

## Korean Gay Men's Daily Life and Fashion

Korean Gay  
Men's Daily  
Life and Fashion

Hana Lee · Yoon-Jung Lee

Ph.D. Candidate, Department of Human Ecology, Korea University Graduate School, Seoul, Korea

Professor, Department of Home Economics Education, Korea University, Seoul, Korea

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**Abstract** *The primary purpose of this study is to explore the daily lives of gay men and assess their interests in fashion and appearance management with the goal of better understanding the roles or meanings of fashion in their lives. In-depth interview method was adopted and the responses were analyzed qualitatively. Six homosexual men were interviewed, and the outcome of each conversation was recorded and analyzed; each man had a different background and thus showed different behavioral patterns. The life patterns distinct to Korean gays, the importance the highly patriarchal society places on family lineage and mandatory military service, for example, were discussed. Even though the interviewees asserted that their interests in fashion is not related to their sexual orientation, fashion was utilized as a means of self-expression by these gay men.*

**Key words** *Fashion, Homosexual, Gay, South Korea, Daily Life*

### **Introduction**

In the U.S. or Western Europe, homosexuals have explicitly expressed their sexuality, forming a unique culture of their own. By the 20th century, they positioned themselves as a major subculture. As a result, since the beginning of the 21st century, homosexuality has been widely accepted in some cultural domains, including in fashion, music, and design, to the extent that it has come to be considered a part of the mainstream culture (Hovey, 2007). With the heightened interest in this new culture, in-depth academic research on homosexuality has been published. Literature on gay men's fashion in the U.S. or Western Europe has revealed that there are many trendsetters among gay men and heterosexuals who try to express their identities through fashion statements (Fischer, 1997; Snezek, 1986; Rudd, 1996). Homosexuals are also known to be more affluent with expensive taste and a hedonistic lifestyle, and thus potential consumers of many cultural products including fashion, theatre, art, and gourmet food (Braun, Cleff, & Walter, 2015). In the body of literature, it was assumed that gay men's interests in fashion and appearance management as a result of their marginalized position in society, this leads to a question of whether this holds true for gay individuals in non-Western countries as well.

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*Corresponding Author: Yoon-Jung Lee, E-mail: yleehe@korea.ac.kr*

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Asian countries including South Korea—in which homosexuality has long been rejected from the society because it was considered abnormal—could no longer deny gay culture, and social interest in this subculture is increasing. By the late 2000s, it has become easier to find portrayals of gay individuals in TV dramas and other media in South Korea. This social group, however, albeit their increased representation in media, seems to be still social invisible and it is hard to come across a gay individual in “real life.” Previous research on homosexuality and the homosexual in South Korea have mostly focused on human rights issues of sexual minorities (Hong, 2009; Kong, Oh, & No, 2002), and only a few studies examined gay men’s clothing behavior in South Korea (Jeon, Lee, & Choi, 2000; J. Lee, Shin, Kim, & Ha, 2003). For example, Jeon et al. (2000) focused on the characteristics of homosexual men’s clothing using a survey method; this study makes an important contribution, in that it regarded homosexuality as a subculture that affects the fashion scene and attempted to infer generalizable conclusions. However, its limitation was that they failed to come to a consistent conclusion due to the vastly diverse responses. J. Lee et al. (2003) compared the clothing behavior of homosexuals to that of heterosexuals. In this study, so-called ‘tops’ and ‘bottoms’ among heterosexuals, which hold the male and female roles, respectively were differentiated and compared. However, the practice of differentiating tops from bottoms and assigning male and female roles to homosexuals was criticized for studying homosexuals’ experience based on heterosexuals’ standards. The researchers also suggested at the end that homosexuals’ clothing behavior needed to be studied in greater detail. The current study aimed at supplementing the previous studies on homosexual men in South Korea.

The primary purpose of this study is to explore the daily lives of gay men and assess their interests in fashion and grooming with the goal of better understanding the roles or meanings of fashion in their lives. In-depth interview method was adopted because when adequate rapport is formed, this method is expected to help address the sensitivities of their personal lives. Six homosexual men in South Korea were interviewed, and their responses were qualitatively analyzed for the purpose of tapping into the life of Korean homosexual men. This study is expected to provide glimpse into the daily lives of Korean gay men and their fashion behaviors, of which little is known to academia.

### ***Literature Review***

#### **Gay subculture and fashion**

According to Hovey (2007), the sexual liberation movement of the 1960s led to a countercultural rejection of established sexual and gender norms, particularly in the urban areas of North and South America, Europe, Australia, and South Africa. Many subcultures representing non-normative sexuality increased dramatically, and fashion and gestures were used as means of cultural expression by these subcultures (Hovey, 2007; Schofield & Schmidt, 2005). Certain images of homosexual men have long been developed. In the West, in particular, homosexual men have been studied in terms of self-expression, consumption, production, identity formation, and as a niche market (Visconti, 2008). Many studies found styles unique and indigenous to gay communities, which separate homosexual from heterosexual men

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(Rudd, 1996). Homosexual men are seen as a trendsetting subgroup that is influential with other consumers (Elliott, 1990): their style influences or even guides fads in heterosexual male communities. Such gay dress and appearance were interpreted as a means of nonverbal communication which systematically transforms the information about the wearer (Sha, Aung, Londerville, & Ralston, 2007). According to Cole (2000), many of the homosexual utilized dress as a means of self-expression, may it not be the expression of their sexual identity.

Subcultures tend to have their own language and ways of expression, which often utilizes style, clothing, and social customs (Hovey, 2007; Rudd, 1996). Subcultures such as teddy boys, mods, hippies, and punks have all developed unique ways of dress, which display their identities. In a cultural environment that is accepting of differences, gay communities also have used their attire and appearance to express themselves. The visual stereotypes of homosexuals include that they have sleek and muscular bodies and tattoos and wear dandy suits, tightly fitting T-shirts, or an earring. Fashion not only serves as gay men's way of showing their attractiveness but also works as a communication method. For example, the rainbow flag, created by Gilbert Baker, is a symbol of life, healing, the sun, nature, art, and the soul for homosexuals, and it is often seen during festivals celebrating gay culture (J. Lee et al., 2003). Their known fashion features have significant meaning in that they help gay men recognize each other without verbal expression.

The literature on gay subculture in the U.S. or Europe pays attention to not only how different gay consumers are from heterosexual consumers in terms of fashion consumers (Reilly et al., 2008), but also is focusing on the diversity among subcultural markets within gay community (Kates, 2002; Aung & Sha, 2016). The literature on gay subculture and their style as ways of expression, however, has been developed basically in the U.S. or Western Europe, and little research has been conducted in Asian countries. Considering that Asian countries, such as Korea, have very different social and cultural environments than where previous research has been conducted, it would be worthwhile to examine the role of fashion in identity formation or social interaction in South Korean gay communities.

### **Sexual identity of gay men**

According to scholars, the sexual identity formation of homosexual men takes place in distinct stages (Brady & Busse, 1994; Cass, 1979; Troiden, 1989), which are related to the personal psychological thoughts about coming out. Cass (1979) proposed a six-stage model, and building on to Cass's work, Troiden (1989) suggested a four-stage model and Brady and Buss (1994) suggested a two-stage model. These models propose that an individual progress through a series of developmental stages, and the process generally begins with an initial awareness of same-sex attraction, followed by same-sex sexual experience, self-labeling, self-disclosure, and eventually, adoption of a positive gay identity. Progression through these stages is driven by the desire to establish unity between the individual's self-perception and environment (Cass, 1979); the nature of the interactions between individual gay men and the gay community evolves alongside this progression.

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In comparison, Hsieh and Wu (2011) who studied Taiwanese gays proposed a seven-stage model of identity formation in a consumer culture, asserting that they come out as gay as their ego identity and social identity overlap in the process of realizing their sexual identity. The identity formation process was considered to take bidirectional process, oscillating back and forth like a pendulum (Yoshida, 1993), in that individuals stop progressing or move backward to previous attempts in response to dynamic social influences. Personal psychological state and social limitations are considered in this process, and the roles of gay-identity-enabling consumption were noted on each stage.

The seven steps suggested by Hsieh and Wu (2011) are: identity discovery, identity disclosure, identity disposal, identity construction, identity maintenance, identity latency, and identity reconstruction. Individuals on the stages of identity discovery and identity disclosure realize their emerging homosexual orientation but have perceived the cognitive dissonance, as they ascribe the negative trait of being homosexual to oneself. Identity discovery involves invisible consumption through virtual platforms, searching for gay-related information, and cultivation of private gay identity. Gay men at the identity disclosure stage engage in discreet gay-identity-enabling consumption, which signal their identity to certain others under specific conditions. After disclosing their identity to other homosexuals, if received affirming feedbacks, individuals expand their social networks and increase socialization and immersion into the inner circle. In this stage, gay men suppress gay-identity-enabling consumption and withdrawal from the inner circles of their social networks.

On the stages of identity construction and identity maintenance, individuals recognize that homosexuality is a fundamental aspect of their character. Consonance can only be achieved by identifying with the gay community, where homosexuality is the norm. At these stages, individuals have gone through identity acceptance (Cass, 1979) and now view homosexuality as a normal way of life. At this point, individuals tend to avoid interactions with heterosexual people as a means of minimizing conflicts and nonconformance. In contrast, increasing involvement with the gay subculture validates and normalizes their homosexuality. Interactions with other gay men provide individuals with support to cope with feelings of alienation from the heterosexual world. Identity construction of gay men, who increasingly engage in gay-identity-enabling consumption and extend the inner circles of their social networks, reflects the stereotyped gay subcultural ethos. Gay men on the stage of identity maintenance continuously adjust their gay-identity-enabling consumption, emphasizing personal characteristics and status within the gay community.

If interactions within the gay subculture are not affirming in terms of pleasure or esteem building, the individual ceases or reduces the frequency of identity-related activities and consumption behavior. This is when identity latency occurs. Gay men in the stage of identity latency show reduced gay-identity-enabling consumption and withdrawal from the inner circles of their social networks but increased consumption of items that reduce stress caused by aging. Attempts at identity reconstruction occur when individuals who receive gay-identity-disconfirming feedback are retained in gay social networks and continue to engage in related activities. To achieve the desired feedback from others in the community, individuals reconstruct their identity by adjusting their consumption activities. In the stage of identity re-

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construction, gay men change their gay-identity-enabling consumption as a result of disconfirming feedback from individual others and society. They also change their gay-identity-enabling consumption by engaging in more family-related consumption and balancing between homosexual and heterosexual network development.

This model seems to be more applicable to Korean situation, because Taiwanese and Korean cultures commonly have heavy Confucian influence. Since this model explains identity formation in terms of consumer culture, however, Hsieh and Wu (2011) warned that these steps may not be applicable to the *Kulturkreise* wherein gay culture does not display any particular consumer patterns.

### Gay culture in Korea

In Asian countries, particularly in Korea (which have historically been heavily influenced by Confucianism), social attitudes toward homosexual men differ from those in Western Europe or the U.S. The family-orientation and patriarchal culture provided no room for homosexuality (M. S. Lee, 2001; Wong & Tang, 2004). In South Asian countries, having to get married, bear children, and raise a family is an enormous burden for homosexual men (McKeown, Nelson, Anderson, Low, & Elford, 2010). The overarching culture stigmatized and oppressed homosexual men and they had to hide their sexual identity in order to survive. Recently, however, with the Western influences, the numbers of homosexual men and their communities are increasing in Asian countries, and their cultural perceptions are changing. Human rights movements for gays are spreading, especially in countries where Western influence is high (Hsieh & Wu, 2011).

Since mid-2000s, the media and films in South Korea started to reveal interest in homosexuality, and movies such as *The King and the Clown* and *Ssanghwajeom* emerged. TV dramas such as *Personal Taste* and *Life Is Wonderful* also dealt with homosexuality, showing rising interest at the social level. However, despite that phenomenon, homosexuals still fear publicly acknowledging their true identity. In modern Korea, there is a social movement away from Confucian patriarchy, fueled by increased social participation of women. Women now proactively take diverse social roles and family culture have changed. Single-parent, multicultural families, and single-person households have also become commonly accepted, making society more diverse and embracing overall. However, social perceptions on homosexuals are still very negative. The reasons for this pattern are found in the traditional norms and social customs of Korean society. In Confucian-influenced cultures, where the firstborn son must carry on the family lineage, marriage and childbirth are among the most important virtues. There are many terms that refer to the firstborn son in the Korean language, which indicates how important blood ties are to Koreans. "Carrying on the family lineage" signifies not only continuation of the lineage but also the family-indigenous cross-generational culture. This affects the position of not only firstborn but all sons in Korean society. With their significance in most Korean families, it is hard for parents to accept that their sons are homosexual.

### *Research Methods*

The purpose of this study was to understand Korean gay men's daily lives and the role of fashion in their identity formation and social interaction. The qualitative interviews was used in order to study the lived experience of gay individuals in Korea and the data were analyzed using a phenomenological approach. Specific research questions are: first, to describe the daily lives and their clothing behavior of gay men in South Korea; and second, to explore the roles or meanings of fashion in their identity formation and social interaction.

For this study, the first author met with seven homosexual men aged between their late 20s and early 40s, living in Seoul and vicinity area to have conversations regarding their daily lives. The interviewees were recruited through an online gay community. They all revealed themselves as gay via the community. The interviews took place in fall, 2011, and McCracken's long interview method was implemented (1988). Each interview took about 1.5 to 2 hours and was recorded and transcribed with the consent of the interviewees. The findings of the study were then provided to the interviewees to confirm the validity of the interpretations. Six out of the seven interviewees have been quoted in this study, because one of the interviewees asked to exclude his interview later. The characteristics of the interviewees are summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1.**  
Summary of interviewee's characteristics

	age	Occupation	Coming out?	Family/Housing	Community Participation	Stable partner?	Gay Identity Formation Stagea
A	31	employed	No	Live with parents	Online	No	Identity discovery
B	26	Student	Partly	Dormitory	Online	No	Identity disclosure
C	30	Employed	Yes	Live with parents	On/offline	No	Identity construction
D	33	Employed	Yes	Live alone (single)	On/offline	Yes	Identity maintenance
E	35	Employed	No	Live with parents	Online	No	Identity discovery
F	42	Employed	Partly	Live alone (single)	On/offline	No	Identity construction

<sup>a</sup> Based on Hsieh and Wu (2011).

The interview was conducted as a semi-structured interviews and example questions asked during the interviews are shown in Table 2. The topics covered during the interview include the difficulty for gay men to live in Korean society, how they realized their sexual identity, their opinion on coming out, how interested they are in fashion and grooming, and how they manage their appearance. For daily life, included were questions such as what they do for living, who they socialize with, and if they have any past time hobbies, to examine their general interests and values. The term "fashion" was defined broadly for this study, to include clothing, accessories, grooming, as well as body-related concerns. The re-

spondents' general interests in fashion and appearance were pursued during the interviews.

**Table 2.**  
Interview questions

Topic	Example Questions
General questions related to identity formation stages:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Please tell me about yourself.</li> <li>· When was the time you start to think about your sexual identity?</li> <li>· What did you think or feel when you first realized your sexual identity?</li> <li>· Did you come out of the closet?</li> <li>· If so, what motivated you to tell others? If not, what kept you from telling others?</li> <li>· What were the difficulties you experienced in coming out?</li> <li>· What was the responses from people around you? Did you experience any difficulties after coming out?</li> </ul>
Lifestyle/community activity:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Do you live with your parents/family?</li> <li>· What are your past-time activities or hobbies? Who are the people you share the activities?</li> <li>· Do you involve in community activity?</li> <li>· Are you in relationship with someone?</li> <li>· What do you do when you meet with your partner? What do you do while you're dating?</li> </ul>
Fashion:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Are you interested in fashion? Are you concerned about your fashion style?</li> <li>· What are other appearance management practices you engage in on daily basis?</li> <li>· What do you think about your everyday outfit? Is there anything particular about it?</li> <li>· Do you think your sexual identity is related to how you dress?</li> <li>· What is your opinion or feeling about the general perception or preconception about gay men and fashion?</li> </ul>

The interviews were read several times and analyzed to identify recurrent themes. In the following section, the interview results are analyzed from two different perspectives: First, each of the interviews will be summarized, as each of them has different characteristics and backgrounds. Second, the common themes across the six interviews will be discussed to improve our overall understanding of gay men as a community and subcultural group.

## ***Results and Discussion***

### **Daily life of gay men in Korea**

*We are not different from heterosexual men.* The first interviewee, A, is 31-year-old with regular employment. He appeared in jeans, a sweatshirt, and sneakers and introduced himself as an average employee who started working after graduation. During the interview, he expressed his fear of being treated differently just because he is not straight, as well as the frustration he experienced by the general perceptions people hold about homosexual men. He mentioned the celebrities who have publicly come out

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and consequently gone out of business, and cited many other similar cases from the online homosexual community. He was uncertain whether he wanted to come out at all; better put, he was scared of it.

A also felt lonely, because he had to hide his true self even from his close friends, family, and acquaintances. He could not participate in offline gay community because he did not openly declared his sexual orientation. He was also suffering from constant fear in his daily activities; he felt he was becoming an “island” with the truth locked within him.

(My daily life) is not that much different from that of ordinary people. I wake up in the morning, go to work, get off work. The weekdays are pretty much the same, and then during the weekends, I meet up with friends, maybe play a bit of soccer. Given the situation, I do get lonely often. People often say to me that I look depressed...

Remember that time when that gay celebrity publicly came out and caused a huge controversy? Yes, they say he is doing well with his business, and he appears on TV now, but back then, many organizations wanted to ban him from appearing on TV. Watching things like that make me reconsider coming out.

More than anything, since I have not come out yet, it is hard for me to be a part of an offline gay community. It is true that my gay friends and the gay rights community have their door open, but it is not easy to reveal myself in front of others. So, I usually interact only with people online.

He was frustrated by discrimination, from which homosexual men had to suffer in most aspects of life, while they are only different from heterosexual men in terms of who they love. The difference, according to him, only exists in ideas or misconceptions people have. There is nothing particular about their fashion or lifestyle.

**Military service: the biggest challenge.** The second participant, B, was a 26-year-old college student who came to the interview in an average casual look, similar to many other students of his age. Physical appearance was not the only thing he shared with his peer students: employment was his biggest concern. Fear of potential employment discrimination stopped him from coming out. Two of his close high school friends were the only ones who knew his secret, but even confessing to them was not easy at all. He was raised in an average family, with both parents and an elder sister, and he recently moved to a dormitory. He even tried to date a female student during his first year in order to alter his sexual identity, only to realize it was not something he could change at will.

I am still a student, so I pretty much do what all college students do. It is hard to find a job, so I have much preparation to do. These days, I usually spend all my time in the library studying.

He was deeply worried about the mandatory military service. This reflects how troubling the mandatory system is for homosexual men.<sup>1)</sup> Homosexual men fear that their sexual orientation could be re-



vealed while serving in the military, but they cannot opt out of it. In Korean society, it is widely known that many consider homosexual people as abnormal and mentally ill; this is why homosexual men in Korea fear about their future mandatory military service. There are incidents that those in the military service commit suicide emotional distressed from the inability to reveal their sexual orientation in the male-dominated, hierarchical society (G. D. Lee, 2013).

I am yet to serve on the military, but they say you should not come out there. I read a newspaper article just recently about a man who was assaulted in the military [because of homophobia]. It is like that in the military. People cannot survive when they are discriminated and treated with contempt in such a closed space. They sometimes even treat you like a mental patient and send you off to the hospital.

**Religion and conformity.** The third interviewee, C, is in his 30s and has regular employment. He has revealed his sexual identity, but he does not feel completely free. Many have looked at him with curiosity and even approached him to ask about his personal life history. He experienced discriminatory attitudes during religious activities in his high school years, and he is now an atheist. He tried to find comfort through religious activities but was only left with wounds.

The conflict between religion and homosexuality is very serious in many cultures. In Korea, in particular, where Christianity is dominant in number, the social sentiment towards homosexual men is rather hostile. Historically, Christians in a ruling position suppressed homosexuality based on the verses in the Bible, blaming it for the rise of diseases like AIDS and syphilis and the dissolution of families (Eric, 2006).

The first time I realized that I was a bit different from others was when I was in high school. I used to attend church, so I asked this college student, who was the Sunday school teacher, for advice. He said that I should never go that way. Christianity has no choice but to be negative towards the homosexual orientation because of its doctrine. So, I hid it for a while. Then, after I was discharged from the army, I learned that my university had gay and lesbian group gatherings. I felt so relieved when I was able to meet with people like me and talk to them. After that, I decided to come out.

I try to be diligent and reliable at work, but I tend not to participate in get-togethers with my colleagues. I might say things I should not reveal when I am drunk, and people usually ask personal questions at those get-togethers; and it is difficult to answer them without revealing too much.

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- 1) Military service by homosexual men has been publicly discussed in the United States, where the service is not mandated. However, the official policy of the U.S. Army was, "Don't Ask, Don't Tell, Don't Pursue," which means that the service itself does not discriminate against anyone on the basis of the sexual identity, as long as it is kept personal and homosexual activity is not sought after while the individual is in service.

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He thought it unreasonable that society holds misconceptions or prejudices about homosexuality while admitting that he was being controlled by social perceptions after coming out. He found himself carefully designing and executing his behaviors, because any misdeeds by him might add to general misconceptions

***Overseas experience and its influence.*** The fourth interviewee, D, has lived in the U.S. with his family. He said he was thankful, because his parents accepted his sexual identity. He may have some trouble with his siblings, but his parents embraced him with never-ending love and care. He remained comparatively stable when conflicts involving sexual identity occurred, because he spent some of his youth in a country where personal freedom is more guaranteed.

I knew that my parents would be shocked but also understood. They both lived overseas for significant amount of time, and especially, they met quite a few gays in the U.S. Of course, they would not understand it 100%. It was a shock for them as well, but they did not get mad or yell at me; they tried to understand me. The person who had the hardest time with me coming out was probably my brother. He still has not gotten over it. That is why I left my parents' house and live alone: if I am at home, we are bound to clash.

His parents, who also lived in the U.S. for a long period, could also suffer less from their son's confusion. This may be a good example that shows the amount of exposure to homosexuals at an earlier stage of life affects one's accepting and embracing other homosexual people. In a society where coming out is more common, and homosexual couples are seen on the street more often, getting to know a homosexual person personally should be more common. However, in Korea, where homosexuals are virtually invisible, and homosexuals try to hide their identity, any homosexuality is taken as problematic.

***Patriarchism and the first-son being gay.*** The fifth interviewee, E, is in his 30s appeared at the interview in a dandy suit. He said he was having a trouble with his family. E did not seem to have any confidence or willingness to fight against the Korean custom—or the virtue, as considered by many—of being the first son: carrying on the family lineage. Due to Confucian influence, the firstborn son in a family is considered most important in Korea. He not only has to continue his family lineage but also take charge of family rituals. As long as this is widely accepted as standard, it is hard for any firstborn son in Korea to avoid the duty. Such difficulties are described even on TV shows, indicating how hard it is to overcome the tradition.

I still have not told my parents. They just think that I am too busy to meet a woman. I am the eldest son. All my younger siblings got married and have families, and I am the only one who is single, so my parents are even more anxious. However, I do not think I can handle the storm that would come after I tell them that I am gay. My siblings do not know either.

I think it was well depicted in that recent TV show. The title was *Life is Beautiful*, wasn't it? The oldest son on the show is gay, and he could not tell his grandparents. Some of his family members accepted him, mostly the women, but the men could not accept who he was. They became angry and said abusive words. In real life, it is worse; the show was in no way an exaggeration. You know, cursing at you.

The 2010 TV drama *Life Is Beautiful* was an instant hit due to its homosexual contents. The main gay couple, Gyeongsu and Taeseob, came out of the closet in the drama, and the whole process of coming out in the drama effectively depicts how difficult it is for a homosexual couple to live free from any type of social discrimination. Gyeongsu, who even got married to a woman and had a child, had divorced his wife. Taeseob, on the other hand, was living with his big, conservative family—which included his grandparents—and had to come out only partially. The two characters reflect actual present-day society. The drama also shows that female family members are more accepting than male ones. One cause of that discrepancy is thought to be that men tend to have stronger homophobia, while women feel more comfortable befriending homosexual women.

For this reason, in many cases fathers are the last ones to know about the sexual orientation of their homosexual sons. This is true not only in Korea but also in other countries that share Confucian culture, like Japan (Harada, 2002) or China (Ren, 2016). According to Ren (2016), young Chinese homosexuals hide their sexual orientation from their parents or close family, because they think their parents would not accept it.

**Weekend gay.** The sixth interviewee, F, was living a dual life. On weekdays, he was an average employee, but on weekends, he spent his time with his gay friends whom he found in an online community. This accentuates the importance of the online gay community, which also seems to cause social isolation in homosexual men.

There is the phrase “weekend gay”; it means that you are living a double life. You act straight on weekdays at work, and you are only gay when you meet people from offline communities on weekends. There are swim clubs, movie clubs, book clubs, and various kinds of clubs. You get to choose one that fits you.

**Common factors.** Among the six interviewees, two came out, and two partially did, while the other two did not at all. Homosexual men in Korean society are very reluctant, if not afraid, to come out. The reasons are simple: The society has long refused to accept them and homosexuals are stigmatized. Revealing one's true identity can be risky for homosexual men, because they may have to deal with the hatred and discriminations against them by their friends, family, and society in general. Korean society is not tolerant to changes or diversity. Homosexual men know this very well, and they also know themselves are a part of such changes or diversity. During the interview, they mentioned all sorts of negative reactions they anticipate to receive when coming out. On the society level, hostility and bias against ho-

homosexuality are criticized and the general attitude is changing. But on the personal level, individual gays still feel the discriminatory gazes.

Of course, I am afraid of the discriminatory glances towards me when I reveal myself, but more than that, the reason I am so careful of my daily behaviors is because I am afraid other people might find out and reject me without me even saying it. You know, I am afraid of being rejected. I am scared of being rejected by others when I am not ready for it. I am not yet ready to face the consequences. (E)

Social bias against homosexuality usually becomes more powerful as it is combined with pathology. Many think homosexual men are AIDS-infected or at least suffer from sexual or mental diseases. This makes their coming out even more difficult.

Because there is so much talk about STDs and AIDS, and to some degree, it is true. However... there are so many people who frown at you the moment you reveal you are gay, because they think all gay people are like that. They think gay bars are places in which promiscuity occurs, and they think gay people are mentally sick. (B)

The significance of the firstborn son in the patriarchal society of Korea was mentioned above. In this social atmosphere and tradition, it is difficult, if not impossible, to find a parent who would readily accept the fact that his/her son is homosexual. Frequently, even those who revealed their sexual identity could not help but hide it from their parents; neither could they handle the shock their parents would experience nor the conflicts with them that would arise afterwards. The social responsibilities of the firstborn son (i.e., carrying on the family lineage and taking charge of family rituals) make this even worse. However, in case of D – who lived in America for a long period with his parents – experience in a culture in which homosexuality is more common seemed to help them embrace the sudden change. This suggests that as society becomes more open to differences and diversity, discrimination and bias against homosexuality are likely to decrease.

People who have not gone through internal conflict after figuring out that they are “different” cannot even imagine the agony and hardship we endure. I truly applaud the courage of people who came out. I still blame myself whenever I think of my parents. (E)

Unlike other minority communities, homosexual communities are rarely open to the public. Many of their online communities are closed, and offline gatherings are usually limited to the Nakwon-dong area (S. Lee, 2007). Homosexual men in Korea seek someone similar to themselves from these communities and are in search of their true sexual identity. These are the primary functions of gay communities: social activities and identity affirmation.

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More than anything, since I have not come out yet, it is hard for me to participate in an offline community. . . . . So, I usually interact only with people online. (A)

It is a group of people who understand me more than anyone else. It mostly consists of people who have many similarities and share the same interests with me. (C)

It is a place that gives me psychological security. Man is a social animal, and those communities are types of societies. The group meets and goes drinking or bowling; there are also people who start relationships in the group. (D)

It is surely an attractive place, in the sense that I can meet other people who are like me, but I am still not ready to reveal myself in front of people. (E)

Homosexual men who greatly fear that their sexuality could be unwillingly revealed find comfort in gay communities. On weekdays, they live as a part of society, fulfilling everyday tasks, while on weekends, they do not hesitate to express their true selves as a part of undisclosed communities. They may feel guilty at leading a double life, but at least it gives them breathing room. It is significant that these limited places are the only outlets for homosexual men.

#### **Gay identity formation and fashion**

According to the interviews, their levels of interest in fashion differed from person to person depending on personal taste or situation. The social preconception that homosexual men are usually more fashion-sensitive and lead the trend, which has been argued and verified in Western society, also exists but has not always been confirmed in Korea. In general, homosexual men we interviewed were reluctant to agree that there is any meaningful difference between them and heterosexual men in terms of fashion, but it is just a stereotype that homosexuals are more fashion-oriented and have a queer sense of fashion style. By asserting that "we are not different," they expressed their distaste for discrimination and desire to be accepted. They stated clearly about it and asserted that the general idea that homosexual men are fashionable is a stereotype. For them, managing one's look is a common phenomenon rather than something peculiar to homosexual men. They cited the current heightened interest in grooming among heterosexual men.

It is easy for the majority to look at a minority group, choose an obvious characteristic, and use that to interpret the entire group rather than try to understand all of its aspects. That is why people develop stereotypes. I guess there is a stereotype that all gays must be fashionable, because there are many world-famous gay fashion designers. (A)

You know, people usually think that way, that we [gays] are fashionable and like peculiar outfits; but there are many people who are not like that. Just look at me, for instance; I only wear suits to work on weekdays. Since I do not really go out much on weekends, I am not really interested in clothes. I just want people to have a neat image of me. Further, is that not the case for everyone, not just us [gays]? Nobody wants to look messy. (C)

It has nothing to do with whether you are gay or not. Do all people not want to look good? Further, to look good, you want to dress nice. These days, it is not just gays; men in gen-

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eral are also very interested in fashion. They even have cosmetic surgeries. (D)

Appearance and fashion products may be considered identity-enabling consumption, and thus their clothing behavior seems to be related to the identity formation stages by Hsieh and Wu (2011). In terms of identity formation stage, A and E seemed to be in the identity discovery stage, in that they had emerging homosexual orientation yet have not come out because of fear of rejection. They are not engaged in any gay-identity-enabling consumption, and are still in cognitive dissonance. B is assessed to be in identity disclosure stage, because he let his close friends know about his sexual orientation. However, he is not in the process of fully accepting his identity or willing to publicly express it. In comparison, C and F are assessed to be in the identity construction stage. Even though C was not engaged in identity-enabling consumption, he was conscious about what his image as a gay would be to other people. F partially acknowledge his identity to only his acquaintances, but he studied other gay community members' appearance and consumption, and tried to conform to the norm. Finally, D was considered to be in identity maintenance stage. He seemed to feel relatively comfortable about his identity, view homosexuality as a normal way of life.

To be specific, among those gay individuals who openly acknowledged their sexual identity, however, there were evidence that their interest in fashion grew after coming out, or at least become conscious about how they look to others. Some of them, like C, are concerned about their image "as a gay" toward out-group people. They try to look good to others because their image can influence the image of gay in general. This may be partly attributable to the human instinct to make good impressions on others: homosexual men tend to be more sensitive to how others think of them, since coming out usually has a negative impact on their image. Thus, their interests in fashion and appearance can be considered not voluntary but partly forced upon them by imaginary pressures from others.

I did not care about clothes at all before, but since I came out, it seems that people pay attention to me a bit differently. Because of the stereotypes about gays, I became much more fashion-conscious. I try to look as "gentle" as possible. (C)

The more they are involved in gay community activities, they become influenced by gay communities and desire to assimilate with them. Hsieh and Wu (2011) also noted that individuals with identity construction and identity maintenance attempts have high levels of interaction with the gay community and are thus more likely to conform to the gay subcultural ethos and to reconstruct the meaning of gay identity-enabling consumption practices. Interviewee F, for example, who claimed himself to be a weekend gay, also suggested that someone who looks to become a member of a community or group chooses to make a likeable image, and the need leads them to develop fashion- or appearance-related sensitivity. He wanted to get involved with the community and desired a sense of belongingness. Thus, he sought the fashion or style that matched it. This often results in the similar fashions or a "wannabe" phenomenon. As a result, F actively developed an image of a fashion-conscious gay. He claimed that he

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started to manage his appearance with greater care after coming out.

When I look at people I meet through different communities, it seems there are many fashionable people. Thus, I pay a bit more attention to what I wear when going to weekend gatherings. I try to fit in and be more like them, just like when you are a student and tighten your uniform to fit in with the “cool” kids. (F)

The interviews revealed that homosexual men needed communities to which to belong; this made them readily accept the groups' behavioral patterns. They absorb culture in the process, which contributes to consolidating the identity and assimilating with the communities. This leads to psychological stability. Therefore, it seems that fashion facilitates gay individuals' conformity and integration with gay communities.

Whether due to the gay nature of fashion-consciousness or to the general social trend of interest in appearance management, the gay interviewees showed significant amount of interests in fashion and grooming. Interviewee D's accounts in particular, revealed that he had always been known for his unique fashion style among his acquaintances that made him pass as a gay. It is also notable from the following quote that homosexual men would stand out when they express their identity by means of special fashion items, colors, or silhouettes, due to the general perception is that fashion-sensitive men are usually homosexual.

I care very much about what I wear and how I look. Now, the people closest to me know; however, before, when no one knew, people were still asking me if I was gay. These days, whether you are a man or a woman, you get to wear whatever you want that shows off your taste, but when I was in my twenties, people were still very conservative. Even when you just wore a bright color, you stood out - you know, something colorful that is not white or black. (D)

As with other heterosexual men and women, concerns about face and body were mentioned by these homosexual men. Increasing awareness of body shapes is also a factor. The muscle and fitness craze, which is related to the “Adonis complex” or men's obsession with physical appearance and body shapes, is affecting homosexual men as verified in the interviews with informants A and D.

Being in shape is just as important as looking good. When you are fat, you just look lazy and like you do not care about yourself. So, I watch my weight as much as I take care of the appearance of my face. (A)

These days, it is not just gays; men in general are also very interested in fashion. They even have cosmetic surgeries. If you want to dress well, you have to have a nice body. I am not really interested in becoming “buff,” but I do work out regularly so as not to gain weight. I get concerned, because I do have to go to dinners and get-togethers often. (D)

I take the most care of my face when it comes to looking attractive. I... also decide whether

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someone is attractive or not by their face. It is not about being overly handsome or not; it is about leaving a good impression. (F)

The increased interest in fashion among men is also strongly related to a certain property of post-modern society: From the deconstructivist point of view, decentralization is taking place, and the distinction between traditional male and female roles is blurred. The terms “androgynous,” “unisex,” and “metrosexual” signify that traditional gender distinctions are being deconstructed. In the midst of this phenomenon, the homosexual communities in the U.S. or Western Europe played important roles of resisting and questioning the gender distinctions. The fashion of gay subculture, represented by drag queens’ attire in particular, was a sartorial representation of their resistance to the mainstream gender dogmas. Thanks to the ‘metrosexual’ trend in the early 2000s, what used to be considered the gay subculture styles or appearance codes are now accepted into the mainstream of men’s fashion (Simpson, 2002). This may be considered a cultural appropriation by the main stream culture, which usually results in the death or evolution of the subculture (Goldstein-Gidoni, 2003). It was in this global circumstances that gay fashion and personal expression is wide-spread among Korean men. It seems the iconic style elements of gay appearance now lost its distinctively symbolic power for the Korean gays.

### ***Conclusions and Implications***

The purpose of this study was to tap into the daily lives of Korean gay individuals to examine the roles of fashion and appearance management in their identity formation and social interactions. A qualitative research method was adopted, with in-depth interviews because this method is expected to help address the sensitivities of their personal lives. Six interviews from gay individuals aged between 25 and 45, living in Seoul and vicinity area were conducted, and the daily life experience in relation to fashion and appearance management activities were analyzed from phenomenological perspective.

The interviewees of the current study asserted that homosexual men’s fashion and appearance traits are not visually distinct from those of heterosexuals. The distinct fashion and appearance characteristics of homosexuals, which have been considered an obvious development in Western cultures, were not apparent in Korea for various social and cultural reasons.

According to the stereotypic image of homosexual men, the use of clothing and grooming aids is more extensive among homosexual than heterosexual men, and there is a higher proportion of fashion innovators and opinion leaders among homosexual men. The homosexual men in Korea—at least who were interviewed for this study—, however, maintained their interest in fashion is not related to their sexual orientation, nor they are interested in expressing gay identity through dress. The Korean gays asserted that the idea of gay being more fashion-oriented is just a myth. For them, it was another stereotype that differentiates homosexuals from heterosexuals. They did not want the society to consider them to be special, and thus did not want to associate particular styles to being homosexual.

The daily lives of homosexual men in Korea may be characterized more by their closed nature



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than by any expression of identity. In general, the interviewed homosexual men experienced a degree of difficulty in revealing themselves due to many reasons. One interviewee asked to withdraw his story from the study. The mere idea of his secret identity being recorded and shared with others made him uncomfortable, even when anonymity was assured. This reluctance to reveal themselves is similar to those of other Asian countries; yet, Korean homosexual men experience more complicated situations due to the mandatory military service as well as the pressure by family lineage, which still strongly influence their lives. For this reason, homosexual men in Korea seem to segregate themselves in closed communities and communicate only among themselves. They have hidden themselves from the social frame in closed communities. It is probably due to this reluctance to be exposed, that they did not develop particular styles of fashion or appearance traits. Few forms of communication or expression through clothing and accessories were undertaken among Korean gays, unlike in Western society.

However, in personal expression of identity, fashion seems to have roles in individuals' daily lives, and their identity formation stage seem to be related to their interest in fashion. Just like Cole (2000) noted for Western gays, their levels of interest in fashion differed depending on personal taste or situation, but in general Korean gays were using dress as a means of self-expression, may it not be the expression of their sexual identity. Some of them said they had unique fashion style to begin with, and others mentioned they decidedly developed their sense of styles after coming out for self-expression. Participation in gay offline communities facilitated them to adopt gay styles. For example, some of the informants tried to conform to social notions of characteristically gay appearance and became conscious of their appearance in order to portray the image that is deemed 'correct.' On the contrary, some of them tried to deny such social notions by trying to assimilate with others. For both categories of informants, their appearance has become a means with which individuals shape and develop their gay identity by either accepting or defying the images provided by society.

The contribution of this study is that it explored the daily lives of gay individuals in South Korea, who have rarely been studied in previous literature and whose characteristics are relatively unknown. This study particularly focused on the roles of fashion and appearance in gay individuals' daily lives in helping them to accept and form their gay identities and interact with others. Understanding the fashion of gays is important in that gays are known to be lucrative market of many products because of their high interest in aesthetic and relatively high education and income levels, regardless of whether they came out of the closet (Braun, Cleff, & Walter, 2015; Hsieh & Wu, 2011). Understanding the life of gays would help the marketers of not only fashion products but also other cultural products such as foods, theaters, etc.

This study has implications for not only the understanding of gay culture as a minority subculture in Korea but also the understanding of fashion and appearance in human interaction. It was noted that high level of gay community engagement lead the gay individual to participate in the subcultural ethos and openly participate in developing gay identity, and fashion, as a form of identity-enabling consumption, can play a crucial role in identity formation. However, in the society where gay identity is rather concealed than declared and pursued, the role of fashion is relatively limited.

Even though this study has its own contribution to a deeper understanding of gay culture and fashion in South Korea, it also has limitations. The limitations of the study include the fact that only six interviews were conducted because of difficulties with interviewee recruitment. Also, the interviewees were in the relatively early stages of gay identity formation. Another limitation was that the interviews were conducted in 2011, and thus the interviews do not reflect the recent changes in Korean society. Considering that the society has become more openly accepting alternative sexual orientations, the activities of gay community may also be more active and lively, allowing easier access to gay individuals than the past. Interviews with gays in a later stage of identity construction, or with gays who are considered fashion leaders could generate much fuller understanding of gay fashion.

Additionally, the researcher who conducted the interview was not a gay and this could have been an obstacle in obtaining complete rapport. In future study, researchers may hire a homosexual interviewer to collect the insiders' perspective. Also, with other types of research methods, such as ethnography, increased understanding of gay culture may be possible through participant observation. Further, other sexual subcultural groups, e.g., lesbian or transgender, may also be studied to generate better understanding of contemporary homosexual culture.

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