

Masculinity in Gaming Communities : An Analysis of Costume Play Meme

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INTRODUCTION

Virtual worlds are not ideal spaces where gender equality is consistently upheld, and video games specifically expose disparities between genders (Yee, 2014; Song et al., 2017) in a variety of ways. Scholars have examined the culture of gamers as being male-dominated (Condis, 2018; Yoon & Kim, 2023). Online gaming communities are permeated with 'geek masculinity' (Condis, 2018), implying that the community is imbued with "subcultural guidelines for exhibiting masculinity" (Ibid., pp.15). They regularly express their masculinity by disliking anything that might be seen as feminine or homosexual (Ibid., pp.21). This is a common occurrence within the Korean gaming community, which is characterized by a hyper-masculine culture that consistently promotes men as the norm and women as the exception (Yoon & Kim, 2023).

In this paper, we investigate the masculine identity of the Korean gaming community through the lens of 'memefied' costume play. 'Memes' provide significant insights into the specific characteristics of group (Blackmore, 1999), as they are exchanged and propagated among the members (Nagle, 2017). The Korean gaming community has also embraced the culture of memes, and we intend to examine the community's attributes through a meme known as 'Goimul look'.

'Goimul' is a Korean term which literally means stagnant water. In gaming culture, it refers to someone who consistently spends a lot of time playing a specific game. To gamers, a 'Goimul' is an expert player with an advanced level, numerous items, and exceptional skills. Therefore, 'Goimul Look' pertains to the attire style of a skilled and capable 'Goimul' player. However, within the community, the 'Goimul Look' is considered abnormal attire, which can include wearing a provocative costume or featuring non-human characteristics, such as purple skin or additional limbs. The 'Goimul Look' typically perpetuates a stereotype of a muscular male character donning a revealing, fluorescent outfit with animal ears or tails. It is paradoxical that the 'Goimul' players, who hold significant influence in the gaming community, intentionally present themselves in peculiar way.

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Figure1: Examples of the ‘Goimul Look’

Dressing up in costumes can serve as a crucial avenue for self-expression in the gaming world. This form of play allows individuals to experiment with virtual identities and showcase their skills (Fron et al., 2007). Although costume play in gaming is often viewed as an identity free trial in a digital world (Turkle, 1997), it is also significantly impacted by power dynamics in the real world, particularly in competitive multiplayer games where dressing up is a means of exhibiting prowess (Fron et al., 2007). In this environment, players are anticipated to showcase their abilities, projecting a more authentic form of power. The ‘Goimul Look’ is a common occurrence in Massive Multiplayer Online (MMO) games, where users exhibit their costumes as an exhibition of status. It is important to note that the meme interacts with power dynamics, particularly regarding gender norms and masculinity.

METHODOLOGY

Our study analyzes online posts and associated comments containing the keyword ‘Goimul Look’ sourced from the 'DC Inside' January 1, 2020 to December 31, 2023. 'DC Inside' is one of the largest internet communities in South Korea. It is no exaggeration to say that much of Korean internet culture is derived from there, with numerous internet neologisms, memes being invented. The community has various subforums, many of which are video game themed. So, it's safe to say ‘DC Inside’ is also one of the largest gaming communities in South Korea, which makes it a useful resource for this research. We collected data from 610 articles using online scraping techniques and analyzed them in conjunction with the comments on each article.

RESULTS

The ‘Goimul Look’ meme points to two prominent themes with costumes. In some games, costumes indicate the strength of the players or the characters that they play in two ways. In some games, costumes are given to players under certain conditions - long playtimes, reaching certain levels, or completing difficult tasks. Wearing costumes that can only be obtained by spending a lot of time and resources indicates that the player is competent. Also, when costumes function as armor, they are directly involved in gameplay by increasing the strength of the game avatars. So, the higher level armor an avatar wears, the stronger the avatar becomes. But here is the paradox: ‘Goimuls’ tend to show their strength by not equipping armor. They deliberately

equip low-level armor, or walk naked, to show that they are strong enough to not need the aid of armor. By revealing their vulnerability, they boast of their strong masculinity. In other words, being vulnerable paradoxically shows that the player is powerful.

In some other games, costumes are merely styles, not directly involved in game play. But even here, 'Goimuls' show off their vulnerability in similar but slightly different ways. In games that allow a great deal of customization of character appearance, costumes don't really participate in gameplay because they are not rewarded under certain conditions, and they have no function other than to express the players themselves. Here, players highlight their vulnerability by abusively appropriating queer aesthetics. The community users often state that 'Goimul Looks' are like "gay", describing that they are "perverted" and "abnormal". They choose "unrealistic" skin colors for their male characters, such as pink, blue, or purple, and wear revealing or overly feminine costumes. Embodying queer aesthetics can be an expression of masculinity for them, as their self-assurance of heteronormative masculinity is so strong in the gaming community in Korea. They don't doubt each other's sexuality even if they dress like "gays". They can be "gay" as much as they want without being judged for their sexuality. In fact, being "gay" proves their masculinity because it shows that they are able to emphasize their vulnerability or queerness in a mocking way. Whether or not the costumes are directly related to the game play, the 'Goimul look' displays its vulnerability by appropriating queerness to emphasize its masculinity without any respect for vulnerable minorities, leading to the securing of heteronormativity in Korean gaming communities.

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