

Capstone Cover Page

Weber State University Bachelor of Integrated Studies Program

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Project Title: Gay In Seoul

Brief summary of project: Establishing one's identity, as a gay individual in western cultures, can be an arduous process. Social pressures often create turmoil that influence how one reconciles this identity in the larger cultural context. Little has been studied on how this process differs in eastern cultures where the construct of identity is vastly different. This ethnography explored how image influences gay identity, and how the creation of a force deemed as the *Social Body* allow identity to be formulated and navigated in Seoul South Korea.

Area of Emphasis 1: Anthropology

Committee Member from that discipline: Professor Susan Young

Area of Emphasis 2: Women and Gender Studies

Committee Member from this discipline: Dr. Kathryn MacKay

Area of Emphasis 3: Asian Studies

Committee Member from this discipline: Dr. Greg Lewis

Gay In Seoul

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Acknowledgments

This ethnography has been a labor of love and has taken much effort. However, it was not achieved on my part alone. It was a joint effort between my amazing informants, my wonderful committee, those supporting me behind the scenes, and myself. I am so deeply grateful to all of those who supported me along this journey.

During the process of this ethnography, I had the great honor to work with men, my informants, but beyond that my friends, who have so graciously opened themselves up to me. They allowed me to explore their situations and lead me to an understanding of what it means to be them. I especially owe much gratitude to 효리, my confidante throughout the entirety of this process. Your countless hours of work to help with translations and interviews was beyond anything I could have asked for. To my committee, Dr. Kathryn MacKay, Dr. Greg Lewis, and Professor Susan Young, your guidance throughout this process has been invaluable. I have learned so much under your direction, and can truly state that you have all shaped my mind through your tutelage. Finally, I must thank the unwavering support of my family. They have been a pillar of stability throughout this process, and for that, I am deeply grateful. Mom, thanks for your hours of effort in being my soundboard, and Dad for your never changing belief in me and encouragement in all of my crazy ventures.

To everyone who has listened to me ramble on about this work, I am forever grateful. You have all made this possible. Thank you all.

Note on Romanization and the narrative

All Korean words that are included in the following ethnography have been romanized according to the official Korean language romanization system present in South Korea; the Revised Romanization of Korean. I have also decided to include words as they are written in Korean as well. These have been included in order to capture the feel and authenticity of my interviews.

Additionally, I have tried to capture the feel of the culture in various parts of my narrative. Although it is traditional in the West to always adhere to active voice, this is not the case in Asia and in specific South Korea. That said, I have purposely used passive voice in parts of my narrative in an attempt to more accurately convey the mood and tone and conversational approach and grammatical format of South Korean society.

Note on Terminology

Throughout this ethnography I refer to the community at large as the “gay community” rather than the “LGBTQ community.” This is because this ethnography deals specifically with the community of gay men in South Korea. I was unable to access spaces and informants of other identities within the LGBTQ community due to my own identity as a gay male.

Introduction

In the spring of 2016 I returned, once again, to Seoul, South Korea. I had visited in the past, but not with a focused intent. Rather, I had gone for travel, or to reconnect with old friends, once even for a six-month period in order to learn a rudimentary base of the Korean language. This time however, I was looking to embark on a new journey. It so happened at this point in my life that I needed to commit to a research topic in order to complete my undergraduate capstone thesis. I was in my last year of my undergraduate

career and I was searching for a way to not only finish my degree, but also to get myself back to South Korea. I wanted to again study the Korean language, and immerse myself in a culture I had been so taken by. I was often asked what a white boy from Ogden, Utah was doing studying Korean. Why I would want to go to South Korea was beyond the understanding of most people. When people would discover it was my goal, the response was usually, "What for?" Even while in Seoul, I was confronted with this same question by South Koreans themselves.

The answer to this question is rather complex, and to be honest, even I was unsure of my reasons. I always loved meeting new people from different places and enjoyed learning how they saw themselves especially in the context of new areas. During my early years in at Weber State University, I came into contact with many exchange students from South Korea. I had always had an interest in Korean society, language, and popular culture, but making these connections solidified this interest. At this time, I was also lucky enough to make friends with a student from South Korea who happened to be gay. This was the first friendship I formed in my life with someone who identified the same way as I did. This was also the first time I felt connected to someone on a different level than I had before.

Formulating my identity as gay in Utah, I was rather lucky. My family was always supportive of my sexuality. My two closest friends, and by extension their family, offered another support system, that to this day has never wavered. However, the drawback to being in a conservative area such as Utah, in the time I was formulating my own identity, was a paucity of community of people who shared my orientation. That is what made this specific friendship so interesting to me. Through this friend, as if by some

form of fate, I was able to meet 효리 (Hyori), who would later become a key player in the completion of this project. I first traveled to South Korea with the intent to stay for the purpose of studying, and my friendship with these two grew and became something that I had experienced with only a few people.

I had always been the type of person who questioned what led me to formulate my own understanding of my identity as gay. What did it mean for me to be gay? What are the factors that reinforced my identity? How did I project my identity to the world, and why did I find solace in claiming this label? At the time of the formulation of this project, these questions began to shift to the other people in my life who identified the same as myself. I began to wonder what factors existed in my friend's cultural climate that was, and continues to affect, their understanding and perception of their sexualities.

I decided this was my moment to strike. I gathered my things and with the intention of finding answers to these nebulous questions, I left for Seoul. I secured a living space at the same 고시원 (go-si-won). I had lived there previously, and could adjust quickly while once again attending a local language institute. I understood that to learn as much as I could about the gay community in Seoul, I needed to grasp the language more than I already did. With this arrangement in place, I was ready to do research to complete my undergraduate capstone thesis.

My process was straightforward; I conducted eleven ethnographic interviews with native Korean men who self-identified as gay. Ten of these interviews were short, lasting twenty to fifty-minutes, using a survey style dialog. The survey was predesigned to collect a broad base of information. In contrast to these ten short interviews, I also

conducted one more extensive interview, designed as a life history dialog. This interview was meant to provide depth versus breadth. It was done over the course of six individual meetings spanning anywhere from one hour to two and a half hours. I was beyond lucky to have zealous help from 효리 (Hyori) in translating and understanding these interviews. He even became the main informant of this interview process due to his willingness to be the subject of the life history.

Within all of these interviews, I was looking for underlying cultural themes that would lead to insights on various questions regarding the formation of self-identity in the conservative climate of South Korea. I was curious how this process might affect an overarching self-identity and its formation within the gay community. Additionally, I wondered how a larger cultural and ethnic identity with its underlying roots of Confucian philosophy and emphasis on filial piety might impact gay identity formation. My hypothesis was that such a cultural context would not support variance in expression of identities. With this in mind, I spent the year improving my language skills and completing the interview process by day then accessing “gay spaces” at night (see figure 1).

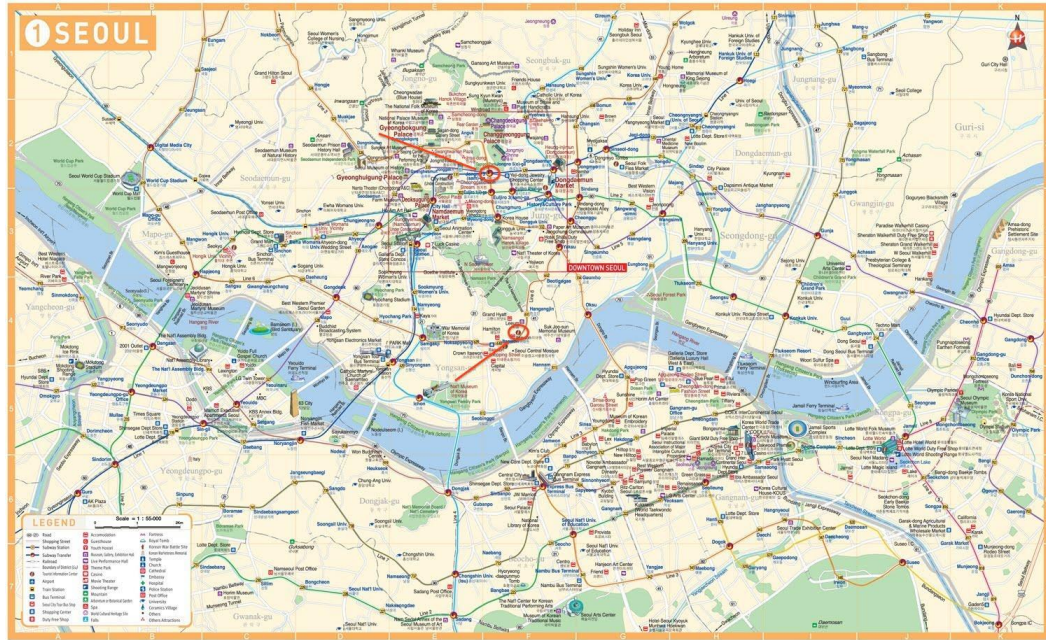


Figure 1: Map of Seoul South Korea taken from
(<http://ontheworldmap.com/south-korea/city/seoul/>)

I began to spend countless hours at the bars and clubs of **종로 (Jong-ro)** and **이태원 (Itaewon)**. Each area was a small beacon of gay nightlife that lights up from Friday night through the weekend and into the following workweek. Gay men pack the seats of the street food carts along the main drag of **종로(Jong-ro)**, file into local bars, or stay up until the next sunrise participating in **술번개 (sul-beon-gae)**. They also crowd “Homo-Hill” in **이태원 (Itaewon)**, jumping from club to club, dancing with each other and brushing shoulders with foreigners or the occasional drag queen. Being engrossed in the events, activities, and gatherings of these areas was a stark contrast to my nine a.m. to three p.m. schedule at a Korean language institute in **혜화 (Hyehwa)**.

Because of the countless experiences I had during my stay, I was better able to understand and contextualize the motivations, behaviors, and resulting identity formation among gay men in South Korea. I began to see how gay identity seems to live in contrast to the obligations of society, obligations that create a carefully curated *social body*, a concept that became a dominant focus of my research. I was also able to understand how this social body would allow for a fluidity of identity. This fluidity then aids in one's understanding of their own identity as gay, with a social body protecting their private identities. This was all in contrast to my original hypothesis I formulated upon first entering the native setting. I assumed that gay identity was formulated, understood, and accessed in the same ways as it is in the West. What follows here, is what I learned about the existence of gay identity in contemporary South Korean society.

Methods

Design:

This ethnography engaged informants from two perspectives; 1) interviewing a single informant for depth of experience (Part A), and 2) a survey of multiple informants using standardized survey questions for breadth of experiences in contemporary youth culture (Part B). It took place in Seoul, South Korea, further referred to as “the native setting.” This two-pronged approach to ethnography followed the guidelines outlined by Spradley (1979). This included: locating an informant, interviewing an informant, making an ethnographic record and generating data, discovering cultural themes and writing an ethnography. To accomplish this, I involved myself in the cultural context via

participant observation also using methods outlined by Spradley in *Participant Observation* (Spradley 1980).

The advantage of this approach is that it allowed for a comparison between “ideal” culture (what people believe they should say) and “real” culture (how people actually behave). The space between ideal and real is likely the space in which cultural variation occurs. I was struck by the work of De La Torre in *Santeria: the Belief and Rituals of a Growing Religion in America* (2004). He clearly articulates this principle as follows: "Those of us raised in this spiritual environment survived the alienation of living in a new country because of the shared scared space created by the tension existing between Christianity and Santeria." (De La Torre, 2004 p.2).

Though the context of my project exists within a different country and explores a different aspect of culture, it does deal with marginalization in a way similar to that described by De La Torre. In this regard De La Torre has voiced a transferrable truth. Modified to fit my purpose, this truth would read: *Those of us raised in this cultural environment survived the alienation of living with a new identity because of the shared communal spaces created by the tension existing between ideal culture (traditional obligation) and real culture (the construction of a new category of identity).*

To complete this approach, I had to locate an appropriate informant for Part A (depth of experience). Securing this informant presented little difficulty. I had previously lived in South Korea for six months and had deepened rapport and trust with an individual who has a history of living as a gay man. The existing trust relationship also enabled me to generate solid data about the “real” issues involved in experiences of sexual identity in this culture. In turn, Part A was augmented through connections gained

from my own experiences formed within the gay community, as well as contacts presented by the informant participating in Part A. This helped to capture the “ideal” face of sexual identity in contemporary culture as it presented itself to me.

All data collection followed protocols outlined by Spradley for ethnographic interviewing. As stated above, this was achieved through a dual approach. Part A was extensive interviewing of a single informant. This approach is often referred to as a “Life History” approach, and aids in a better understanding of cultural shifts across time. All data was collected and processed through methods outlined by Spradley (1979), Wolf (1990) and Geertz (1973) including; heavy participant observation, standardized ethnographic methods of recording observations and asking questions, journaling first hand experiences/feildnotes, and finally thick description represented by qualitative data. Part B not only focused on collecting basic demographic information and answers to structured short response questions (Appendix A), but allowed for latitude in the interview process for questions to form organically. These interviews helped to shape further questions discussed in Part A. Part B then ensured breadth of knowledge over a larger population and quantifiable data that spoke to contemporary issues within the arena of young, marginalized gay men.

Informants:

* A note about the names that follow: In order to assure anonymity and protect the identities of my informants, all names have been changed. Names have been selected randomly from a pool consisting of names of South Korean celebrities. These names

neither describe my informants nor do they reflect the celebrities in any way, shape, or form.

*A note on the information that follows: All information given in the following section is based on my personal observations and experiences with each informant. In order to assure anonymity and protect the identities specific demographic information is not included. However, all informants interviewed range from the ages of 22 to 29 years of age.

효리 (Hyori): Intelligent, kind, and armed with a quick wit, he is one of my closest friends. He taught himself to speak English to a level that makes me envious. 효리 is not one to be underestimated. For this study, he spent many hours dedicating himself to countless interviews, not only as the subject of the life history, but also as an aid in securing other informants and assisting in the translation processes as well. Knowing 효리 for years now, his friendship is one that I know I can count on for the rest of my life.

우현 (Woo Hyun): Easy going, fun to be around, and one of the smartest people I have met. I first got to know 우현 at my university. Knowing him the longest out of any of the informants has led to a personal understanding of the information presented throughout the interview process. During my time in Seoul, he always put forth the effort to make

time for me, despite his busy workload. I always enjoy meeting 우현, and look forward to when we can meet again.

남준 (Nam Joon): Though my interactions with 남준 were limited to our interview together, what was striking was his understanding of the subject at hand. I came to find out he held a degree in Women and Gender Studies, and had done his thesis work within the gay community. He is an advocate for gay rights, and described to me, how accepting his own identity was strengthened through his understanding of feminist and queer literature. I also came to understand that within his circle of friends, he was a major influencer in the way his friends, and in particular 효리 (Hyori), understood their own identities as gay.

민혁 (Min Hyuk): Warm, shy, and very soft spoken, 민혁 has the best eye smile I have seen. He was introduced to me by 효리 (Hyori), and spoke English very well. 민혁 struck me as someone who was very romantic in disposition. He detailed to me how he wanted to move outside of South Korea, so he could get married and raise a family. He seems to be always traveling and we did not have as many chances to meet, as I would have liked. However, we still keep in contact from time to time.

성훈 (Sung Hoon): 성훈 was another informant introduced by 효리 (Hyori). Of all the informants I meet through 효리 (Hyori), I ended up becoming the closest with 성훈. He was very kind and always took an interest in how I was doing. We met many times outside of the interview process, enjoying a meal or coffee together as well as drinking with 효리 (Hyori) and 우현 (Woo Hyun) in 종로 (Jong-ro). We still contact each other on a regular basis.

강인 (Kang In): With an ability to speak nearly perfect English, I met 강인 for the interview at his office. He owns his own business selling goods between South Korea and the United States. He was very open and his interview was the longest of those in Part B. He was willing to talk to me about his experiences with being in a relationship with a foreign male and was able to compare that to being in a relationship with a native South Korean male. I enjoyed our interview as he was able to articulate the way he felt not only as a member of the gay community in South Korea, but also as a representative of how the gay community seemed to feel as a whole.

경재 (Kyung Jae): Rather masculine and quiet, 경재 was in a relationship with 태일(Tae Il). I did my interview with 경재 separate from his boyfriend, but within the same day. Because 경재(Kyung Jae) was only a friend of 효리 (Hyori) through the

connection of his boyfriend, I could tell **경재** was the most reluctant to share information with me. This being the case, he was still rather nice and was willing to participate.

태일 (Tae Il): 태일 was in a relationship with **경재** (Kyung Jae), and friends with **효리** (Hyori). What I remember most about him was his smile, which he displayed very often. He was more open than his boyfriend, and was much more playful as well. I didn't have much contact with either 태일 or **경재**(Kung Jae) after the interviews. This is likely because they are in a relationship and spent time mostly together.

진기 (Jin Ki): 진기 was another informant introduced to me by **효리** (Hyori). He was my age and lived in my neighborhood. Though he was soft spoken, his English skills were rather good. Even so, he was a little bit shy during the beginning of the interview process. He slowly opened up during the interview and was able to give great insights into his experience of being gay in South Korea. I remember that the glasses he wore were rather charming, and I ran to get a pair from a clothing shop near my house after our interview because I thought they were so cute.

기범 (Ki Bum): Lively, Funny, and a character, **기범** is a friend I met while living in Seoul. He goes to school for video game design and is very talented. We are the same age and **기범** speaks not only Korean, but English and Chinese as well. Whenever we met,

He never wanted to talk with me in Korean, and even when we would go dancing it was always in 이태원 (Ittaewon), a district populated mostly by foreigners. I had many experiences in the gay clubs of 이태원 (Ittaewon) but none as fun as when I was with 기범. I love to dance, and he was one of the few people who could keep up with me. We became rather close and talk very often to this day.

세훈 (Se Hun): Another friend I met while interacting in the gay community, 세훈 was very kind and artistic. Being a fashion major he was always dressed well. We often met to eat, and would go to many buffets and nice restaurants. He lived outside of Seoul but whenever he stopped into town we would connect. We occasionally ran into each other in 이태원 (Ittaewon) as well. Because he was very outgoing, anytime we met in 종로 (Jong-ro), he always seemed to know people who happened to be there.

성규 (Sung Kyu): Though not involved in the interview process, 성규 became one my closest 형(hyung). Extremely outgoing, he seemed to know everyone. 성규 has an interesting personality that is hard to put into words. If one were to try, perhaps eclectic would describe him best. I met him through a previous contact, and he really took me under his wing. He introduced me to a whole new world in 종로 (Jong-ro). Because of him I was able to make many friends and enter the door of the gay community,

something that many foreigners in South Korea don't get to do. This friendship enabled me to gather observational data in locations that as a foreigner I would typically have little access to.

Findings

The Social Body:

Narrative - I once again found myself with **성규** (Sung Kyu) **형** (hyeong) in **종로** (Jong-ro) at our favorite **포차** (po-cha). Like most Saturday nights in **종로**, gay men were popping in and out of bars, and **성규형** seemed to know every second person passing by on the street. We drank only beer as **성규형** didn't like drinking **소주** (soju) that much. As our plate of stir-fried pork began to dwindle, he suggested that tonight we go to a **술번개** (sul-beon-gae). I had no idea what that was, as it was my first time hearing the word. I knew **술** (sul) meant alcohol and **번개** (beon-gae) was lightning, but I wasn't sure what the two of them together could mean. However, being the adventures soul I am, I responded confidently, "Sure."

We entered into a bar, down an alley and around the corner, and went up the stairs. A sliding door was opened, and as we entered the room, all heads shifted to look at us. In the center of the room sat a table long enough to accommodate at least twenty people. The table was surrounded on three sides by booths in which about fifteen men sat.

성규형 took a seat and I quickly followed, sitting next to him. I was directed to give 15,000 **원** (won) to a man sitting at the front corner of the table. He wore glasses, a messy hairstyle, and a microphone that made him look like someone about to give some sort of speech in a conference room.

After I handed him the money, he spoke, his voice amplified due to his microphone headpiece. We were instructed to go around the table, one by one and introduce ourselves. I came to learn about **술번개** (sul-beon-gae) that night. It is a gathering, similar to a round of speed dating. A group of gay men get together, carry on conversations with each other, play games, drink and eat, all while directed by a host of sorts. The point of such events is to make connections within the gay community; whether that be a connection to satisfy the needs of one night, or create a relationship that would last longer.

At this particular **술번개** (sul-beon-gae) I noticed an interesting fact. The best looking attendee was, undoubtedly, also the most popular. I myself was somewhat of an intrigue too, as a foreigner that is. They all told me they have never seen someone who wasn't Korean at one of these things. However, unlike the most handsome man there, everyone was not vying for a chance to sit next to me. Everyone seemed to stare at him, and laugh exuberantly at anything he said. When it was my turn to chat with him, however, I was struck by how blatantly rude he was. Still, this seemed to affect no one's perception of him. People continued to compliment his looks, fashion choices, and praise how great he was at the drinking games being played, even if he wasn't. I couldn't figure out what he had going for him. Sure he was good looking, but he was a regular stick in the mud. He was disinterested in all the games, and even left early, stating he had a more

important appointment to get too. After he left, the atmosphere of the place took a total nosedive. No one seemed interested in talking to each other or playing games anymore.

After the fun of the night came to an end, I couldn't stop wondering what was going on with that specific guy. I had to ask 성규형 what had happened exactly. 성규형 told me that it was pretty typical behavior, that he had seen it many times. He told me handsome guys sometimes have bad attitudes, but no one cares. He stated that they get away with whatever they want because they look good.

Image is a reproduction or imitation of the form of a person or thing. The idea of one's image is something that we take upon ourselves personally to carefully, and thoughtfully curate. It affects how others navigate interactions with us on all levels of social happenings. At a more singular level however, it begins to affect the way we interact with ourselves. The way in which we process situations within our own experience falls subject to our held beliefs about our own identities. If so desired, we can take this idea one step further and broaden this definition of image into a wider discourse. Culture, as outlined by Geertz, is "a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about, and attitudes towards life." (Geertz, 1973 p. 89). These symbolic representations can be referred to using another other term, images. These images are communicated to others and give us a subliminal, and yet explicit set of rules and norms. People use such symbolic forms of communication not only to communicate attitudes towards life, but also their standing within said life as well. And even yet, our outwardly presented image is not curated by us alone. It is also curated by our cultural setting.

While entrenched in the interviewing process, I began to notice a common thread that ran throughout all the interviews. This was that of the idea of "image." It was a persistent theme, and as I began to formulate an understanding of what the informants

and 효리(Hyori) were telling me, the idea of image continued to poke it's head out of the bushes and wink coyly at me. While further digesting this idea of image, I began to notice it also appearing within the greater cultural context of South Korean society as a whole. But what did this nebulous idea of image mean exactly? In short I have found "image" to be too limiting a concept, and therefore have decided to bring this rather nebulous idea into reality by defining it as a *social body*. My research indicates that the construction of an unseen but pervasive *social body* results from various social tensions inherent in South Korean society. These tensions work on two levels. In a broad sense they create a culturally defined and acceptable idealized version of the self to which all aspire. Yet at a singular level the social body becomes a shield, thus allowing one to simultaneously detach from the social body while still maintaining the reaffirmation and creation of this pervasive force (see figure 2 pg. 19).

At its axial core, an emphasis on kinship and familial structure exists. This produces an ongoing socio-economic stream from which the culturally desirable social body begins to form. Tradition comprises one half of the construction of a social body that works to further support its formulation through means of the codependence between socio-economic status and the then consequential school opportunities resulting in career progression. These make possible another key component in the creation of a culturally acceptable social body, a traditional marriage. This traditional marriage then enhances and ultimately aids in the replication of the axial core. The social body is therefore directly aligned with status in society in the sense that it is a mechanism *for* achieving status, and then also becomes a marker *of* that status once achieved.

However, these components comprise only half of the total social body. A significant component of this structure lies in the variable factors that comprise physical markers. These allow one to create and maintain the appropriate image. In this regard one has greater expressive latitude. Socio-economic status, as a part of the axial core, creates an equal but opposite tension to support the creation of a consciously curated physical reality. The greater the economic means, the more desirable the physical reality can become. The better the physical reality, the greater the opportunity in school, career, and marriage. This, therefore, leads to the ultimate ability to curate a more acceptable social body in and of itself. But, the irony of this scheme is that a social body that is closely viewed as the cultural ideal allows for the formation of incongruous identities. This is because a better social body creates a more durable shield behind which incongruous individual identities can thrive. The result of this is variable creations of identity, detached from, but still connected to, by tensile force, the greater social body at large. It is here that choices about sexuality can exist.

However, the entirety of this structure denoted as the social body is created and exists as a nucleolus within the larger role of obligatory action. This action works to drive the recreation and reaffirmation of a point on the axial core: Kinship. Thus obligation itself perpetuates the formulation of a social body.

An additional floating variable in the model is age. It acts as an external influence that dictates when each of the components of the social body hold importance and it determines the way in which other individuals perceive and act towards the individual at any given time.

In applying this definition of the social body to the information gathered from my interview process, the idea of social body became clearer than ever. I no longer had to mill through the words of my informants searching for cultural themes. Instead, it was right there in front of me, and this time, it wasn't winking; it was shouting at me.

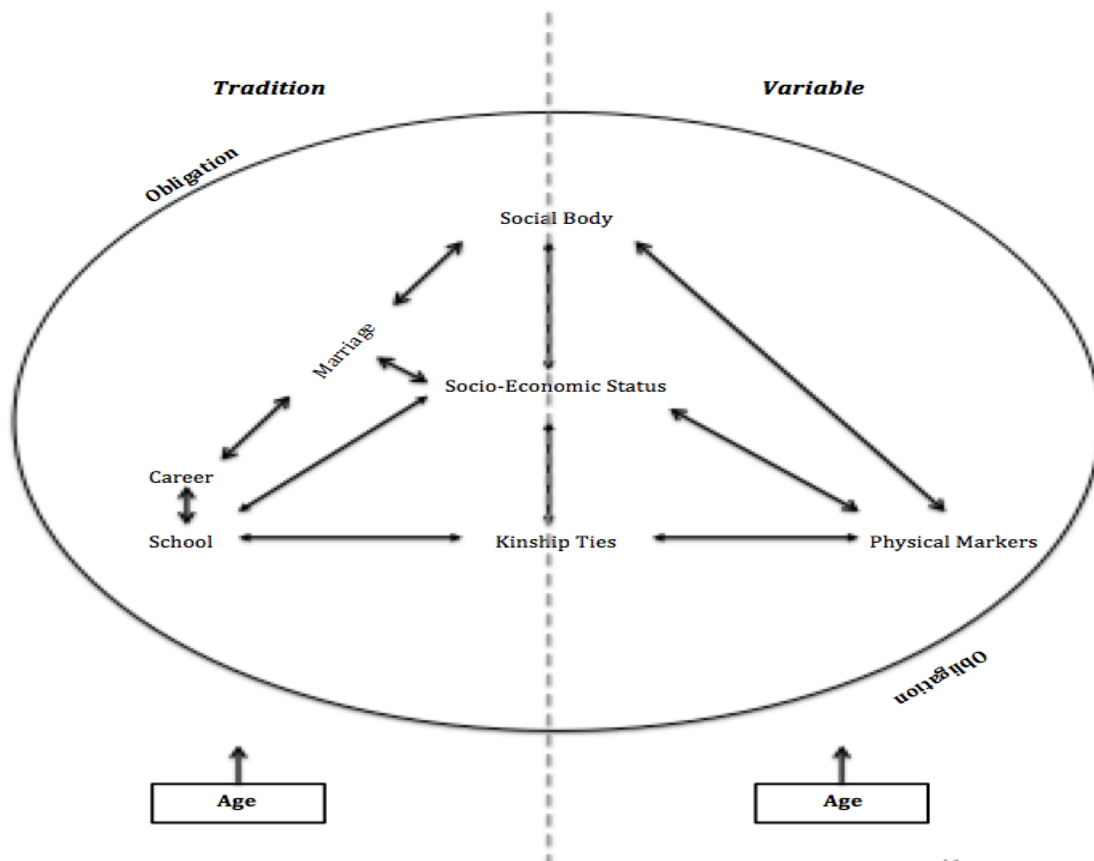


Figure 2: The inner workings of the social body

The social body can be directly seen in the words of four informants who explicitly expressed this idea in reference to the gay community in South Korea. They all agreed that many gay men felt that the gay community needed to put forth a culturally

acceptable image (social body). This thought implies that the construction of a social body is applicable not only to an individual navigating social interactions but groups navigating cultural discourse as well.

In addition to the vocalization that a need for a culturally acceptable image is held widely within the gay community, my informants also identified the fact that the social body should conform to the dominant culture, *not* deviate from it. However, three of the four informants directly stated they saw this ideal as a divisive issue within the gay community. They expressed that there is a concern in the gay community that any self-expression that deviated too drastically from the normative South Korean view of self created a negative perception of gay men. They outwardly identified this ideal as an obstacle to affirming variable gay identities.

This can be seen reiterated in the words of 강인 (Kang In) who identified that behaviors which deviate from the desired norm are likely to result in a stigma. Gay men evaluate other gay men based on this desired norm. Ironically, gay men then stigmatize other gay men, creating a challenge the community faces as a whole. As an example, he discussed a pride event held in June (2016) at City Hall in Seoul. 강인 (Kang In)

explained the backlash the pride event created among some members of gay community:

“Still many people that I know, when they speak about the gay pride parade in Seoul, they are having a western style gay parade, they say people are being naked and showing [openly] that they are gay and flamboyant. But many gay people think that we should show only the good side of ourselves. Not the naked or sexual things. The feeling is that only handsome guys can join the party.”

This feeling was reiterated by other informants. They echoed the sentiment that the community of gay men at large objected the “over-the-top-ness” of the pride parade,

with its displays of nudity given the high profile public nature of the event. This even became a topic of discussion among 효리 (Hyori), 우현 (Woo Hyun), 성훈 (Sung Hoon) and myself while enjoying a stop at a coffee shop after attending the pride event of 2016. They expressed that they heard mumblings among other gay men who chose to opt out of attending the pride event due to the above-mentioned factors. Anecdotally, an acquaintance of mine, whom I often ran into while bar hopping in 종로 (Jong-ro), expressed to me his contempt for the fact that a local drag queen headlined the performances at the festival. Put simply, the eccentricities displayed at Seoul's pride festival were seen as being harmful to how heterosexuals view the gay community as whole, and by extension, individuals within that community. Clearly, the presence of this sentiment can be argued through the application of my social body model. The ideal exists because the social body works as a shield that insulates the individual from direct opposition to individual identities that run counter to cultural obligations.

This raises an interesting ideology that diametrically opposes the ideology that is held within academic circles and the rhetoric of queer studies formed in Western culture. In these arenas, embracing the queer is seen as not only important in research and pedagogy, but as a necessity. This is exemplified in the work of Alexander and Wallace (2009) who outline the "transformative power" of queerness and its ability to shed light on a difference in experience through the understanding of alternative identities.

Furthermore, in the West, this idea of embracing the queer is not reserved for the echelons of academia alone. Rather, this has permeated queer culture as a whole, where the idea is transformed to the singular level. Placing value on embracing one's queerness

and individual eccentricities is seen as a virtue. This is particularly true in the United States, where the slogan of “We’re here, We’re queer” has been part of the LGBTQ cultural zeitgeist since the early 1990’s (Queer Nation, June 24, 2017). However, the rather combative approach to affirming one’s identity as LGBTQ, which is held in the cultural framework of the United States, is antithetical to that of the South Korean cultural ideal. In this society, one *should not* be too individualistic but should instead attempt to create a harmonious relationship *with* the broader society.

It is important at this point to once again reflect back on the exact words of my informant as previously quoted above. The pride event in question was explicitly characterized as a “western style pride parade.” This clearly reflects a subconscious understanding that gay identity in South Korea deviates strongly from a global overlay of gay identity based in western ideology. This also explains why people in the gay community might be against happenings at the pride event.

This idea of “submission” of individual identities for creating a harmonious relationship with the broader society, however, seems to create a sort of transformative power. This power is held within one’s own ability to navigate social situations through the use of a curated identity that conforms to the culturally accepted standard (the social body). This can clearly be seen exemplified in the words of 기범 (Ki Bum) who discussed the changing views among the youth population due to the emergence of a gay identity in online spaces.

기범 (Ki Bum) made explicit the idea that the younger generation of South Koreans are becoming more accepting of gay identified men. When asked about the

reason, he stated that it is specifically due to a slow growing presence of gay identified men on social media networks.

With the phenomena of the websites such as 아프리카 TV (AfreecaTV), online 먹방 (meok-bang), and the popularity of smartphone applications such as Instagram, the average person can gather a following. Interestingly, some who have found success on such sites have been self-identifying as gay. My perception of this phenomenon is that cyberspace is a liminal environment in which traditional social norms are often suspended. Other anthropologists have noted this liminality effect and its disinhibiting power to produce variances in social norms. (Fox 2008; 334)

Cyberspace however, would have no disinhibiting power were it not for the existence of a social body that achieves excellence in physical markers. This has become evident in application of the linguistic modifier 훈남 (hun-nam). In colloquial use, this modifier is not unusual, as it is used to express male physical beauty in general application. However, what is illustrative is that in cyberspace there is now the existence of a gay male couple who have attracted an outstanding following through means of appearing on broadcasts with well-established online personalities. When they appear they generate incredibly high viewing numbers—in some cases upwards of 2.4 million views on YouTube alone. I estimate that 98% of the viewers are Korean by dint of replies in that language (Park, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y7lkhGeUAIg>).

It is essential to recognize that whenever they appear in online spaces, the modifier 훈남 (hun-nam) always precedes the words gay couple. This is clear evidence

that the appropriate social body is not only key to acceptance by the larger society, but also allows for variance in culturally standardized identities. Due to their outward appearance, a variable component that is key in the cultivation of a social body (see figure 2 pg. 19), this couple has been accepted by a greater cultural discourse to a degree not possible in day-to-day life. This is further supported and made explicit by 기범 (Ki Bum). To paraphrase his words:

“I think, originally when on TV programs, they think (viewers) gay men are just very girly, or only in there for comedy. But now handsome guys like BJs (a BJ, is someone who creates and uploads online broadcasts) are becoming popular. So, handsome people or manly people also are visible through media, and they are gay as well. So it is increasing our (gay men’s) privilege. (Young) people now think not all gays are girly; this is making our privilege go higher.”

The message is clear. These openly gay men are handsome, wear the acceptable amount of makeup for men in South Korea, and they have a “nice” body. The point is this: they have created an acceptable social body which then acts as shield for individual eccentricities that would otherwise not be tolerated. This social body also allows them to interact with others in a traditional socially acceptable way. So the social body must be present, and this specific social body is one that cannot deviate too far from the acceptable cultural norm. Cultural obligations are, therefore, driving much of what is happening in the formation of a social body.

Nevertheless, this social body is not one that is exclusively self-created. Rather, it already exists within the cultural mindset and framework of day-to-day life. If achieving said social body is accomplished, a transformative effect takes place. The social body then acts as a shield allowing for variations in behavior, identity, and in this case sexuality that are all diametrically opposed to the culturally accepted norm. This is due to

the fact that the social body becomes the vehicle through which communication and interactions can occur. So, rather than communication with an individual on the level of a singular whole, communication with a constructed social body is taking place. In the West, identity is comprised of *all* aspects of an integrated single individual. However, in contrast to this, South Korean identity integrates a multiplicity of identities all of which use the social body as the vehicle of communication. Yet, at the same time, communication from a social body is also taking place. This creates an effect where communication happens between curated social bodies that do not necessarily encompass all aspects of each parties' identity.

This is supported by an example illustrating the converse side of the illustration given above. In South Korea there is one openly gay celebrity 홍석천 (Hong Seok-cheon). In his case the liminal effects of cyberspace did not apply when he came out publicly. He was initially rejected, alienated, shunned, and discriminated against by society. He was even forced to cut ties with his broadcasting company. However, 홍석천(Hong Seok-cheon) slowly found his way back into the world of entertainment.

The initial reaction to his coming out could be explained by the previously stated effect of a liminal environment. However, if we were to apply my model of the social body, I believe that a somewhat deeper understanding of why its shielding affect was absent can be understood. 홍석천(Hong Seok-cheon) was described by 기범 (Ki Bum) and 효리 (Hyori) as someone the gay community of South Korea at large does not necessarily want as their representative. His physical markers are lacking. He is bald, effeminate, and would not be described in the same way as the couple who found success online.

Therefore, the social body is lacking one of the key tensile forces (physical markers) and does not exist to its full potential as a shielding agent.

In short, if correctly curated, once the social body is in place behavior can then follow. If one presents the appropriate social body, then extreme behavior, in this case forms of sexual expression become okay or would likely go *uninvestigated*. Is your behavior justified because of the presence of your carefully curated social body? My research suggests that the answer would be yes.

An Image-Based Culture:

Narrative - *I sat in class on my first day of school full of excitement to be able to study Korean again. This excitement quickly turned to worry when I was informed that I needed to go to the international office after class. I sat terrified thinking I had done something wrong. Did my visa not go through? Was my payment for the class insufficient? Was I going to be removed from class? After what seemed to be an interminable amount of time class finished; I ran like a marathon competitor to the building containing the international office. It sat atop what seemed like the steepest hill in all of South Korea, looking over the campus like a fortress.*

When I reached the office my breathing was irregular, both from the run and from the fright. I was informed by reception that I had forgotten to attach a photograph of myself that would be used for my student ID card. My breathing miraculously became normal, color returned to my face, and I was so relieved that the issue was just a small oversight that could be take care of easily. I skipped down the hill outside the front gates of campus to a place that could take and print a picture for me.

A man took my picture, walked to a back room leaving me waiting for what seemed a curiously long time to print a photo. I thanked him, handed him the money, and walked out of the store. As I made my way back up the steepest hill in South Korea, I looked at my pictures. To my shock they had been altered. My skin had been whitened, my jaw trimmed and my shoulders broadened. Had he Photoshopped my picture? I thought it was odd but had little time to question it. When I reached the international office I gave the secretary my picture expecting her to ask if it was really me. However, she didn't. She looked at them and simply said 감사합니다 (gam-sa-hab-ni-da).

Now that I have established that the social body exists within the cultural setting of South Korea, the question becomes, what facilitates the necessity for the process of the creation of said social body? In looking back to the original definition of culture given by Geertz, culture works as a blueprint, relaying mores through which appropriate behavior is enacted. I assert that in the case of South Korea, cultural expectations are driving the creation of a social body. This specific culture is one that is *image-based*.

As explained previously, communication between individuals takes place using the social body as a vehicle, a curated image of a culturally acceptable *best-self*. It functions as an identity that the user projects to the outward world. The social body is a reflection of cultural expectations. It follows that a culture that warrants the curation of a social body and that values strategies of symbolic communication must be imbedded in an image-based culture. The motivation within such a culture is to appease society at large through image-based maneuvers. In other words, it is critical to present a certain way using the social body. Once your social body has been accepted, you cannot break its superstructure. You have now brought most of the world's forces into *collusion with you*, and, therefore, you are not going it alone.

The idea that South Korean culture values image-based maneuvers is an argument for which evidence is readily visible in the media. I must, however, confirm this position as I believe it holds truth outside of the popular culture. To find evidence of this one needs only to look at happenings that are commonplace within the framework of everyday South Korean society. Examining behaviors engaged in by the majority of people in South Korea, we can see this point at play.

The obsession with skin care and cosmetics that permeates South Korea can easily be verified by anyone walking the streets of Seoul. “Road Shops” selling makeup are ubiquitous and South Korea is renowned for its innovation in skincare. It has become a Mecca of sorts, with people flocking from all around Asia with the goal of purchasing products that will help one achieve the “perfect *Korean* skin.”

In recent years, South Korea has also become notorious for the omnipresence of its plastic surgery industry. So much so, that “medical tourism” contributes greatly to the South Korean economy. The subway station of 강남 (Gangnam), an upscale, frequented area of Seoul, instantly brings this fact to attention. Signs detailing deals on procedures offered by the multiple plastic surgery clinics in the area are present from the moment you exit the train. Statistics further support this; the most plastic surgery procedures per capita on earth, with over 980,000 recorded operations in 2014, take place in South Korea. These statistics echo this point from 2009 onward (Baer, 2015).

Shifting gears from the industries that are ever present in South Korea, we can even look for evidence of image-based culture within the individual process of finding employment. Securing work, as detailed in the model of the social body, is an action that is extremely important for someone in South Korea. Obviously this ensures economic stability, but it also necessitates the creation of the social body. In South Korea, this process of securing work is reinforced with image-based maneuvers. 효리 (Hyori) disclosed to me that on job applications in South Korea, one is asked to list details such as weight and height. This is reinforced through the attachment of a photograph or a “headshot.” However, this photograph is something of a ritualized behavior in which the

subject creates a physical image of themselves that may not necessary match actual reality. Nearly all the people that get these headshots are photoshopped and edited by the photographer. And it goes beyond simple edits such as removing temporary pimples. Faces are slimmed, eyes are widened, and shoulders are broadened.

This is not the only aspect that comes into question when looking for work. Job applications also require details about traditional factors of family history and background. One must list the educational background of their parents, detailing the exact schools they attended. One is also required to list what their parents do for work. All of these factors prove that the cogs that exist within the social body model, such as kinship ties, are effecting the way in which one is perceived by the outside world and directly affect one's ability to secure status.

Though finding evidence that an image-based culture is present within South Korea is rather easy when focusing on physical markers, it can also be glimpsed through the emphasis on kinship ties. This raises the question of what is fostering this effect in the first place. I believe that if one looks through lens of the religious and philosophical belief systems that have been present throughout the history of Korea, we can find the answer to this question.

A literature survey of the philosophical origins of Korean thought attests to the shamanic and totemic roots of Korean society at large (Hyung, 2000). The shaman becomes the visible symbol that connects the physical world to the pervasive and unseen reality. Displays of the shaman's (무당, mu-dang) visage on totem poles (장승, jang-seung) not only wards off negative energy but inveigles the unseen world to provide the

immediate needs of the clan. This establishes a paradigm where image is a connecting link between the world at large, the family, and individual success.

Overtime this notion will be amplified, reinforced, and solidified into a worldview and social structure emphasizing correct behavior within the family and society at large.

This notion will again be articulated by Confucius in a different cultural context.

However, his ideology was transplanted to Korea and became a dominant shaper of

Korean thought and action. Both collide by the 14th century when the 양반 (yang-ban)

manifest as the highest social class of the Joseon Dynasty, 대조선국(Dae-jos-eon-guk).

A dynastical rule that lasted until Japanese occupation in 1910 (Kang).

This brief outline of Korean philosophical thought shows a clear trajectory in thought. Right behavior and outward image become the most important elements of social success. Clearly, it is a society bound by ritual behavior. Scholars of comparative religion characterize this as orthopraxis, a worldview in which “right behavior” is the only necessary requirement to achieving a desired result.

As we have previously seen, this too exists in diametric opposition to philosophical orientations of the West that are based in orthodoxy, right thought. This raises an interesting point. In systems of orthodoxy, belief, faith, and emotive connection are critical to sustaining the philosophy. But in orthopraxis all that is required are ritualized behaviors that create the appropriate symbolic representation that obligate unseen forces to cooperate. In other words, it creates a condition of balanced reciprocity. It is well to keep this mind for later exploration of fluidity of identity. It also becomes relevant to the role of obligation that follows.

The Role of Obligation in Identity Formation:

Narrative - *As I stepped down the stairs and out the door of my 고시원 (go-si-won) the humid Korean air hit me. I looked up and studied the sky noticing the rain clouds in the distance. Sighing, I ran back in, slipped off my shoes at the threshold, and shuffled down the hall back to my small closet sized room. I rummaged through my bag to find my room key; in my regular fashion I had restricted my morning schedule with just enough time to shower, dress, fix my hair, and get out of the door as to not be late for my nine a.m. class. Squeezing in the extra time for sleep was important and running inside to get an umbrella wasn't part of that schedule.*

I didn't want to be late for today's class. My favorite teacher was lecturing and we were learning vocabulary for an upcoming project. Being in level five at the language institute meant that debate was a focal point of our studies.

Luckily I made it to class with three minutes to spare. The day was rather regular, focusing on vocabulary and grammar structures followed by our lunch break. After quickly eating at the 편의점 (pyeon-ui-jeom) we returned to our studies. The second half of the day was focused on reading and listening work. We delved into a short essay about a Korean American adoptee who had discovered he had a rare genetic disease and was looking for people who matched his DNA gene in Korea who could possibly help through a transplant of vital spinal fluid. As we discussed the article our teacher inquired about the donation of organs in different countries. She said she had heard many Americans donated their organs after their death.

I responded that I am a donor and that most people I know were one as well. She was fascinated to see that it was even listed on my driver's license. When I, in turn, inquired about the donation of organs in South Korea she responded, "No, in Korea many people don't donate their organs. There is a rumor that doctors might kill you faster if they know you are a donor, but to be honest it is because of Korean culture. We don't donate our organs because our body isn't our own. We don't own our body; it is our parent's body. We can't choose what to do with it, that is our parent's decision."

At this point, with what has been written about the image-based nature of the South Korean culture, it is easy to subscribe to the mistaken notion that because South Korea is image obsessed, it is a superficial nation. And yet, that is not the sense I had when I completed the interviews and lived within the native setting. Rather than a desire to achieve a look for individualistic reasons rooted in vanity, the real issue seemed to be the idea of *obligation to society*. In previous sections, I have attempted to establish that in

South Korea the goal is to achieve a cultural, or group ideal through the creation of a social body. However, this body exists completely within the sphere of obligatory action. Submitting to the obligations embedded in South Korean society that stem from an image-based culture allows one mobility in status. The more you conform to the held group ideal of *right image*, the happier everyone is.

In furthering this idea, we see that this sense of a collective “right” image has an interesting overlap with the idea of obligation. This overlay extends beyond the fact that right image is manifested in a social body existing within the sphere of obligation. Yet, upon closer examination, this idea becomes rather obvious and nearly self-explanatory. For those participating in a cultural setting that does not assert individual identity as important, and in turn values a systematic process of ritualized imagery that manifests through physical appearances and traditionally defined behavior, the obligation for one to create an identity that fits the norm becomes a requirement. This cultural process becomes a self-perpetuating machine where the wheel of obligation turns the cog of the social identity. Those who choose not to participate are not afforded the benefits of society. Therefore, it can be said that more than existing within the sphere of obligation, obligation is driving the creation of the social body. This creates a symbiotic relationship between the two forces.

My interviews confirmed the notion that obligation is reinforced by an image-based culture and is intertwined with the social body from a personal level to a broader cultural worldview. From the Western perspective it would be easy to assume that there is selflessness in the suppression of personal identity in favor a creating a social body, as if one must give up something or some part of the personal self for some larger sense of

societal honor. Rather, in my interviews I often heard that it was an action that was represented a kind of cultural norm. I believe that this can be seen in the process of realization of one's own sexual identity.

Not one of my informants identified coming to terms with their sexuality as turbulent, traumatic, or stress inducing. This was a foreign concept to me. In a western sphere, the self-defining process of gay identity is seen to go through a model with the final step often detailed as *positive* self-identification of one's sexuality (Cass, 1979). However, in the cultural setting of South Korea this model seems to be absent. Rather than a model consisting of a linear progression through difficult phases, being gay was not something that was grappled with in a way that was fraught with negative views of self (Baams, 2015). Instead, in South Korea it seemed that even at a young age it was just something that happened to be.

My interpretation is facilitated by an understanding of the philosophical underpinnings of both societies. In the West, the dominant philosophical orientation is monotheistic, which results in conditions of oppositional duality. That said, things can only be good or bad; by extension behavior must be categorized as either saintly or sinful. This results in the initial feelings of confusion, rejection and unworthiness that the Western gay male must navigate. However, in South Korea the underpinning of society is shamanistic and totemic by nature. This system can be characterized as complimentary duality, in which each half contains an element of the other and often blends into the other in abstract ways. This creates a philosophical environment in which fluidity is an assumption. This idea can clearly be seen symbolically represented in the very symbol of nation character and pride, the South Korean flag (태극기, tae-gug-gi) (see figure 3).

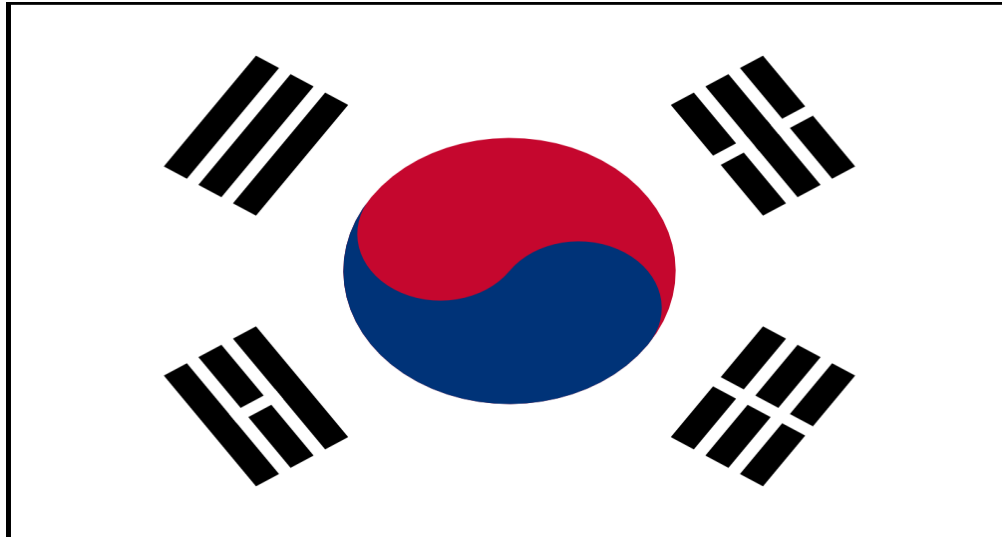


Figure 3: South Korean Flag, image taken from:

(<http://flagpedia.net/data/flags/ultra/kr.png>)

It seems clear that what contributes to the lack of trauma associated with understanding one's sexual identity is the formation of a social body that acts as a shield. In addition to the shielding effects of the social body, obligatory action is an encompassing force negating trauma in one's understanding of their gay identity. Obligatory action minimizes the emphasis on personal expression, resulting in an understanding of self that is based on the manifestation of an appropriate social body. By default, you understand your behaviors through the lens obligation.

An illustration of this was given by 태일 (Tae Il), who disclosed to me he had come out to his mother. This was unusual; coming out to one's parents was not commonplace in South Korea. More unusual from a western perspective was the result of his statement. He stated that his mother absorbed his "coming out" but quickly shifted

the conversation to a question, “When are you going to get married [to a woman]?” Rather than investigate his statement, she instead turned the conversation to the obligatory action of participating in, and securing a traditional marriage. This lack of continual dialogue about the behavior of sexuality, with the quick conversational turn to obligation, illustrates the importance of cultural expectations. This suggests that variance in acceptable sexual identity can be left untouched so long as traditional obligations are being fulfilled. I would argue that Durkheimien (1912) principles of social order are expressed in culturally generated formulations of identity. In South Korea, individual identities are structurally connected to ideas concerning obligation, family, and marriage (see figure 4).

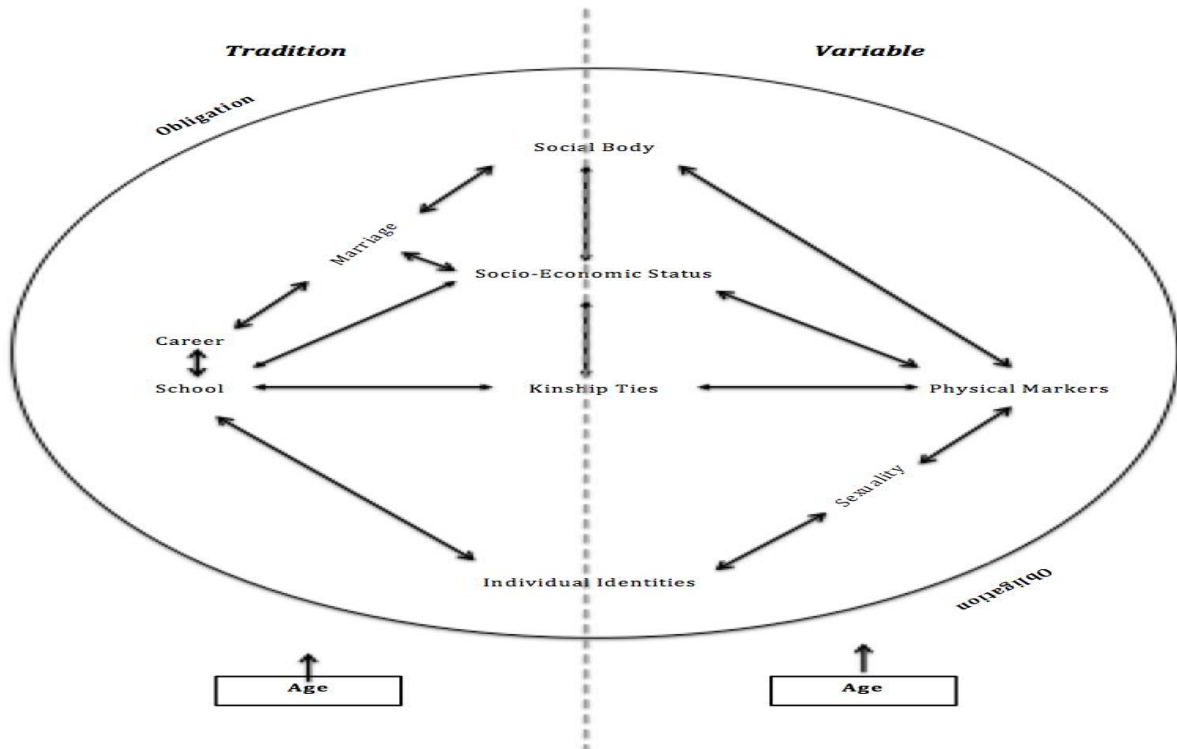


Figure 4: The social body and individual identity

This ideal can be further seen in the work of Cho (2009), who discussed the existence of a phenomena known as marriages of convenience or contract marriages, 계약 결혼 (gye-yag gyeol-hon). Gay men and lesbian women are seen participating in a form of contract marriage, in which filial roles are met while still allowing their individual identities of sexuality to exist and be accessed behind the scenes. This theory can be augmented with the theory of the social body. A social body allows for adherence to appropriate behavior dictated by obligations, shielding one from the consequences of deviating from societal norms.

This can also be seen when looking at other obligations besides a traditionally defined marriage. The role of social obligation came into play with at least three of my informants who explicitly stated that their ideas of their sexuality took a back seat, as at the time they realized their identity as a gay man, they were more focused on their role (obligation) as a student. 효리 (Hyori) specifically stated:

“I honestly didn’t think much about what it means to be gay, it was just kind of something that I knew I was. I never denied it in myself or anything like that, but I was more focused on studying at that time so I didn’t really think about it until I was in my university period.”

The notion that obligation and family and kinship blend into each other was also expressed. For example, three informants specifically cited potential economic disadvantage as a primary reason for not “coming out.” Furthermore, 진기 (Jin Ki) explicitly said that his reason for not coming out is because he is still financially dependent on his parents.

This clearly reflects my proposed model in illustration of the assertion that the axes of kinships and socio-economic status lead directly to job and career opportunities, which in turn result in the formation of a social body. But, my work suggests that this interdependence extends even further. For example, another informant stated that his reason for not coming out is because he has a job now and sharing his identity as openly gay could be detrimental to his job standing. I feel that it is important to state that within South Korean society being gay is not seen as mainstream. This is because sexual identity is diametrically opposed to a key component of the model for creating a social body, marriage. Differing sexuality, in South Korean society, is not stigmatized because of behavior; rather it is stigmatized because of philosophy. In this case, the value the philosophy of Confucianism places on traditional marriage. Furthermore, without marriage the proper social body cannot be attained and perpetuated.

I saw an interesting illustration of the interplay of these ideas while attending the Gay Pride event mentioned previously. The only protestors at this event were individuals directly affiliated with Christian denominations.

Fluidity of Identity:

Narrative - *I was seated at the table of a coffee shop. Now alone, as 우현 (Woo Hyun) had just left to go to the bathroom, I was reflecting on what we had just talked about. We had come here for the purpose of an interview for my ethnography. Knowing 우현 since his time in Utah it was interesting to learn more about him, in a much more intimate way than I had before. However what had struck me the most was his words on what he saw for himself in the future.*

He had just told me that he would probably end up marrying a woman at some point. When questioned on this, he explained that he could love women; he loves his mom and grandmother. If he were to marry a girl, it would be in much the same way. He might

never “love” her in the same way he would a man, but if they worked to support each other they could be happy.

Reflecting on his words I was taken back to a time in Utah I had almost completely forgotten. 3 years prior, 우현(Woo Hyun) and I had been walking through the aisles of a grocery store having nearly this same exact conversation. At that time I couldn't believe what he was saying. I found it rather selfish that he would consider marrying a woman, and lying to her for the rest of their time together.

Hearing these same words 3 years later, however, my sentiment was different. I actually understood his heart. I felt where he was coming from, and could now understand what he meant. No longer did I feel he was selfish, rather instead, I was able to see myself in him. This was his way of accessing his identity in the realm of obligation to which he is bound as the oldest son of his family. There is fluidity to the way he sees himself.

우현(Woo Hyun) returned from the bathroom and suggested we leave. I smiled and nodded. We made our way outside the café and back onto the streets of Seoul.

This all leads to us directly to a discussion of the variable side of identity formation. Clearly all the aspects of the traditional side influence the variable side of the model now encompassing individual identities. However, on the variable side lies the greatest behavioral and philosophical fluidity (see figure 4).

In particular, this fluidity can be viewed within the private conception of an individual. This is because if one has correctly participated in, or is working towards, the obligatory standard of kinships ties, socio-economic status, presentation of proper physical markers, school, career, and marriage, the social body is operational at an optimum level. Curiously, the social body now exists as a constructed reality. Personal identity can be sustained from and facilitated by the existence of this constructed reality. This explains why within the statements given by informants, coming out was not seen as the zenith in the reinforcement of their individual sexuality. What seems counter intuitive from the Western perspective, is brought to clarity once one realizes how the social body works.

The implications of this have greater resonance. I must assert a noted lack of frustration in regards to “hiding” a gay identity. Unlike Western ideals where a person must be true to oneself and “come out” in order to be authentic, Korean men embrace a different ethos. I conclude that in South Korea, there is an ability to shift identity as needed. Further, people in South Korea accept the notion of fluidity of identity, as previously demonstrated through the use of my model. This is supported by a similar notion of “Dividuality,” explained in the thesis work of Gitzen (Gitzen). Gitzen seems to suggest that Dividuality supports the option of different forms of identity existing in the same plane for specific purposes. I would however, modify Gitzen’s ideas of dividuality in that I do not see identity in South Korea as planar in anyway. Conversely I see identity as circular, encompassing all aspects of both traditional society and personal identity preferences bound by obligation and protected and reflected by the social body.

The other interesting detail to note is that ultimate variation exists in its fullest form only in the private quadrants of my model (see figure 5).

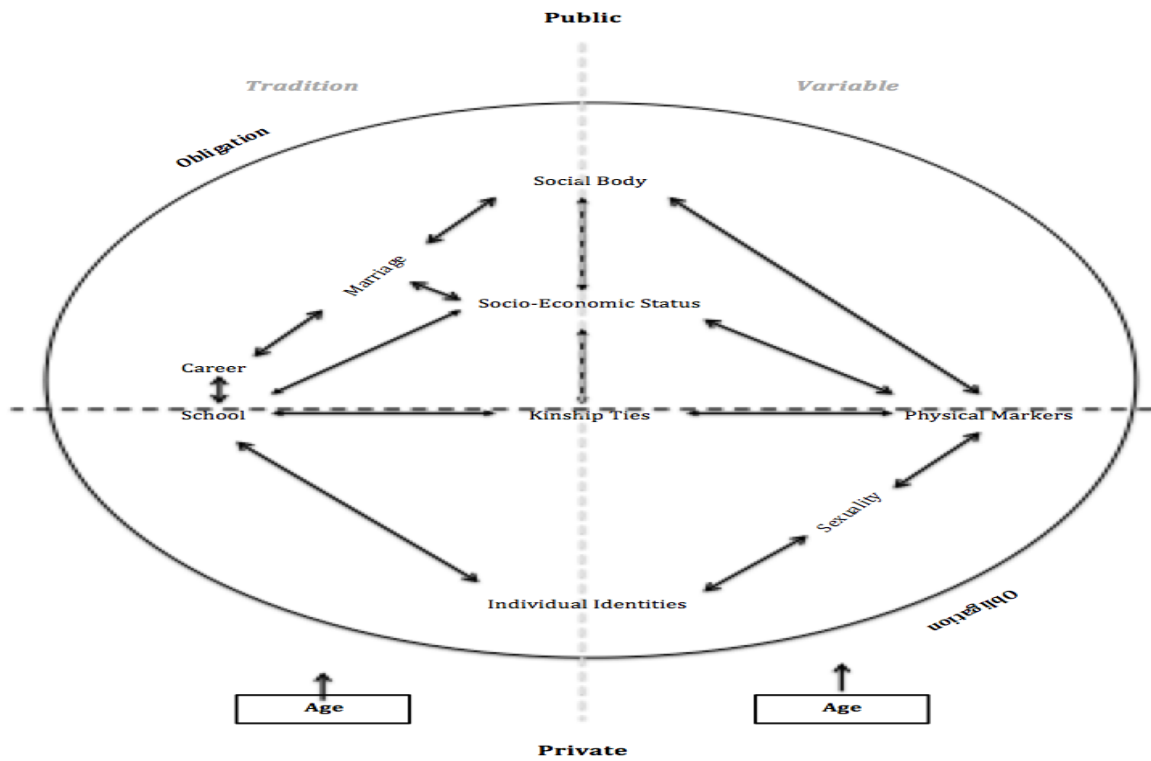


Figure 5: Social Body complete representation

Conversely the formation of a social body exists solely in the public quadrants of my model. It is now, therefore, easy to understand the ways in which the social body works as a shield, buffering understandings of individual identities, in this case, sexually identity, from the public world. Rather than being encompassed in a linear and, therefore, singular whole, South Korean identity exists in three-dimensional reality. This does not imply a lack of congruity between self and all identities. Rather only aspects of identity that are deemed traditionally acceptable are allowed to be expressed publicly through the social body. However, other aspects of identity can exist and be shielded by the social body and be practiced privately. If privately practiced, they are left uninvestigated by other members of society. This can be seen most simply in my interviews. Eight of my

eleven informants did not articulate a desire to come out. Even more interesting however, is that only one informant identified a “coming out “as something that they hope to do in the future. In no case was it cited as a burning issue or personal necessity.

Conclusion

My original hypothesis about how expression of sexual identity is formulated, understood, and allowed to exist in South Korea was rather limited. I came into this project understanding that being gay was something that was not accepted by the larger culture. I believed that this reaction would be laid out in a similar fashion as it is in the culture in which I exist. However, I came to find out that rather than sexual identities being rejected by society at large, the situation is much more nuanced. Sexual identities *can* exist and may even be known, but the social body ensures that they remain *uninvestigated* by the outside world.

This is due to the presence of a social body that exists within the cultural setting of South Korea. Not only does it exist, but also it becomes one’s obligation to create. The social body exists in the sphere of obligatory action and becomes a vehicle through which one interacts with society at large. The social body works through image-based maneuvers that come about due South Korea’s deeply rooted image-based ideology. Subsequently this ideology can be traced back to Korea’s philosophical underpinnings that are rooted in shamanic, totemic, and Confucian traditions. All of this culminates in the transformative power of the social body that allows fluidity in accessing other points

of identity that do not fit the bindings of societal obligation. Identities now lie in a three dimensional reality, behind the social body, to be accessed and understood separately from, and in some cases opposed to, the social body itself.

However, understanding these facts hold within it imbedded ramifications beyond knowledge for knowledge sake. It is dangerous, especially for one who is employing the lens of queer theory and feminist redirect, to adopt the assumption that sexual identity is fixed and always follows the same path in formulation. In addition it is a pitfall to assume that sexuality will be expressed, understood, and tackled by the individual and society in similar fashions cross culturally. As demonstrated through this study, a gay identity is not accepted by the larger cultural redirect in South Korea; rather, it is allowed to exist behind the scenes. This process is allowed by the existence of a social body, which cultivates an understanding of gayness that is formulated through different pathways than in the West. This results in an acceptance of gay identification that is often one that is less fraught with anxiety about gay identity itself. It can be argued that coming to terms with sexuality is fraught with anxiety for any human being. But culture largely determines the way in which sexual identity is ultimately formulated.

In the past we have seen the dangers of suppression of cultural identity through means that were thought to be benefiting those being suppressed. The concentration of Native American children into “Indian Schools” in the United States comes to mind. Though this often came about through a more explicit form of ethnocentricity, it is my belief that assumptions, like the ones detailed above, are more dangerous. These assumptions take the form of implicit ethnocentricity, shrouded in the cloak of a helping hand. Insisting that owning a gay identity and being open with who one is to the broader

society is something that is not always transferable when looking at marginalized populations in different locals of existence. It isn't and shouldn't be the gold standard in the formulation, understanding, and acceptance of one's gay identity as a whole.

My research, though offering insights into what is driving understanding of gay identity in South Korea, still leaves more to be done. I am still interested in how physical space affects the social body, and the causes that have led to a lack of public movement in the acceptance of queer identities in South Korea. I intended to return to Seoul, the city that has stolen my heart, and continue work within the gay community that exists there. I hope to continue to grasp a better understanding of what it means to be gay in South Korea, and through such work, become a better ally for those living through such identities, in a setting different from my own.

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Glossary

Definition of Korean Terms:

AfreecaTV – 아프리카 TV: A social networking site that allows anyone to create live broadcast of themselves.

Dae-jos-eon-guk 대조선국: Joseon dynasty.

Gam-sa-hab-ni-da – 감사합니다: Thank you.

Go-si-won – 고시원: A small room meant for students or people studying to live in.

Gye-yag gyeol-hon – 계약 결혼: Literally translating to contract marriage; as seen in the work of Cho.

Hun-nam – 훈남: Handsome/Hot Guy.

Hyung – 형: Modifier used in the Korean language by men to denote relation; meaning older brother.

Jan-seung – 장승: Totem pole.

Meok-bang – 먹방: Eating shows in which one broadcasts themselves eating large amounts of food while others watch.

Mu-dang – 무당: Shaman

Pyeon-ui-jeom – 편의점: Convince store.

Po-cha – 포차: Street-food cart.

Soju – 소주: Korean style liquor; rice wine.

Sul-beon-gae – 술번개: Gathering held, by gay men, similar to rounds of speed-dating.

Won – 원: South Korean currency

Yang-ban – 양반: The aristocracy of Korea during the Joseon period; mainly composed of civil servants and military officers.

Appendix A
Survey sheet

Survey Sheet for Participants (Part B)

What is your age?

What is your gender identity?

What is your Sexual Orientation?

What is your Marital/Relationship Status?

How do you choose to self-identify as a member of the LGBTQ community of South Korea?

At what age did you realize your sexual and/or gender identity departs from the standard?

To whom have you disclosed your sexual and/or gender identity?

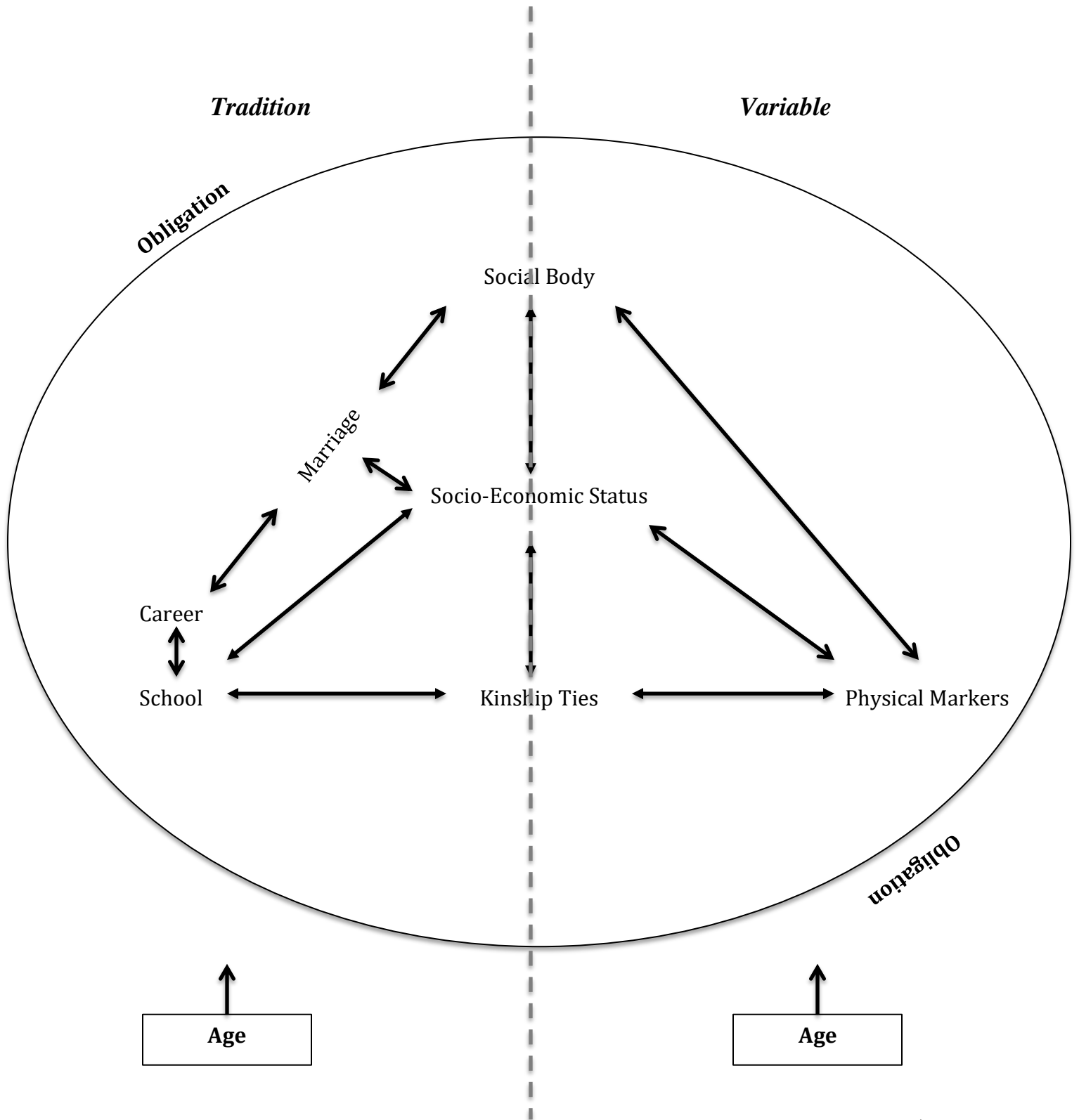
In what setting do you feel comfortable to share your sexual and/or gender identity?

What do you consider to be the challenges facing individuals who self-identify similar to you within South Korea?

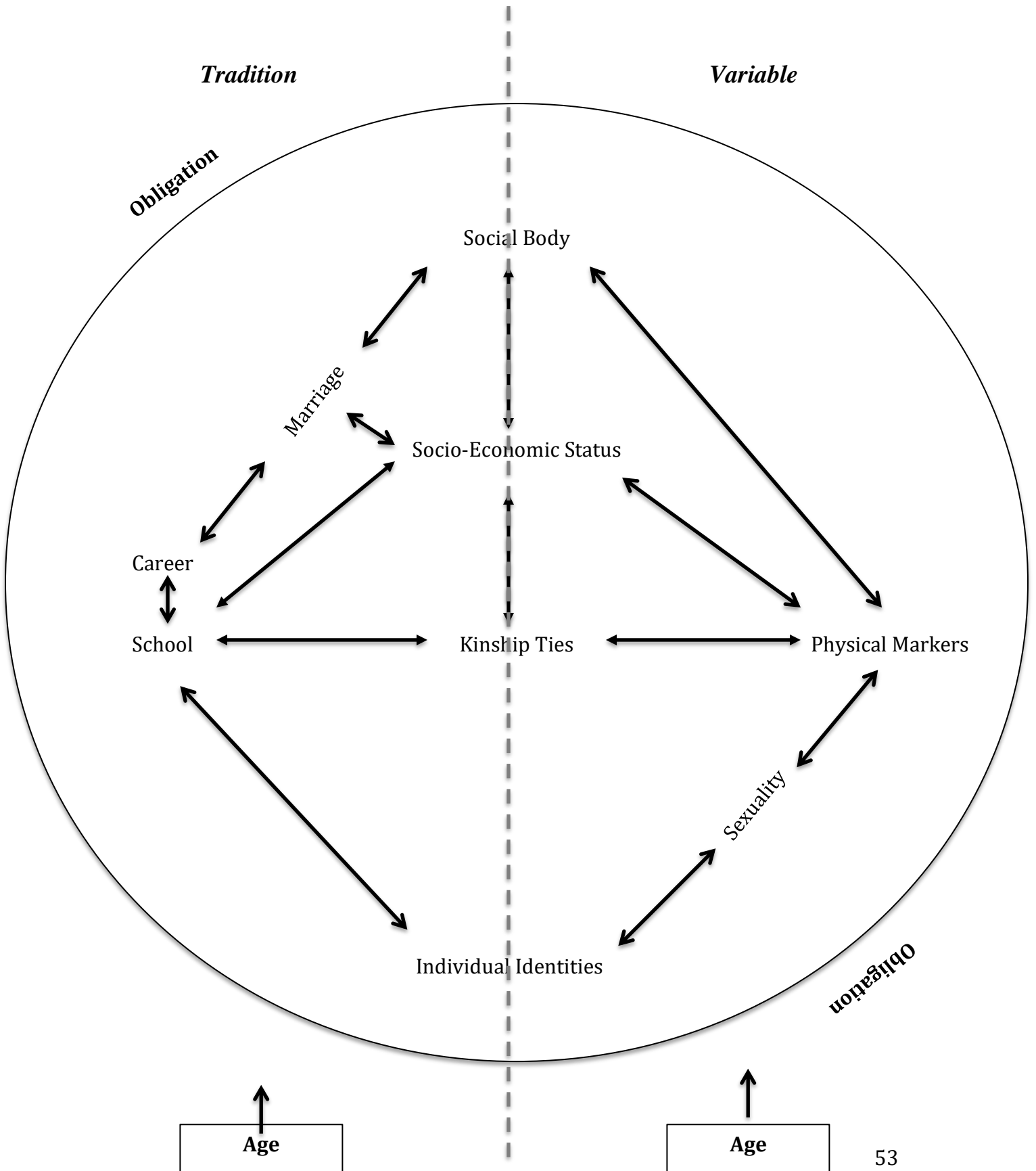
What do you perceive the future to hold for the situation of the LGBTQ community in South Korea? What changes do you think will be made? How long do you think these changes will take to happen?

Field Observations:

Appendix B
Figure 2



Appendix C
Figure 4



Appendix D
Figure 5

