultural powers that young Korean women wield.

This recognition, however, does not mean one should dismiss the dark side of the engagement these women have in the production of global culture. As I addressed earlier, aspiration for “pretty boys” in gay-mediated texts engendered a sense of alienation among quotidian homosexuals and resulted in the simplification and glamorization of homosexual lives in films. Likewise, women’s strong inclination for the flower pretty boy syndrome has, in terms of physical appearance and music style, dampened the diversity of the entertainment industry. For this reason, global fans at times become blasé about K-pop culture. After interviews with K-pop fans in the United States, Oh (2012) concluded

that they sometimes feel that K-pop stars are “all merely an assembly of a mass-produced artifacts” rather than an artist (p. 215). This is a meaningful point for both young Korean women and the Korean entertainment industry: for the women, in terms of their unconditional, cultural taste for pretty boys and for the industry, in terms of their mechanism of creating cultural products lacking variety, which could potentially cause a withering of Korean wave.

In relation to the issue of young Korean women and media, I would argue that there are other stories about the same female generation. Some young women are struggling to survive, competing with men in unfavorable conditions (Y. Kim, 2012). They are deprived the chance of employment and are paid less for the same work as men. For them, the notion of attaining cultural or global power by using media may sound illusory. And future research is necessary to identify the intersection between gender and class with media in Korea.

### Suggestions for Future Research

In spite of my best efforts in this project, I could not cover all the topics that I initially wanted to cover. Some topics were less relevant to the main topic and others called for longer and deeper research as an independent issue. I thus suggest here areas for further research that could yield important findings.

First, as more and more marginalized identities are emerging in Korean society, more attention should be paid to media content about sexual minorities. In particular, I recommend writing about other types of sexual identities other than gay men, such as lesbians and transgendered people. These groups have rarely been mentioned in the

patriarchal public sphere of Korea. As representations of lesbians and the transgendered in Korean media are germinating, scholarly interests should follow and address topics like analysis of media representations or audience studies including lesbians and transgendered people. Although sexual minorities have enjoyed little visibility in mainstream media, their stories have been told by independent or alternative media prior to *King and the Clown* (2005).<sup>97</sup> Recently, low budget films or documentaries (e.g., *Miracle on Jongno Street* in 2010) about sexually marginalized communities have attracted public interest and helped spectators understand minorities' lives. I assert that research on these small productions is significant. They are usually directed by sexual minorities themselves and thus stimulate conversations within their communities. These media productions and inside interactions are likely to unveil hidden issues relating to sexual identities and communicating them to outsiders. One result might be opening society to the plurality of sexuality.

Second, young women in their twenties and thirties deserve more scholarly attention. There is a tendency among scholars to consider young women as apolitical or anti-political, focused on their private lives, as we see in the images of postfeminist women. I tried to refute this idea in Chapter 2 by relating the lived experiences of my interviewees. Yet I believe more detailed observation and delineation are required. What does politics mean to them? What do they do if their personal advantages conflict with their ideologies? Furthermore, how do they think of their political, economic, and cultural powers in contemporary Korean society? How do they recognize their position as a local yet powerful subject in a global space? Answers to these questions might fall beyond the

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<sup>97</sup> It is a documentary featuring four gay people.

field of communication and media studies. However, answering them would clearly help our understanding of young women and media.

Third, work similar to this project's should be done in other countries. The production and consumption of the gay body—proliferation of *yaoi* and slash fiction—are spreading globally. For example, *yaoi* culture has permeated into media production in Asian countries with many *yaoi*-themed media texts being created. Then, how about in other countries? What do local female fans do with global gay content? In other regions, what roles are played by the female subculture of gay popular culture? How do sexual minorities receive the subculture? I believe this research is one of the ways to look at contextualities and complexities of globalization.

Fourth, the Korean entertainment industry needs to be examined regarding its globalized system. In this project, I investigated the process by which the film industry became globalized and ultimately emulated Hollywood's system. By extension, future study should explore other media sectors. Now, Korean popular culture is thriving and enjoying global popularity. This boom found its impetus in Korean media companies adopting a globalized entertainment system in the 1990s. And the influence of globalization on Korean media and their advance to a global market informs the circularity and hybridity of local culture in a globalized time and place.

Of course there are other meaningful and interesting issues that I have overlooked. Nevertheless, I hope that my work inspires intellectual curiosities and promotes readers' future works.

### Final Remark: One Step Forward and Two Steps More

In this dissertation, I examined issues related to spectacularizing the homosexual body in Korean media, because they offer a complicated and rich picture of the intersections of glocalization of culture, mass media, and industry in terms of gender, sexuality, and age. In my examination, I employed an interdisciplinary approach, as it is a multi-directed topic. In particular, to make my project more grounded, I interviewed a wide range of people who are connected somehow to the phenomenon. By doing so, I believe this dissertation has contributed to our understanding of how significant a role Korean young women played in making same-sex media so popular in the Korean mainstream film market. Additionally, this study has helped reveal the possibilities and limitations of the representations. And, finally, it proposed ways that homosexuals might take a more active part in the dynamics of commodification process and coexist with young women, and the media industry. I wish to conclude this project by expressing my desires and concerns for the future of same-sex themed media, as I am still concerned about the reality of homosexual life. However, I recently realized that I could have a measure of optimism.

Most recently, Koreans witnessed a couple of dramatic changes in the socio-cultural milieu for Korean homosexuals. In June 2013, a national mock test for high school students included a question that treated sexual minorities as “ethically non-problematic and normal” and called for a change to the social prejudice of sexual minorities. Additionally, one high school textbook was published addressing that sexual minorities are not medically abnormal or different from general people and therefore a society should respect sexual minorities as a normal member. The mock test and the book

instantly stirred up controversy, irritating some groups including anti-homosexuality organizations and churches (H. W. Kim, 2013; Yoo, 2013). They protested the Seoul Office of Education, which administered the test, and demanded that the publishing company delete “favorable” content for sexual minorities in the text and be more neutral. In Chapter 4, I presented another textbook that in 2009 categorized homosexuality as a social problem. Within a few years, alternative discussion against the discriminating text made its way into the public sphere although some Koreans are yet adamantly against homosexuality. And on September 7, 2013, a gay film director whom I interviewed, Kim Cho Kwang Soo, married his longtime partner.<sup>98</sup> They had a ceremony at the Choenggye Stream (Cheonggyecheon), an open space located in the middle of downtown and visible to everyone. Reportedly, even though a few tried to interrupt it by throwing excreta, yelling, and holding placards with anti-gay messages, the event went relatively smoothly and approximately a thousand citizens blessed the newlyweds (M. S. Kim, 2013). These two monumental events were something I had not expected when I started writing this dissertation.

Hence, I hope a virtuous circle is immediately established as follows: these changes in the real world immediately are mirrored in media in a way that same-sex media content embodies plurality. And I hope for the influence to run the other direction as well—that various future representations of homosexuals in mainstream media have a positive impact on reality. Meanwhile, homosexuals should “intervene and produce their own iterations of [these] discourses of their bodies” (Baez, 2009, p. 166). I, a straight woman and a constituent of the fandom for same-sex popular culture that helped gay

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<sup>98</sup> They announced that they planned to register their marriage and, if it is not accepted, they would file an administrative litigation (K. J. Kim, 2013).

media take one step forward, will embrace and support diverse representations about gay reality so as to help same-sex media move two steps forward.

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- National Statistical Office (<http://kostat.go.kr/>)
- Unofficial Fan site of *King and the Clown* (*Wangui Namja*) (<http://www.wang-ui-namja.com/events.htm>)