

# **Maneuvering Contested Space and Community**

An Ethnographic Study of the Underground Electronic Music

Scene in Itaewon



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*I dedicate this thesis to those who lost their lives, their loved ones, a friend, a family member, or someone close to their hearts in the Itaewon Halloween tragedy, the 29 October 2022.*

# Table of Content

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<b>Abstract</b> .....	<b>VII</b>
<b>Acknowledgments</b> .....	<b>IX</b>
<b>Chapter One: Introduction</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<i>Anthropology of the Club and Musicking</i> .....	2
<i>Theoretical Framework</i> .....	4
The Production of Space .....	5
Community .....	9
<i>Geographical Location: Itaewon</i> .....	11
<i>Methodological and Ethical Considerations</i> .....	13
Methodology .....	13
Ethical Considerations .....	15
Notes on Language and Lingo .....	17
<i>Chapter Outline</i> .....	18
<b>Chapter Two: Itaewon – Where Others Live and Play</b> .....	<b>21</b>
<i>The History of the Yongsan Garrison</i> .....	23
Anticommunism and American Reliance .....	23
‘ <i>Yanggongju</i> ’: ‘ <i>The Western Princess</i> ’ .....	25
<i>The Days of Only ‘Wholesome National Culture’</i> .....	28
No More Curfew and the 3S Policy .....	30
<i>Colonized Spaces and the L.A Riots</i> .....	31
<i>The 90s: Olympics, Moral Rehabilitation and Yongsan Negotiations</i> .....	33
<i>A Foreign Country Within Seoul: New Globality</i> .....	35
Multiculturalism and Foreignness as a Spatial Tactic .....	35
A Community of Strangers .....	37
<i>Conclusion</i> .....	39

<b>Chapter Three: Creating Safe Spaces for Queer Identities Through the Itaewon Club Scene.....</b>	<b>41</b>
<i>Clubbing as an LGBTQ+ .....</i>	43
The Forgotten Legacy .....	43
Placing Queer Clubbing and Itaewon’s Freedom .....	44
<i>Rainbow and Creating a Safer Club Space .....</i>	46
Rainbow .....	49
Little Lolli .....	50
<i>Being the Other: A Double-Edged Sword .....</i>	51
<i>When Covid Came to Homo-Hill.....</i>	53
“They Probably Wouldn't have come if it wasn't for it Being a Pride.” .....	53
<i>Conclusion: “It used to be one of my Favorite Clubs.” .....</i>	57
<b>Chapter Four: Maneuvering a Contested Night-Life Landscape.....</b>	<b>59</b>
<i>The Underground Electronic Music Scene in Itaewon.....</i>	61
The Origin Story .....	61
What is even ‘Underground’?.....	63
<i>Covid Regulations and the Consequence for Club Space .....</i>	66
<i>Maneuvering Illegality and Knowing Space.....</i>	69
The Tiki Bar and “Bear, Bear, Bear” .....	69
Distinctions and the Right People.....	72
<i>Conclusion: Knowing and Navigation.....</i>	78
<b>Chapter Five: Dreams, Trends, and Berlin .....</b>	<b>81</b>
<i>Trends: The Wannabe Berlin.....</i>	82
<i>The Future of the Scene and Utopias .....</i>	84
<i>Conclusion: ‘Berlin-esqu’ .....</i>	87
<b>Recapitulation and Reflections.....</b>	<b>89</b>
<b>Epilogue.....</b>	<b>91</b>

**Bibliography..... 93**



# Abstract

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This thesis examines the dynamics of the underground electronic music scene in Itaewon, Seoul, South Korea, within the framework of contested space. Building upon the theories of Henri Lefebvre, Anthony Cohen, and Sarah Thornton, this research explores the formation of communities, spatiality, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Itaewon's cultural landscape.

Drawing from Lefebvre's reflections on spatial contestation, the study investigates how physical and symbolic spaces in Itaewon shape the experiences and interactions within the underground music scene. It delves into the significance of venues such as clubs and bars as cultural hubs, where diverse groups come together to express themselves and forge communities.

Informed by Cohen's theory of community, the research sheds light on the social bonds, shared practices, and sense of belonging that emerge within the underground electronic music scene. It explores the collaborative endeavors, mutual support, and navigation of the complexities of the urban environment and the covid pandemic through stories from interlocuters and ethnography.

Thornton's work on club culture provides insights into the role of music and cultural practices in shaping the experiences of individuals within the Itaewon underground club scene. It examines the intersections between music, and identity, highlighting the ambiance and social dynamics of the underground electronic music community.

Furthermore, the study delves into the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the underground music scene in Itaewon. It delves into the myriad challenges artists, organizers, and participants confront as they navigate the constraints imposed by restrictions, strive to sustain connections, explore the quest for safe spaces, and seek out alternative pathways for creative expression.

By integrating these theoretical perspectives, this thesis provides a comprehensive understanding of the underground electronic music scene in Itaewon, emphasizing its significance within the LGBTQ+ community. It illuminates the transformative power of inclusive cultural spaces, the role of music in identity formation, and the resilience of communities in the face of adversity. The findings contribute to urban anthropology and our understanding of contested spaces, cultural expressions, and the ongoing evolution of underground scenes.





# Acknowledgments

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Writing a master's is no easy journey. Nevertheless, it has been a life-altering expedition, which I would not have been able to complete if not for the people, I met who helped me along the way. This thesis would not have taken place without the support, backing, and guidance of the people who have been there like a lifeline in stormy waters.

Above all, to my dear friends and interlocuters in Seoul who welcomed me into your life, the time spent with you has been one of the most rewarding times of my life, a journey in self-discovery and what it truly means to be free; thank you. Thank you for your bravery in sharing your stories, thank you for all the treasured memories, thank you for all the late-night drinks and talks, and thank you for your friendship, it is and has been a great pleasure.

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Bergen, June 2023



## Chapter One: Introduction

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During my seven-month fieldwork in Itaewon, Seoul, I delved into the depths of the ever-changing landscape of the contested underground club scene amidst the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic. With its rich history perpetrated by contestations, influenced by factors like the Yongsan military base and the perception of being a 'foreign' space, Itaewon became even more multifaceted due to the pandemic. Furthermore, the disruptive effects of the virus upended everyday norms of movement, behavior, and interaction with the environment, which compelled individuals to re-manuever Itaewon's fragmented landscape, now marked by uncertainty and a reimagining of familiar routines. This new reality challenged the established structures and practices of the underground electronic music scene, requiring participants to adapt and find innovative ways to connect, express themselves, and maintain a sense of community amidst uncertainty.

My interlocutors, including patrons, DJs<sup>1</sup>, and individuals involved in the electronic underground club/bar scene, faced the challenge of adapting to the new reality. Amidst the restrained flow of movement imposed by restrictions, an intriguing contestation unfolded, shaping the operational and navigational dynamics of Itaewon's nightlife. The community had to navigate the dual challenges of the stigma associated with a COVID-19 cluster in a gay bar within the area and the imposed restrictions. It was a delicate balancing act as they sought to preserve the essential elements of leisure and survival within the vibrant nightlife scene they had fostered while grappling with societal stigmatization and regulatory measures.

In a conversation discussing the effects of the pandemic, Raveto, an interlocuter, shared her thoughts on the impact of the pandemic:

I think the general point is like, obviously, the COVID one. I cannot really picture how things will be in one year or in two years. Because I think club culture has been ruined ever since the pandemic, and then I don't know how fast it will get recovered. I think it still would be in the long term. And then also, the media kind of shows that, like, clubs are really bad because there was a

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<sup>1</sup> DJ refers to a disc jockey. A DJ is an individual who selects and plays recorded music for an audience. They typically perform at events such as parties, clubs, and music festivals, using various equipment such as turntables, mixers, and digital controllers to mix and manipulate music tracks. DJs play a crucial role in shaping the atmosphere and energy of a venue or event, often using their skills to blend different genres of music and create seamless transitions between songs.

case of COVID in clubs. And then especially Itaewon area, because there was a COVID case who actually went to clubs in Itaewon. But for that, like, Itaewon got so stigmatized. So, there was a moment like, everyone's having really, really hard time. So, I think that kind of stigma just made it really rough for everyone.

*Raveto, -*

Raveto's words underscore the challenges faced by the community and the impact of the stigma surrounding Itaewon in the wake of the COVID-19 cluster. Raveto eloquently depicts the profound struggles and uncertainties endured by individuals deeply involved in the underground electronic music scene during the tumultuous pandemic.

Therefore, this text aims to explore the contestations faced by the underground electronic music scene, the historical connotations to its locality, the transformations of spaces, and the interpretations of restrictions within the spatial setting of Itaewon.

## **Anthropology of the Club and Musicking**

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To effectively capture the realities of club culture during a pandemic, it is crucial to build on and reflect upon previous club cultural studies (McKay 1998; Malbon 1999; Hebdige 1979). Furthermore, as my research delves into the social, cultural, and spatial dimensions of club culture, it not only draws upon an extensive body of scholarship on the subject but also incorporates the insights of Christopher Small. While Small's work on musicking (1998) does not directly focus on club culture, it provides invaluable perspectives on the significance of performance and listening, thereby enriching our comprehension of the cultural dynamics at play in Itaewon's electronic music scene.

By engaging with the influential works of Sarah Thornton, who explores club cultures in her book *Club Cultures: Music, Media, and Subcultural Capital* (1995), I aim to deepen our understanding of this field and situate my research within its trajectory. Blackstock's (2002) work will also be addressed later in the text, offering further perspectives on club culture and its spatiality.

Thornton offers valuable insights into the world of clubbing and electronic music scenes. Her research delves into social practices, identity formation, and the role of cultural

capital within these subcultural spaces. While I do not directly employ the term 'subculture'<sup>2</sup> in my thesis, Thornton's nuanced understanding of the complexities of club cultures has dramatically influenced my exploration of the dynamics within the underground electronic music scene and how they shape perceptions of space. Her in-depth analysis of social practices, identity formation, and the role of cultural capital provides a rich framework for comprehending the multifaceted factors that shape the dynamics of club cultures, including the underground electronic music scene.

In addition, Christopher Small's *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (1998) offers valuable perspectives on the act of 'musicking' and the social, cultural, and communal aspects of music-making and listening. While not directly focused on club cultures, Small's exploration of the transformative potential of music and its role in shaping social dynamics resonates with my research on the underground electronic club scene. According to Small, musicking encompasses the entire process and experience of music, emphasizing its interactive and participatory nature. It recognizes music-making's communal and collaborative aspects and highlights how music shapes social relationships, identities, and cultural practices. Musicking goes beyond passive listening and viewing, emphasizing the dynamic and transformative power of music as a lived and shared event. By considering the notions of 'musicking' and the shared experiences within club cultures, I aim to uncover how music and communal participation contribute to the construction of spatial practices and the negotiation of restrictions in the context of Itaewon during the pandemic. Musicking, although not extensively referenced in my text, serves as a powerful lens through which to interpret and contextualize all the actions, events, preferences, and information collected during my fieldwork. It provides a valuable framing perspective that allows for a deeper understanding and analysis of the cultural practices and experiences within the underground electronic music scene.

Inspired by Thornton's exploration of club cultures and Small's insights on musicking, I aim to delve deeper into the dynamics and significance of club cultures within the context of nightlife and Itaewon. Their works have provided a theoretical and historical foundation that allows me to navigate and shed light on the complex social, cultural, and spatial dimensions

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<sup>2</sup> I have chosen not to use the term 'subculture' in my thesis. This decision was based on my interactions with interlocutors during my research, who did not employ or emphasize the concept in their discussions. By refraining from using the term, I aim to stay true to the language and perspectives shared by my interlocutors and present a more authentic understanding of the underground electronic music scene.

of the underground electronic club scene in Itaewon amidst the challenges posed by the pandemic.

Furthermore, I find it important to highlight a more peripheral work within the study of club culture; Bill Blackstock's thesis "A Contested Space in Transformation: Rave Culture and Club Culture in Metropolitan Toronto" (2002), which explores the evolving nature of rave culture and club culture within the context of Toronto. Blackstock's study delves into the multifaceted aspects of these cultural events, highlighting their contested nature and their transformative impact on the urban landscape. Moreover, like me, Blackstock draws on Lefebvre's ideas as he analyzes how the physical spaces of clubs and rave venues are socially constructed and shaped by power relations, cultural practices, and urban development processes. The application of Lefebvre's theories helps illuminate how rave culture and club culture negotiate their presence within the urban landscape, navigate regulatory frameworks, and contest dominant spatial norms. This sheds light on the transformative potential of these, such as raves, subcultural movements, and their impact on the urban fabric. It unveils the transformative potential of these club culture movements and their profound influence on the urban environment.

The inclusion of Blackstock's work enhances my research's theoretical and methodological foundations, offering a broader understanding of the complexities surrounding club cultures and their spatial dynamics. By integrating insights from Small, Thornton, and Blackstock, I aim to comprehensively examine the interplay between cultural expressions, social practices, and spatial transformations within club cultures during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **Theoretical Framework**

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The substantial emphasis placed on the theoretical framework in this thesis portrays the significance I attribute to two vital theoretical perspectives: Henri Lefebvre's (1991) conception of space and Anthony Cohen's (1985) exploration of community in understanding and contextualizing my ethnography. These perspectives serve as vital lenses through which I analyze and comprehend the complexities of the underground electronic music scene in Itaewon. Lefebvre's insightful framework helps me unravel the spatial dynamics and social interactions that shape the club scene in Itaewon. At the same time, Cohen's exploration of community illuminates the shared experiences, social bonds, and cultural practices that underpin the underground electronic music scene in Itaewon. By weaving together these

theoretical perspectives, I aim to present a comprehensive understanding of how space, community, and club cultures intertwine, offering valuable insights into the cultural landscape of Itaewon. In giving considerable attention to these theoretical underpinnings, I seek to contribute meaningfully to the scholarly discourse surrounding club cultures and their relationship with space and community.

### **The Production of Space**

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Lefebvre's conceptualization of space provides a valuable framework for exploring the complexities of the underground electronic club scene in Itaewon and its relationship with the urban landscape. Drawing on his ideas, I examine how club spaces in Itaewon are socially constructed and influenced by power dynamics, cultural practices, and urban development. Through Lefebvre's analysis, I delve into the transformative potential of these club cultures and their ability to challenge and reshape the spatial norms of the urban environment. Lefebvre's theories shed light on how club cultures negotiate their presence, navigate regulations, and create alternative spatial configurations that foster inclusivity, creativity, and a sense of belonging.

### ***Space as Multiplicity***

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First and foremost, Lefebvre argues against any perception of space as a container or capsule in which life transpires; space is so much more. To cite the famous geographer and social scientist Doreen Massey: "The imagination of space as a surface on which we are placed, the turning of space into time, the sharp separation of local place from the space out there; these are all ways of taming the challenge that the inherent spatiality of the world presents. Most often, they are unthought" (Massey 2005: 7). Space, as argued by Massey and Lefebvre, is political, always open, a multiplicity, and exists within several relational levels and ties. Space is filled with people, architecture and its messaging, networks, and structures between locations and surroundings (or lack of); space contains walls, borders, exclusions, creativity, leisure, and human connections. So even though space codes and perpetrates behaviors, looks, privilege, and class, it also fosters memories, communities, spatial bonds, and personas. Lefebvre's perspective is relevant to my thesis because it acknowledges the influence of space, specifically Itaewon, in shaping behaviors, identities, and social dynamics within club

culture, while also illustrating the power dynamics it maneuvers. Itaewon's unique characteristics and history contribute to the underground club scene's complexities and the interactions within its spatial context.

A space is thus neither merely a medium nor a list of ingredients, but an interlinkage of geographic form, built environment, symbolic meanings, and routines of life. Ways of being and physical landscapes are of a piece, albeit one filled with tensions and competing versions of what a space should be. People fight not only over a piece of turf, but about the sort of reality that it constitutes (Molotch 1993: 888).

### **The Production of Domination**

In the context of Itaewon, Lefebvre's theories on spatial production and domination offer valuable insights into the dynamics shaping the underground electronic music scene. Itaewon's spaces are not just physical constructs but also manifestations of human intentions, economic cycles, and power relations. The subsequent chapter provides concrete examples of the commodification of Itaewon as a 'global city' and the spatial struggles revolving around the American military base in Yongsan. These examples highlight the intricate interplay between spatial reproduction, domination, and the contested rights to define and utilize space.

Lefebvre conceptualizing space as a product of producers and consumers is particularly relevant in understanding Itaewon's transformation. Producers, such as government entities and capitalists, play a role in shaping the physical appearance and purpose of Itaewon's spaces. At the same time, consumers actively occupy, modify, and adapt the environment to suit their needs.

Moreover, the spatial triad becomes a valuable tool to analyze the complex spatial dynamics within Itaewon's electronic music scene. The spatial triad aims to explore how our perception of space, the way space is conceptualized and designed, and our actual experiences within that space are interconnected. It helps us understand how our subjective interpretations, societal norms, and physical environments influence our interactions and behaviors in different spatial contexts. It is important to note that the first two aspects of the triad, spatial practice, and representations of space, are on a cognitive level: something that happens in our minds. By examining the interplay between spatial practice, representations of space, and representational space, we gain a comprehensive understanding of how Itaewon's contested spaces are produced, reproduced, and transformed. It sheds light on the scene's continually



changing and conflictual nature, highlighting the multi-faceted interactions and struggles within Itaewon's spatiality.

### **Spatial Practice (Perceived Space)**

Spatial practice encompasses the everyday movement patterns and interactions that shape our experiences and perceptions of space. It is through the examination of physical spaceness and how individuals navigate and engage with the material environment that we can develop a deeper understanding of how space is produced and reproduced within Itaewon and the underground club scene. This understanding becomes especially significant when considering the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Itaewon's club culture. The intricate dynamics resulting from COVID-19 restrictions, including limitations on group sizes and the historical context of Itaewon's landscape, exert significant influence on the patterns of movement and interactions within this space. Our interactions with the material environment while moving within and across space are pivotal in shaping the spatial dynamics that characterize Itaewon's club culture and its responses to the pandemic's challenges. By exploring these spatial dynamics, we can gain valuable insights into the multifaceted interactions and social dynamics that define Itaewon's club scene during these unprecedented times.

### **Representations of Space**

According to Lefebvre, representations of space refer to dominant perceptions and meanings imposed by external entities onto a specific space. While Lefebvre primarily focuses on governmental lenses, I have chosen to extend this framework to include the role of media as well. In the context of Itaewon's underground electronic music scene, these representations are shaped by media portrayals, governmental regulations, and societal attitudes. By applying Lefebvre's theory, I aim to analyze how these external perspectives influence the understanding of space within the scene.

Lefebvre also emphasizes power's role in producing and disseminating spatial representations. In my research, I will investigate how media narratives, regulatory measures, and societal stigmas impact the visibility, accessibility, and acceptance of the underground music community. By critically examining these representations, I will uncover the power dynamics at play and how they shape the possibilities and limitations within the underground scene.

## **Representational Space**

Lefebvre's theory also emphasizes the importance of representational space, which encompasses the participants' lived experiences, practices, and appropriations of space within the underground electronic music scene. By adopting Lefebvre's framework, I will explore how the community perceives, uses, and transforms the physical environment in Itaewon.

By analyzing the lived experiences within the underground scene, I will uncover the spatial practices, creative expressions, and sense of belonging among participants. Lefebvre's theory allows me to delve into how the community negotiates and challenges dominant spatial narratives, forging their unique spaces and social interactions. This examination of representational space reveals the transformative potential and cultural significance of the underground electronic music scene in Itaewon.

## **Concluding remarks on Lefebvre**

As illustrated by his understanding of producers and consumers, Lefebvre expanded on Marxist concepts and described urban space in terms of its function in the reproduction of capitalist relations of production. Building on this, it is essential to state that in Henry Lefebvre's eyes, power over space is power over life. Furthermore, more critical to the first chapter is how he sees space as constantly a part of both past and present. Space is a never-ending sowing process: the needle stings or fabric-making ties together in different patterns manifesting fabrics and textures.

*"Thus production process and product present themselves as two inseparable aspects, not as two separable ideas" (Lefebvre 1991: 37).*

By applying Lefebvre's methodology to studying the underground electronic music scene in Itaewon, we gain a comprehensive understanding of the intricate dynamics through which space is constructed, experienced, and contested. This framework sheds light on the lived realities and spatial complexities that shape the community's practices, expressions, and sense of belonging and recognizes the role of creative and cultural activities within these spatial contexts. As we delve deeper into the manifold dimensions of the underground scene, guided by Lefebvre's perspective of space as a product of socialization and a socializing factor, we unravel the profound impact of musical engagement (musicking) too and spatiality on the lives and interactions of its participants. Through this lens, we uncover how musicking

intertwines with space, creating unique sonic landscapes that contribute to the cultural fabric, social connections, and creative expressions within Itaewon's underground electronic music community.

## Community

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Since the book *Community and Civil Society* (2001)<sup>3</sup> by Ferdinand Tönnies, the notion of community has been like a ghost constantly hunting social scientists. Tönnies states that the industrial revolution marked a bygone era for the true communities as they used to be. Put differently; the true community was marked by a shared togetherness and common understanding that comes naturally - which now is the community of the past. True community no longer exists in Tönnies eyes (Bauman 2001). Conversely, in the book *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (1985), Anthony P. Cohen criticizes Durkheim, Weber, Tönnies, and Simmel's view on community. Cohen's critic's previous discussions on communities as they tend to describe the "(...)nature of human association entirely a product of the dominant features of its structural context, such as size and scale" (Cohen 1985: 27). Cohen further states: "Thus, moving away from the earlier emphasis our discipline placed on structure, we approach community as a phenomenon of culture: as one, therefore, which is meaningfully constructed by people through their symbolic prowess and resources"(Cohen 1985: 38). Put; differently, Cohen's view is that we should treat communities as symbolic forms.

Furthermore, Cohen asserts that 'yes' communities have been threatened by modernization, which has led to the appearance of homogeneity. However, modernization has only led communities to reassert their symbolic boundaries. "In other words, as the structural bases of boundary become blurred, so the symbolic bases are strengthened through 'flourishes and decorations,' 'aesthetic frills' and so forth" (Cohen 1985: 44).

I agree with Cohen that communities have different ways of reasserting themselves in meeting pressure and change. However, how one applies his framework of communities as symbolic forms are highly dependent on what the symbol consists of. Likewise, a symbol, or how one understands symbols, might differ depending on the individual who observes and interprets its meaning. Cohen frames his symbolic understanding through two outlooks: for the outsider, the community is symbolically simple, while for a community member, it is

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<sup>3</sup> The work's original title is *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (first published in 1887).

symbolically complex. In my thesis, I will look at how Cohen's community symbolism forms in or shapes space maneuvering and the form symbolism takes within the community. Specifically, how symbolic forms can emerge as communal borders based on understandings of authenticity, temporality, and knowledge of the electronic music scene through a global lens.

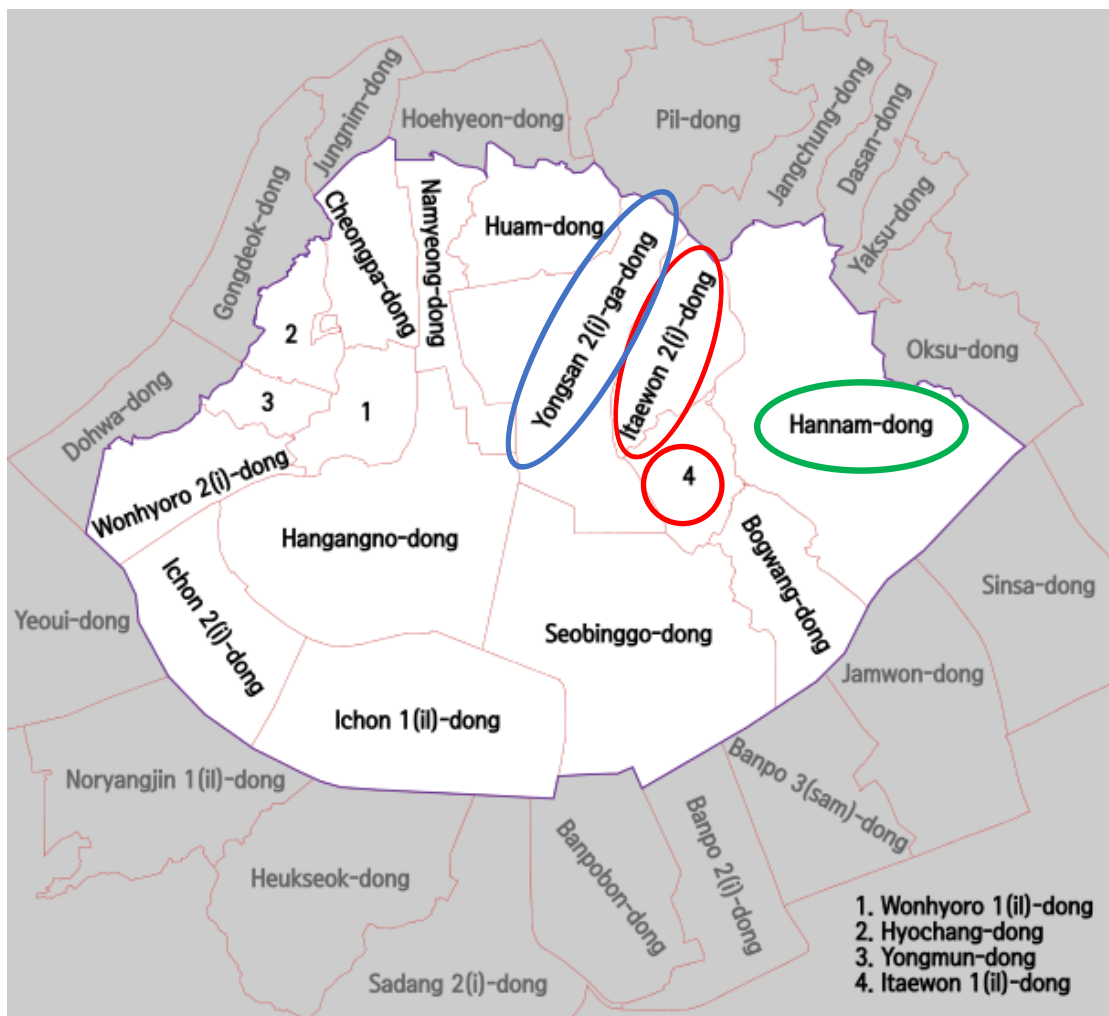
Moreover, I will also understand communities similarly as philosopher Zygmunt Bauman illustrates in the book *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World* (2001) when he references Fredrik Barth. Where Barth states that communities are "(...) forever unfinished (and all the more feverish and ferocious for that reason) boundary drawing" (Bauman 2001: 17). Furthermore, communities are constantly reconstructing themselves, appropriating and regenerating identitarian borders.

To wrap it up, it is also important to state that I will take a stand akin to how Levi-Strauss views identity in how I view community. Levi-Strauss sees identity as "(...) 'a sort of virtual center (foyer virtuel) to which we must refer to explain certain things, but without it ever having a real existence'" (Lévi-strauss 1987: 332 in Brubaker and Copper 2000: 9). To summarize my view on community and how I will see it, communities gains existence through the borders, symbolism, and meanings it creates.

By understanding community through the borders, symbolism, and meanings created, we can explore how communities in Itaewon and the underground electronic music scene manifest and assert their identity in the face of societal changes. As described by Barth and Bauman, the notion of community as an unfinished and boundary-drawing process which emphasizes the dynamic nature of community formation and its continuous reconstruction. This perspective enables us to examine the ways in which communities redefine and reinforce their symbolic boundaries in response to external pressures, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. By focusing on community, we can gain a deeper understanding of the intricate interplay between spatial practices, representations of space, and the formation of communal bonds. It allows us to explore how communities navigate challenges and contestations and foster a sense of belonging, thereby shedding light on the multifaceted dynamics of space and connections within these contexts.

## Geographical Location: Itaewon

Seoul consists of 25 autonomous districts known as ‘Gu’(구), each containing smaller neighborhoods called ‘dong’(동). The map below illustrates the geographical layout of Yongsan-gu (용산구), a district located within Seoul, which encompasses Itaewon-dong (이태원동). Itaewon-dong is situated within Yongsan-gu. Positioned centrally within Seoul, Yongsan-gu is bordered by Namsan (남산)<sup>4</sup> to the north and Hangang River (한강)<sup>5</sup> to the south.



Map of Yongsan-Gu (안우석 2015)

<sup>4</sup> Namsan(남산): A mountain in the center of Seoul.

<sup>5</sup> Hangang(한강): the fourth largest river in Korea. The river has played an important role in the development of trade routes.

Throughout history, dating back to the Joseon Dynasty (조선) (1392-1910), Itaewon has served as a vital connection point between Korea (Joseon) and the outside world. Its favorable topographical location and proximity to the Han River, a primary waterway linking the southern region of the peninsula to Seoul, has solidified its significance. Itaewon also served as one of the four main gates connecting the capital to local provinces, establishing its role as a bustling trade hub for both local and international goods (J.Y. Kim 2014).

The areas commonly recognized as part of Itaewon, namely Itaewon 1(il)-dong and Itaewon 2(i)-dong, are highlighted in red on the map provided on page 11. However, it is worth noting that Hannam-dong, indicated in green on the map, often overlaps with Itaewon or is considered part of Seoul's broader underground electronic music scene. Nevertheless, there are discernible distinctions between the two areas. Itaewon is often promoted as a global city within Seoul and features an array of independent shops and restaurants scattered throughout. In contrast, Hannam-dong exudes a more upscale atmosphere, characterized by luxury shops, sophisticated cafes, and Western-style restaurants offering cuisines such as French and Italian. Additionally, Hannam-dong boasts high-end bars with elegant interiors. Furthermore, many of my interlocutors lived in Haebangchon (HBC for short), located in the Yongsan 2(i)-ga-dong area (blue circle on the map), and we would spend a lot of time in the neighborhood. HBC will be further described in Chapter Two.

Despite their differences, Itaewon and Hannam-dong are interconnected and frequently explored together. It was common to meet with interlocutors for meals or at coffee shops in Hannam-dong and then transition to Itaewon's vibrant bar scene. Conversely, Hannam-dong often becomes the preferred destination if one seeks a more relaxed or upscale bar experience. Notably, these areas are within proximity, typically within a 15-minute walking distance or separated by a single subway stop, facilitating easy access and fluid movement between Itaewon and Hannam-dong.

## **Methodological and Ethical Considerations**

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Gaining access to the field was a daunting task, met initially with silence across communication platforms such as Facebook, email, and Instagram. However, a simple invitation eventually came, pushing me to embrace the unknown. Entering the bar, unease and a feeling of not fitting in washed over me. Yet, I introduced myself, recognizing the significance of every step and interaction. Echoing the word of advice from my interlocutor that I got that day, it is ‘no big deal,’ I immersed myself in Itaewon's underground electronic music scene, understanding the weight and responsibility of accurately representing lives and experiences. Despite downplaying it, I acknowledged the importance of my work and continued the journey of discovery with determination and respect, reminding myself that each step mattered.

### **Methodology**

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I was in Korea from February 2021 to September 2021 and conducted my first anthropological fieldwork in Seoul, Itaewon. I had initially wished to explore how creative expression was maneuvered in the underground electronic music scene during Covid; as I look back, it is evident how naïve I was. It did not take me long to realize how intangible creativity was, how personal and intimate; I also realized that as covid lurched, creativity that already was secluded had hidden further into intimate spaces and homes. So, I went a long, waiting for whatever my thesis would be about to appear. Now when I look back, it was already in the cards. When describing to friends how I ended up focusing on Itaewon, I would say something along the lines of “So, I found a YouTube video about the covid situation in Itaewon, and I thought like, oh cool, hmm, I like music, I find stigma interesting, and urban anthropology is fun, and space might fit into this, why not?”. In my initial thoughts, creativity was not even in the picture, but the relationship to the space where this scene existed was, and Itaewon was the space. Ideas of Itaewon appeared increasingly throughout my fieldwork; it seemed to somewhat perpetuate how the underground electronic music scene existed, was understood and the placement of it, and who it was for. Through this text, I aim to delve into the space of Itaewon and explore the vibrant underground electronic music scene.

Additionally, it is important to note that my arrival in Korea coincided with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, which had a profound effect on the daily lives and experiences of my friends and interlocutors. Therefore, the COVID-19 pandemic will play a central role in shaping the narrative and analysis presented in this text.

Throughout my fieldwork, most of my interactions revolved around navigating the complexities of Covid-19 regulations. It required a delicate balance, often pushing the boundaries of legality. Initially, I harbored concerns regarding the potential consequences of engaging in certain activities, such as clubbing after-hours<sup>6</sup>. However, I swiftly realized that allowing these concerns to impede my exploration of the field would hinder my ability to engage with it truly. Consequently, I made a conscious decision to embrace the opportunities that arose.

I adopted a participant observation approach to amass research materials, drawing inspiration from Margarethe Kusenbach's 'go-along' method (Kusenbach 2003). This approach entailed actively joining my interlocutors as they navigated the diverse landscape of Itaewon. Over the course of my fieldwork, I accompanied them to various events, frequented cafes alongside them, hung out at bars, spent time in their homes, shared meals, and meandered through the streets as they told me stories and memories. By immersing myself in their world, I wished to grasp the intricacies of their daily lives and the broader socio-cultural context in which they existed. This methodological choice allowed me to develop a more intimate understanding of my interlocutors' experiences and perspectives. It gave me a unique vantage point to capture the subtleties and complexities permeating their lives and the broader cultural landscape.

My wish with the 'go-along' method was to engage in meaningful dialogues, get to know my interlocutors and their lives, and further enrich my comprehension of the underground electronic music scene in Itaewon. Moreover, adopting the 'go-along' approach fostered genuine connections and cultivated trust with my interlocutors; it also functioned as a 'snowball' effect. The 'snowballing' that the 'go-along' method provided me with allowed me to contact a wider group of potential interlocutors and engage with their everyday. This brings me to another essential framing for my participant fieldwork; following Karen O'Reilly (2012), who draws on Thomas R. Hochschild (2010), I applied 'guided conversations' as a method of collecting data.

Inspired by O'Reilly's and Hochschild's insights, I applied their interactive and adaptable approach to guided conversations, allowing for a deeper exploration of the subject matter. By avoiding predetermined questions, I tried my best to create space for natural, unrestricted, and flowing conversations between myself and my interlocutors. This approach empowers my interlocutors, giving them the agency to actively shape the conversation and

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<sup>6</sup> In this text, 'after-hours' refers to the bars, clubs, or parties that took place after the permitted operating hours of regular bars or clubs during the COVID-19 pandemic.



fostering a collaborative and dynamic engagement. Alongside guided conversations, I sometimes had semi-structured interviews (O'Reilly 2012). These interviews allowed me to follow up on topics I had encountered in the field. I thereby had some pre-determined questions while still leaving room for participants to express themselves freely. I aimed to gain a more diverse coverage of my interlocuter's reality through guided conversations and semi-structured interviews.

## **Ethical Considerations**

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Amidst the pandemic, every movement, social event, meeting, or casual outing carried a sense of uncertainty. It was a time when even simple acts were under precarious conditions. Moreover, given the contested nature of Itaewon within my fieldwork, ensuring the anonymity of my interlocutors became a vital concern. This emphasizes the personal and ethical implications as we share, retell, and interpret the sensitive data our interlocutors entrusted us.

As anthropologists, we delve into the lives of others, observing, questioning, analyzing, and writing about their experiences. This immersive approach raises critical ethical questions that warrant careful consideration. O'Reilly (2012) rightly points out that while some may view our method as ethically challenging, it does not mean we should abandon our research style altogether. Instead, we must strive to develop a heightened awareness, reflexivity, and informed approach to our work. By acknowledging the significance of ethical dilemmas and engaging in thoughtful reflection, we can maneuver these difficulties with respect for our interlocutors. Through this reflective practice, we honor and appreciate the individuals who share their stories and let us into their lives.

However, it is important to remember that anthropologists balance a thin thread. We are interpreting our interlocuter's stories and representing our image of their reality; no matter how we try to portray our observations and the conversations we have taken part in, it is still our reflections.

Throughout my fieldwork, obtaining consent from my interlocutors was of utmost importance. I established a respectful and collaborative relationship with them, valuing their perspectives and agency. In cases where I had doubts about including certain observations, I sought their input and clarification afterward. This approach allowed for transparency and ensured that my research accurately represented their voices. It fostered mutual understanding

and shared ownership of the findings, emphasizing the significance of consent and respecting their experiences.

Moreover, I have prioritized respecting and protecting my interlocutors' privacy. These individuals have transcended their roles as research participants and become cherished friends. Their invaluable wisdom and experiences have profoundly enriched my life, underscoring my commitment to handling their personal information with the utmost sensitivity.

The contested landscape of COVID-19 restrictions has posed unique challenges for my fieldwork. Ethically portraying my interlocutors' occasional breaches of regulations while preserving their anonymity has been a delicate balancing act. To navigate this ethical terrain, I have drawn upon the insights of Hopkins (1993) and embraced the concept of composites. By embracing composites, I have crafted representative narratives that integrate elements from multiple individuals. This approach enables me to safeguard the identities of my interlocutors while authentically capturing the essence of their collective experiences. It is crucial to emphasize that these composites remain true to my interlocutors' genuine events, sentiments, and realities.

The preservation of my interlocutors' privacy and confidentiality is of paramount importance to me. With great care, I have taken measures to protect their identities by assigning pseudonyms to the places mentioned, such as bars and clubs, and to my interlocutors. Moreover, I have deliberately decided to exclude specific data from my research due to concerns about the potential identification of individuals and locations discussed in the context of the pandemic's contested circumstances.

I aspire to honor and give due recognition to the stories shared with me by my interlocutors, both through my chosen methodology and ethical considerations. I sincerely intend to capture their experiences with the respect, depth, and thoughtful reflection they deserve.

## Notes on Language and Lingo

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I knew very little Korean when I came to Seoul, and considering I had been to Korea before during my exchange semester, I felt sad and disappointed that I had not delegated more of my time to learn at least some Korean. It might have bought on more reflective fieldwork that highlighted either more personal, more profound, or other aspects of my interlocutors' reality. During my fieldwork, I encountered a diverse group of interlocutors who predominantly spoke English, reflecting the international nature of the scene I focused on. However, I also had many Korean interlocutors who occasionally expressed frustration and sighed, stating that it would have been easier to convey their thoughts and feelings in Korean. Further interestingly, one of my Korean interlocutors humorously highlighted the contrasting dynamics of conversations depending on the language spoken:

You know, I have observed this thing, a phenomenon. When I hear Koreans speak English, they often speak more pessimistically, like they talk about Korea and their life more pessimistically. However, when they speak Korean, they are more optimistic. It is weird, right? You must mention that in your research.

*Bap, -*

Depending on the perspective of the individuals involved, Bap's reflections may hold some truth. However, they also underscore the inherent limitations of my role as an anthropologist in capturing and representing someone's stories and experiences. Bound by time constraints during fieldwork, I can only capture a fragment of the broader narrative, with significant gaps before and after. Additionally, as an active participant in the process, I acknowledge that information passes through me, a subjective and non-neutral intermediary.

Moreover, I was prepared for the restrictions my limited Korean could bring; I was not prepared for the lingo that followed the underground electronic music scene. As O'Reilly notes:

Even if you are not studying a group who speak a different language to you, in modern ethnography, if you want to learn about the way of life of a certain subculture or institution, you will need to learn certain ways and words that are expected and accepted. There are often sets of behaviour and vocabulary which are used to mark outsiders from insiders (...)  
(O'Reilly 2012: 95).

During my fieldwork, I encountered a unique lingo closely tied to unfamiliar approaches to music, specialized equipment, and emerging technologies. I made a concerted effort to familiarize myself with the specific vocabulary, expressions, and terminology used within this context. However, I must admit that there were instances where certain terms and nuances went beyond my comprehension.

## Chapter Outline

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As I have attempted to illustrate through this introductory chapter, this thesis wishes to explore the changing, contested, and moving underground electronic music scene in Itaewon, Seoul, Korea. The second chapter of my thesis delves into the intricate creation and production of the spatiality within Itaewon, as experienced and maneuvered by my interlocutors. It aims to unravel the interwoven fabric of Itaewon's spatial dynamics and the perceived notions associated with it. Drawing upon Lefebvre's spatial theories, I historicize Itaewon's military history and the presence of the Yongsan army base while also exploring the surrounding environments and communities that emerged around it. Through this historical exploration, I shed light on the contestation that arose from Itaewon's status as a marker of foreign territory. This chapter serves as a spatial clarifier, illustrating how communities and scenes that fell outside conventional notions of proper Korea found their space within Itaewon.

Building upon the concepts of foreignness and spatiality explored in Chapter Two, Chapter Three, through the stories from my interlocutors and ethnography, delves into the experiences of LGBTQ+<sup>7</sup> individuals in finding a space within Itaewon's spatial dynamics. It specifically examines the important role of LGBTQ+ entities in producing and shaping club spaces, highlighting their contributions to the vibrant and diverse underground scene in Itaewon. The chapter further explores how these queer spaces became havens, providing safe spaces within a discourse that is contested. Additionally, the chapter delves into discussions regarding bodies in space (Lewis 1995; Simonsen 2005; Johnston and Longhurst 2010; Lefebvre 1991; Douglas 2003), drawing upon Goffman's (1963) concept of stigma and examining how queer bodies navigate and negotiate their presence within spaces. It sheds

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<sup>7</sup> LGBTQ+ is an abbreviation encompassing various identities, including Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and others such as questioning, two-spirit, intersex, asexual, and more (Walks 2014: 15).

light on how the perspectives and maneuvering of safe spaces fluctuated throughout the course of the pandemic, particularly in light of the transformative effects of the Itaewon cluster case. By illustrating the consequences of the Itaewon covid-cluster on the perception of safety among queer individuals, the chapter emphasizes the significance of the underground electronic club scene in Itaewon and its role in providing a sense of safety and belonging for LGBTQ+ communities.

Building on the tension field illustrated in Chapter Three, Chapter Four delves deeper into the intricate dynamics of the underground electronic music scene. This chapter offers an exploration of how the scene itself and its dedicated patrons maneuvered and responded to the fluctuating contestations that emerged during the pandemic. Firstly, the chapter provides a rich understanding of the interlocutors' definitions and perceptions of the underground. It presents their narratives and experiences, shedding light on the development and evolution of Korea's underground electronic music scene, particularly in Itaewon. Secondly, the chapter delves into the specific Covid regulations and the varying degrees of monitoring associated with them. The chapter examines how individuals, bars, clubs, and different groups of people navigated these regulations. It explores the strategies employed to uphold or maneuver around the restrictions, including the understanding and negotiation of illegality.

Additionally, the chapter highlights how certain establishments existed within a framework of distinctions (Thornton 1995; Bourdieu 1984), where knowing the right places to go became crucial. By examining these aspects, the chapter offers insights into the underground electronic music scene in Itaewon and how its participants navigated the evolving landscape influenced by Covid regulations and stigma. By exploring the interconnectedness between the ideas and needs surrounding clubbing, the community surrounding the club, spatial dynamics, and broader contextual factors, this chapter provides a profound understanding of the intricate dynamics that shaped Itaewon during the transformative pandemic period.

In the fifth chapter, inspired by the works of Baudrillard (1994) and Lefebvre (1991), the focus shifts towards delving into the underground electronic music scene in Itaewon, particularly emphasizing its fascination with Berlin aesthetics. Drawing on ethnographic research, this chapter examines how dreams, trends, and ideals intersect to shape perceptions of space within the club scene. By analyzing the incorporation of Berlin vibes and the desire for collaborations with international clubs, we engage with Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality, where the boundaries between the real and the simulated become blurred. Additionally, we explore Lefebvre's notions of utopia, investigating how the transformation of

Itaewon's music scene influences urban experiences and cultural production. Finally, I will present a chapter of recapitulations and reflections, where I delve into the core of what I have written, propose potential areas for future research, and contemplate the far-reaching consequences of the Itaewon Halloween tragedy.

## Chapter Two: Itaewon – Where Others Live and Play

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Fighting the wind as we are walking, the weather is unusually moody. Maybe to be expected for monsoon season along a highway without protection from the weather's wrath. Susie and I were going to a vegan restaurant, having a chill friend date together. Later in the evening, Susie and I planned to meet some friends at a techno<sup>8</sup> bar. While walking, Susie keeps pointing out the different landmarks. Some landmarks are out of sight, protected by the giant wall enclosing the military base in Itaewon.

While other landmarks are highly visible, just separated by the highway. The highway divided the alleyways of Itaewon from the military base as if it were two different worlds. "Right there on the other side of the street, there used to be a coin-norebang<sup>9</sup> (코인 노래방) where my friends and I used to go after school; it closed down, ehmm I'm not sure when." Susie spent parts of her childhood within the walls of the military base. Susie's father is a commander in the army and met her mother while stationed, fell madly in love, and ended up settling down in Korea. While walking past a deteriorating wired gate, which was the only open spot where one could catch a glimpse of the interior of the base, Susie perked up and pointed to a building on the inside: "That was my school; it's stupid that they are letting the building just stay empty. It should have been used to house refugees." Right after pointing at her school, she turned and pointed to the other side of the highway to a slim alley right by a bar "The mandu (만두)<sup>10</sup> place that I talked about is in there; it is super cheap; I used to go there when I was younger, - I think it's the same ahjumma (아줌마)<sup>11</sup> that runs it." After a fifteen-minute walk from the subway station, we reached the end of the military base. A little while later, her face turned a bit sullen, "there used to be this really nice, cool bar there," nodding her head towards a BBQ spot across the highway, "but it went bankrupt when the military base moved." Most of the walks me and Susie had in the Itaewon area were like this, she would point out places she had a memory attached to or mention things that had changed without me asking. As she walked through the neighborhood of her upbringing, it became

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<sup>8</sup> Techno is a genre of electronic dance music known for its repetitive beats, synthesized sounds, and futuristic aesthetic.

<sup>9</sup> Coin-norebang (코인 노래방): small karaoke rooms made for 1-4 people.

<sup>10</sup> Mandu (만두): Korean dumplings.

<sup>11</sup> Ahjumma (아줌마): married or middle-aged women.

evident that a sense of nostalgia permeated her experience as she deftly navigated her memories through the act of spatial practice.

Susie stated that we were only a few minutes from the restaurant in Haebangchon. Haebangchon, for short HBC, is one of the most foreign and vegetarian-friendly neighborhoods close to Itaewon and one of Susie's favorite areas. A ceramic store marked the entrance to HBC, and pots for storing and fermenting kimchi covered the last few meters of the wall to the military base. "An old ahjumma runs it; it's been here as long as I can remember." Following the old ceramic store, the street was lined with bars and small independent shops. The first bar had an odd vibe. The bar was reminiscent of the raggedy pubs one saw on American sitcoms, and its customers fitted the bill, with their loud voices and wandering eyes following us as we walked past. A block from the bar, one could find a vegan sex shop, an ecological grocery store, a Moroccan restaurant, a French restaurant, and a Lebanese vegetarian spot. Further up the hill was Susie's favorite vegan restaurant, which was our destination, and if one walked further up, one found a traditional Korean food market.

As illustrated, Korea's history is soaked, perpetrated, and defined by the battle about the right to space, who is entitled to it, and how it is viewed. Not many places in Seoul are as representative of the spatial struggle in Korea as Itaewon. This is especially illustrated through Itaewon's relation to the Yongsan Garrison base. Exiting Noksapyeong station, located in one of Itaewon's many scattered neighborhoods, tall brick walls greet one with barbed wires at the top. The walls shelter the Yongsan garrison from the public or the public from it, its presence is essential to how Itaewon is viewed and how Itaewon came to be. In many ways, Itaewon, through the presence of the Yongsan garrison and its impact, represents Korea's multicultural future while constantly reminding its habitants and visitors of their colonial past. Walking through sections of Itaewon is like walking through somewhat segregated historical memories; a mix of past, present, and future ideas live alongside each other, creating a collage of history, memories, and sometimes contradicting messages of what the space should represent or be.

The goal of this chapter is to highlight how the battles, tensions, and ideals of the past shaped the now. Furthermore, it is important to establish the space, history, and power dynamics within which the underground electronic scene in Itaewon exists and maneuvers. Without understanding the surrounding environment, the rest of my thesis would seem hollow, as the world my interlocutors encompass and maneuver is shaped and reshapes already existing patterns, spaces, ideas, and ideals. In a way, this chapter is a spatial



overview- where the intention is to give a historical perspective of what was, thereby illustrating what is.

The first section of this chapter will focus on the history of the Yongsan Garrison, how it shaped Itaewon, and how its inhabitants created and maneuvered spaces that were shaped by/for their consumer needs, such as the Yanggongjus. This first section's intention is to illustrate how Itaewon came to be seen as a dirty or non-Korean space, thereby opening doors for businesses or entities that did not fit the idea of the proper Korean. Furthermore, I will also show how the Korean government tried to cleanse Itaewon and 'protect' Koreans from unwholesome behavior and decadent culture. Later in the chapter, I illustrate the shifting power dynamics and spatiality of Itaewon and Korea, as influenced by Korea's rising status in the global economy and the growing anti-American sentiment among the Korean population.

## **The History of the Yongsan Garrison**

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Due to its ideal location in the center of Itaewon and thereby both being connected to the Han River and ideal trade routes, Yongsan has a long history of foreign intervention and militarization. The most recent forced occupations were by the Japanese military and the US. In 1894, sixteen years before Japan colonized the then Joseon, the Japanese military established their main army base in the Yongsan area. After Japan occupied Joseon, Yongsan also played further importance in their rule as the area housed their main military base and through the construction of railroad networks (J.Y. Kim 2014: 51).

It was not until after World War II that Korea would be liberated from Japanese rule. During WWII, the Yongsan military base swiftly changed owners, and it was now under the leadership of the US Army. For a short period, the base was abandoned following the democratic election in 1949, and it was under North-Korean control for a brief time during the Korean Wars. However, in 1953 the Yongsan military base was again under American authority, and it has been under American control since (J.Y. Kim 2014).

## **Anticommunism and American Reliance**

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Anticommunist ideology has significantly impacted South Korea's nation-building process since the peninsula split into north and south. Thus, demonstrating the intellectual superiority of liberal democracy over communism emerged as a crucial objective for the Korean

government at the time. In addition, economic progress, seen as being 'hampered' by and during the Japanese colonial occupation, was at the center of developing governmental policies. The military and economic reliance on America was seen as essential for stabilizing Korea during the 60s political and economic upheaval. Upheavals such as the liberation from Japanese domination, the Korean War, the country's split, and the protracted Cold War era. Consequently, as Korea became politically and economically dependent on US military rule, the Yongsan base assumed a crucial role in national security (J.Y. Kim 2014: 53). This aligns with Lefebvre's concept of representations of space, which recognizes the influence of power dynamics on the shaping and control of territorial domains. The signing of the Status of Force Agreement (SOFA) in 1966 further solidified this relationship, granting the US military unrestricted use of Korean territory and exclusive privileges, such as the utilization of bases like the Yongsan army base, as well as sole criminal jurisdiction over military personnel and their families (J.Y. Kim 2014: 54).

During most of Korea's early years, the American military was an active designer in transforming the area surrounding the Yongsan base. It is important to clarify that when I am writing about designers, I refer to governmental policies or plans structured by people or organizations in power. This implies that the American military can be viewed as a governmental designer or a group of people in power that influences how an area is to be used and experienced. Put simply, the American military operates as a design-driven entity guided by influential ideas and goals that significantly shape the surrounding area's functioning, creation, and infrastructure. Its heightened position of power reinforces and supports this role. However, it is important to note that considering the American military structure as a designer does not necessarily imply that individual military personnel within the organization are designers themselves. Instead, a more productive perspective is viewing soldiers as consumers who interact with and appropriate the surrounding areas while influencing the representations through their consumption patterns. This aligns with Lefebvre's concept of representational space, where the actions and practices of individuals within a space contribute to the production and transformation of its meaning and function. It is crucial to recognize that the relationship between the designer and the consumer is dialectical, continually shaping and restructuring each other. This highlights the reciprocal influence and interdependence between those who design and those who consume, as their actions and interactions inform the evolution and dynamics of the spatial environment.

It would not be far-fetched to state that during the 50s, Korea was economically reliant on the American military and its soldiers. The Yongsan military base drastically changed how its

surrounding area was used and viewed. Because of the base, Itaewon became a hub where the core customer base was American soldiers, their families, and civilians connected to the military. In the Itaewon neighborhood, bars, restaurants, stores, etc., all relied on and interacted with the soldiers. Itaewon, effectively, became the key spot where American soldiers would find leisure. They developed their own area around the base, where the mixing of Koreans who searched for 'foreign' culture and American soldiers who wanted to emulate a feeling of home came to hang out. Thus, the image of Itaewon as an Americanized ghetto developed (J.Y. Kim 2014: 55). The Yongsan military base was transformative in how people navigated and maneuvered the surrounding areas. The base functioned as a principal space marker, -and surrounding areas structured themselves around its needs.

However, there is often a stark difference between the abstract space, or the space that is physically set out, and the lived reality of space. The hidden alleys, the shadowy-smokey bars, and all those tiny little in-between spaces that do not fit the original picture create another layer of how the space is used and perceived. The 'hotspots' are seen as cultural landmarks, the shady bars that one should avoid or are unknown for people who are not viewed as an insider, the experience of a neighborhood can be viewed as a battle of defining space. Or, put in different terms, a conflict of observation. It is always important to ask what labels or ideas are connected to a particular space. The lived reality is almost always different from the wanted or intended reality. Moreover, sometimes even the government accepts defeat, and the consumer or other designer interests takes charge. Sometimes one must let a necessary 'evil' take root or accept loss when it comes to who has the hegemony over a particular space, a statement especially vital when we look closer at the 'yanggongju's (J.Y. Kim 2014).

### **‘Yanggongju’: ‘The Western Princess’**

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Yanggongjus are sex workers catering to the soldiers and foreigners attached to the military. Moreover, during the 50s to 80s, American military soldiers were the main consumers and thereby imposed their needs upon the area. By shaping Itaewon to their needs, the American soldiers also illustrate the dialectic relationship between producers and consumers that Lefebvre theorizes on. To explain further, the American military (the government and politics behind the structuring), - functioned as a producer by shaping buildings and roads to fit their practical, political, and militarized goals. Furthermore, moving in soldiers also brought in a new consumer group. The soldiers imposed their habits and needs upon the area with their consumption habits and needs. These consumption patterns did not fit what the Korean

government saw as proper behavior or proper use of space. However, due to the economic benefits and the military stability that the American government provided, the Americans were allowed to somewhat reign freely:

As the deterritorialized place whose governance was partly handed over to the American government (U.S. Forces), it has become a place for Koreans to be exposed to American cultures at everyday life level and to experience its 'unique' atmosphere and 'exceptional deregulations' (J.Y. Kim 2014: 1).

A vast sector of the economic revenue that the soldiers contributed came from buying sex from 'Yanggongjus.' Which translates to 'the Western princess' or whore. At one point, half of Korea's sex workers were 'yanggongju's (J.Y. Kim 2014: 55). The Korean public relationship with Yanggongjus was ambivalent at best, but the sentiment was often that they were a necessary evil. In the eyes of the government, it was also seen as a necessary evil, even though allowing sex work did not align with their value system in any way. However, as stated earlier, the government was economically reliant on these 'dirtied' sex workers and the American military. The Lee Seung Man's administration<sup>12</sup> valued a patriarchal family structure (which was strongly based on Confucianism<sup>13</sup>), national pride, and a heightened sense of Korean superiority over other groups of people. In other words, Yanggongjus' sexual interactions with foreigners imperiled the country's racial purity, which directly tarnished the administration's image of the patriarchal order (J.Y. Kim 2014: 55). Because of this, Itaewon is now frequently perceived as a 'sexualized' and morally 'polluted' environment. This perception stems from the idea that Korean women who "(...) mingled flesh and blood with foreigners (...)" (Moon 1997: 3) opposed the mainstream hegemonic value system that Confucianism inspired. During a significant period, the Korean government tolerated and allowed certain forms of improper behavior within the boundaries of Itaewon, resulting in the neighborhood being predominantly under American governmental spatial control.

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<sup>12</sup> The Lee Seung Man administration refers to the government led by President Lee Seung Man, who served as the first President of South Korea from 1948 to 1960. His administration played a significant role in shaping the early years of the Republic of Korea and was characterized by its anti-communist stance and close alliance with the United States. The policies and actions of the Lee Seung Man administration had a profound impact on the political, social, and economic landscape of South Korea during that period (Britannica 2023).

<sup>13</sup> Confucianism is an ancient philosophical and ethical system originating in China. It revolves around the teachings of Confucius and emphasizes moral values, social order, and the cultivation of virtue. Central to Confucianism is the concept of filial piety, respect for elders, and the importance of harmonious relationships within society. Confucian principles have greatly influenced East Asian cultures, including China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam, shaping their traditions, values, and social structures (Practices 2023).

Consequently, the presence of the American military and the consumers they attracted played a pivotal role in shaping the dynamics and character of Itaewon during this time.

Even though most sex workers have moved out of Itaewon, how they influenced the area's public image is still resilient. There are also some areas where one can still see the reminiscences of the yanggongju's that previously accounted for 25% of Korea's national GDP<sup>14</sup>(Schober 2014). Most notably, Hooker Hill that Elisabeth Schober, among others, paints a picture of in her article "Itaewon's suspense: masculinities, place-making and the US Armed Forces in a Seoul entertainment district" (2014):

Next to Itaewon's fire station, a smaller street leads up a hilly area that is lined with a diverse range of bars and clubs crammed into a number of older buildings, some of which have young Filipina or Russian women loitering at their entrances. A few steps further, she would be faced with a dark alley cutting across the street that is dimly lit by the fluorescent lights of a succession of small venues with hyperbolic names ('Best Club', 'Tiger Tavern', 'Texas Club') – this is 'Hooker Hill'. Past the signs in Korean that warn minors to stay out of this area, you can see scantily dressed Korean women casually standing in the street who try to convince the few lonesome male figures making their way up here to set a foot into their premises (Schober 2014: 39).

As my fieldwork occurred during the pandemic, the sex industry was as good as invisible during my stay. The sex industry was never discussed among my interlocutors except when mentioning that one of the most known clubs in the area is in a basement where there was previously a strip club. The club, named Cupcake, prided itself on its previous promiscuous past, as one can see on its own Facebook page, where it mentions the venue's history. Thereby, Cupcake re-appropriates the area's history to influence its image and illustrate its openness towards liberal sexual behavior. Cupcake was, at least not by its consumer, viewed as a dirtied space; it was a space where one where free. Pre and after covid, Cupcake was/is one of the hot spots for LGBTQ+ parties. My interlocuter Ji Hyo, a Korean lesbian resident DJ at Cupcake, describes the club as her home and somewhere everyone "(...) can go wild". However, Cupcake was the only context that brought up the topic of sex workers. The lack of discussion surrounding the topic did not mean that sex work had vanished, but it mostly

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<sup>14</sup> GDP stands for Gross Domestic Product. It is a measure used to assess the economic performance of a country. It represents the total value of all goods and services produced within a country's borders during a specific period.

lingered in the shadows of where my interlocutors and I hung out while a veil of covid precautions hid it.

## **The Days of Only 'Wholesome National Culture'**

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Following Lee Seung Man's exile, Park Jeong Hee seized power in 1961. His dictatorship lasted until he was assassinated in 1979. Through his dictatorship, the government's definition of a proper Korean condensed even more, and the reigns of Confucianist ideals on these definitions tightened even further. At the start of Park Jeong Hee's period, he established a five-year economic development plan, which many see as the start of Korea's economic growth. The economic plan helped legitimize his regime, and Park Jeong Hee tightened his authoritarian leashes even further. By the end of his third period, he had declared martial law<sup>15</sup> and ordered a constitutional amendment<sup>16</sup>, enabling him to control Korean society with a tighter grip. Additionally, he dismissed the national assembly, closed universities, and enforced strict censorship over the media; this was the start of the so-called Yushin period<sup>17</sup>. There were also executed certain expectations for what was expected behavior or allowed behavior, as Pil Ho Kim and Hyun Joon Shin describe in the article "The Birth of 'Rok': Cultural Imperialism, Nationalism, and the Globalization of Rock Music in South Korea, 1964–1975"(2010):

In August 1970 the police began stopping young people on the street for a snap inspection known as changbal tansok (long-hair crackdown; fig. 5). Men got a free haircut on the spot if their hair was deemed too long. Women's skirts had to be long enough to cover their knees. The streets of Seoul turned into a theater of the absurd, where police officers, armed with measuring sticks, imposed "the discipline of the body" on the hapless passersby(P.H. Kim and Shin 2010: 216).

Furthermore, "(...)any deviation from the 'wholesome national culture' was not tolerated" (P.H. Kim and Shin 2010: 216). During Park Jeong Hee's regime, youth culture became a primary target of restrictions, as the government perceived it to be associated with deviant

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<sup>15</sup> Martial law, in short, refers to a state of emergency where military forces take control of a region or country. During martial law, the military assumes authority and can enforce laws, maintain order, and limit civil liberties.

<sup>16</sup> A constitutional amendment is a formal change to a country's constitution, altering its fundamental principles and rules.

<sup>17</sup> Also often called the fourth republic. The Yushin Constitution, which codified President Park Jeong Hee de facto authoritarian powers, was approved in the 1972 constitutional referendum, which laid the groundwork for the Fourth Republic. (Im 2011)

behavior. Musicians who were deemed to promote inappropriate music often faced imprisonment or arbitrary punishments. This crackdown on youth culture is significant because underground scenes and music scenes, in general, often find their roots or have strong connections within youth culture. As Christopher Small (1998) argues in his concept of musicking, the experience and expression of music encompass not just the musical performance itself but also the social interactions, meanings, and activities associated with it. Therefore, when youth culture is targeted, it impacts the underground scene and has broader implications for the music community as a whole (Thornton 1995; P.H. Kim and Shin 2010). However, keeping the party going, and avoiding the curfew, became a symbol of resistance, exemplified by Tommy Shim, who is mentioned in Kim and Shin's article:

Clubs were popular hangouts for young hipster boys and girls in Seoul. Every morning [at 4 a.m.] when the curfew was over and the club closed, the band members and the partygoers went out together to grab a bite or have a cup of coffee. We were like a family. It'aewo ñ at that time was a paradise for hippies. I don't know what it's like now, but there used to be small clubs on both hillsides playing live music every night, competing with one another (P.H. Kim and Shin 2010: 219).

It is also important to note that a significant section, as hinted towards in the citation above, of so-called decadence culture took place in the streets of Itaewon. Moreover, a considerable portion of what was seen as decadent culture was linked to " 'decadent alien culture,' "(P.H. Kim and Shin 2010: 226), which again connects back to the idea of the Yanggongju. As mentioned earlier, Yanggongjus is often viewed as a culturally dirtied Korean woman who has lowered herself and had sexual interaction with a foreigner, thereby ruining the image of Korean purity. The area where foreign culture, and thereby foreign music, was available to the public was in the streets of Itaewon; thus, it was also seen as the area where improper Koreans got even more dirtied by foreign cultures.

As a result, deviation from 'wholesome' national culture not only survived but bloomed in the shadows and behind curtains, just out of reach from the government, which seemed hellbent to stop it. The first era of this development happened during the so-called go-go dance<sup>18</sup> times when the music was turning 'sleazier' and hiding further into the shadows of night. "The go-go craze was greeted with sensationalist media coverage, which framed the

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<sup>18</sup> Gogo dancing is a form of dance that emerged in 1970s nightclubs and discos. It is distinguished by its strong intensity, fast-paced motions, and sensual, provocative aesthetic. Gogo dancers are frequently spotted at clubs, parties, and gatherings, executing their own distinctive dances to energetic music (Gregory 2018).

phenomenon as something of a moral panic" (P.H. Kim and Shin 2010: 219). Nonetheless, even as the youth kept partying, the government and the media still tried to clean this dirtied and unclean music scene. The youth culture was thereby driven out of the open and into the shadows, growing even more audacious in undermining the established sexual mores and work ethic. In retrospect, the entire debaucherous culture propaganda produced a self-fulfilling prophecy.

### **No More Curfew and the 3S Policy**

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With the growing prosperity in the 80s, people's view of 'traditional' Korean values changed as the flow of goods and information caused by globalization flourished. Following Park Jeong Hee's assassination in 1979, General Chun Doo Hwan seized power in 1980. Chun Doo Hwan's new government was no less severe in dealing with political criticism than its predecessor. Nonetheless, the new government was ready to accept and co-opt what had been stigmatized as decadent culture. A clear mark in the change in the new government's view towards decadent culture could be seen in 1982 when the curfew from midnight to the morning was lifted. The curfew had been in place since 1945, and the lift signified how the government viewed and used so-called decadent behavior to paint themselves as modernizing and globalizing (P.H. Kim and Shin 2010).

Traditional appeals to frugality and collective sacrifice became increasingly unconvincing as Koreans began to enjoy the fruits of individual achievement, and as the new middle class was restrained less and less by the collective values of their parents' generation (Buzo 2002: 167).

Additionally, the government took advantage of these new, more capitalist and individualist values to further distract the population by pursuing the '3S' policy. '3S policies promoted "(...) sports, screen, sex [sensual issues] to divert the people's attention away from political issues" (J.Y. Kim 2014: 59). However, with these changes, the moral panic toward crazed decadent culture and irresponsible consumption grew among the cultural conservatives. Moreover, with its closeness to the military base, the red-light district, and an already rambunctious party and bar scene, Itaewon was an easy target for this criticism and fear.



## Colonized Spaces and the L.A Riots

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The Korean public's relationship with the American army soldiers has always been a double-edged sword. On the one hand, their presence is a necessity, shield, and scarecrow to North Korea: a safety net. On the other hand, the occupation of their land and the American government's support of General Jeong, "(...)who was assumed to order the Gwangju massacre"<sup>19</sup> (J.Y. Kim 2014: 63) in 1980, awoke disdain. An upsurge in anti-Americanism was also caused by a series of 'unjust' acts carried out by US military personnel, including sexual assaults, the murders of Korean sex workers, the denial of extradition requests for American criminals, and the illegal disposal of hazardous materials. Likewise, Korea's economic growth and decreased reliance on the United States were directly correlated with an upsurge in anti-American sentiment (J. Kim 1993).

In addition to the physical divide between the 'actual' America and Itaewon, the symbolization of America within Korean national territory has contributed to the formation of anti-American sentiments. This sentiment has been influenced by global factors and national political and economic events. The Los Angeles riot in 1992, where in part Korean American stores were targeted and resulted in the death of a Korean boy, further intensified the tensions. Consequently, Itaewon contestation was further established, characterized by power struggles, identity politics, land rights, and issues of accountability (J.Y. Kim 2014: 64). This situation aligns with Lefebvre's (1991) theory of representations of space, where the symbolic and ideological aspects of space intersect with political and social struggles, shaping the contested nature of Itaewon. By incorporating Lefebvre's framework, I aim to delve deeper into the multifaceted nature of Itaewon's contestation, exploring how the symbolic representation of America intertwines with political and social dynamics to shape the lived experiences and spatial struggles in the area. This perspective provides a valuable lens through which to analyze and interpret the complexities of Itaewon and its ongoing evolution as a contested space.

Tales and stories on how harmful and dangerous the American soldiers were are still prevalent in how Itaewon is observed by people who live in Itaewon, those who do not, and people who were/are involved in the electronic scene there. One of my interlocutors Anne,

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<sup>19</sup> The Gwangju Massacre, or May 18 Democratic Uprising, occurred in Gwangju, in 1980. It was a pro-democracy movement against the military government's repression of civil liberties. Troops responded with violence, resulting in numerous casualties and human rights abuses (Han 2023).

who sometimes 'hung out' in Itaewon when she was younger, told me stories about the area when it supposedly was much more dangerous:

Anna's thick American accent was prominent during the conversation. Even her appearance and way of dressing seemed more American, her rustled hair, makeup-free face, and loungy work wear: loose pants and a sweater with 'boiler room' written on it. Her relaxed presence made sense; though her parents were Korean and partially grew up in Korea, her work has taken her worldwide, and she spent parts of her childhood in America. Anna had previously worked for Ultra-records<sup>20</sup>, Universal<sup>21</sup>, billboard Korea<sup>22</sup>, and Music Taste<sup>23</sup>. However, in recent years, she has worked more specifically in the underground scene in Seoul.

Among others, as a promoter for one of Itaewon's longest-running electronic music clubs, The Belly. While now, she is working freelance, partially in a Korean underground magazine and partially for Boiler Room<sup>24</sup>. Even though she now spends most of her time in Itaewon, both day and night, - it was a place she was told to avoid when she was younger. "It used to be really rough here, like when I was in high school in the 2000s," she stopped and sighed, "Oh god, I am old." "You are not," I chipped in, "yes, in this industry, I am. Anyways, a while ago, this area was not safe. The reason it was not safe, it used to be a US military base, which they are now making into a park<sup>25</sup>. It's only been recently moved, but you used to get a lot of foreigners here from all different cultures, and there are loads of bars, and people would get into fights. There used to be a burger king. I remember when I was in middle school, somebody got stabbed at the burger king." She sighs and taps her fingers rhythmically on the table: "It was really bad till one point where they held a curfew for all military personnel, so all military police. So, what would happen is that you would get people patrolling, and they could ask you, 'Can I see your ID` and if you had a military police license after the curfew, which I think was like, after one, you were like, I think you were like penalized monetarily or

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<sup>20</sup> Ultra-Records is an independent American electronic dance music record label founded in 1995 (Ultrarecords n.d.).

<sup>21</sup> Universal Music Group (UMG), is the world's biggest music rights company (musicbusinessworldwide n.d.).

<sup>22</sup> Korea's billboard department.

<sup>23</sup> The Seoul-based company MyMusicTaste offers a platform where fans can launch campaigns to get their preferred performers to their local areas (Shu 2017).

<sup>24</sup> Boiler room is an independent music platform and cultural curator, which connects underground club culture to fans worldwide via the internet. The premise is simple: Boiler Room organize a wildly oversubscribed party, film the DJ playing a live set and then live-broadcast's it online (Iqbal 2019).

<sup>25</sup> The plan to develop a park on the site of the former Yongsan Military Base involves transforming the land previously occupied by the military installation into a public green space. The objective of this development plan is to repurpose the area for recreational, cultural, and environmental purposes, providing the local community with access to open spaces and amenities.

with some kind of penalty... I can't remember, so what ended up happening is people just didn't drink in Itaewon anymore because the only place they patrolled was here, and then it went from that to moving the whole base."

The curfew my interlocuter mentions has been an on-and-off thing on American military bases worldwide; however, it seemed like the curfew Anna mentioned was specific for Itaewon and the military personnel there. Curfews have been a usual restriction for military personnel and a dusk-to-dawn curfew was first placed on US service troops and their families in the aftermath of the Gulf War in 1991. This led to military police being stationed in the business district of Itaewon, practically emptying the streets for some time, as it was not as fun and tempting to party with military officers looming on the streets with guns (J.Y. Kim 2014: 63-64). The curfew was again reimposed after 9/11 when my interlocuter was in high school (E.-S. Kim 2004:5).

## **The 90s: Olympics, Moral Rehabilitation and Yongsan Negotiations**

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The article "Itaewon as an Alien Space within the Nation-State and a Place in the Globalization Era" (2004) by Kim Eun-Shil, explains that the 90s marked a stark change for Itaewon. Kim Eun-Shil's focus in the article is to illustrate the practice of different politics of space within Itaewon's spatiality. Firstly she demonstrates how, during the Olympics in 1988, "(...)Korean society recognized the potential of Itaewon's exotic culture to bring in foreign currency(...)"(E.-S. Kim 2004: 13). Secondly, she illuminates the flipside, that once the tourists left after the Olympic celebrations, the government started a 'moral rehabilitation' of Itaewon "(...)in order to encourage its rebirth as a social acceptable space" (E.-S. Kim 2004: 13). However, the 'moral rehabilitation' process and the governmental support set in place during the Olympics disappeared right after the event was done, which had detrimental consequences. When the Olympics were done, many storeowners suffered due to a lack of customers, and 27 nightclubs were ordered to shut down by the government due to promoting 'immoral behavior'(E.-S. Kim 2004: 14-15).

Furthermore, "In the 1990s, Itaewon merchants' associations, the government, and the City of Seoul agreed that Itaewon should be developed as a shopping unit, free tourist zone, and multicultural area, rather than a cultural space for American forces" (E.-S. Kim 2004: 13). This change can be connected to several processes and transformations happening at the time.

Firstly, Korea had, during the 80s-90s, rapidly and steadily elevated its economic power and was therefore given a higher status in the global market. Secondly, this economic development changed the relationship between Korea and the U.S government:

For instance, Donald P. Gregg, U.S. ambassador to South Korea, testified in his confirmation hearing before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on 12 May 1989 that 'as our relationship has evolved over the years, it has moved away from that of patron to client. It is now a relationship between partners—equal partners. This in my view is not only an inevitable development, but a healthy one' (J. Kim 1993: 303).

Thirdly, as the anti-Americanism among the Korean public grew stronger, the American government had no choice but to start discussing relocating the Yongsan garrison in the 90s. Especially as the Yongsan garrison took up so much space in the center of Seoul. The discussions with the American and Korean governments eventually led to the final decision to relocate the base to Pyeongtaek<sup>26</sup> in the early 2000s (Mitchell 2004). The change of Itaewon to a tourist location, where Itaewon was marketed as an example of Korea's globality, also functioned as a tactic to further ostracized the troublesome American soldiers. Furthermore, the decision to make Itaewon a tourist-free zone intended to help fill the consumer vacuum left by the American soldiers. The American soldiers were being increasingly pushed out of Itaewon. As they were no longer seen as belonging or welcomed, not just by the Korean government but also by the public, which saw them as a danger to their society and national identity.

Anne continues after a brief break, her words slipping out of her mouth as fast as one would expect from someone who is both engaged in what they are talking about and confident: "Yeah, like it was really rough, so here was kind of the one place, it was kind of a meeting of cultures too, because it's like a really foreign area, so it was, I guess.... Harder, but also easier because everybody here was already in a different community that is not the Korean community." She continues, her eyes glazed as if the nostalgia is hitting her: "But in terms of here, it was easier, I guess, for me, I guess, because everyone that comes to Itaewon kinda already makes a decision to fuck it, you know what I mean? I remember people that came here to have a fucking ride. I remember when I was younger, in like high school, and I came here just to drink, my parents were like,- you shouldn't be going there, even now I have

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<sup>26</sup> Pyeongtaek is a city located in the Gyeonggi Province of South Korea, approximately 70 kilometers south of Seoul.

like Korean friends whom I tell them like you should come here, we could grab a meal- scary, I am like its fine like this was 20 fucking years ago, it is not that bad. But there is this stigma about this area, but that also kinda makes it for people who are already a part of this community, they already know that they are a part of this community, this foreigner international community, so it's okay, it feels kinda safe because I guess everybody has already made that decision to be a part of this like really like ridiculous road".

## **A Foreign Country Within Seoul: New Globality**

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*Until recently, the Korean mass media viewed Itaewon as a place of excretory culture, where American soldiers engaged in hedonism, prostitution, illegal drugs, and criminal activities. But in the globalization process, transnational phenomena have become everyday affairs and the cultural particularity of Itaewon is fading (E.-S. Kim 2004: 4).*

The transition of Itaewon's designer role from the American government to the Korean government was accompanied by the persistence of the exotic and foreign elements that had already shaped the space's function and perception. Rather than altering Itaewon's function as a space for controlling the influence of the foreign population on mainstream culture, it proved more advantageous to maintain Itaewon as a space for others to inhabit. It served as a community for those who were marginalized or considered outside the boundaries of Korean society, as exemplified by Anna's earlier statements.

The attitude of the Korean government toward Itaewon as the alien zone for American soldiers, was to tolerate its illegality and deviance for the purpose of providing comfort space for American soldiers as well as earning dollars, while at the same time isolating and controlling it in order to minimize its influence on the rest of Korean society (E.-S. Kim 2004: 20).

## **Multiculturalism and Foreignness as a Spatial Tactic**

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Itaewon is, in the eyes of the Korean government, an area where one can contain foreign cultures and promote oneself as a multicultural and open-minded nation. While referencing Sassen (2001: 173), Kim Eun-Shil (2004) argues that a frontier zone develops within the state's borders whenever a global agent—be it a company or a market—overlaps and engages

with the nation-state (E.-S. Kim 2004). Such a border zone is not just dividing the nation-state from the rest of the world, but it creates an area where political, economic, and cultural exchanges occur. Here, new locations are made, and existing ones are changed. She further states that: “Itaewon’s foreignness has been exaggerated as the arena of multiculturalism in this globalization era by the Korean government as well as by local developers, to sell its foreignness and difference as objects for consumption” (J.Y. Kim 2014: 2). Kim Eun-Shil concludes that “Itaewon finds itself in a kind of contention with new spaces being formed in this globalization era”(E.-S. Kim 2004: 4-5).

Additionally, it is beneficial to further highlight Kim Eun-Shil’s observation by applying some of Appadurai’s (1996) theoretical framework, which looks at the notion of nationhood and the nation-state as a spatial generator that nurtures and frames notions of culturalism. Appadurai’s framework will help us understand how and what the nation-state frames and produces, thereby allowing us to engage with his understanding of culturalism. Firstly, it is important to establish that when the nation-state is discussed in an anthropological context, it is often referred to Benedict Anderson and his work on imagined communities (1991). Simply put, Anderson refers to nations as being imaginary communities. Anderson uses the word ‘imagined’, suggesting that such communities are not just made-up or fictional; national identity is a potent sense of belonging deliberately created by the government and the media. If one frames the nation (nation-state) in a Lefebvrian sense, the nation-state could be seen as a prime designer, as it, through its delegation of plans, ideals, and labor, creates maps, buildings, and the physical environment we maneuver and walk through. Furthermore, ideals of who the space is for are manifested through this dialectic relation between these spatial practices and representations of space that are fostered. Stated differently, everything that is contested, discussed, and maneuvered through spatial dynamics is, to some degree, shaped by the borders and ideals that the nation-state provides.

Secondly, to dive further into culturalism, it is important to establish how Appadurai defines culture. Rather than viewing culture as a substance (something that is), he sees it as the dimension of difference (something that is made or crafted). A crafting process that might be best illustrated through how the proper Korean is someone who is ethically Korean, a filial son or daughter, and fits into the heteronormative framing. Additionally, Appadurai moves from “culture as group identity based on difference, to culture as the process of naturalizing a subset of differences that have been mobilized to articulate group identity” (Appadurai 1996:14-15). His understanding of culture as a tool for naturalizing differences gives us the basis to move onto his view on culturalism. In Appadurai’s understanding, many groups

consciously organize themselves according to identarian criteria. These conscious actions can be viewed as a result of government schemes to contain their ethnic diversities into rigid, limited, and often forcefully given cultural categories. “Culturalism, put simply, is identity politics mobilized at the level of the nation-state” (Appadurai 1996: 15). In simpler terms, culturalism is labels and categories that governments sort bodies through and with: “(...)a feature of movements involving identities consciously in the making” (Appadurai 1996: 15). Appadurai, is both useful as framing in dissecting Itaewon’s planned, fragmented, and contested identity as it illustrates the government's tactical use of group framings, as enhancing proper use of space but also in augmenting who belongs where. Thereby mapping out spatial practices and representations that code patterns of cultural categories within certain spatiality where multiculturalism enriches global persona. However, this does not mean that this codification of multicultural spatiality feels like a unified community for those living there.

### **A Community of Strangers**

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Therefore, before moving on with my discussion and spatial storytelling, it is important to highlight that Itaewon is not a community, at least not in the sense that it is often perceived. Rather, as Kim Ji Youn argues in the thesis “Community of strangers: Itaewon from ‘Americanized’ ghetto to ‘multicultural’ space” (2014), Itaewon is a community of communities and strangers. As mentioned earlier, Itaewon is illustrated as a foreign community. Still, such an essentialization of the people and the culture within Itaewon does little to explain the complexities within Itaewon's locality.

For instance, a married couple from India, who were interviewed, said that they had never crossed the main road in front of Hamilton Hotel, which is a landmark of Itaewon. Although there are more Indian restaurants across the main road, for them, the imaginary distance of the area seems to be far distant from them since there are many clubs for gay and transgender people (J.Y. Kim 2014: 4).

While the foreigners in the Itaewon community are frequently depicted as having a uniform identity, Kim Ji Youn suggests that the notion of a shared "foreignness" serves as a unifying factor. However, it is important to note that this shared foreignness does not imply that these individuals possess identical values, lifestyles, interests, or a sense of sameness. It is

rather a 'foreign identity' based on a sense that one does not or does not feel like one belongs in the wider Korean community, which creates symbolic boundaries (Cohen 1985). This foreignness can be marked by several factors, such as not looking traditionally Korean (ethnicity), not obeying to traditional standards of how one should dress or look, or not following heteronormative ideals and standards. Thereby, one's feeling of foreignness and exclusion is not determined by whether one has an ARC (alien registration card)<sup>27</sup> or not, but rather by the foreigner's physical appearance. In other words, Itaewon, from the outside, is seen as symbolically simple (Cohen 1985); it is often essentialized in media and by the public: "Thus, we can all attribute gross stereotypical features to whole groups: but, for the members of those groups such stereotypes applied to themselves as individuals would almost invariably be regarded as gross distortions, superficial, unfair, ridiculous" (Cohen 1985: 75). However, as illustrated by my interlocutors and Kim Ji Youn's research, the lived reality is far more complex than the shallow first impression. Within Itaewon, there might be a somewhat loosely tied community based on the feeling of 'foreignness', but it is rather the other groups and communities within this foreignness that shapes how Itaewon is experienced. Itaewon is a patchwork quilt of groups, cultures, identities, sub-cultures, interests, and individuals who might largely consist of foreigners or people who feel foreign to Korean society, but this only paints a hollow and superficial picture of Itaewon's people and how Itaewon has changed throughout the years. However, it is important to understand the framework of perception that Itaewon exists within, with its turbulent past, its foreign-friendly marketability, and the foundations these factors have formed to understand which cultures have been allowed to take shape or found Itaewon's street fitting for their communities.

The boundary thus symbolizes the community to its members in two quite different ways: it is the sense they have of its perception by people on the other side – the public face and 'typical' mode – and it is their sense of the community as refracted through all the complexities of their lives and experience – the private face and idiosyncratic mode. It is the private, idiosyncratic mode with which we are primarily concerned, for it is here that we encounter people thinking about and symbolizing their community. It is in these depths of 'thinking', rather than in the surface appearance of 'doing' that culture is to be sought (Cohen 1985: 76).

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<sup>27</sup> Now known as residence card or RC is a national identification card for foreigners living long-term in Korea. Many found the former name alien registration card due to "(...)its negative connotation toward foreigners"(T.-e. Kim 2020b).



## Conclusion

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It has become apparent throughout this chapter that Itaewon's history has widely shaped how the area was viewed, perceived, and experienced at the time of my fieldwork. The experience of the past follows my interlocutors as a lead in how to experience and view Itaewon and how others around them see their interaction with Itaewon. These sentiments have been enhanced by governmental policies and interests that used Itaewon as a foundation to frame certain people within a certain controllable and marketable space. This chapter has tried to highlight different historical, political, and societal factors that functioned as tools, both directly and indirectly, to frame Itaewon as a space for people who do not fit the idea of a proper Korean or might not be Korean at all. Going back to my analogy of garment making, one can see the representations of space and spatial practice as one first looks at the garment, the superficial feel of the clothing, and the patterns. Nevertheless, it tells you nothing about how it is made, what fabric is used, who made it, and how it is all connected. In some ways, the spatial practice and representations of space are only the frontstage of where my interlocuter lives. These spatiality's represent the outside perspectives on their world or what is seen as their world. In this chapter, I have illustrated the history of Itaewon and its geographical positioning. Spatial factors made Itaewon a space where the battle between governmental control has been indispensable. These factors have created an environment where the feeling of otherness and outsidership becomes a binding factor both in the way Itaewon sees itself and for the people who hang out or seek Itaewon. The groups of people and the feeling of community that Itaewon fosters will thereby build on, extend, and foster this otherness and outsidership as a binding connection. These groups/communities will be the focus of my next chapter, which will look more into the structures one sees within these formations, and what factors are important in shaping communities. It is, of course, important to remember that the focus will be on people or communities connected to the electronic music scene.

As of now, over 40 embassies and consulates are located in and around Itaewon, and up to 20,000 foreigners dwell nearby, including in Hannam-dong. Itaewon has drawn foreigners living in Seoul, including foreign employees and visitors from all over the world, to share expertise and participate in social activities since the 1990s. In Itaewon, the global is the selling factor. In the hills of Itaewon, past the main street, right by several halal restaurants (some of them selling halal versions of Korean dishes), you will find Seoul's only mosque. The building towers high, with rounded ceilings gently embracing the sky. From being an

American ghetto, since the 90s, Itaewon has been better known as "a foreign country within Seoul"(E.-S. Kim 2004: 11).

Having set the stage for Itaewon's contestations and revealed the lasting impact on my interlocutors, the subsequent chapter delves into the exploration of the LGBTQ+ community's journey in finding a safe haven within Itaewon's hills and clubs. It seeks to unravel the intricate dynamics of navigating and sustaining this space amidst the challenges posed by the pandemic.

## Chapter Three: Creating Safe Spaces for Queer Identities Through the Itaewon Club Scene

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As I headed towards the bar where I was meeting my interlocutor, I had to double-check Kakao-map<sup>28</sup>. The bar was well hidden, tucked away in a basement floor on a street where no other businesses seemed to exist. Walking down the stairs to the bar, I noticed a note on the door warning guests not to take pictures of other guests to protect their anonymity. As a friend later told me, the bar functioned as a space where lesbians could be as queer as they wanted without judgment. On a later occasion, I took a picture of a friend posing by the pink three-dimensional vaginas that covered the walls, which led to a stern warning from the owner: “Make sure no faces are in the picture.” It appeared that anonymity and queerness in Korea often go hand in hand. However, during the pandemic, many spaces where one was free to be queer were forced to close. Pink Flush, the bar I headed into, was no exception. Due to covid restrictions, loss of income, and dwindling motivation from the owner, The Pink Flush had its last opening day a few weeks before I left Korea.

This day I met up with Raveto, a DJ who focused on mixing techno and traditional Korean *pansori*<sup>29</sup>. Raveto was a bisexual woman in her late 20s and in a stable relationship with an Irish man she also worked with. Raveto discovered electronic music while seeking a break from the noisy environment of her carpentry work. Techno became her solace as it effectively muted the sounds of her equipment, prompting her to pursue DJ-ing as a leisure activity. She eventually became an active member of a DJ collective and worked on organizing and promoting events.

We sat in the corner on pink plastic chairs, slightly shielded from the rest of the clientele, surrounded by the endless pink. To the left of us, shelves with sex equipment provided a sprinkle of colors other than pink. There were dildos, BDSM equipment, vibrators, and racy costumes. After getting our drinks, we small talked a bit before I asked Raveto about the cluster case in Homo-Hill:

So, like a year and a half ago, when Corona was starting in Korea, there were these cases at gay clubs, which was like a huge deal. There were actually not that many

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<sup>28</sup> KakaoMap is a map app used to find directions, similar to google map.

<sup>29</sup> Pansori is a traditional style of Korean music.

cases, but the media and people hate the gays, you know. There were like 30 people having a clubbing day, and people think they are seeking someone, you know, like sex and stuff, and maybe they are, but they are often just there to have fun and be with like people. It just seems like that, and people hate the queers anyway.

*Raveto, -*

Later the same day, following the interview with Raveto, I reflected on my motivations for traveling to observe the underground club scene in Itaewon in the first place. Before starting my fieldwork, I had preconceptions about Itaewon due to its foreign persona, which initially appeared tacky. I assumed Itaewon was solely populated by drunk American soldiers, exchange students, or Korean men seeking a ‘white horse to ride’<sup>30</sup>. However, my preconceptions partially functioned as motivation, especially as I began to learn more about the history of the area, its inhabitants, and the contestations evoked through Itaewon’s spatiality. While staying in Korea, Itaewon seemed to grow even more contested as the pandemic ran its course. A contestation that fascinated me, especially when diving into the reasonings and the sentiments it evoked, which were enhanced by the extensive media coverage of the Itaewon cluster case. On the evening of the 1st and early 2nd of May, a man walked into several gay clubs in Itaewon and undenounced to him; these visits would lead to the second most significant cluster case at the time, as he had corona (TheKoreaTimes 2020). For the next few days, newspapers all over Korea told the story of the covid-cases connected to the Itaewon cluster, which originated close to and in Itaewon’s homo-hill. Tracing initiatives were started, and everyone who had been to the club or lived nearby was encouraged to get tested. When interviewing a bar owner I connected with during my fieldwork, he mentioned that “the whole of Itaewon got tested like we tried our best. Everyone who lives and works here tested themselves”. Another interlocuter later stated that “the reactions were so intense like people feared losing their jobs if they were associated or seen in a club. It didn’t even need to be a gay club”.

The previous chapter illustrated how Itaewon became an area for otherness and how ideas of foreign otherness became a part of how Itaewon is spatially known and maneuvered. Through the spatial contestation that Itaewon exists within, it also opened for communities marked by other kinds of out-of-placeness, such as the LGBTQ+ community. This chapter

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<sup>30</sup> During my prior travels to Korea, friends explained to me how ‘many’ Korean men would look for a foreign white woman to have sex with (to ride a white horse), a bucket list goal for some. A male Korean friend of me once also said while snickering, “there exists many horses”.

first introduces parts of the social, spatial, and precarious terrain within Itaewon's queer scene and its connection to the underground electronic music scene. A spatial and precarious terrain I wish to illustrate by first portraying how the LGBTQ+ club scene historically has existed within marginalization. Thereafter, I wish to place Itaewon's queer scene within the spatial otherness and foreignness described in the previous chapter. Subsequently, I explore how queer spaces disappeared, were renegotiated, and existed within notions of bodily and gender ideals as corona uprooted the spatial landscape.

## **Clubbing as an LGBTQ+**

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### **The Forgotten Legacy**

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In the article “The Forgotten LGBT & Racial Roots of Clubbing Culture” by Jenna Dreisenstock (2018), she states that the true roots of “(...) clubbing culture and electronic music scenes as we know them” were built on the intersectionality of queerness and race. Intersectionality, which as time paced and clubbing became more mainstream, “(...) warped into alienation, in which suddenly spaces created by LGBTQ communities and people of color have found themselves discarded and forgotten ”(Dreisenstock 2018). For instance, events such as the Disco Demolition night, for many better known as the day disco ‘died,’ have been widely associated with and motivated by racist and homophobic viewpoints at the time<sup>31</sup>. Disco was mainly a genre that played in gender playfulness and catered towards black and LGBTQ+ populations(Dreisenstock 2018). Disco demolition day, in most parts, marked the official death of disco as music labels started to shun the genre (Koning 2022; Lynch 2019). However, that did not stop the creation of similar safe environments for safe expression of gender fluidity, sexual playfulness, and room for people of color to explore their sexuality. And, out of disco, House<sup>32</sup> emerged - and the genre, which started developing right after the death of disco, mostly adopted Disco's audience. Thereby, house clubs fostered and welcomed queer people and people of color. The house phenomenon did not only develop an

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<sup>31</sup> On July 12th, 1979, Steve Dahl, a DJ in Chicago, invited fans to Comiskey park, where they could attend a doubleheader game for just 98 cents if they brought a disco record. Dahl later asked all the attendees to ruin and burn the documents as a symbolic protest against the genre, which rapidly escalated to full-on chaos (Lynch 2019).

<sup>32</sup> House as a genre started to appear in the underground Chicago club culture scene and was pioneered by African American DJs and producers. The genre is categorized by 120 beats per minute, with steady rhythmic patterns which are ideal for dancing (Lynch 2019; Blanton 2023).

audience in the US; it also spread to, for example, South Africa. Among others, house clubs in south-Africa played a crucial role in creating safe spaces for queer people of color during apartheid. Similarly, the techno scene in Detroit in the same period, specifically its afterparties- allowed its participants to foster and experiment with sexuality (Dreisenstock 2018).

Likewise, or maybe under even more dire circumstances, raves developed to create a safe place for queer communities, who, during the AIDS crisis, found themselves under more pressure and threat of police brutality. In other words, raves partially developed, so marginal identities could continue with the self-expression that clubbing provided as far out of harm's reach as possible, in venues such as abandoned warehouses or secret locations in forests or outside town. "In a metaphorical sense electronic music created a shelter by developing an environment where one can go to seek emotional support or a well-needed escape, not through a physical space such as a nightclub or dance floor, but through the music itself" (Koning 2022: 20). To be specific, the clubs and the music provided a sort of escapism during these challenging times, where the illness did not define them, and the LGBTQ+ community found a place where they were able to embrace themselves, share their pain, but also escape and transform it. Furthermore, raves served as transformative spaces where marginalized identities could engage in the act of musicking, finding solace, self-expression, and resistance against the oppressive forces they faced. Even though much of the LGBTQ+ and black communities' impact on club history and its genre seems forgotten and alienated, some legacies still live on. For many, the club and its surrounding community primarily function as a safe space, escapism, and creative outlet; it provides a community and allows people to feel like themselves without judgment (Koning 2022; Dreisenstock 2018).

### **Placing Queer Clubbing and Itaewon's Freedom**

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Queer club spaces, throughout history, have faced challenges and contestations. The spaces they provide for safety and freedom are influenced by the contested nature of their sexuality. Moreover, these spaces have not only been shaped by this contestation but have also played a significant role in reshaping and transforming the broader clubbing culture (Henry 2019; Johnston and Longhurst 2010; Taylor 2012). Genres and ways of clubbing have been created to generate and maintain the need for a safe space. When discussing Itaewon's club scene

with Raveto, she mentioned how many foreigners there are in Itaewon and how they are a contrast to the conservative Koreans. She also states that:

Foreign people are open about it, and that they have, like, diversity, they understand the real diversity more deeply. You know, they really just feel free to enjoy stuff, so that's why, like, it is easier in Itaewon. They are also just kind of careless. Koreans, when they imagine Itaewon or a gay club, maybe they imagine that something strange is happening there. Like, what do gay people do in clubs? Do they kiss? Like, what do they do? Like in gay clubs, they must be doing bad stuff.

*Raveto, -*

The opening of the first queer clubs and bars in Itaewon resonated with the sentiments expressed by Raveto, reflecting a recognition that the foreign presence in the area fostered a more open-minded and accepting atmosphere, providing a sense of liberation for individuals to freely express themselves. Itaewon's emergence as a prominent hub of Westernized gay culture in Seoul began with the establishment of the first recorded gay bar in 1995, driven by the area's acceptance of behaviors considered undesirable by Korean society (Van Nyhuis 2020: 23). This significant milestone marked the transformation of Itaewon into a symbol of gay culture, where individuals could temporarily shed societal constraints and authentically express their identities without fear of judgment or discrimination (Alexander 2021: 15). Put in other words, the main factor driving the growth of homosexual clubs in Itaewon was the comfort that the foreigners' acceptance of LGBTQ+ culture provided or at least the notion that they were more accepting than conservative Koreans (E.-S. Kim 2004: 23). As more queer spaces, bathhouses for sexual encounters and gay clubs started to open in the vicinity of each other, building the foundation for what would be known as Homo-hill. Homo Hill in Itaewon is now a renowned area that has become a symbol of LGBTQ+ visibility and community in Seoul. It is characterized by a cluster of bars, clubs, and establishments catering to the LGBTQ+ population and offering spaces for socialization, self-expression, and celebration. The name 'Homo Hill' itself reflects the history and significance of this space as a gathering point for the queer community in Itaewon.

Itaewon has existed as a sort of 'special gayborhood', where the queer culture has been able to manifest and creates pockets of safe space through the already existing marginalization of the area (Jugănaru 2018: 38). Opposingly, in maneuvering everyday public life, LGBTQ+ individuals usually need to be cautious, especially when accompanied by their

significant other. Furthermore, studies have revealed that an individual's life experiences significantly influence their perception and interaction with public spaces (Sanschagrin 2011). Moreover, it is important to note that when discussing space, inherent heteronormativity is often taken for granted:” Public space, despite being fixed in heterosexual norms, has been constructed as a value-neutral space. The predominance of heterosexuality along with the exclusion of non-heterosexuality and the power of selection is quietly excused” (Kang 2020: 1).

Throughout history, clubs have served as spaces where individuals can discover themselves, evade marginalization, and cultivate creativity. This act of escaping societal constraints and finding personal liberation within club culture aligns with Lefebvre's conceptualization of space as a transformative force. An interlocutor, Mimi, whose journey will be explored in more depth later in the chapter, experienced her first exposure to clubbing and the freedom it offered during her exchange program in Amsterdam. This pivotal experience played a crucial role in Mimi's acceptance of her sexuality as a queer woman. Upon returning to Korea, Mimi quickly acquired DJ-ing skills and established her identity by playing music from queer and female artists. Mimi's commitment to acknowledging and amplifying the contributions of marginalized musicians reflects her aspiration to foster a safe and inclusive space that nurtures community and embraces queerness while also paying tribute to the rich heritage of club culture. In this way, Mimi's story, intertwined with Lefebvre's insights on transformative space, exemplifies the profound impact of clubs on personal growth and the creation of inclusive environments.

This sub-chapter has explored what was, in other words, the history of queer clubbing and how it has manifested itself in Itaewon. In the following section, I wish to explore how queer spaces are created and maintained in pre-covid Itaewon, which eventually will lead me into a discussion on how queer club spaces were affected by the pandemic.

## **Rainbow and Creating a Safer Club Space**

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Rainbow was an initiative started by a friend of Mimi. “You should have fucking seen it; you should have been there,” Mimi said, her eyes glimmering excitedly. Her usual calm persona and laid-back attitude were gone as she happily iterated Rainbow's last event before covid restrictions made anything too fun or too late impossible. The event had been early in the pandemic or when regulations were laxer; it was unclear from the conversation. “Like there were drag queens, and people were just like being, I don’t know themselves kind of; it was



just people who were all accepting.” It was clear that Rainbow’s event had been a great success. Rainbow is a curated event that takes place in various venues in Itaewon. It is known for its inclusive and diverse setting, offering a unique experience for patrons. The event showcases a range of performances, DJ sets, and artistic expressions, creating a vibrant and welcoming atmosphere for the LGBTQ+ community and allies. Rainbow aims to provide a safe space for self-expression, celebration, and community building within the context of Itaewon's nightlife scene. One of the founders of Rainbow expressed their commitment to promoting unity within the LGBTQ+ community. In a conversation, Mimi shared her observations regarding the gendered and divided nature of queer club spaces in Korea. She highlighted how this division had hindered the interaction between different sexual identities, resulting in unequal access to inclusive clubs and fostering a feeling of isolation among community members. Mimi emphasized that many gay clubs strictly prohibited women from entering, while conversely, lesbian clubs often excluded men. Rainbow's mission was to bridge these gaps and establish a space where individuals from diverse sexual identities could converge, fostering a stronger sense of community among the LGBTQ+ population.

At that time, Mimi was a close friend and one of my primary sources of information on the queer elements of Itaewon. She was also dating one of my friends, and we would often hang out, go to cafes or drink together. Mimi was lesbian and often wore oversized street-style clothes: a baggie t-shirt with a logo, different fabric sweatpants, and air Jordans. In contrast to all my other queer Korean interlocutors, Mimi was out to her parents, and they supported her. It was only during her school years that she struggled with her sexuality:

I had like an internalized hatred of myself. Like, why can't I just be straight? Because it seemed impossible that I was gay. Like, can't I be normal? At one point, I thought I was bisexual, but after college, I was like, I don't really like guys. So started to think that I was gay. But I wouldn't say that my experience applies to everyone because I only had good people around me, but maybe deep down, I chose the right people.

*Mimi, -*

Mimi later explained that one of her dreams was to create and foster communities like Rainbow provided. To elaborate, she wished to create spaces that allowed queer’s to feel more normal; “It's good to have like people, especially straight’s, going to these kinds of queer parties because they get to know that we're just normal as you are. And then it's making them engage with us, with our community, the queer community”. It appeared that Mimi

wanted to help people who did not have the same support as she received, dealt with not feeling normal, and fell outside of Korean ideas of proper.

Discussions in both the previous and current chapters have depicted Itaewon's representations of space as being linked to the concepts of 'outsideness', 'abnormality', and 'the other'. This type of representations of space promotes people's lived experiences (representational space) as being intertwined with otherness. Anna's narratives on Itaewon as a haven for those who feel alienated or labeled as the other, along with Mimi's struggles with her sexuality, have further reinforced this perception.

Mimi's perspective on the term 'other' is rooted in her experiences and understanding. She sees 'other' as a label that society assigns to those who fall outside of mainstream norms, particularly in relation to gender and sexuality. For Mimi, being labeled as 'other' can lead to feelings of alienation and a sense of not being considered 'normal' according to Korean societal standards. Mimi's desire to create inclusive communities stems from her belief that by involving people who are not part of the LGBTQ+ community, such as straight individuals, in queer spaces and events, the notion of 'otherness' can be challenged and dismantled. She sees it as an opportunity for people to realize that LGBTQ+ individuals are just as 'normal' as anyone else.

The marginalization experienced by queer communities in Korea is often intertwined with spatial aspects, whether it be the bodies that inhabit certain spaces, or the perceived notions associated with those inhabitants. Despite homosexuality not being illegal in Korea, there is no legal recognition of same-sex marriage, and there are no explicit regulations in place to protect against discrimination. Drawing from Todd Henry's (2019) work on queerness in Korea, and Judith Butler's (2004) concept of 'precarious conditions,' Seoyoung Choi and Jungmin Seo argue that "In becoming a modern nation-state, Korea marginalized and categorized non-normative genders and sexualities as 'unruly subjects' that must be controlled" (Choi and Seo 2020: 502). This has resulted in queer communities continuing to live in precarious conditions. In Korean society, queer communities are often considered marginalized and 'other' due to their 'non-traditional' gender and sexual preferences. These individuals navigate their identities in various ways, sometimes choosing to remain anonymous and at other times seeking visibility as they navigate their daily lives. Overall, the marginalization of queer communities in Korea is deeply intertwined with spatial dynamics and societal perceptions, contributing to the challenges and precarious conditions they face in their everyday lives.

Through stories from my interlocutors, I want to illustrate ideas, maneuvering, and the contestation of different safe spaces and otherness as they existed through their memories, ideas, dreams, and movements before covid restrictions shifted the scene. Additionally, in the forthcoming ethnographic exploration, I intend to delve into the intricate interplay between queerness and club culture, revealing how it permeates and extends beyond the confines of the club environment into the public realm.

## **Rainbow**

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To gain insights into the dynamics of safety and conflicts within the queer club scene in Itaewon, it is crucial to examine two prominent clubs/events frequently referenced, as they exemplify distinct contestations within this scene. By exploring these examples, a clearer understanding of the establishment and conflicts surrounding safety can be attained in the context of Itaewon's queer club culture. On the one hand, as mentioned earlier, Rainbow is an event concept centered around creating a safe and inclusive nightlife venue specifically for the LGBTQ+ community and their friends. The objective is to offer a space where individuals can explore and express their sexuality without fear of discrimination.

As demonstrated by Eleanor Formby (2012), a safe space can positively impact an individual's well-being, similar to the notions Mimi describes, as it allows queer personas to feel 'normal'. For instance, by coming out in a welcoming and inclusive space or freely expressing physical affection without fear of judgment. Rainbow would often host their events at Cupcake, as they found their club to be the most aligned with their values. Especially since Cupcake already, both through its venue (a former strip club), its location (right by the former military base and the subway), and its ethos (no discrimination), was the perfect match for Rainbows events. Through the historical memory of the strip club and its closeness to transportation, Cupcake was accessible and played with representations of space. Cupcake and Rainbow, seen through the lens of representations of space, were illicit, erotic, and sexual, and in the Korean context, 'really out there.' At Rainbows events, people could dress however they wanted (even though they sometimes had themes). Events where the clubgoers were free to wear fetish gear, rave clothes, or come with a leash. For those whose maneuvered Rainbow as lived space, it was an experience of freedom, non-judgment, and unleashed sexuality.

## Little Lolli

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Like Rainbow's events, Little Lolli, which I sadly never got to visit as it was closed during my stay, was a club my interlocuters and queers could express their sexuality. It was a club drag queens would often come to and do shows. However, through my interlocuter's recapitulations of Little Lolli, another side of clubbing as a queer persona and being visible with one's queerness came forward. I had never seen Anna as engaged and frustrated as when she rendered the spectacle that would typically take place around pride. As the pride parade passed Little Lolli during the celebrations, it was a common place for protesters to gather.

During pride, Little Lolli invites drag queens and voguers<sup>33</sup> and have like a big party, and since Little Lolli is on the route of the parade, people come with fucking banners and shit. Fucking people protesting against pride, and it's like, you are already alienating them. Why do you need to put more blame on them? It's just because, like, it is so different, people think that it's not normal to be gay, and it's just like... they are all humans? You know what I mean? People ask me, like, how do you treat like a trans woman, people dressing up in drag, and they think that's so weird, and that's just like, that's that person's way of expressing themselves. It is not a big deal.

*Anna, -*

Anna's experiences highlight the complex relationship between space, queerness, and societal norms. Space serves as a platform for expressing queerness and identity but is also challenged by those adhering to heteronormative ideals. Pride events, occupying prominent positions in public space, magnify the visibility of queer individuals and disrupt conventional notions of heteronormative spatiality. This clash of perspectives and the conflicting spectacle of pride emphasize the need for safe spaces and inclusive communities for queer individuals and allies.

Examining Rainbow and Little Lolli, prominent clubs/events in Itaewon's queer club scene, provides insights into the dynamics of safety and conflicts within this community. Rainbow embodies the concept of creating a safe and inclusive nightlife venue for the LGBTQ+ community and allies, enabling the exploration and expression of sexuality without discrimination. Little Lolli, a club hosting drag queen shows, represents another facet of

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<sup>33</sup> Voguing is a form of dance and performance that originated in the queer ballroom culture of New York City in the 1980s. It involves stylized poses, intricate hand movements, and elements of runway modeling (Regnault and Baker 2011).

clubbing as a queer individual and being visible with one's queerness. It has faced challenges, particularly during pride celebrations when it becomes a focal point for protesters.

These examples highlight the complexities of Itaewon's queer club scene and the multifaceted nature of safety and conflicts within it. Rainbow emphasizes the creation of safe spaces and inclusive communities, while Little Lolli's experience reveals the ongoing challenges faced by queer individuals in maintaining visibility and confronting societal resistance.

## **Being the Other: A Double-Edged Sword**

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*So here we have the Korean community, which is like set. I hear that all the time about gay culture, about foreigners, and people are saying, 'It's not that I don't like it; I just don't know how to act around them.' It's because they're inexperienced. A lot of people have never even left the country, most people have simply stayed in Korea their entire lives, so it's still alien to them, so they just want to be on the right side of it, it's them, it's not us, it's them.*

*Anna, -*

For those protesting pride, it is the queer lifestyle, their clubs, and their non-heteronormativity that deem LGBTQ+ existence as sinful<sup>34</sup>. My interlocutors and those who benefit from the communities provided by events thrown by Rainbow, and Little Lolli, are essentialized through their sinfulness. Following Cohen's (1985) theoretical framing, the queer community is for the protester outside symbolically simple, as it is seen and defined by its erotic sinfulness. On the other hand, for those inside the club, those experiencing it, it is, as described by its ethos and what I have heard from friends, a freeing experience. The club is, thereby, for many of my queer interlocutors, an experience defined by its symbolic complexities of sexual freedom, the celebration of queerness, and the experience of non-judgment. However, as illustrated by the ethnographic case at the start of the chapter, anonymity is, for many queer spaces and queers, essential in the free expression of the self and, thereby, essential in the creation and maneuvering of these safe spaces.

In the article "Fragile Subjectivities: constructing queer safe spaces" (2018) by Gilly Hartal, five different frames for the creation of safe space are analyzed. Hartal's perspective sheds light on the vital role of maintaining participants' anonymity, which serves as a crucial

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<sup>34</sup> According to my interlocutors, many protesters were affiliated with religious organizations, and their signs often conveyed sentiments labeling homosexuality as sinful.

element in establishing the framework for numerous queer safe spaces in Korea (Henry 2019; Alexander 2021; Kang 2020). This emphasis on anonymity plays a pivotal role in ensuring the privacy, security, and comfort of individuals within these spaces, enabling them to freely express their identities and experiences without fear of judgment or exposure. This concept is further illustrated through an ethnographic case study presented at the beginning of the chapter, emphasizing the importance placed on safeguarding personal identities within these spaces. Hartal defines anonymity as such: “The anonymity frame encompasses constructing a space where no questions are asked. Thus, the reasoning behind this frame of safe space is based on the right to privacy and is related to affects like fear (of stigma) and shame” (Hartal 2018: 1064).

The book, *A Select Body* (1995) by Lynette A. Lewis and Michael W. Ross, which describes the phenomenon of large-scale dance gay dance parties during the HIV/AIDS epidemic, illustrates the need for creating covert spaces of interaction. The book portrays how due to the dangers of being discredited for their sexual preferences, many queers were driven to build a hidden strategy for engagement and a covert system for engaging and meeting individuals who were like themselves. When using the term discredited, Lewis and Ross take inspiration from Erving Goffman's stigma (1963). Stigma is a vital part of being an other and the marginalization experience, and thereby an important notion in this text. Stigma highlights “(...)’ the deeply discrediting attributes prescribed by the dominant culture to disqualify (...)” queer people from social legitimation (Lewis 1995: 162-163). “However, as the line between homosexual and heterosexual spaces became thinner, the use of the segregated spaces has diminished” (Jugănaru 2018: 38). A thinning, that as much as it normalizes queer culture, also makes it harder to be anonymous.

In public discourse, Itaewon has been portrayed as a place where many gay people gather to party. This perception has had both positive and negative implications, as the safety and privacy once provided in Itaewon have been reduced due to its increasing popularity as a multicultural area, leading to queer spaces becoming more visible to the public eye (Kang 2020; Alexander 2021; McGuire 2016). Some individuals fear being involuntarily outed due to their association with the LGBTQ+ community, particularly as images can easily be shared online<sup>35</sup>. The pandemic has intensified worries about anonymity and the blurring of boundaries between spaces for heterosexual and queer individuals. However, this has not been

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<sup>35</sup> A concern, that has been especially well portrayed in Matthew McGuire’s (2016) dissertation “Outside Jeong? Young Men, Sexuality and Conflicting Selfhood in Seoul”.

due to greater acceptance, as Jugănaru suggests, but rather because of harsh judgment, public exposure, and the involuntary loss of privacy.

## **When Covid Came to Homo-Hill**

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### **“They Probably Wouldn't have come if it wasn't for it Being a Pride.”**

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Due to the pandemic, Rainbow had been forced to either host livestreams or do collaborations with smaller bar spaces instead of the club venues they usually used, as those clubs were closed, temporarily shut down, or operating slightly illegally. One of the events they collaborated on was a pride celebration. During the pride weekend, our group attended a club that had planned a series of events from Friday to Sunday. The first day of the event, which had been a great success, was lesbian-themed, “for the gals to have fun”, as my friends said. However, when looking back, it seemed as if danger was already imminent in the background, as Peter, at one point, had come over to us to make sure that our group were not posting any photos of the event on Instagram, “you never know if the Gu sees it” he said.

The bar Peter worked at normally had a very public image and did not usually shy away from social media. However, this was a different time, and keeping a low profile to avoid governmental scrutiny was essential for surviving as a business. The memories of the initial reaction to the covid outbreak were still looming in people's minds, as after the breakout, a witch-hunt seemed to have transpired. Western news outlets reported instances of parents using online stalking to verify if their children's teachers had visited clubs in Itaewon (VICE 2020; Choe 2020). Additionally, many individuals were concerned about the potential negative impact on their income, employment, or reputation if they were linked to the cluster. The cluster happened in one of Itaewon's many hilly streets, better known as homo-hill and the area close. A place that, for a long time, has existed in a tense relationship with both governmental ideals and spatial heteronormative ideals, a contestation that only was enhanced during covid. Early in the pandemic, the Korean government received international praise due to how they handled the pandemic and the efficiency of their tracing technology. A success that was highly reliant on the three ET methods: Early testing, early tracing, and early treatment (Sung 2022). However, the tracing methods were highly dependent upon following digital traces, such as digital media and telecommunication infrastructures, which evoked concerns regarding citizens' privacy (J.R. Lim, Jun, and Ledford 2022). The cluster case,

intertwined with its association with the queer community, had detrimental consequences for Itaewon, perpetuating the public perception of the area as a space defined by erotic behavior and illness. This association and stigma further exacerbated the challenges faced by the community in terms of acceptance, visibility, and societal judgment (Borowiec 2020).

The risks associated with being publicly revealed or 'outed'<sup>36</sup> as queer, coupled with the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, significantly altered people's perception of safety and their ability to access and navigate spaces. The ET tracing methods that were greatly applauded internationally were considerably less successful when dealing with a community where anonymity was of great importance (McCurry 2020). Moreover, given the timing of the Itaewon cluster case during the pandemic's early stages and the hostility towards the LGBTQ+ community, it had a detrimental impact on contact tracing efforts, the LGBTQ+ community, and its members.

The next pride event the following day catered to everyone if one was not homophobic, racist, or sexist and did not solely focus on lesbians, warranted Peter's concerns. While the drag queens were performing, the music loud, and my gin tonic in hand, I noticed the police had come, the event was cut short, and my friends and I fled to another club.

Later in the weekend, Peter and I met for dinner: "What happened after we all left?" I asked. Peter sighed, his hands dragged across his face in a motion of what I would assume was frustration, "They just told us we were too many people and violating covid restrictions and gave us a fine of one million won<sup>37</sup>". "Shit," I replied. "They probably wouldn't have come if it wasn't for it being a pride event like they chose this weekend of every weekend to come knocking on our door. Like it doesn't seem like a coincidence," Peter said. The illusion had been broken, their space tempered, as the blue-collared police officers knocked on the door and scattered the crowd.

The carefully orchestrated event had been loud, both in a literal sense but also as it disturbed the line between proper public space and what was interpreted as indecent behavior. It did not seem like it was the illegal crowd gathering during Covid that allured the police to act, but the members of the crowd themselves. The event, predominantly attended by the LGBTQ+ community, challenges regulatory frameworks by violating COVID-19 restrictions and defying the established norms of public behavior. It becomes a site of contestation, where spatial practices redefine boundaries and question dominant representations imposed by

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<sup>36</sup> Outing someone refers to the act of disclosing or revealing an individual's LGBTQ+ sexual orientation or gender identity without their consent.

<sup>37</sup> Approximately 1000USD



pandemic regulations. This act of contestation underscores the transformative potential of space in shaping social dynamics and challenging regulatory frameworks, while also shedding light on potential biases or discrimination targeting specific communities.

After taking a smoking break, Peter returned and continued the conversation:

Like I have friends that.... I have several gay friends that are struggling now. One person that was a gay artist, and he was like, he doesn't shy away from the way he dresses, he dresses in bright colors, beautifully, and he told me like: I got yelled at, at the train today- like after that thing happened, the club thing, and to be honest I'm really scared of being out in public, and for a while just hid, got really depressed because he was just being hated on for what?

*Peter, -*

Peter's statements and the ethnographic case exemplify the negative reactions triggered by non-heteronormative appearances, resulting in heightened stigma. This underscores the social dynamics and biases prevalent in a society where individuals who deviate from traditional norms of gender and sexuality often face prejudice and discriminatory attitudes. The discomfort arises from the body's appearance not fitting into expected categories, referred to as 'matter out of place.' According to Mary Douglas (2003), 'matter out of place' is the systematic dirt that arises from our constructions of reality, where ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements. The relationship between the body and space is dialectic, meaning that the space's representations are coded toward normalized cultural perceptions, as "The body can never be extracted from the social. Sex and gender are always inextricably linked. Gender writes itself not on but through bodies" (Johnston and Longhurst 2010: 12). This means that our expectations of what we will encounter in space are based on cultural norms. When these expectations are broken, what is seen as not belonging is experienced as dirt or stigma, and the body itself contaminates and challenges the space. To quote Nikki Sullivan and her book *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory* (2003) as it illustrates that queering poses a challenge to the construction of any activity or identity as natural or normal: "The punishment or stigmatisation of so-called 'unnatural' actions and identities is everywhere apparent in our society, and functions to reaffirm or naturalise that which is held to be 'normal'. And we are all both agents and effects of disciplinary regimes" (Sullivan 2003: 84). There is a spatial tension evoked when bodies perceived as defying ideas of spatial use appear within restricted spatial settings, such as Peter's colorful friend. According to Lefebvre and Simonsen's interpretations of his work, the body is not only confined to a specific spatiality

but also possesses the ability to shape and influence space. The relationship between the body and space, the interplay of the body in space and space in the body, is characterized by a dialectic connection, highlighting the reciprocal influence and dynamic interaction between the two: “A body so conceived, as produced and as the production of space, is immediately subject to the determinants of that space ... the spatial body's material character derives from space, from the energy that is deployed and put to use there” (Lefebvre 1991: 195). The bodies in the space are vital in how it is used, perceived, and seen within their temporal setting, and vice versa.

The story of Peter's friend serves as a poignant reflection on the challenges faced by individuals who do not conform to heteronormative standards of appearance. In the aftermath of heightened bodily stigma and increased stigma reactions towards LGBTQ+ populations following the cluster cases, many found themselves retreating to the safety of their homes, seeking solace away from the judgmental stares of society. A spatial tension that Beverley Skeggs (1999) notes when discussing Manchester's 'gay village, ':

If public visibility and spatialization are mechanisms for the construction of oppositional gay identity, they also become the instigation for attack. When the individual is held responsible for their visibility, then the future for anything other than the norm must always be a dangerous one. Struggles for visible identities will often incite danger, for visibility can threaten the normalized landscape (Skeggs 1999: 221).

Peter's friend's experience underscores the significant risks and challenges faced by those who dare to defy societal expectations. It reveals how the pursuit of visibility and the authentic expression of diverse identities can come at a high cost. The retreat into seclusion is a defensive response to protect oneself from the potential harm and discrimination that accompany non-conformity. It is a stark reminder of the delicate balance between asserting non-heteronormativity and navigating the dangers that arise from challenging established norms.

## **Conclusion: “It used to be one of my Favorite Clubs.”**

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As I reflect on my anthropological journey through the Itaewon club scene and its significance for queer identities, I am reminded of a conversation I had with Peter and Min Ho just a few months into my fieldwork. Walking along the street where the cluster case occurred, Peter pointed to Trunk<sup>38</sup>, one of the most prominent gay clubs in Itaewon. However, he mentioned that the club had been unable to reopen since the incident. Min Ho, who used to live in Berlin and was considering applying for jobs overseas, expressed his disappointment, stating that many of the good places were disappearing, making him question if it was worth staying. Now, as I write this chapter, I discovered that Trunk has permanently closed down, replaced by a hip-hop club. This realization further emphasizes the dynamic nature of the Itaewon club scene and its vulnerability to external factors, including the ongoing pandemic. It serves as a poignant reminder of the challenges faced by queer spaces and the LGBTQ+ community in maintaining their havens of self-expression and community.

This chapter has aimed to illuminate the rich history and significance of queer clubbing in Itaewon while also highlighting the impact of external factors such as the pandemic. By examining the intersection of queer identities, spatial contestation, and club culture, we gain a deeper understanding of the struggles, maneuvering, and spatial changes experienced by the LGBTQ+ community in their quest for safe spaces and self-acceptance.

In conclusion, the Itaewon club scene serves as a microcosm of the broader struggle for queer visibility, acceptance, and safe spaces.

Building upon the previous discussions on contestation, Chapter Four delves into the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the underground electronic music scene. Chapter four explores the various tactics, knowledge, distinctions, and spaces that emerged within the underground electronic music community amidst the pandemic restrictions. By examining these aspects, we gain a deeper understanding of how the scene navigated and adapted to the challenges posed by COVID-19.

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<sup>38</sup> In this ethnographic case, I have chosen not to anonymize the club's name, as it is no longer operated, and the information shared is already covered in news articles and information that does not damage the club or my interlocutors.



## Chapter Four: Maneuvering a Contested Night-Life Landscape

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When the clock hit 10 pm, we were all hushed out of the bar, the mandatory covid night-life time limit had caught up with the dancing crowd. Most groups split into pairs of two or huddled into the shadows to continue drinking either in parks or to see if they could enter one of the few bars/ clubs that maneuvered the risk of staying open.

This evening I found myself with a new crowd. The first half of the night/afternoon was spent in my usual location, a small bar, where the drinks were cheap and the crowd either were DJs, friends of DJs, foreigners, or a mix. The bartenders working there were careful not to garner too much attention from the outside. During a specific time, the curtains that faced the outside were closed. Additionally, the staff made sure that the groups of smokers outside did not exceed four individuals per group, as it was mandated that after 6 pm, groups could not surpass a headcount of four. One of the bartenders would walk with a duster cleaning the street for cigarette buds, bringing the street back to cleanliness accepted for daytime.

I planned to meet up with a Swedish (Laila) friend I got to know through one of my interlocutors. Laila was doing an exchange semester in Seoul, which later turned into a stay at a language school so she could stay longer. A semester or year at language school was one of the many ways foreigners would elongate their stay when their visa was running out.

I first encountered Laila at an illegal home party with Spanish exchange students (a notorious crowd). At one point, Laila and I left the party temporarily to buy more booze; it was after 6 pm, which meant one could not be more than two people in one group<sup>39</sup>. However, even though we were abiding by the restrictions (at least at that moment), two foreigners wandering the streets at night with soju<sup>40</sup> in their hands looked suspicious, and we noticed two police officers walking toward us. Laila and I immediately started talking loudly in Norwegian and Swedish to each other. Maybe the police officers thought we did not know English, but they ignored us, and the risk was avoided. Stories of exchange students who had gotten their passports confiscated and visas evoked due to breaking covid regulations were a vivid warning throughout my fieldwork for both me, interlocutors, and exchange student friends.

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<sup>39</sup> It is important to note that during my fieldwork, covid regulations often changed. Sometimes, only two people could be together after 6 pm, other times, up to four people were allowed after 10 pm.

<sup>40</sup> Soju is a popular Korean alcoholic beverage made from rice or other grains.

After meeting up for drinks, me and Laila were wandering the streets with the people we had just befriended and also clubbed with for a bit. One of the men walking with us had just played a set at a famous techno club, which we went by for about an hour. The set was perhaps the first time since the pandemic began that I experienced a clubbing atmosphere that resembled pre-COVID times. The crowd was tightly packed together, energetically jumping and dancing to the music. However, I soon realized that the reason for this was that most of the people in the crowd were not Korean but exchange students. I even recognized some familiar faces from my dormitory - a group of French and German students with whom I would occasionally socialize and drink with.

When we left the club, the exchange students I knew had joined our group, and we were now eight people. Double the allowed size of a group following the covid regulations. At this point in time, I was aware that there were bars that operated illegally after regular hours, but I had not been invited to any of them nor knew their names. However, my new friend, who was a DJ, had the necessary connections to enter such a bar. While approaching the bar, my new friend expressed some concern, saying, "I'm not sure if everyone can get in, as they seem to be quite full. We are the last group they are letting in, and it might be better to leave them behind" he nodded towards my exchange student friends. I asked if that would be okay, and he sighed, saying, "Just leave them behind. You don't know them well, and they're not the right quality." As we were being secretly taken into the bar by the security, I glanced behind me and saw my exchange student friends sitting gloomily outside the CU<sup>41</sup> across the street. I felt a twinge of sympathy for them.

During my fieldwork, I frequently came across comparable situations that required a certain level of knowledge to navigate. Knowing where to go and how to behave in public spaces to avoid drawing attention, as well as having the right connections and information, were crucial for gaining access to certain places. Moreover, understanding how to maneuver COVID regulations was vital for the club/bar scene to function. In this context, risk assessment played a significant role in how one understood and maneuvered the underground electronic scene.

The objective of this chapter is to initially present the underground electronic music scene in Itaewon, followed by an examination of how COVID regulations have impacted the scene. Subsequently, a section will describe the strategies used to maneuver both COVID regulations and social distinctions.

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<sup>41</sup> CU is a South Korean convenience store chain.

# The Underground Electronic Music Scene in Itaewon

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## The Origin Story

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Whenever I asked my interlocutors about the history of electronic music and the underground electronic music scene in Itaewon, they always said: “Maybe you should go and talk to Bap, he is like the OG<sup>42</sup>,” so I did. Bap started DJ-ing when he was around fourteen and had, when we met, been DJ-ing for 20+ years. Bap was very involved in the electronic music scene in Itaewon and would work on many projects on the side of his day-to-day work as an editor and DJ. Due to the covid pandemic, he also sometimes did DJ classes to earn extra income in an unstable economy, as there were few DJ gigs available. I quickly realized during the interview that my other interlocutors had sent me to the right person, as he had at one point collected materials to write a book about electronic music history in Korea. However, he dropped the project as it was impossible to “prove” if anything of what he was told was true, as no written documents had been kept. Through his research and conversation with other OG DJs, he discovered that there were at least four to five distinct origins of how electronic music arrived in Korea.

Bap first explained to me that during the 1960s, there was a group of classical students from Korea University and Seoul National University who were passionate about developing computer-based music. Some of the “extra interested” students brought a large modular system, “which might have been a Roland”<sup>43</sup>, to the university and, after a while, established an art community. Another version of the origin story centers around Korean psychedelic rockers during the 1970s. The psychedelic rockers imported synthesizers and produced “insanely good records,”; all while being heavily involved in the drug scene. However, their activities eventually drew the attention of authorities, leading to their shutdown<sup>44</sup>. Furthermore, Bap mentioned the importance of early K-pop<sup>45</sup> producers and nightclub DJs who played music imported from places like America, Japan, or Europe. Where some of these individuals then attempted to create their own music, some successfully and some not. Another part of the origin story is the presence Korean American and European students had

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<sup>42</sup> “Someone or something that is an original or originator and especially one that is highly respected or regarded”(Merriam-Webster.com).

<sup>43</sup> Roland is a Japanese company that makes electronic musical instruments, electronics, and software.

<sup>44</sup> The Korean rock scene, including the events that transpired, has been explored in depth by Kim Pil Ho and Shin Hyun Joon in their article "The Birth of 'Rok'" (2010), where the scene's locality in Itaewon is highlighted.

<sup>45</sup> Korean Popular music.

in Korean electronic music in the 80s and 90s. Korean Americans were particularly interested in hip-hop and subsequently introduced the genre to Korea, even though the genre did not see popularity until later. The rave style, introduced by the European students from the UK, was quite popular. However, due to associations with drug use, the scene was only able to stay active for a short time, as Bap portrays through the story of Pseudo:

At the time, around the 92 to 94, there was a very, very famous club called Pseudo. The club only existed for, like, six months because one day, Army police just, you know, shut them down. Then they vanished because a lot of people were doing drugs inside, and when they refused to open the door, the army police came in, and everybody just got arrested.

*Bap, -*

Through the portrayal of Bap's storytelling, the groundwork for the diverse and interconnected musical landscape of Itaewon's underground electronic music scene has been established. This includes an introduction to the various musical ties, relationships, spatial connections, and global influences one sees within the Itaewon club landscape. On a later occasion, I sat down with Mimi and told her about my conversation with Bap and asked her an important question that I had forgotten to ask Bap<sup>46</sup>: how did the scene end up in Itaewon? Mimi looked unsure as she contemplated for a moment:

I think there's always a period where clubs in Itaewon moved to Hongdae<sup>47</sup>, and vice versa, I think it always goes back and forth. Yeah, but Itaewon is definitely more like there's a lot of foreign traffic going on. So, you definitely get to hear a lot of different sounds for sure. And I think if that's the case, maybe that hypothetically makes sense.<sup>48</sup>

*Mimi, -*

My inquiry into how the underground electronic music scene came to settle in Itaewon, as well as the history of electronic music in Korea, prompted a discussion with my interlocutors about the true meaning of 'underground' and how it manifests in Korea. I noticed throughout my fieldwork how the term seemed to be mentioned as a sort of taken-for-

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<sup>46</sup> It was challenging to locate a moment when he was accessible for me to ask him the question later, despite my best efforts.

<sup>47</sup> Hongdae is a neighborhood in Seoul that is known for its lively and dynamic atmosphere. It is situated near Hongik University and offers a diverse range of cultural and entertainment options. The area is popular among both locals, students, and tourists, with its numerous live music venues, art spaces, cafes, and shops.

<sup>48</sup> The movement of the scene as fluctuating between different areas in Seoul, will be further explored in the following chapter.



granted or doxa (Bourdieu 1977). The underground was never mentioned or explained in everyday conversations. Nevertheless, the underground seemed to be essential in how interlocutors talked about the club scene. Therefore, the next section of the text wishes to explore, through conversations I had with interlocutors, the differing views and thoughts on the underground and how it shapes the understanding of the scene as existing on the peripheral.

### What is even 'Underground'?

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*Everything can be underground, however, if it's overexposed by media, then it is not underground.*

*Bap, -*

When entering the field, I assumed that 'the underground' was easily understood and maneuvered, or at least I thought it would be when 'I knew' the correct lingo, places, behaviors, or fashion<sup>49</sup>. Yet, with more time spent within the scene, I came to the realization that the 'underground' was much more nebulous than I had initially assumed. The 'underground' was just ideas or complex ties through one created pattern of belonging and community, akin to Cohen's (1985) 'symbolic complex communities.' When I asked Bap how he defined the underground, he explained that it was largely seen as being opposed to the 'mainstream'. The 'mainstream' in Bap's eyes was mostly K-pop or what he called 'soap music' (RnB<sup>50</sup>). Bap also expressed skepticism about whether the underground truly existed. Despite this, the bar he typically collaborated with identified itself as an 'underground' spot.

In reality, there is no underground, and as a DJ and music enthusiast, I know individuals who prefer to remain in an underground spirit, although this is not clearly defined. Everyone seems to have their own interpretation of what it means to be underground. Therefore, I don't believe that there is a single definition of the underground, but rather certain genres that appeal to specific groups of people. I refer to these groups as a 'tribe', and there are many of these tribes out there. While music interpretation is subjective, it's clear that different tribes react differently to various

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<sup>49</sup> These aspects of the underground will be discussed and portrayed later in the chapter.

<sup>50</sup> From a historical perspective, 'rhythm and blues' (RnB) typically refers to a genre of music that emerged after World War II. RnB incorporates elements of pop, gospel, blues, and jazz, and is characterized by a prominent backbeat.

genres and styles. If a tribe is small enough, their interpretation of music may be considered underground.

*Bap*, -

Furthermore, Bap also alleged that if something was to stay or be underground, it could not be too overexposed by the media, on a later occasion, he told me that would only lead to a strange 'crowd'. This suggests that the mixing of crowds could lead to an uncomfortable experience as everyone had an expectation of different 'vibes'<sup>51</sup> and how the evening would turn. Raveto and Anna also held differing opinions regarding 'underground' music and its scene. Raveto views underground music as music that is not part of the mainstream and is not controlled by large labels but released by independent artists or small labels. She thinks underground music is different from the typical music you hear when shopping, which she associates with the mainstream. On the other hand, Anna sees a substantial difference between electronic music in clubs and K-pop. Anna is not sure whether the electronic club scene in Itaewon qualifies as 'underground' as there is not a lot of drug use within the scene, which is "normal" in other underground scenes. She regards the 'underground' as something that goes against the norms, "which in Korea is not what you typically find, and it's still relatively new. It's not weird, but it's like foreign".

Nevertheless, Anna emphasizes the possibility of an 'underground' scene in Itaewon due to the fact that the majority of the electronic music clubs in the area are not licensed. Only one electronic music club in Itaewon has a license, while all other electronic clubs are registered as food establishments or snack bars. These clubs operate without government approval, exist outside the norm, and are not considered part of the mainstream. Anna illustrates that notions of illegality and maneuvering unbeneficial legislation are a resistance that, for some, is what makes it underground, these notions are also reflected by Stephen Graham.

In his book *Sounds of the Underground* (2016), Stephen Graham notes how "the underground has existed in some recognizable form outside and/or at the fringes of the cultural and social mainstream, with links to but partial independence from capital and institutions of the state, for forty-odd years" (Graham 2016: 4). In Sarah Thornton's book *Club Cultures* (1995), the term 'underground' expresses authenticity and exclusivity within subcultures. These exclusive worlds create spaces for individuals to engage with sounds and

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<sup>51</sup> A 'vibe' refers to the overall atmosphere, mood, or energy that is present in a particular place, event, or social gathering. It encompasses the collective feelings, emotions, and experiences that individuals perceive and share within a specific environment. The term 'vibe' is often used colloquially to describe the overall ambiance or vibe of a place or social setting.

styles not widely consumed by mainstream society but whose value lies in their authenticity and uniqueness. Moreover, on a similar notion as Thornton, Graham states that “(...)for the most part, underground practices exist at something of a remove from the mainstream, ‘underground’” (Graham 2016: 4). Graham further highlights how the “‘Underground’ has long served as a potent metaphor, suggesting as it does concealment, dissidence, and subversion” (Graham 2016: VII). Most importantly, Graham also shows how “the underground and the fringe are heuristic concepts whose ‘reality’ is fragmentary and incomplete and continually being formed and reformed (Graham 2016: 6)”. During the pandemic when I did my fieldwork, the club scene and the experience of the underground was re-maneuvered, formed and reformed to allow the ‘undergrounds’ existence and survival.

Within this subchapter, I have discussed the varying opinions interlocutors, such as Bap, Raveto, and Anna, have on what defines underground music and scene. While Bap expresses skepticism about whether the underground even exists, Raveto sees it as independent music not controlled by large labels, and Anna views it as something that goes against the norms of Korean society. By considering Thornton and Graham's ideas regarding the underground being an exclusive, authentic, and potentially rebellious environment that exists outside of the mainstream, it is evident that my interlocutors share a similar understanding of what the ‘underground’ is. It is important to emphasize that the underground should not be seen as a homogenous or easily defined concept but rather as a complex network of communities and practices. Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that the concept of the ‘underground’ is nebulous and difficult to define. However, it is this very elusiveness that contributes to its symbolic framing within the ‘undergrounds’ communal identity. A part of this symbolic complex framing, as seen in many underground scenes and in Itaewon, is the feeling of foreignness in relation to the mainstream (Cohen 1985). A feeling of foreignness is also reflected in the experienced otherness and foreign persons of the area the underground scene is located: Itaewon. The maneuvering of government resistance and the subsequent experiences of subversion and resistance within the underground scene contribute to the symbolic framing, resulting in distinct spatial configurations that reflect the unique cultural identity of the community. These spatial configurations serve as tangible expressions of the struggles, resilience, and creative responses of individuals within the underground electronic music scene.

In the upcoming section of this chapter, we will delve into the transformative effects that the world has undergone as a result of the global pandemic and the resultant upheaval of our everyday lives. Specifically, we will examine these changes' impact on the underground

electronic music scene in Itaewon. However, before we proceed with our discussion of the consequences of Covid-19 on the music scene, it is essential to provide background information on the Covid-19 regulations and the conversations around them. This is to ensure that we have a solid understanding of the political and discursive contexts that have shaped the realities of those involved in the scene. By doing so, we establish a strong foundation as we transition into the subsequent sub-chapter.

## **Covid Regulations and the Consequence for Club Space**

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On January 20th, 2020, the first COVID-19 case was reported in Korea (S. Lim and Sohn 2023). At that time, I had just returned from my exchange program at Keimyung University in Daegu<sup>52</sup>. As the pandemic began to spread, the entire world grounded to a halt. While I was tucked away at home, I worked tirelessly to complete my bachelor's thesis. During my downtime, I watched YouTube videos that showed the desolate streets of Daegu city center, where I once socialized and drank with my friends. “From February 2020, the South Korean government adopted severe preventive measures, including epidemiological investigations of the possible routes of infection, strict isolation of affected patients, and extensive public lockdowns” (S. Lim and Sohn 2023: 3). In Seoul, Itaewon what would be my future fieldwork location at that point, the streets, bars, cafés, and clubs were turning increasingly desolate as well. The streets emptied even more after the Itaewon cluster case, which was described in the previous chapter, and the discourse surrounding it. When interviewing Anna, we started discussing how Itaewon was affected by the pandemic, where she, among others, described how half the neighborhood closed down. Anna explained that it was really sad to see the consequences of the pandemic and that people were just holding by, and their business “could be closed by any second”. Moreover, Anna stated that “We've seen some places where I never thought they would close, and they have closed.” For Raveto, clubbing was like medicine, a way to destress, and the disappearance of club life during the pandemic distressed her:

You know, when you are listening to a new DJ from abroad or whatever. Like, you are totally it feeling and so excited? You know, it's like, on another level. That was my life, like, every weekend, or like, I went every night, that kind of thing. But it's gone now. Nobody can

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<sup>52</sup> Daegu is a city in South Korea. It is the fourth-largest city in the country and is located in the southeastern part of the South Korea.

say to me that you cannot go club or cannot go where there will only be two people, only two people. Like what? Oh, sometimes I cannot believe it still, you know, is this our life?

*Raveto, -*

Raveto portrays the deep sense of loss felt as the pandemic caused the fragmentation and temporary disappearance of everyday ways of creating community and leisure. Individuals who found solace and thrill within the club scene experienced a great level of instability in the way their everyday lives were performed and felt. Raveto revealed that creating sets for gigs was instrumental in combating her depression, as it allowed her to channel her energy and passion on the weekends. The thought of being able to party and play DJ-sets again after the pandemic also provided comfort in these trying times.

It is important to note that the adverse effects of the pandemic were not solely limited to individuals who frequented clubs or gained economic stability from gigs, such as Bap. As Anna explained, the pandemic had a substantial impact on various businesses, including club owners. In fact, VICE's article "Can South Korea's Club Culture Recover From COVID-19?" (2020) sheds light on the challenges that club owners had to navigate amidst the pandemic.

Club owners say the law doesn't explicitly close nightclubs during the pandemic, but makes it impossible for them to operate – allowing the government to skip out on providing any sort of COVID-related support. "If the government issued an administrative order to shut down our businesses, they would have a responsibility to provide a monetary solution, but the phrase they're using is 'banning large gatherings'," explained Lee Myung-ha, the owner of Faust.

"It's a play on words," he continued. "They get off on a technicality without providing us with a means to survive"(Choe 2020).

The prohibition of large gatherings had a significant impact on my fieldwork, as well as my interlocutor's navigation of the electronic music scene. It would ultimately shape all of the experiences and data that were collected during my stay in Seoul. In prior ethnographic discussions, I indicated how COVID restrictions would change throughout my fieldwork. The most lenient COVID restrictions allowed gatherings comprising up to eight individuals before 10 pm, subsequently reduced to four individuals after. However, the strictest rules only permitted groupings of four individuals until 6 pm and subsequently limited it to two individuals only, these regulations followed Korea's five-tier social distancing system:

Level 1 of the five-tier system will be more or less what's enforced in Level 1 of the three-tier system, with people obligated to wear face masks in public and practice social distancing.

In Level 1.5, some facilities such as churches will be obligated to limit the number congregants allowed into their buildings, while events involving 100 people or more can be banned.

In Level 2, any events involving 100 people or more will be prohibited, while nightclubs and bars that allow dancing will be forced to shut down. Restaurants won't be allowed to receive customers after 9 p.m., but takeout will be allowed.

In Level 2.5, events involving 50 people or more will be banned and noraebang (singing rooms) will be ordered to shut. Other public facilities where people tend to mingle or keep a short distance from one another will be forced to shut after 9 p.m.

In the final Level 3, any events involving 10 people or more will be prohibited, and public facilities that were forced to shut after 9 p.m. in Level 2.5 will be told to close throughout the entire day. Such public facilities include public bathhouses, wedding halls, funerals, movie theaters, hair salons, amusement parks, study cafes, restaurants and coffee shops (Lee 2020)<sup>53</sup>.

The five-tier system limited the number of people allowed in a space, depending on its size<sup>54</sup>. Large gatherings were restricted, and establishments had to comply with the regulations set up by the government. Monitoring was done through what I will categorize as either self, expected, and governmental monitoring. I have categorized the methods of monitoring to demonstrate how monitoring was implemented and managed at different levels: individual, establishments (such as bars, cafes, clubs, etc.), and governmental. Firstly, self-monitoring is exemplified through me and Laila's maneuvering when encountering the police (self-monitoring will be discussed more later in the chapter). Secondly, when discussing expected monitoring, I am hinting at the data collection and spatial monitoring bars, cafes, restaurants, and other businesses were expected to uphold. Establishments were required to collect personal information for contact tracing purposes, such as name, phone number,

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<sup>53</sup> As noted by the author of the article, the covid tier system changed and was revised several times during the pandemic as well.

<sup>54</sup> My interlocutors would sometimes mention that they had gotten instructions from the government regarding how many people were allowed in the bar they were operating. However, I never got any information regarding the specifics in how the number of people allowed in one space was determined.

address, and body temperature. This information was obtained through a QR-code<sup>55</sup> connected to an ARC or by writing contact information down on a provided paper. Later in this chapter, I will further delve into the ways in which the establishments and their guest's maneuver expected monitoring. The role of governmental monitoring became evident in the enforcement of COVID regulations, as exemplified by the imposition of a fine on the bar where Peter worked following the pride event. This incident showcased how the government employed surveillance mechanisms to track and penalize violations of COVID guidelines. By implementing monitoring systems, authorities aimed to ensure compliance with public health measures and deter individuals and establishments from disregarding safety protocols.

This sub-chapter aimed to set the stage, offering a scenic backdrop for the forthcoming discussions and portrayals of maneuvering. Through personal narratives and my anthropological inquiry, the profound impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on community, culture, and individual experiences have come to light. The palpable sense of loss and longing that permeates the vanished social spaces and cultural practices has been portrayed by highlighting struggles faced by club owners and Raveto and Anna's stories. Stories that have portrayed the intricate dance between policy, economy, and cultural expression within the nightlife ecosystem. Moreover, the exploration of monitoring and surveillance mechanisms has provided invaluable insights into the shifting dynamics of social interactions and spatial landscapes. Shifting dynamics and maneuvering will be further explored as we dive deeper into stories of nightlife in Itaewon during covid. The following sub-chapter will further explore who the crowd within the Itaewon electronic music scene are, how they maneuvered covid, illegality, each other, and the changing spatiality of the scene.

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## **Maneuvering Illegality and Knowing Space**

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### **The Tiki Bar and “Bear, Bear, Bear”**

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As I gave my friends sitting outside the CU a last look, we were hushed in by the security guard. The tall security guard, likely of Spanish-speaking origin, held a walkie-talkie in one hand and whispered what appeared to be a code word - "bear, bear, bear" - as he guided us

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<sup>55</sup> In high-risk locations like bars, nightclubs, and karaoke lounges, visitors are mandated to scan smartphone QR codes provided by Naver, an IT giant. These QR codes contain personal information such as full names, phone numbers, visit dates, and durations. The Ministry of Health and Welfare assures that the data is anonymized, managed by the state-operated Social Security Information Service, and inaccessible to third parties. Furthermore, the data is discarded within four weeks(A. Kim 2020a).

into a narrow alleyway that made him appear significantly larger. While we disappeared into the shadows of the ally, I saw the fading lights of a police car patrolling the streets. The police car, which seemed to be repetitively patrolling the streets of Itaewon, had driven past us several times while we waited for someone to lead us into the bar (we had waited at least thirty minutes). The security guard led us further into the depths of the ally, eventually guiding us to a metal gate that appeared similar to those of a residential building. After entering the gate, the security guard led us to a door, we entered the building and walked up several floors to the roof. At the rooftop, we were led to another door that went into another building again, after walking down some floors, the security guard opened a door, and there we were in a tiki bar. The lighting was moody, warm, and low with a tint of red, walls were adorned with bamboo and thatched huts, while the ceiling was covered in palm fronds, adding to the island-inspired theme. The air in the bar was thick with smoke, and people were spread in groups throughout the room. The bar, I later learned, was owned by a Latino man, and most of the people working there were of Spanish-speaking origin as well. The bar was operating highly illegally, as it was way past time constraints mandated by covid policies.

The complicated process of entering the bar bore a resemblance to Victor Turner's (2017) description of entering liminality, as we separated ourselves from the regulations and familiarity of everyday life during covid. The maskless individuals inside the smoke-filled room and the crowd dancing tightly together, bodies meeting, making out, all seemed like a feverish dream, the normality of it all seemed so abnormal. Within the red tint of the tiki bars, it was as covid temporarily did not exist. However, as Laila and I went for a short toilet break together, we both figured we had enough as we were out of stamina and missing our beds. As we danced with the club-goers, our *communitas* was based on the shared understanding that in this temporary spatiality, Covid's presence had been temporarily suspended. However, our bodies had adapted to a schedule where the night began and ended early. Laila and I informed the security guard that we wanted to leave, we were informed that we had to wait for the correct 'moment' and could not "just leave as we wanted", the bar was taking a big risk. A few minutes later, we were informed that if we wanted to leave, we had to leave now, we said bye to our friends in a hurry and were whisked out. In contrast to when we entered, the way out was way simpler. We were guided down a set of stairs, walked past a sign that blocked our path, and there we were out on the street, the CU sign glowing in the dark embrace of the night.

I later learned from my new DJ friend that the night I visited the tiki bar had been somewhat less regulated than what it normally was, as normally the staff would check all



people entering and make sure they had a negative PCR test<sup>56</sup>. It seemed that even the bar, which provided an escape and leisure from covid, could not escape the influence of self and expected monitoring. The manipulation of monitoring practices, exemplified by the checking for PCR tests, becomes a calculated strategy employed by the bar to navigate the delicate balance between non-compliance and maintaining a veneer of adherence, ultimately enabling patrons to engage in the bar's activities while mitigating potential risks or consequences. The tiki bar's strategic monitoring practices, including checking for negative PCR tests, help navigate the dynamics between non-compliance and perceived adherence amidst evolving COVID-19 regulations. The PCR test seems to provide a level of reassurance to both patrons and external observers. In a conversation with someone from that evening whom I met again on a later occasion, it was mentioned that “they at least are trying their best, and like it is not like they have much of a choice”. It appears as if the tiki bar is balancing the need for escapism (and, in all likelihood, survival) while maneuvering ideas of self and expected monitoring.

The tiki-bar case was not the only instance club/bar spaces were maneuvered in the search for escapism during covid. The ethnographic case at the beginning of the chapter also illustrates the maneuvering of covid regulations through the closing of curtains and the manipulation of public perception by keeping the area around the space of liminal escapism clean. Besides, during my fieldwork, I had the opportunity to visit another open after-hour bar in Itaewon. Additionally, I came across information about another bar operating ‘illegally,’ although I was unable to visit it as I never received an invitation.

Simultaneously and correspondingly, as the maneuvering of the need for escapism during covid’s restrictive leashes, knowledge of where to go, how to distinguish people, and knowing the ‘right’ people were also navigated. The following sub-chapter wishes to illustrate just that: how people, knowledge, and views on crowds are sorted and maneuvered within space.

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<sup>56</sup> PCR tests are commonly used to identify individuals infected with the SARS-CoV-2 virus responsible for COVID-19.

## Distinctions and the Right People

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### *Determining the Right Crowd and Style*

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In one of my hangout sessions at the bar Peter worked at, I asked him who the most usual patrons were, and a few seconds later, he answered, “Exchange students”. Peter took a short sip from a drink in front of him and continued, “Like, there are a lot of exchange students coming here, and they just get drunk. Because, you know, what other clubbing spots are there? I mean, I feel bad for them if they came to Korea, like, you know, a few years ago, that would have been totally different.” When Peter is talking about a few years ago he is referring to the times before the pandemic. Bap, who often played at the bar where Peter worked, joined our conversation:

So, for the Korean audience, who primarily enjoys mainstream music, background music is not their priority. They don't know how to appreciate it. It might be because of this group mentality they have, where they don't react much to background music because their friends or colleagues don't enjoy it either. However, there are also people in Korea who like electronic music, and they consider themselves intellectually superior. I'm not saying this applies to everyone, but there are definitely some who think that way. But hey, you can still enjoy it, right? Some people in Korea are exposed to foreign media like myself. I've listened to a lot of live music and watched shows like Sesame Street<sup>57</sup> when I was young. That exposure led me to explore different types of music, including EDM<sup>58</sup> festivals. Over time, I discovered that there are other genres too. People develop their musical taste gradually, and eventually, they become fans of certain genres, like car enthusiasts, for example.

*Bap,-*

When talking to Bap later when he took a smoking break, I asked him what he meant by referring to background music. Throughout the conversation, it appeared to me that Bap defined background music as the type of electronic music played in clubs that serve as a backdrop or ambient sound rather than the main focus of attention. Further emphasizing the sentiments portrayed earlier in the chapter that Korean audiences may not pay much attention to electronic music and may not know how to enjoy it. Bap contrasted electronic music with

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<sup>57</sup> Sesame Street is a highly influential educational television program for children.

<sup>58</sup> EDM, or Electronic Dance Music, is a genre of music characterized by its electronic sound production and its focus on dance-oriented rhythms.

mainstream music, suggesting that the two have distinct characteristics and appeal to different audiences.

Similarly, Mimi illustrates how there are distinctions within the DJ-scene and how there exist different perceptions of 'good' DJ music and performances:

When I finally got to play my music, I wanted to mix different styles in my sets. But I wasn't sure if it would be successful. Some DJs stick to one type of music, which makes them appear more professional and focused. People in the scene see them as serious and skilled, like techno or house DJs. I could have done the same, but I didn't want to limit myself to specific clubs or parties. I wanted to explore and play various types of music. There was a moment when I was scared to play pop remixes, afraid people would think it's cheesy and not take me seriously. But at places like Little Lolli, they don't mind as long as you create the right vibe for the crowd. They don't care about genres. And you know what? I'm having a blast playing with pop music. It's a lie when DJs say they don't like pop. When pop music works well, it can elevate underground music. They have a mutual impact on each other. You can't escape pop music; it's always there, influencing and being influenced.

*Mimi, -*

Mimi's hesitation in playing pop remixes stems from her apprehension of being perceived as tacky and not being taken seriously. Yet, at places like Little Lolli, genre distinctions matter less compared to creating the right atmosphere for the crowd. This aspect of Mimi's experience challenges the rigidity of genre expectations within the DJ scene and echoes Sara Thornton's (1995) argument that perceptions of 'good' music and performances can vary widely.

Through the experiences shared by Bap and Mimi, we gain valuable insights into club culture that align with the perspectives of Pierre Bourdieu (1984) and Sara Thornton's subcultural capital(1995). Bourdieu's concept of cultural distinction can be observed in Bap's observations about the Korean audience's preference for mainstream music. This preference reflects a collective taste shaped by social norms and group mentalities. Bap also touches upon the distinction between electronic music and mainstream music, suggesting that they cater to different audiences with distinct characteristics and preferences. This differentiation exemplifies Bourdieu's notion of cultural hierarchies and the symbolic value attributed to certain forms of expression.

Similarly, Mimi's exploration of different music styles in her DJ sets challenges the boundaries and expectations set within the club scene. By refusing to limit themselves to a

single genre, Mimi exemplifies Thornton's argument about subcultural capital and the existence of diverse perceptions of 'good' DJ music and performances. Mimi's fear of playing pop remixes due to concerns about how it may be received by others highlights the pressures of conforming to certain standards and the potential stigmatization faced when deviating from them. However, Mimi's embrace of playing with pop music and the recognition of its potential to elevate underground genres underscores Thornton's contention that these perceptions can be challenged and reshaped through individual agency and creative exploration.

Similar distinctions were made when Peter discussed the Spanish exchange students: As stated previously, the Spanish exchange students are a notorious bunch, and Peter, an interlocuter presented previously in my thesis, would often complain about them as he was the one that had to clean-up after them. I mentioned earlier that Peter worked as a bartender, and Spanish exchange students would often come in big groups to his workplace (way bigger groups than what was allowed). They would often bring their own alcohol and scatter the empty bottles in the street by the bar, leaving Peter with the job of cleaning it up. Furthermore, they would bring unwanted attention to Peter's workplace with their 'large gatherings' outside the bar and with their loud behavior and persona. "They are just fucking rude, I get that they want to party and have fun, but they are fucking us over like we are getting neighbor complaints because of them. Like we are all in a fucked situation, and they are just being rude".

Peter's perspective provides valuable insights into the dynamics involving the Spanish exchange students and the bar's efforts to navigate COVID-19 restrictions while managing its reputation. From Peter's accounts, it becomes clear that these students are regarded as a notorious group known for their disruptive behavior and disregard for the consequences of their actions. The Spanish exchange student's actions attract unwanted attention and complaints from the community, creating a challenging situation for both the bar and its surroundings. This situation highlights the interplay between social space, power dynamics, and regulatory frameworks as conceptualized by Henri Lefebvre. Lefebvre's theories emphasize the production of space and the ways in which social relations and power structures shape the lived experience of space. In the case of the bar and the Spanish exchange students, their actions disrupt the established social space and challenge the regulatory frameworks in place. The bar, in its efforts to provide an engaging and creative atmosphere, engages in spatial practices that redefine the boundaries of public space. However, the actions of the Spanish exchange students push against these boundaries, bringing attention to the bar's

non-compliance with COVID-19 regulations. This clash between the bar's spatial practices and the regulatory frameworks reflects the dialectical relationship between space and power that Lefebvre discusses. Moreover, as illustrated previously in my thesis, the bar is already treading a thin line, as they have previously faced consequences for breaking COVID-19 restrictions. This adds another layer to the power dynamics at play, as the government's regulatory authority imposes limitations on the bar's spatial practices. The actions of the Spanish exchange students further complicate this relationship, exposing the tensions between creative expression, community engagement, and compliance with regulatory frameworks. In this way, the situation involving the Spanish exchange students and the bar exemplifies Lefebvre's conceptualization of space as a site of contestation, where spatial practices, power dynamics, and regulatory frameworks intersect. It underscores the ongoing negotiation and struggles over the production of space and the implications for social relationships and community dynamics within the bar's context.

Through Peter's narrative, we gain a deeper understanding of the intricate dynamics between the Spanish exchange students, the bar's operational challenges, and the broader social dynamics of the underground electronic music scene during covid. Peter sheds light on the underlying tensions, conflicts, and negotiation processes at play within the underground electronic music scene in Itaewon.

### *Maneuvering the Knowledge of Where to Go and Whom to Go With*

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On the last weekend of my stay in Korea, I was invited to my second 'after-hours' bar. The crowd of my go-to bar had invited me to come to join them over to a bar a friend of theirs was opening (the bar was still under construction). Even though the bar was technically not operating yet, our group was well over the legal limit for 'group gatherings'. While chitchatting, I started talking about my experience at the tiki bar, and a guy suddenly blurted, "You went there? That place is really shitty like the crowd is just like drunk exchange students, and even the music is shit, have you been to Sensur?", I sat confused as his reaction surprised me.

The crowd today consisted of people I had met before but never hung out with in such an intimate way, as we were only nine people. I normally met them at the bar Peter worked at, we would sometimes chitchat a bit, and I had slowly gotten to know them better. All the people I was hanging out with were active within creative industries like marketing, the club or bar scene (places that had DJ booths), modeling, or Djing. One of the guys I had met on

several occasions, but it had taken me quite some time to understand his influence. It seemed as if he knew everyone. Furthermore, he also sometimes provided spaces where events could be held, or DJs could play. One of the spaces he provided was a vacation house by the beach, which I was later told was in his family. During the event, I had the opportunity to engage with another individual who happened to be a well-known model. This encounter was not our first, as we had previously interacted on several occasions at a local bar. Through my subsequent exploration of his Instagram feed, I discovered the extent of his recognition within the industry. Whenever I met him out, he would always dress extremely well, but the brands he often promoted on his Instagram and worked with were never visible in his daily attire. Another person in the room worked in marketing for Gucci (Hanbin), I had been to his house before while hanging out with Peter and some other friends after all the bars closed. Hanbin's house was nothing too fancy, but it was a prime location and filled with new tech, and an extensive wardrobe, it was the first time I saw a runway piece in person. While hanging out there, we suddenly heard a knock on the door, Hanbin had told us to hide in case it was the police. However, it was just some additional friends joining us that were "fucking with us" (as Hanbin stated).

Two of the other people in the shady bar, Jinny and Wonbin, a couple whom I throughout the evening had called mom and dad (they were probably in their late thirties to early forties), as they kept buying everyone drinks and took care of everyone, seemed to be well connected as well. Jinny and Wonbin knew everyone in the room, and it seemed like everyone respected them, their mannerism, clothing, and the way they carried themselves confidently oozed with a certain kind of security that I found hard to define. I felt like a matter out of place, I was not only the youngest in the room, but I also had none of the expertise and knowledge that everyone in the room oozed off. Throughout the evening, our conversation delved into the realm of music, particularly the transformation of the DJ scene. They shared their observations about the impact of the pandemic, explaining that as larger clubs shut down, smaller bars emerged as alternative venues that could accommodate smaller crowds. These intimate bars, still featuring DJs, had gained popularity during this time. While interviewing an interlocutor named Namjoon, a DJ who was now taking up his studies again after pressure from his parents and putting his DJ career on a break, he mentioned these new smaller bars:

After COVID, a lot of small bars and lounges started opening up. They couldn't open big clubs because of the strict regulations and limitations on people. So, many owners decided

to open smaller bars instead. As a result, there are now many bars with plenty of opportunities for DJs to perform. This is great because it gives a chance for new DJs to emerge. However, there is a problem. The owners, or bosses, don't pay DJs properly. They don't give them the fair payment they deserve for their work.

*Namjoon, -*

The guy who had asked if I had been to Sensur (Hanbin) told me that we should have “all gone” to the bar together, however, as I was leaving Korea the next day, that was a lost opportunity. Reflecting on the evening, I came to the realization that there seemed to be perceived hierarchies within the underground electronic music scene in Itaewon. By me telling them I had been to the tiki bar, I had exposed my lacking knowledge of where to go or where I could go.

The experiences and observations from my time in Korea, particularly at the after-hours bar and the conversations with the group of people I met there, have brought to light the significance of knowledge and distinctions regarding the preferred venues, quality music, and shifting dynamics caused by the pandemic. As I engaged with people active in creative industries such as marketing, modeling, and DJing, I realized the existence of perceived hierarchies within the underground electronic music scene in Itaewon. Certain individuals possessed extensive networks, influence, and resources, evident through their connections to various spaces for events and their prominence in their respective fields.

The evening's discussions revolved around the changes in the DJ scene, with the emergence of smaller bars and lounges due to the restrictions imposed by the pandemic. These intimate venues provide opportunities for DJs to perform and for new talent to emerge. However, a troubling issue emerged concerning the fair payment of DJs. Despite their contributions and efforts, many owners or bosses did not adequately compensate DJs for their work, revealing an exploitative aspect of the industry. This was information that only was provided or known by insiders or DJs in the underground electronic music scene in Itaewon.

Through my encounter with Hanbin and the mention of Sensur, I became aware of the intricate knowledge and understanding required to navigate the underground music scene effectively. By admitting my visit to the tiki bar, I unintentionally exposed my limited knowledge of the preferred spots and cultural nuances. This emphasized the importance of being well-versed in the scene, knowing where to go, and understanding the evolving landscape shaped by COVID-19 restrictions.

Throughout my fieldwork, I repeatedly encountered situations where having an awareness of the 'cool' spots, clubs operating within the limits of COVID-19 regulations, and discerning good music were crucial. It became evident that cultural familiarity, insider knowledge, and a grasp of social codes played essential roles in navigating and comprehending the distinctions and intricacies of the Itaewon electronic music scene.

Looking back, my experiences in Korea have shed light on the multifaceted nature of underground music scenes, their adaptation to challenging circumstances, and the hierarchies that exist within them. The observation of these dynamics underscores the need for ongoing exploration, understanding, and recognition of the complexities that shape the underground electronic music culture in Itaewon and similar communities worldwide.

## **Conclusion: Knowing and Navigation**

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In conclusion, this chapter delves into the intricate dynamics of navigating the contested nightlife landscape of Itaewon's underground electronic music scene during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through a combination of ethnographic exploration and personal narratives, it vividly portrays the profound impact of the pandemic on individuals, communities, and cultural expression within the club scene. The stories of Raveto and Anna serve as poignant examples of the emotional toll inflicted by the pandemic. Raveto's yearning for the revival of vibrant nightlife underscores the clubbing scene's role as a source of solace and excitement. At the same time, Anna's observations shed light on the economic challenges faced by businesses and clubs.

This chapter sheds light on the complex interplay between COVID-19 regulations, economic stability, and cultural expression. The struggles encountered by club owners, trapped in a conundrum of government bans on large gatherings, highlight the precarious position of establishments within the nightlife industry. Furthermore, the examination of monitoring and surveillance mechanisms reveals the shifting dynamics of social interactions and spatial landscapes, where strategic manipulation of monitoring practices becomes crucial in navigating the fine line between compliance and non-compliance.

Moreover, this chapter unravels the art of maneuvering illegality and the significance of social networks in seeking escapism amidst the pandemic restrictions. The clandestine operation of the tiki bar and the selective preferences for particular crowds illustrate the resourcefulness of individuals and establishments in adapting to regulations; consequently, temporary spaces of normality and leisure are carved out.



By immersing ourselves in the ethnography and experiences of the interlocutors, this chapter contributes to a deeper understanding of the underground electronic music scene's significance within Itaewon's cultural and social landscape. It illuminates the profound impact of COVID-19 on the clubbing community and unveils the intricate dynamics involved in maneuvering a contested nightlife landscape. Ultimately, this research paves the way for further exploration of the evolving dynamics of nightlife in Itaewon, offering valuable insights into resilience, cultural expression, and the transformative nature of community in the face of unprecedented challenges.



## Chapter Five: Dreams, Trends, and Berlin

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Susie had lived a short period in Berlin a few years back, and she would often speak about her time there, and Berghain often appeared in those tales. Berghain, located in Berlin, Germany, is widely regarded as an esteemed nightclub with a global reputation as a leading and influential destination for electronic music enthusiasts. The venue is renowned for its unique ambiance and strict entrance requirements, which have contributed to its legendary status among clubgoers. Susie used to go there several times while she lived in Berlin, “it is insane,” she said, “like I once went there on New Year’s, and like all the floors were open for everyone. I went to the toilet on one of the floors that normally were never open, and like the floor was like soft? I then realized the whole floor was covered in human feces”. She continued after snickering at my shocked face, “You lose track of everything when you are there, just like people are there for several days when they go”. Another friend of mine, Louis, a DJ from Portugal, who was in Korea for photography work, often traveled to Berlin as well and had similar stories from Berghain. Louis told me that he would stay in Berghain for 72 hours at a time and that he would do so much “sick shit in there”. After telling the feces story, Susie looked at me, contemplating, “You know, like a lot of places here are trying to like to emulate the Berlin feel, have you noticed like so many of the electronic clubs here have German names? Like there is Blüte, Loch, Berg, and Heim”. Susie mentioning the Berlin club persona that many places try to emulate brought back another memory.

During one memorable night at one of these clubs, my friends and I found ourselves dancing to the pulsating beats of the music right next to our table. The club had interpreted the COVID policy in a way that allowed patrons to be present if they were seated and granted the freedom to dance if we remained near our designated seats. While dancing, a friend of mine who used to live in Berlin at one point, too, commented how my dancing gave off a ‘Berlin vibe’. My other friend dancing with us, Veronika, who was German, frequently commented how funny it was that all the clubs had German names and kind of had an “underground-esque” aesthetic. Dark interiors, concrete walls and floors, simplistic furniture, and dim lighting seemed to be a common aesthetic for most of the clubs with German names.

Susie came back after ordering some food, we were eating at one of her favorite vegan restaurants at HBC, and after making herself comfortable in her seat, she said, “You know it is like a trend, the techno Berlin-esque music was really big before the pandemic, and I guess

it's still a trend". She further described Korea as a country where trends move fast, stating that something could be in the next day and out the next:

Like now, I think because of covid, I think like kind of nostalgic vibes are in, there are a lot of Vinyl-Djing bars and spots opening, the scene is always shifting. Mimi told you right? That the scene used to go back and forth between Hongdae and Itaewon? Now a lot of the clubs are moving to Apgujeong-dong<sup>59</sup> it's kind of following the trendy areas.

This chapter wishes to explore how dreams, trends, and ideals of the underground electronic music scene in Itaewon and how these notions shape ideals of space and how its perceived.

## Trends: The Wannabe Berlin

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While I was in Korea, there was this food trend going around, mint-Choco everything my friends and I called it. Meaning every food had to have a mint-Choco flavor, this includes mint-Choco flavored fried chicken, mint-Choco noodles, and mint-Choco Tteokbokki<sup>60</sup>. My friends and interlocutors would describe the mint-Choco trend as a part of the `ppalli ppalli culture`<sup>61</sup>. `Ppalli ppalli` is a Korean term that reflects the culture's value of doing things quickly. `Ppalli ppalli` is all about efficiency, getting things done fast, and how things in Korea move fast. It was in this context that Anna brought up how the club scene keeps moving and changing locations. Anna also explained how the Itaewon scene used to be grittier before it became trendy, especially as more and more bars emulating the Berlin techno vibes kept popping up in Hannam-dong. As the trends shifted, the neighborhood's ambiance underwent a transformation as well, reflecting the trend cycles. In line with this topic, Mimi once expressed her thoughts, highlighting the evolving dynamics:

I believe they also drew inspiration from Europe, particularly from the techno scene known for its intense, deep, and dark sound. People associated these techniques with Berlin.

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<sup>59</sup> Apgujeong-dong, also known as 압구정동 in Korean, is a prestigious neighborhood located in Gangnam-gu, Seoul, South Korea. It is widely regarded as one of the wealthiest and most affluent areas in Seoul.

<sup>60</sup> Tteokbokki (in Korean: 떡볶) is a popular Korean dish made with stir-fried rice cakes.

<sup>61</sup> `Ppalli` (빨리 in Korean) means quickly or hurry in English.

Sometimes, people are more drawn to the image and the trend rather than the music itself. They chase after the hype, but it's something that can be done.

*Mimi, -*

Within the context of Baudrillard's<sup>62</sup> concepts of simulacra and simulation (1994), the changes observed in the club scene take on an intriguing dimension. Baudrillard argues that contemporary society is characterized by a proliferation of images and signs that have detached from their original referents, creating a hyperreal world where simulations replace reality itself.

In the case of the club scene, the incorporation of Berlin techno aesthetics can be seen as a form of simulation. The clubs in Hannam-dong and Itaewon, by emulating the techno vibes associated with Berlin, create a hyperreal experience that blurs the boundaries between the original and the reproduced. The emphasis on creating a specific atmosphere and ambiance, which aligns with the perceived image of Berlin's club culture, contributes to the construction of a simulated reality within the local context. When talking to my German friends in Korea, many of them had friends who often frequented the scene in Berlin. They told me how they found the fascination with Berghain weird and that:

Honestly, not many people from Berlin go there, it's just turning touristy, and they are just going there because it is something people in the club scene think they must try. Like it is not that people from Berlin have like totally stopped going to Berghain, but it is not the same anymore, and there are better spots like Kitkat.

*German friends, -*

According to my friends, the perception was that Berghain had become increasingly touristy, attracting people who were seeking to check off a box on their clubbing bucket list. They emphasized that the local Berliners themselves were not as heavily involved in the Berghains scene anymore, and they mentioned other alternative spots like Kitkat<sup>63</sup> as more

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<sup>62</sup> Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007) was a French sociologist, philosopher, and cultural theorist. He focuses on postmodernism, hyperreality, and the concept of simulacra and simulation. Baudrillard explores how contemporary society is saturated with signs and images that have lost their original meanings, blurring the line between reality and representation. His theories have greatly influenced fields like sociology, cultural studies, and media studies.

<sup>63</sup> Club KitKat is a well-known nightclub situated in Berlin that stands out for its alternative and fetish-themed ambiance. It offers a one-of-a-kind and immersive experience with a wide range of music genres and avant-garde decor. The club is highly regarded for its inclusive and accepting atmosphere, allowing people to express themselves without judgment.

appealing options. An observation that sheds light on a potential fetishization of Berghain and the Berlin club scene. It seems that outsiders, including those within the club scene, have developed an idealized image of Berghain, valuing its exclusivity and underground reputation. This fetishization involves projecting exaggerated expectations onto the club, viewing it as a pinnacle of authenticity and edginess. By focusing on this ethnographic perspective, it becomes apparent how the fascination with Berlin and Berghain can be seen as a form of fetishization, where the club's cultural significance is romanticized, and its local roots may be overshadowed by the influx of tourists and external perceptions.

These changes in the club scene, influenced by global references and driven by the desire to create a hyperreal experience, invite us to reflect on the interplay between authenticity and simulation. Baudrillard's concepts help illuminate how the club scene becomes a space where the distinction between the real and the simulated blurs and where cultural meanings are constructed through the interplay of signs, images, and aspirations. This simulation is also further illustrated by the imaginatives of Berghain, as a place one has to go to experience the 'real club', and those ideas are simulated in the stories and expectations towards the experience.

## **The Future of the Scene and Utopias**

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*They have like a nightlife, like a nightlife governor in London or advisor you know, in Berlin you have a nightlife association, we don't have that here. You know, only recently have we built late last year a club association<sup>64</sup>.*

*Anna, -*

We can also analyze the experiences and observations within the framework of Henri Lefebvre's concept of utopia (1991). Lefebvre argued that utopia is not merely a distant and unattainable ideal but rather a transformative and imaginative space that challenges the existing social order. The ethnographic account reveals the evolving nature of the club scene in Korea, particularly in relation to the changing landscape of Itaewon. The emergence of new bars influenced by the Berlin techno scene can be seen as an attempt to create an alternative utopian space within the context of the Itaewon neighborhood. These spaces embody a

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<sup>64</sup> Many of my interlocutors talked about the new nightlife association, but I was not able to get in contact with them.

different atmosphere and aesthetic, evoking a sense of rebellion and counterculture, as well as not actually engaging with its association, as noted by Mimi, a utopian experience. Mimi's reflections on the club scene in Hannam-dong and Itaewon, which simulate the Berlin scene, raise doubts about whether it truly embodies the transformative and imaginative space envisioned by Lefebvre's utopia.

Nevertheless, as illustrated by a quote by Anna at the beginning of the sub-chapter, imaginatives of what can exist are prominent. Bap and Peter would often discuss dreams of what the future of the scene in Itaewon could entail.

Korea's scene is kind of like an in-between of Japan and China. If you go partying in Japan, it is totally chill, you are not supposed to bump into other people are anything, they have their own zone. In China, it is like the totally opposite, it is totally crazy, there is no control, you don't even know what is in your drink, it might not even be alcohol in it.

*Bap and Peter, -*

They continued discussing the potential for the club scene in Korea and Itaewon: “When DJs come to Korea, they're usually on tour because individual clubs here can't afford to sponsor a DJ trip alone. So, what they do is collaborate with clubs from other countries, with several clubs joining forces to make it happen.” Moreover, they mentioned that while Korea may not be as popular for DJs to visit yet, its club scene and persona are gaining more recognition.

I believe that in Europe, this kind of system is well-developed, which is why many Koreans aspire to play there. European crowds are known for their vibes and strong connection to the music scene. In Korea, there are some agencies, but they mostly operate independently. If there were more established agencies for musicians and DJs that could globally connect with different scenes, it could potentially open up a new chapter for the Korean electronic music scene.

*Bap and Peter -*

The ethnographic insights provided by Anna, Bap, and Peter shed light on the imaginative possibilities and potential for the club scene in Korea, particularly in the context of Itaewon. Their discussions highlight the distinct characteristics of the scene in comparison to Japan and China. While Japan offers a more laid-back and controlled partying atmosphere, China represents a more chaotic and unpredictable experience. These observations contribute

to the ongoing conversation about the future direction of the club scene in Korea and the desire to create a unique identity for Itaewon.

One significant aspect discussed is the collaboration between Korean clubs and those from other countries when it comes to hosting international DJs. This collaborative approach enables clubs to pool resources and makes such events possible, as individual clubs may not have the financial capacity to sponsor DJ trips on their own. However, it is noted that Korea is still not as popular of a destination for DJs compared to Europe. The aspiration to play in Europe stems from the well-developed system and the solid and enthusiastic crowds that European music scenes offer.

The analysis of the situation raises questions about the existing agency structure in Korea. While there are some agencies, they predominantly operate independently, limiting the global reach and connection to different scenes. The proposition of establishing more agencies that can bridge the gap between musicians and DJs and globally connect with diverse scenes is seen as a potential avenue for the Korean electronic music scene to enter a new chapter. This vision aligns with Lefebvre's notion of utopia, as it involves reimagining and actively working towards a more vibrant and interconnected community within the electronic music landscape in Korea.

The concept of utopia is further relevant in the context of the ethnographic observations discussed. Utopia, as mentioned earlier, represents a transformative vision of a better society that challenges existing norms and structures. In the case of the club scene in Korea and Itaewon, there is an inherent desire to create an idealized version of the community, one that encompasses the characteristics of both local and global electronic music scenes. The discussions surrounding the potential for the club scene in Korea reflect a longing for a utopian space where the Korean scene can develop its own distinct identity and gain recognition on a global scale. This utopian vision involves reimagining the spatial and social dimensions of the club scene, including the establishment of more connected agency structures that can facilitate global collaborations and exposure. Furthermore, the desire to play in Europe, which is seen as a well-developed and vibrant music scene, signifies the aspiration to be part of a larger global community. This aligns with Lefebvre's idea of utopia as a dynamic process of questioning and reimagining the present reality. It involves challenging the existing status quo and striving for social change, in this case, by connecting the Korean electronic music scene with diverse scenes worldwide.

By invoking the concept of utopia, the analysis recognizes the transformative potential and imaginative nature of the discussions about the future of the club scene. It encourages



envisioning alternative possibilities and actively working towards creating a more desirable and interconnected community within the electronic music landscape in Korea.

## **Conclusion: 'Berlin-esqu'**

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In conclusion, this chapter explores the dreams, trends, and ideals of the underground electronic music scene in Itaewon, and their influence on perceptions of space. The incorporation of Berlin aesthetics creates a hyperreal experience, blurring the boundaries between the original and the reproduced. Discussions about collaboration with international clubs and aspirations to play in Europe reflect a desire for a transformative and interconnected community. The observations presented invite us to contemplate the dynamic nature of the club scene, the simulation of cultural meanings, and the potential for transformative change in the electronic music landscape in Korea.



## Recapitulation and Reflections

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In conclusion, I have, throughout this text and ethnography, shed light on the multifaceted dynamics of Itaewon's cultural and social landscape. Through an exploration of Itaewon's history, contestations, and the experiences of individuals within the LGBTQ+ community and the underground electronic music scene, we have gained valuable insights into the struggles, resilience, and transformative nature of Itaewon's underground electronic music scene.

It is evident that Itaewon's history has played a significant role in shaping perceptions of the area, both from within and outside. The government's use of Itaewon as a space for the 'improper' has contributed to the framing of certain individuals and groups as 'other' or 'outsiders.' However, the LGBTQ+ community and the underground electronic music scene have forged their own havens of self-expression, resistance, and community within this contested space.

The exploration of Itaewon's LGBTQ+ community has highlighted the challenges faced in establishing and sustaining safe spaces amidst societal and cultural constraints. It has also illuminated the transformative power of these spaces in providing acceptance, support, and self-discovery for queer individuals. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on these spaces further emphasizes the vulnerability and adaptability of such communities.

Similarly, the examination of the underground electronic music scene in Itaewon has revealed the complexities of navigating a contested nightlife landscape. It has showcased the resilience of individuals, establishments, and social networks in seeking escapism and creative expression despite legal restrictions. The scene's connections to global trends and aspirations for international collaboration have underscored its potential for transformative change and cultural exchange.

In sum, this thesis has provided a comprehensive understanding of Itaewon as a space of contestation, resilience, and cultural expression. It has demonstrated the significance of community-building, self-acceptance, and the pursuit of alternative narratives within Itaewon and its underground electronic music scene.

As we bring this thesis to a close, it is crucial to acknowledge that the narrative of Itaewon is an ever evolving one. Further research is necessary to delve into the ongoing transformations and dynamics within the locality, with a particular focus on queer identities, the nightlife scene, and the intricate interplay between local and global influences.

Moreover, there are several topics that merit further exploration but were not extensively covered within the constraints of this study. These include the nuanced dynamics of gender within the club scene and as DJs, as well as the innovative utilization of new technologies like live-streaming to expand both physical and virtual spaces, fostering new forms of community. Furthermore, my observations revealed that the underground image in Itaewon was frequently utilized as a marketing tool. Companies such as Vans, Converse, and Nike often organized collaborative events with underground bars and clubs. These partnerships sought to capitalize on the cultural cachet and edginess associated with the underground scene. Additionally, the exploration of the changing spatiality in Itaewon and the transformation of the Yongsan base into a park was not extensively addressed. The primary focus of my study revolved around other aspects of the underground electronic music scene and its cultural dynamics. Although these topics hold potential significance, they received relatively less attention from my interlocutors during the course of our conversations and interviews. Consequently, their exploration and analysis could be a fruitful area for future research, offering insights into the evolving nature of Itaewon's spatial dynamics and the socio-cultural implications of the Yongsan parks development.

It is important to note that I did not gather sufficient material from my interlocutors to delve deeper into these aspects within the text. Although these topics were observed during my fieldwork, they were excluded from this thesis due to safety considerations or limitations in ethnographic materials.

By continuing to delve deeper into the complexities of Itaewon's cultural landscape, we can gain profound insights into the resilience, struggles, and aspirations of its diverse communities. This ongoing research endeavor will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of Itaewon and its significance within broader social, cultural, and global contexts.

## Epilogue

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On October 31, 2022, tragedy struck Itaewon, the neighborhood that had become my second home during my research journey. Halloween night, which should have been filled with joy and celebration, turned into a devastating moment of sorrow and loss. A crowd crush occurred, leading to panic, injuries, and even the loss of lives. The impact of this incident on the community was profound and left an indelible mark.

As news of the crowd crush reached me in Norway, I was completely unaware of the events unfolding in the place I had come to know so well. When my mom unexpectedly showed up to drive me home from work, her face told me that something was terribly wrong. She informed me about the tragedy, and my immediate instinct was to reach out to everyone I knew who frequented Itaewon. Thankfully, they all responded quickly, assuring me that they were safe and that the incident had occurred in a different area of the neighborhood. I asked them to check on everyone they knew, and thankfully, they were all accounted for.

In the days that followed, my social media feeds were filled with heartfelt condolences and expressions of frustration from my friends and interlocutors. Itaewon, which had been under constant police surveillance throughout the pandemic, seemed to have a lack of police presence during the Halloween event. It was an event that traditionally attracted hundreds of thousands of people, and the community felt let down by the government's response to the tragedy. They believed that the government was attempting to evade responsibility, exacerbating their frustration and disappointment. Moreover, my interlocutors expressed concern about the potential long-term repercussions for the Itaewon community and businesses. They feared that this incident could undermine what they had built and break the solidarity they had nurtured.

Amidst the frustration and grief, there was a strong sense of solidarity and support among the community. Bars and clubs organized events to raise funds for the victims and their families, with all proceeds dedicated to helping those affected by the tragedy. It was heartwarming to witness the collective effort to come together and support one another during this difficult time.

This somber chapter in the neighborhood's history underscores the ongoing need for continued research, community engagement, and the implementation of improved safety measures. It highlights the importance of understanding the collective strength and solidarity within communities in times of adversity.

In closing, I extend my sincerest condolences to all those who have been affected by the tragic events of the Itaewon Halloween incident.

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