

## 9 The Friendly, Funny, and Bizarre Queer on Live: Queer Live Streaming in South Korea

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### Introduction

Live streaming has been popular in South Korea (hereafter Korea) since the early 2000s, initially having developed as vernacular cultures around the local media-streaming platform AfreecaTV (Song 2018), and recently evolving across platforms, including the Naver V app (King-O’Riain 2020), and the world’s most popular video-streaming platform YouTube (Heo, Kim, and Yan 2020). Live streaming is frequently practiced by young LGBT YouTubers who publicly disclose their sexual identity and brand their YouTube channels with such identities through hashtags (e.g., #Koreangaycouple), content titles (e.g., “Gay Couple’s Honeymoon Video”), and the content itself. First being developed by a few pioneering male gay YouTube channels, such as CHANNEL GIMCHEOLSOO, Open.Kr, and Yeol Lee (TWOTEN), which have become popular gradually since 2016, LGBT YouTube channels increased around 2019–2021, mostly focusing on live streaming content. These LGBT YouTubers live stream frequently (e.g., four times a week) and prolongedly (e.g., from one hour to even four hours per broadcast). Considering the dominant anti-queer sentiments in Korea (Han 2016; Nayong 2018), it is worthwhile to study how these people live stream and make their online presence visible while striving as queers in a homophobic society.

This chapter explores media practices of Korean LGBT YouTubers for visibility during their live streaming, which I call “queer live streaming.” I address two questions: First, how do the LGBT YouTubers organize their content for queer live streaming? Second, what are the sociocultural meanings of queer live streaming? To answer these questions, I focus on three media practices that are frequently exercised in queer live streaming:

(1) “storytelling the everyday” with their audiences; (2) “performing their gigs” to entertain audiences; and (3) *ssulpulgi*, which involves unraveling their queer anecdotes. This chapter argues that these practices make queer live streaming a locus to build a sense of community between LGBT YouTubers and their audiences and subvert heteronormativity with frivolity, but at the same time result in the sexualization and consumption of LGBT as items for fun and pleasure in the attention economy of YouTube. The data presented here are developed from the textual analysis of the digital estates of young LGBT YouTubers in Korea and long-term digital ethnography.

### Homophobic and Queer-Friendly Korea

Antiqueer sentiments are dominant within South Korea when it comes to human rights issues, but ironically LGBT images are favorably consumed in media culture. According to the Pew Research Center’s report on national attitudes toward homosexuality, Korea is one of the countries showing the lowest acceptance rate of homosexuality among high-income countries (Poushter and Kent 2020). Not only is same-sex marriage forbidden, but also a bill to ban discrimination against gender, sexuality, disability, race, and others has been sitting on the table at the Korean National Assembly since 2007 due to backlash from conservative Christian groups (Jung 2020). Left without any legal and institutional protective measures, sexual minorities in Korea show a significantly higher prevalence of depression, and suicidal ideation and attempts than the general population (Yi et al. 2017).

Contrary to the dominant antiqueer sentiments in politics and society, cultural scenes are welcoming LGBT images, particularly images of male gay couples. Originally influenced by the Japanese subculture Yaoi in the late 1990s, a subculture of fantasizing male-male romance has developed among young women in Korea, which is now visible in the mainstream media culture as well (Kwon 2019). So-called boys-love (BL) content is favorably consumed and produced in young women’s subcultures and K-pop cultures. Not only do K-pop fans create and consume fan factions of their male stars engaging in homoromantic relationships with other male stars, but star agencies and media industries also make their business by producing BL texts and appealing to niche demands for BL (Kwon 2019). Media scholar Jungmin Kwon (2019) finds political implications from the

BL culture, including its potential of reversing heteronormativity and forging queer solidarity. Yet some scholars criticize its mirroring fantasy of heterosexuality, in which homoerotic relationships are imagined along the line with gender scripts featuring love between a feminine male character and a masculine male character (Hong 2008; Zhou, Paul, and Sherman 2018).

In these contexts, Korean internet celebrities who publicly identify their LGBT identities have gradually entered social media scenes, extended BL culture, and built a new subculture for queers online. LGBT content is now a popular sight on platforms like YouTube, in which such nonheterosexual influencers exhibit their identities “authentically,” using new media technologies like live streaming, rather than creating “filtered” or “fantasized” queer images.

### Queer Social Media, Live Streaming, and *Yingyeo* Culture

Online communities and social media platforms like YouTube have afforded various ways for LGBT users to communicate with those with similar identities and to raise collective voices for social change via feelings of intimate connections (Cavalcante 2019; Lucero 2017). Given that live streaming contributes to forging and facilitating a “consistent community” between participants through a sense of “liveness” (King-O’Riain 2020, 4), LGBT YouTubers’ live streaming content may also provide a relatively convenient way to build queer communities online through its unique sense of “liveness” that is circulated among audiences and streamers on the platform.

However, LGBT visibility on social media, including queer live streaming, should be discussed through a multidimensional approach considering socioeconomies in the media industry and culture. In the late-capitalist culture, where one’s unique identity becomes a means of *branding* the self and generating fame, minority identities are strategically curated on media to garner more attention from and appeal to a niche for diversity while conforming to social norms rather than challenging them (Banet-Weiser 2012; Gray 2013). Within this context, nonnormative sexual identity may be *effective* in beguiling audiences and competing for attention on social media when it is presented pleasantly and entertainingly. Gay YouTubers often perform their sexualities in an “acceptable” manner of “get[ting] over their marginality” to capitalize on their identities within media culture

(Lovelock 2017). In this manner, LGBT identities on social media are *authentically* calibrated, manufactured, and practiced in line with the attention economy that runs through social media cultures (Abidin 2017).

Indeed, Korean live streaming culture is already structured in line with the attention-centered economic principles. Live streaming via platforms like AfreecaTV and YouTube works within networked economies wherein networked relations between streamers and the audience and consumers facilitate various businesses and activate the flow of capital like money, attention, and visibility within the cultures. For instance, YouTube's Super Chat donation (and similarly, AfreecaTV's *Byulpoongsun* [별풍선] system) illuminates how live streamers monetize their intimacies with their audiences and consumers for their media business (Guarriello 2019). To generate views and to captivate the eyeballs of audiences in hopes of their monetary donations, streamers engage in clickbait content and sensational and excessive actions, such as the infamous media practice of binge-eating (also called *mukbang* [먹방] in Korean), violence, or sensual body moves, which constitute the infamous media vernacular culture, *yingyeo* culture, in Korea (Kim 2017; Song 2018).

*Yingyeo* culture [잉여문화, meaning “surplus culture” in English] refers to a culture where young people—who are not considered to be contributing to the economy because they remain unemployed and idle—call themselves *yingyeo* [surplus] in a self-deprecating manner (Song 2018). The *yingyeos* are widely considered “social misfits” for their lack of socioeconomic, cultural, and educational capital and their failure at social competitions like marriage, employment, and education (Lee and Abidin 2021, 4–5). By binge-watching others doing absurd things online, the *yingyeos* construct their own vernacular culture centering on instant pleasure and unproductiveness, wherein they can temporarily escape from the unpromising realities, as evidenced in the proliferation of *mukbang*, game broadcasting, and pornlike misogynistic content online (Lee and Abidin 2021; Song 2018).

Within *yingyeo* culture, the audiences of live streaming content are often reported to occupy the position of power by almost enforcing streamers to do whatever they are asking for, exercising their economic power in the money donation system during live streaming (Song 2018). The power dynamics shape the “monstrous” culture of violence, pleasure, and fun in line with attention economies within media environments (Kim 2017). Within this context, it is worthy to study how LGBT people who have historically been

marked as “abnormal” and “exotic” in Korean media scenes (Jin Lee 2013) position themselves through/or with their identity on social media through live streaming within today’s brand culture.

### Queer Live Streaming

This chapter draws on a yearlong ethnography that involves a textual analysis of queer live streaming content and in-depth interviews with LGBT YouTubers from 2019 to 2020. I have followed twenty-two LGBT-identified YouTube channels since 2019 and interviewed seven of their creators, to understand their concerns and practices as LGBT YouTubers. The twenty-two teams include eleven gay male couples, five lesbians, five trans women, and one bisexual woman. Sometimes together with their romantic partners and sometimes individually, the twenty-two teams live stream on YouTube regularly and later post edited versions of their live streaming content (also called “live highlights”) on their channels.

Live streaming is crucial for the LGBT YouTubers in this study in relation to their economies and nonnormative identity. Dia, who runs the gay couple YouTube channel Hyugayso with their partner Dinner-Gury, explains that live streaming is the only option available to them to make earnings from YouTube as a gay man. This is echoed in other LGBT YouTubers in my interviews. On YouTube, people can make income either through participating in sponsorship deals or directly through the YouTube Partner Program system (YouTube 2020), which allows users to monetize their content when they meet certain requirements (e.g., 1,000 subscribers and 4,000 watch hours) (Lee and Abidin 2021, 4). Hour-long live streaming is useful for new aspirants to meet the 4,000 watch-hours criterion relatively easily. For LGBT YouTubers in Korea like Dia, however, it is particularly important because it affords a chance to continue their business despite their nonnormative sexuality within the heteronormative YouTube ecology. Dia states that “advertisers don’t propose sponsorship deals to queer channels, to avoid any controversies, like backlash from antiqueer Christian communities. They don’t want to be in trouble for people like us.”

In this vein, the viewer donation system during live streaming appears to be a lucrative model for them to supplement earnings from YouTube that they could have made if they were—as Dia criticizes—“just normal heterosexual YouTubers.” Although their income from donations fluctuates

and is not predictable, some of the LGBT YouTubers make up to \$1,000 at times from donations during one live streaming session. Thus, many LGBT YouTubers are led to do the extensive labor of live streaming frequently and prolongedly.

Yet, to compete with the increasing inflow of queer-identified YouTube aspirants, which has been notable during the pandemic, the LGBT streamers need to develop media strategies and make their content unique in tandem with their “LGBT brands.” To captivate viewer eyeballs, the LGBT YouTubers exercise various media practices and performances, which I call “gigs.” Gigs are crucial elements of queer live streaming culture, through which the streamers and audiences exchange values and capital, including entertainment value, intimacies, money, and attention. These gigs can be categorized into three genres: (1) storytelling the everyday, (2) performing queer gigs, and (3) *ssulpulgi*. In this manner, queer live streaming serves as a queer community where the streamers and audiences collectively work together and resist heteronormativity with frivolity.

### Storytelling the Everyday

The LGBT YouTubers adopt various YouTube practices, often from nonqueer YouTubers, and they do not necessarily limit themselves to their sexuality. “Storytelling the everyday” is one of the media practices that content creators commonly employ (Reade 2020). Content creators broadcast their everyday lives and share private and personal details with their audiences and followers, which help them perform authenticity and build intimacy with them (Reade 2020; King-O’Riain 2020). The storytelling practice is also found among the LGBT YouTubers, but often in relation to their nonheterosexual identities. It has an additional function for the LGBT YouTubers, in that it helps liberate themselves from the “queer markers” by interacting with their audiences/followers with solidarity.

Rangoongo, who runs a YouTube channel as an HIV-positive gay person, says that live streaming provides an avenue to vent his thoughts and feelings and a way to feel intimacy and solidarity with others in the same situation. During live streaming, not only does he reveal his secret—HIV-positive status—but also he shares his mundane daily life with audiences, such as his work, his college life, and even his dinner menu. The storytelling during live streaming allows Rangoongo and his audiences to put their “ordinariness”

back into their lives, which has not been conventionally appreciated for gay men by the dominant HIV/gay stigma in the society. The storytelling is reciprocally practiced both by the YouTubers and audiences and followers, in a manner that the audience/followers share their personal stories and concerns about identity, and the streamers often play as counselors by listening to the stories, suggesting tips and solutions to handle issues. In turn, queer live streaming functions as a friend community where people forge a sense of intimate connection; get to know each other deeply, including very private relationships; and provide emotional support.

However, to make live streaming an intimate community, both audiences and streamers are required to practice the “emotion work” (Hochschild 1979) of managing their feelings within the broader YouTube ecology. Content creators must present themselves as friendly and intimate and manage their feelings so as not to interrupt the *flow* of their content (Abidin 2017; Reade 2020). This emotion work may be present for many YouTubers in general, but is doubly so for LGBT YouTubers because of Korean society’s dominant anti-queer sentiment. For instance, the male gay YouTuber KimDdolddol responds very gently, not showing any feeling or emotion, to homophobic comments that regularly appear during live streaming: (in response to the comment “you dirty faggot”) “You cannot say ‘dirty’ to a person, I look pretty today. I did my hair today and am wearing a beautiful suit. Please don’t say like that, okay?” (KimDdolddol 2020). Likewise, the LGBT YouTubers in my data tend to lay bare their personal feelings during live streaming and manage any controversial issues of their LGBT identities on the personal levels, so as not to disturb their audience or disrupt their streaming.

### Performing Queer Gigs

The LGBT YouTubers also perform unusual, hilarious, and ridiculous gigs around their sexuality, which I call “queer gigs.” Their gigs aim to create an intimate and humorous atmosphere throughout their live streaming to generate attention, and to curate their LGBT identity in their own way against social stigmas and stereotypes. Many LGBT YouTubers echo in the interviews that LGBT YouTube is already a “red ocean,” so they must try various things to compete for attention, especially given that they all live stream around the same time at night (8 p.m. to 12 a.m.). By performing something memorable and fun to watch, like performing androgynous or

feminine K-pop dance routines (see Oh and Oh 2017), or something absurd, like playing a recorder with your nose, the LGBT YouTubers establish their channel brands and have their audiences *settled* in their branded channels.

Yejiju is a famous lesbian YouTuber known for her hilarious queer gigs. Among various funny things that she shows during her live streaming, her impromptu show is notable. For example, she sings her own song, *yeojohma* [여총마, an abbreviation of “don’t love women” (여자 좋아하지 마세요)], which sarcastically criticizes heteronormativity, which now plays as a jingle with her videos. During her live streaming one day in 2020, she learned that there was a homophobic program from a church that aimed to “cure homosexuality.” To make fun of the program, she suggested, “Then we can make and sing a song there,” simply repeating the homophobic narrative “don’t love women,” but finishing the song with a punchline “please don’t love women, because those women are all mine” (Yejiju 2020c). By sarcastically reversing the homophobic narrative, she resists heteronormativity with frivolity. The counternarrative against homophobia is elevated to more humorous and visible levels as she often performs this gig in variations, such as dancing in safety vests and holding police light sticks as if she is a police force who protects lesbians from homophobic Christians (figure 9.1).

Notably, her frivolous queer gig is sometimes performed *collectively* with her fans—whom she nicknames “ladies”—through live streaming as her



**Figure 9.1**

Screengrab of Yejiju’s *yeojohma* dance with police sticks (Yejiju 2020a).



fan-audiences actively participate in making her live streaming queer content rather than just passively consuming it. Yejiju's fan-audiences make various versions of the song "Don't Love Women," including a piano version, a Christmas carol version, a jazz version, and a dance club version, and amplify her original content and counternarrative message as Yejiju uploads them to her channel.

Similarly, Yejiju's fan-audiences participate in other queer gigs through the subsection of live streaming. Every other Wednesday, Yejiju runs a subsection where her audiences send random pictures of their ordinary lives and Yejiju guesses their sexual orientations by looking at the pictures. For instance, one audience member sends a picture of an ice cream treat and Yejiju guesses that she is a lesbian, as a small part of the ice cream looks like the English capital "L," signifying her lesbian identity (Yejiju 2020b). By participating in the absurd but hilarious quiz content, the fan-audiences also challenge heteronormative essentialism and prove that "queers are everywhere."

However, since these gigs are dependent on one's creative abilities, not many LGBT YouTubers can develop funny queer gigs and maintain high view counts for years. Many LGBT YouTubers in the interviews state that they have many worries about how to manage their live streaming content, how to expand their viewership, and how not to lose their subscribers. While their nonnormative LGBT brands can yield a number of views and subscribers relatively easily at the beginning, those without the creativity to develop unique queer gigs are likely to fall behind their YouTube competition and may not gain much profit from their work. For this reason, some LGBT YouTubers have temporarily left YouTube live streaming or made their content private and redefined their live streaming as an intimate place for just their best friends (e.g., Yeol Lee 2020).

### ***Ssulpulgi*: Unraveling Their Queer Stories**

Some of the LGBT YouTubers "sell" their queer stories during live streaming through another queer media practice, *ssulpulgi*. *Ssulpulgi* is a kind of gig that entertains audiences with their glib ability. *Ssul* [썰] is a Korean vernacular that refers to someone's unusual anecdote. People on the internet use expressions like *ssulpulgi* [썰풀기] or *ssulpunda* [썰폰다] when they relate their anecdotes to draw people's attention, which is widely found in the AfreecaTV live streaming content and *yinyeoo* culture. Live streamers tell humorous monologues and sexual jokes as if they are doing stand-up

shows; and audiences donate money when the stories are funny or the streamers respond to their requests for *ssuls* (Kim 2017; Song 2018).

Queer *ssulpulgi* is somewhat different from other queer live streaming practices mentioned here, in that those queer *ssuls* instigate audiences' curiosity with sensational topics as to LGBT sexuality and bodies, rather than encouraging audiences' participation. It can also work as a double-edged sword within *yingyeo* culture, where the number of views and the amount of donations are determined by how sensational and provocative the content is (Kim 2017). Some popular LGBT YouTubers who have more than 100,000 subscribers and do live streaming both on YouTube and AfreecaTV practice *ssulpulgi* as a way of selling their identities as their brands to attract people's attention. YouTubers like Pungja and Ggodja, who identify as trans women, are the best examples.

Pungja is one of the most successful trans-identified YouTubers, recording 506,000 subscribers as of January 2021. She is known for her *ssulpulgi*, wherein she tells funny stories about her life as a trans woman. Her *ssuls* include her experience at transgender bars, her coming out to her boyfriend's parents, and her close friend's mistreatment of her as an exotic sex toy. During *ssulpulgi*, she uses vulgar and straightforward language and profanity to vividly deliver her feelings of anger, fear, and frustration that she experienced when her sexual identity was stigmatized and sexualized. During her narration of her queer anecdotes, *ssulpulgi*, audiences also attend to her stories, get upset and feel bad for her, and criticize patriarchy and heteronormativity: "do they have a trans-friend as an accessory? I'm so pissed off!" (PungjaTelevi 2020b); "trans identity isn't a sin ㅋㅋㅋ [crying emoji in Korean]" (PungjaTelevi 2020a).

Through Pungja's unique *ssuls*, Pungja and their audiences gather and develop a sense of solidarity against transphobia, while Pungja herself accrues views and donations. Indeed, when Pungja shares her *ssuls*, the more resonating and funnier they are as to her trans identity, the more donations she tends to receive from her audiences. While her trans woman *ssuls* spark discussions about stigmas against trans people and criticize the working of heteronormativity in our personal relationships, they can also be used as clickbait to stimulate people's curiosity about unknown and exotic queer stories, in line with the old media convention of exoticizing sexual minorities in Korea (Jin Lee 2013).

Ggodja is also popular for her *ssulpulgi* gigs—particularly *ssuls* around sex. Her *ssulpulgi* content covers her confirmation surgery, her work experience in brothels, and her getting several plastic surgeries, including breast enhancement and nose reconstruction. Although her *ssuls* illuminate the distressing reality of how trans women are sexually objectified and how difficult it is for them to continue their lives in the face of sexual stigmas, her *ssuls* are mostly practiced as a way of sexualizing her trans body. For example, her most viewed content (over 280,000 views as of December 2021) tells how she masturbates and how different her masturbation is after the surgery: “[After transition] it becomes complicated, I need to prepare a lot and use both hands to have an orgasm. But when I was a man, it’s so easy, you just hold and shake yours—aargh!” (Ggodja 2020). When she tells the *ssuls* about her trans body, it is almost impossible to read comments on the live chat screen as many people comment with excitement and donate money so they can hear more. During live streaming, the queer solidarity that is often found in other YouTubers’ queer live streaming content is rarely seen; Ggodja and her audiences only interact via donations, in that she tells her *ssuls* and people send her money to hear more sex-related stories and jokes, in which queer reality and resistance are overshadowed by the pleasure-seeking *yingyeo* culture.

When social norms and morals are transgressed for instant pleasure and fun in *yingyeo* culture, such transgressive acts often entail today’s online hate discourse and online sexual assaults targeted at social minorities (Kim 2017; Song 2018). Within this context, Ggodja’s trans body is consumed as an exotic item of live streaming. She presents her body as a bizarre object that is constantly molded into an artificial woman through ongoing plastic surgeries. This is done not only through *ssuls* about her confirmation surgery, but also through visual presentations of herself; she constantly appears on screen with a swollen face with bandages and bruises from ongoing cosmetic surgeries. As she appears as an exotic trans body in this manner, some audiences explicitly express their desire, saying “[her vagina] must look sexy since it’s artificially made,” and donate money to her via Super Chats. She then continues to illustrate the look of her genitals, aware of the audiences’ positive reactions and continued donations. As her trans body functions as clickbait content and spectacle that can be looked at in exchange for money, queer politics in queer live streaming, such as community-building

and resistance, is broadly dismissed by society yet consumed for *yingyeo* pleasure and humor.

### Conclusion

Through various gigs, LGBT YouTubers occupy live streaming space as a queer community. By storytelling about their everyday experiences, the LGBT YouTubers and their audiences find intimacy, remain connected, and casually check up on each other to lend support. To attract attention and win more views in the competition of queer live streaming, LGBT YouTubers further develop their own queer gigs by satirizing homophobia. By participating in the gigs that YouTubers are doing, fan-audiences also help live streaming continue smoothly, which fundamentally and frivolously resists heteronormative essentialism. *Ssulpulgi* content also provides a queer place of destabilizing heteronormativity and raising queer awareness.

However, as live streaming is also run through the monetary donation system and governed by broader sociocultural principles, including attention economy and *yingyeo* culture, such resistant queer live streaming may end up reinforcing the dominant heteronormative perspective, which consumes queerness as an absurd and exotic flavor for fun and pleasure. In the money donation systems that many LGBT YouTubers depend on for their living, queer bodies are often displayed on YouTube as spectacles to watch, responding to audiences' demands in *yingyeo* culture. No matter how queer and resistant queer gigs are, they are often decontextualized but consumed for pleasure and fun.

A few famous trans YouTubers were embroiled in a scandal in 2019 when a rumor about their prostitution spread online. Some of them derived fresh content from such rumors and practiced *ssulpulgi* about the reality of trans bars and brothels, all of which resulted in controversies but yielded profitable outcomes in terms of view counts, donations, and comments. While the visibility of LGBT YouTubers has increased thanks to such scandals and media personalities like Ggodja, it is doubtful whether this visibility can raise queer awareness and help other sexual minorities come out of the closet.

I conclude this chapter by citing trans human rights activist Edhi's comment from an interview. As a counselor of trans youths at the LGBTQ Youth Crisis Support Center, DDing Dong, she is skeptical of the increased visibility of queer YouTubers because "LGBT youths are significantly affected

by these YouTubers. And when these YouTubers just talk about their experiences with prostitution, the LGBT youths feel frustrated, thinking that the only job available to them is still selling sex." Although friendly, funny, and bizarre queer live streams allow sexual minorities to construct their subcultures, when they expand and are incorporated within the money-centered and attention-seeking mainstream culture, such subcultural characteristics of resistance and politics are superficially consumed. Then where is safe for sexual minorities to find intimacy and feel connected with a sense of liveness? Considering the increasing popularity of LGBT live streaming content among queer and nonqueer youths, it is urgent to discuss what protective measures we can develop to maintain LGBT live streaming as a safe queer place and how we can help LGBT people on social media exercise their queer creativity.

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# Real Life in Real Time

## Live Streaming Culture

**Edited by:** Johanna Brewer, Bo Ruberg, Amanda L. L. Cullen, Christopher J. Persaud

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