

Evolution of PC Bangs: Traditions and Trends in South Korea

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The “PC bang” concept has accompanied games research since the early 2000s, especially in studies of Asian gaming cultures (Stewart & Choi 2003). Regardless of the word’s wide-ranging implication that is somewhat comparable to those of Western “internet cafés,” the PC bang has always been characterized by its relation to gaming in general and online gaming in particular (e.g. Huhh 2009). Meanwhile, as gaming spaces, PC bangs have been found to operate simultaneously as third places that contribute essentially to young people’s social interactions and relationships (e.g. Chee 2012). In the present study, based on the fieldwork of three months in Seoul’s PC bangs (2018) and a native analysis of related local news/research reports over the same year, we add to those earlier scrutinies by providing a look at the changes and modifications of contemporary PC bang culture in South Korea.

Among South Korean teen gamers of all platforms, 43.5% visited a PC bang more than once a week in 2018 (KOCCA 2018). Compared to three years before (26.7%), the number has increased significantly (KOCCA 2015). The explanation we offer for this climb is associated to the snowballing trend of turning PC bangs from gaming dominated spaces into (even) more general entertainment centers. Says a gamer of age 28 in an interview with a South Korean newspaper: “I used to come to the PC bang only to play games, but nowadays it’s a place for me to rest when I want to clear my head, seating in a comfortable chair and watching movies and dramas, in addition to gaming” (Yoon, 2018). Along with the proliferation of technologies that enable and support such mixed media consumption, the modern PC bang is often also a movie theater, concert hall, and an online lounge with other types of mediated relaxation.

As reactions to (and examples of) the changes in question, Riot Games’ LoL Park PC bang shares the space with the café, exhibition area, and the LCK arena (esports stadium). Jooyontech, a computer hardware brand established in 1988, launched a VRiz PC Café franchise to combine the concept with a “VR bang” (that used to be a separate unit from the PC bang). In turn, Afreeca TV, a notable live-streaming platform, has placed open BJ studios in its franchise PC bangs, and PC Taurant (a new PC bang brand) has become known for its own established restaurant. Following

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the above, various individual PC bangs have joined these transformation trends with advanced snack bars, high-quality food, BJ booths for live-streamers, esports section/screens for local events, and community gatherings for watching broadcasts, VR bangs, music bangs, arcade game machines, coin-lockers, and so on.

One of the abovementioned additions, food, deserves extra attention. According to industry sources (Kim, 2017; Ko, 2018; Jung, 2019), until recently, the most important criteria for selecting the PC bang used to be the computer (CPU, memory, graphics card, etc.) in relation to entry price. However, as the requirements of computer specs have nowadays been lowered down within the titles that are popular (in South Korea), a growing number of PC bangs now make most of the "eating out" as a strategy to differentiate themselves in the businesses. As an interviewed PC bang worker notes: "There are more than 40 types of food that can be ordered from the place, such as pork belly rice, soy sauce noodles, pizza, and pasta. I do not use frozen cooked food at all, so even local housewives often come to buy meals in the evening" (Kim, 2018).

In the PC bang, the order is commonly made digitally via the individual PC. Immediately the order displays on the computer at the counter, and the staff member cooks and brings the food to the seats. At the same time, various PC bangs provide external delivery. Unlike most of the local restaurants, PC bangs are never closed, which enables them to provide 24-hour food service with relatively low pricing. As some PC bangs have thus come to be known for their menus, the mukbang phenomenon (live-streamed eating) has expanded to cover PC bang food. Famous YouTube creators such as Bantz have presented PC bang mukbangs, which again encourages viewers to visit the PC bangs more—yet not to play games, but to taste food. A local reporter narrates: "When I entered the kitchen, various vegetables, shrimp, squid, and mussels were packed side by side in a large freezer for business use. They were ingredients for Bibim noodles and ramen. The prices range from 2000 to 5000 won, which is somewhat cheaper than regular restaurants, so more and more people are looking for this dish to eat. Middle and high school students order homemade hamburgers and Bibim noodles, and 30 and 40 workers usually order rice bowls, Katsu and so on" (Kim 2018).

For context, South Korea is currently witnessing an accelerated enlargement and gentrification of physical spaces to accommodate diversifications of purpose. Such changes, which are also deeply related to present politico-economic factors—such as recent relaxations of related government regulations in effort to once again invigorate Korea's gaming empire (see Jin 2010) contra the global gaming trends that expand beyond the "game-proper" culture—are leading to an increased exposure of the PC bangs in traditional media outlets. Accordingly, the PC bangs have turned into an everyday space from a subculture. The young generation, in particular, has come to understand the PC bang not merely as a place of play, but also as a popular leisure zone in urban space that enables time with friends with the littlest investment possible yet with great convenience and variety. As such, our study evidences the naturalization of gaming outside the West (cf. Kirkpatrick 2014) by showing how videogame play is merging with other forms of mundane culture and, along the way, becoming harder to distinguish and stigmatize.

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