

# One Iced Americano Please: The Cultural and Social Function of Café Space in South Korea

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For my friends who came along with me on my café adventures, my mother for joining me in Korea and putting up with having a daughter with big wanderlust dreams, and everyone who has experienced the social culture of visiting a café

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# Preface

In the Summer of 2023, I arrived in Seoul, South Korea for the first time as an exchange student attending Yonsei University. Worried about starting at a new school, alone in a foreign country with barely enough Korean to get by, I did not know how I would navigate life abroad. However, as move-in day came and went and the first day of classes started, I met many others in similar positions to me. Socializing with people I just met was not as awkward as I thought it would be since we all had one thing in common. All of us came from nations all over the world just to have the opportunity to study in Seoul. Therefore, everyone I met was open to making friends.

On many occasions, I spent a lot of time getting to know the people who became my friends by going out into the city and sitting down at cafés. In those moments, we went from fellow students enrolled in the same university program to the ones we would reach out to immediately to go on new adventures throughout not only the city of Seoul, but the entire country of South Korea itself. In those cafés, sometimes I would sit with them for hours so engrossed in our conversation that time seemed to move almost too quickly. And this would be long after our drinks were finished and not even a crumb of dessert would be left on our plates. Back home in the United States, interactions like this are highly unusual. I never really had many opportunities to sit face to face with someone across the table and feel so at ease during a conversation where time almost stopped for us. People at home are always on the move and finding time to meet is quite a challenge. Oftentimes, all one gets is a short text message saying something along the lines of, “So sorry can’t make it!” However, Seoul is just as busy and chaotic as any mega city in the West. And yet, somehow taking the time to meet with friends,

family, or colleagues for a cup of coffee or a meal seems like a crucial part of most people's lives.

This led me to think about how the café space in South Korea has this effect on consumers and the role of café culture overall in the social lives of South Koreans. I felt like I went to a café almost every day I was in the country. It was routine when getting a meal with friends to go stop at a café or somewhere with dessert in general afterwards. From my observation, the idea of the café appeared to promote two things: social spaces to spend time with others and a joyful opportunity to experience aesthetic café culture that most westerners only get to see online. (Believe me when I say I stumbled upon many cafés centered around an interesting concept with many Instagrammable photo spots.)

With this dual focus in mind, I became interested in learning about why the café culture in South Korea is what it is like today and how integral these spaces are in social life. Would others feel the same impact from frequenting these establishments as I did? Or is there something more to the café's impact on Koreans than meets the eye? Through gatherings in these cafés, I made some of my closest friends, took an absurd number of photos of my food, spent way more money than I would at home, and even got to pet and feed a raccoon. There were even a couple of occasions when I ventured out solo and just sat in cafés alone perfectly content. However, what stayed with me the most after all these café visits was how much joy I felt. It was not necessarily because of the café itself but the experiences that occurred within that space.

I look back on my time in Korea and think of all the people I met, the places I got to go to, and the moments we shared together. Many of those moments were in a café setting. And while my Yonsei friends and I are back to being scattered across the globe, we still keep in touch every so often. I will cherish those moments spent in conversation around the café table for years

to come. I hope that by the end of this thesis, I gain a deeper understanding and appreciation for the uniqueness of the South Korean café culture as well as the commonality it shares with other café cultures around the world as a space for social interaction.

# Introduction

The café is not native to South Korea. In fact, when most people think of cafés, the first thing that comes to mind is probably Europe or a well-known coffee chain like Starbucks. As a New York City native, I constantly walk the streets of Midtown, Manhattan seeing people in their work clothes rushing into cafés to grab a cup of coffee and a quick bite to eat on the go before heading into the office. From the perspective of someone from the United States, it is interesting to see how the café culture is similar, but also different, in South Korea.

In this thesis, I will be examining the café space in general by examining three café types: The traditional old-style coffee/tea houses, theme cafés, and well-known local coffee chains. Each of these cafés have different social functions. For instance, as time passed, cafés in South Korea evolved to be more resemblant of the elegant, European-style café experience that many of us, who live in metropolitan areas, are familiar with. So, one question I will be examining is how each of these café types impact Korean social life and culture. (Note: When I use the term ‘Korean’ in this thesis, I am referring to South Korea unless it is in a historical context.)

Each chapter will focus on a different type of café and their respective social functions. Chapter One will focus on the traditional coffee houses called *dabangs* since these establishments mark the beginning of modern café culture in Korea. From the Japanese occupation through the Korean War and well into the 1980s, *dabangs* were one of the earliest examples of coffee houses in Korean modern history. While the number of *dabangs* has decreased since the rapid industrialization of Korea, there are a small number that are still in business today. *Dabangs* are not as refined and sophisticated as most contemporary cafés. In fact,

in the early days of *dabangs*, most of the clientele were “poor Korean artists”<sup>1</sup> who would sit down in these less than upscale cafés, drink a cup of coffee or tea, and discuss their art, music, and literature amongst each other. The general association that the public had of the *dabang* was a creative space where many of the country’s artworks of the time were born. I plan to further examine the social dynamics within *dabangs* and their evolution to catering to different social classes in later decades.

Chapter Two is centered on the concept of theme cafés. Unlike the *dabang*, this is the type of café where it is more about the experience of being at the café itself than socializing about personal matters and working. That is, the points of conversation are about the space itself. For example, South Korea has different types of animal cafés where customers can walk in to play with cats, dogs, or even more uncommon animals like meerkats or raccoons. There is usually a fee of one drink to enter, but the quality of beverage is not as high compared to a place that is meant to serve drinks. The experience the establishment sells is getting to interact with animals. However, there are other kinds of theme cafés that essentially have the same concept of promoting an experience. For example, *Greem café* in Seoul is a well-known 2D café where the interior is designed to look like a world out of a cartoon. Another example is the *Sanrio Lovers Club* which is a pop-up store and café dedicated to the Sanrio characters. In both these cafés, people visit for the aesthetics of the environment and for the unique experience of being there. (And of course to take photos to show to their friends on social media.)

The final chapter will focus on chain cafés in South Korea. Along with global brands like Starbucks Coffee, South Korea has many local café chains that all function similarly. Oftentimes, these establishments are functionally more similar to *dabangs* in the way that people will go to meet with each other or do work. Since South Korea’s rapid urbanization in the recent decades,

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<sup>1</sup> Lee, Jihyun. “The History of Dabang: The Original Korean Coffee House.” *Creatrip*, 2021

corporations dominate the economic landscape in many forms including cafés. Therefore, each branch of a chain café is a part of a larger corporate entity that looks to consumer markets to be successful. When a customer enters into one of the chain stores, there is already an expectation of what type of experience, product, and service will be provided since there is a standard each branch must uphold. Therefore, chain cafés serve as a reliable spot for South Korean professionals, students, or anyone on the go to stop by for a quick meal or drink before going about their busy days. And for those who need to be productive in a sit-down environment, one can easily occupy one of the seats for as long as they need.

To examine all three café types, I will be using a variety of primary and secondary sources. For chapter one, there is a lot of historical context, so I will be drawing from some academic journals to explain the historical landscape and how the *dabang* was born. I will also use sources that discuss the emergence of the third space and how the customer demographics of the *dabang* evolved, which consequently lead to a shift in social function. The second chapter on theme cafés uses more primary sources ranging from personal photos, to Korean drama scenes, and social media posts. This helps us view what cafés can look like through a contemporary lens. However, there is a book from a contemporary scholar that I will also be drawing from as a secondary source called *Pop City: Korean Popular Culture and Selling of Place* by Youjeong Oh. Her insights on Korean pop culture and its role in contemporary society really tie into what I arguably think the theme café is trying to accomplish. My final chapter, focusing on chain cafés, also draws from drama scenes and social media but with the inclusion of a secondary source on the impacts of Korean dramas in social culture. This chapter has more of a focus on popular culture while still tying everything back to the café space.

Through my thesis, I address the following questions: How do people socialize in the three different types of café space? In what ways are these café spaces an integral part of socializing practices in Korean society? And what does the concept of socializing in the Korean café space share with other café experiences while being unique to Korean social culture? In exploring these three types of café through these lenses, I argue that cafe space in South Korea shares many commonalities with other ones around the world. However, the cultural and social evolution of Korea itself also impacted the cafe space in ways that give it unique qualities. From the social dynamics during the Japanese colonization era, to the rise of the Korean Wave and social media, the Korean cafe has evolved and adapted to be a space that reflects the social needs of the population and integrates itself into the greater community. And in the present day, the cafe space is so integral in modern Korean daily life that it makes itself present in many areas of Korean media and culture. Through this ongoing evolution, it distinguishes itself from other cultures' cafe spaces.

# Chapter One: The *Dabang*

The Republic of Korea was not always the economic powerhouse it is today. In fact, it was considered one of the poorest countries in the world only several decades ago until it rapidly urbanized in the 1980s. With this in mind, it is important to discuss the beginnings of café culture and how vastly different it was then versus today. This will help us to understand how socioeconomic transformation has impacted the evolution of café social space in rapidly industrializing and urbanizing Korea. And therefore, how the thread of commonality in the general café space can translate itself uniquely into the Korean cultural landscape.

The earliest instances of coffee houses in Korea come in the form of the *dabang* (Hangul: 다방), or the traditional Korean coffee house. *Dabang* literally translates to “tea house” or “tea room” but these early cafés were known for having all sorts of beverages including, most notably, coffee and tea. Beginning in 1910, the Japanese Empire annexed the Korean peninsula, and remained as the colonizing power over Korea until 1945 when Japan surrendered to the Allied Powers at the end of the Second World War. It was during the Japanese occupation era when the *dabang* began to appear. *Dabangs* marked the beginning of western style coffee houses in Korea,<sup>2</sup> and Japan during its imperial or colonial expansion era was trying to present itself as a global power to western nations. Therefore, this period saw a lot of Japanese industrial growth throughout its colonized territories.<sup>3</sup> During the 1920s, as foreign trade began to open up, western style establishments, including *dabangs* began appearing in metropolitan areas and especially neighborhoods in Myeongdong in the capital city of Seoul.

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<sup>2</sup> Lee, Jihyun. “The History of Dabang: The Original Korean Coffee House.” *Creatrip*, 2021

<sup>3</sup> Mizoguchi, “ECONOMIC GROWTH OF KOREA UNDER THE JAPANESE OCCUPATION —BACKGROUND OF INDUSTRIALIZATION OF KOREA 1911-1940,” 1.



In the early days of *dabangs*, coffee, tea, and non-alcoholic beverages would be served to upper-class citizens since these beverages were expensive. Therefore, the *dabang* was inaccessible to a majority of the population. At this time, it is clear that being a patron of the *dabang* reflected a person's wealth and high social status in Japanese occupied Korea. The only people socializing in these establishments were of an elite standing and mostly likely had cultural and economic influence in Korean society. Therefore, in the 1920s, the *dabang*'s elite status was reflected by its patrons who frequented such establishments as being customers who showed that one could afford the exotic luxury of coffee or other beverage equivalents. Therefore, socializing in the café space was similar to other coffee houses in the West. This association with Western culture reflected the Japanese colonial goals of modernizing and presenting itself as a global power. And while the functional commonality of the café space mirrored other countries, the *dabang* specifically embodied a social culture of wealth and high standing in colonial society. However, this view drastically shifts in the following decades.



A *dabang* during the 1950s (Photo Credit: Creatrip)

Japan's defeat in World War II meant that the Korean peninsula became free from their colonial rule. However, the United States and the Soviet Union took over the political power to administer Korea in its transition to an independent nation. The United Nations decided to divide the peninsula along the 38th parallel where the Soviet Union would control everything north of the line, and the United States would control the southern territory.<sup>4</sup> In the beginning of the Cold War, the result was the North being established as a communist society, officially the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, and the South was established as a capitalist society, the Republic of Korea. However, while both sides wanted the territory to be united under one national government, the North wanted to take back the South and become a larger communist state. In June of 1950, the North launched a full-scale invasion of the South leading to what became known as the Korean War. After devastation on both sides, the war ended in an armistice agreement in 1953 which created a semi-permanent division between North and South.

With the relentless bombing and artillery fire during the war, much of the country was destroyed and needed to be rebuilt. Consequently, this meant that most South Koreans lived in poverty in the early years after the war, and South Korea at the time was one of the poorest countries in the world. However, *dabangs* still saw business in the cities, specifically Seoul. What changed *dabangs* during the postwar era of the 1950s was the consumers who were of ordinary social class and not wealthy like the previous clientele. Now, middle-class citizens could come enjoy a beverage and socialize with each other. Consequently, *dabangs* were more accessible to the population and became a third space outside of home and work where people could meet and became a part of the social landscape of Korean life.

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<sup>4</sup> Millett, Allan R. "Introduction to the Korean War." 932.

To delve further into the concept, a third space is anywhere outside of a place where one lives or works where people can be social and have conversations with one another for the benefit of developing closer relationships and high social capital. Other examples of third spaces that are not cafés include bars, restaurants, clubs, or any informal, leisurely location people could meet. The term ‘third space’ was coined by sociologist Ray Oldenburg in 1989, and his main argument about third space was that it could be shared by anyone regardless of their background and socially benefits society as a whole.<sup>5</sup> In postwar Korea, *dabangs* became even more essential as a third space since more people could access them and needed a social space during the day or where alcohol was not the main beverage of choice.

*Dabangs* were even portrayed in Korean films at this time. One 1956 film called *Madam Freedom*, *Jayubuin* (Hangul: 자유부인) to Koreans, follows a professor and his wife as they navigate their respective affairs with other people in the context of growing American cultural influence. This film in particular showcases how Koreans at the time saw the *dabang* as a casual space for meeting. More specifically, every time the main characters went to the *dabang*, it was to either gossip with close friends or sneak out for a quick cup of coffee with their partners with whom they were cheating on their spouses.<sup>6</sup> Even disregarding illicit affairs, *dabangs* were a spot for couples to go on casual dates or to meet up after being set up by a third party such as a matchmaker, family members, or close friends. The practice of setting up a couple is called *seonboda* (Hangul: 선보다) by Koreans. The film highlights the *dabang*’s portrayal in popular Korean culture at the time and how it became more accessible to the masses. (Particularly the postwar middle class.)

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<sup>5</sup> David Grazian. “Urban Nightlife, Social Capital, and the Public Life of Cities.” *Sociological Forum*, 2009.

<sup>6</sup> Han, Hyeong-mo, director. *Madam Freedom*. 1956.

The *dabang* especially became popular among poor artists, musicians, and writers as a meeting place to exchange ideas or discuss each other's work. In other words, these groups were culturally well educated but did not have much money to make a living. It was during the 1950s and 1960s that the *dabang* transitioned into a space for intellectuals. This intellectual space created a new sort of elitism except it was not wealth based as in previous decades, but based on cultural capital.<sup>7</sup> Even businessmen and politicians would frequent *dabangs* to discuss important affairs. By cultivating the *dabang* as a meeting space to create exclusively Korean art or start business ventures, the associations people had with *dabangs* revolved around the cultural and economic activities and conversation rather than merely the consumption of the coffee or other consumer products. This contrasts from the time of Japanese occupation, during which the allure of the *dabang* was about the exclusivity of being able to drink exotic and expensive coffee or other western style beverages. But in a few short years after the Korean War, the exclusivity returned in a different form. Therefore, purchasing expensive, hard to obtain goods was less of a concern in the social lives of South Koreans during the postwar decade since many of them simply wanted to rebuild their lives after the war. The *dabang* became a space for meeting and not a reflection of status.

As *dabangs* shifted into the 1970s to 1980s era, South Korea underwent a rapid period of urbanization that changed the social and economic landscape of the country. More people migrated to the big metropolitan cities for work and education. Seoul especially saw tremendous growth during these decades. At the early stage of this growth period, *dabangs* transitioned to a place where people of all ages and economic backgrounds could gather and socialize over a drink. The *dabang* especially became popular amongst young people such as factory workers and college students who needed a place to socialize. It was no longer a space exclusively for the rich

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<sup>7</sup> Lee, 2021.

or intellectuals or business people. Instead, this new demographic contained the majority of *dabang* patrons where they would meet and socialize with their peers. Now everyone could enjoy the *dabang* for what it had to offer. This is also how many people typically view café space all around the world today. This time period is considered the height of the *dabang*. However, the late 1980s saw the decline of the *dabang* as the cultural landscape shifted.<sup>8</sup>

As South Korea transitioned more into the global economic powerhouse that we know today, production of consumer goods skyrocketed. Instant coffee became very popular at this time, so people could just buy some at the store and make coffee at home rather than go all the way to a *dabang*. Then in 1981, South Korea secured the bid to host the 1988 Summer Olympic Games in the capital city of Seoul. So during the late 1980s, the whole world was watching these games and South Korea was presented to global audiences who may not have previously known anything about the country. With this global spotlight, South Korea continued to gain recognition from other countries during the 1990s and consequently became more exposed to western culture. Global and transnational chains started coming into the Korean market, so some products and services previously found at *dabangs* became more widely available and accessible. At the same time, the number of *dabangs* became fewer and fewer as people gained access to cellphones and other ways of socializing. Furthermore, the higher end European style cafés that we are familiar with today started making an appearance, and this certainly did not help *dabangs* to stay in business.

However, a handful have managed to stay open to this day for their value and rarity.

Despite them not being as popular as they once were, *dabangs* are accepted as an integral part of

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<sup>8</sup> Lee, Cecilia Hae-Jin. *Specialty Coffee Association*. n.d. “Love at First Sip: A History of Coffee in Korea | 25, Issue 16 — Specialty Coffee Association.” December 2021.

Korean culture. And in some ways, the younger generation is spending more time at the *dabangs* that are still open. This resurgence occurred after the male Korean idol group Bangtan Sonyeondan (Hangul: 방탄소년단), or better known as BTS, photographed part of their Season's Greetings 2021 package inside a *dabang*. Season's Greetings is BTS' annual merchandise package that consists of exclusive behind the scenes content like a DVD, calendar, photos, and other things. Each Season's Greetings package centers around a theme, and in 2021, they did a retro concept, which is essentially showcasing lesser-known parts of Korean history and culture through their promotion. When it came to choosing locations to reflect the retro concept, the promotion team decided to do one of the shoots at a *dabang* called Eulji Dabang in Seoul. A photo from the Season's Greetings package is featured below with each member of BTS sitting inside the *dabang* wearing retro clothing and holding a drink.



Members of the Idol Group BTS Photographed in *Eulji Dabang* (Photo Credit: BTS 2021 Season's Greetings)

With the incredible amount of influence an idol group like BTS has on popular Korean culture, simply featuring a *dabang* in one of the photo shoots brought many younger fans to Eulji

Dabang to experience it for themselves. When fans see BTS sitting in this establishment, it is selling the idea that the *dabang* is retro and cool. Youjeong Oh describes this K-pop idol to consumer phenomenon in her book *Pop City: Korean Popular Culture and Selling of Place*. She writes, “they [K-pop idols] are both a human product and an agent intended to forge affective relationships with fans/audiences, turning the latter into devoted consumers of the secondary products that idols endorse,”<sup>9</sup> which in this case is the *dabang* experience.

Furthermore, BTS shows that the *dabang* is a proud part of their Korean heritage. By being arguably the most popular Korean music group of the generation, they have such a large audience that wants to learn about their culture. They take pride in the country they represent. So while the rise of technology and social media has pushed younger generations to other avenues of socializing, seeing a celebrity of that stature promote the *dabang* led to fans of the group to make the trip and experience this Korean traditional coffee shop for themselves and connect to their idols and fellow fans alike.

Today’s *dabangs* may not have as much popularity as they once did. However, there are people who still stop by to sit down for a drink, maybe eat a snack served there, and enjoy the atmosphere with others around them. *Dabangs* hold a special place in South Korean heritage, and they set the stage for present-day coffee culture and other café establishments to impact the social lives of Korean citizens and visitors alike.

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<sup>9</sup> Youjeong Oh, “Pop City: Korean Popular Culture and Selling of Place” Cornell University Press, 2018, 105.



Customers at a *Dabang* in the Present-Day (Photo Credit: Creatrip)



## Chapter Two: Theme Cafés

Theme cafés have recently skyrocketed in popularity in the urbanized and industrialized years. By definition, a theme café or restaurant is created to provide a memorable experience through decor or specific concepts for its customers. Their ability to bring people together to enjoy a unique experience makes it an excellent social space for fun gatherings. The beverage and food is typically second in priority to the experience. For example, many Americans may be familiar with The Rainforest Café restaurant chain or Jimmy Buffet's popular chain of Margaritaville restaurants named after his famous song "Margaritaville." At the Rainforest Café, diners enter into a room decorated to look like they are eating in the rainforest while animatronic jungle animals, like elephants and gorillas, bellow with the assistance of booming speakers. The food itself is about average, or may I say lackluster, for American cuisine but diners do not come for the food. They come for the opportunity to socialize together and have an entertaining experience that shakes up their daily lives.<sup>10</sup> And there are many instances of these kinds of spaces all over the world. This commonality among themed spaces tells us that third place establishments, anywhere outside the family/home and workplace, have been remade in a way that signifies the changing of people's social needs and diverts from the monotony of everyday life through the creation of a unique experience.

Most people have heard of Japanese cat cafés or Pokémon themed spaces. When these establishments started becoming popular during the age of social media, most people would think of Japanese culture in association with themed dining. Therefore, themed dining or café experiences are not exclusive to South Korea. However, what makes the experience of going to

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<sup>10</sup> Eric Thurm, "Why Cheesy Theme Restaurants Are Actually the Most Fun" *GQ Magazine*, 2017.

one in Korea popular among the younger generation today? And how have they carved their own space into the social lives of South Koreans and tourists alike?

First of all, one must acknowledge the rise of what is known as the Korean Wave or *Hallyu* (Hangul: 한류). This is a cultural phenomenon describing South Korea's steadily growing popularity throughout the globe beginning in the 1990s. An example where this phenomenon has the most impact is the Korean popular music, or K-Pop industry where artists like Psy with his 2012 hit *Gangnam Style* took the world by storm or idol group BTS setting records with their music. Other Korean industries that are associated with *Hallyu* are the film/television with K-Dramas and beauty industries with Korean skincare, more commonly referred to as K-Beauty. This can be seen in the likes of Bong Joon-Ho's 2019 film *Parasite* or the global sensation of *Squid Game* dominating the streaming platform Netflix.<sup>11</sup> With this popularity in mind, there has been a major investment into Korean culture by Korean corporations and the Korean government. Consequently, people are bonding over that mutual interest and developing closer social relationships whether in their own lives or through social media.

In her book *Pop City: Korean Popular Culture and Selling of Place*, Oh Youjeong writes, "For culture-mediated place marketing to succeed, the cultural hype needs to be translated into actual inbound tourism."<sup>12</sup> Therefore, all of the cultural aspects that make Korea desirable to people from all over the world must go beyond the borders of the country itself and create a new social space that is accessible to those abroad who want to feel immersed in Korean culture but are not able to travel there quite yet. Through social media and Korean dramas, it is very easy to get a glimpse of Korea and pick up on places people frequent or locations that are integrated into

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<sup>11</sup> Youjeong Oh, "Pop City: Korean Popular Culture and Selling of Place" Cornell University Press, 2018, 2.

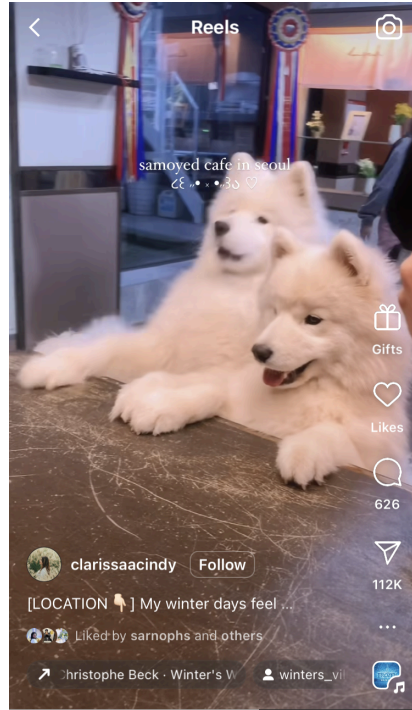
<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 189.

Korean daily life without physically going there. These forms of media bring the experience visually to audiences and can even establish a form of emotional connection to a place they have never traveled to and with those who share their mutual interest.

Returning to the realm of theme cafés, the *Hallyu* cultural development plays a significant role in gravitating both Koreans and foreigners towards the café experience. Oftentimes, interest in visiting Korea leads people to go to social media and search for content posted by others about their experiences in the country. For example, travel content creators, or even visitors who simply desire to share their trip publicly with friends, will post photos and videos from places they visited, including cafés. Consequently, this draws attention to the establishment and then more visitors go there, resulting in a positive ripple effect. And if there is a specific drawing point for the café, like a unique theme, then people are more likely to be intrigued and want to learn more. In turn, they might tell their friends about the café and how they would love to go there together. Theme cafés themselves become the reason for socializing instead of simply using the space to socialize in a general sense like in most generic cafés. For example, in the Seoul neighborhood of Hongdae, there is an animal café called *Gyeongul's House*<sup>13</sup> centered around the Samoyed dog breed. To most people, Samoyeds are big, fluffy, cute, and playful dogs that attract a lot of attention. Therefore, visitors flock from all over to get a chance to play with them. Here is an example of an Instagram post by a visitor who spent time at the café:

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<sup>13</sup> *Gyeongul* is the Korean word for 'winter' (Hangul: 겨울) and is the name of the head dog of the café. It is a very appropriate name given the breed's snowy white coat.

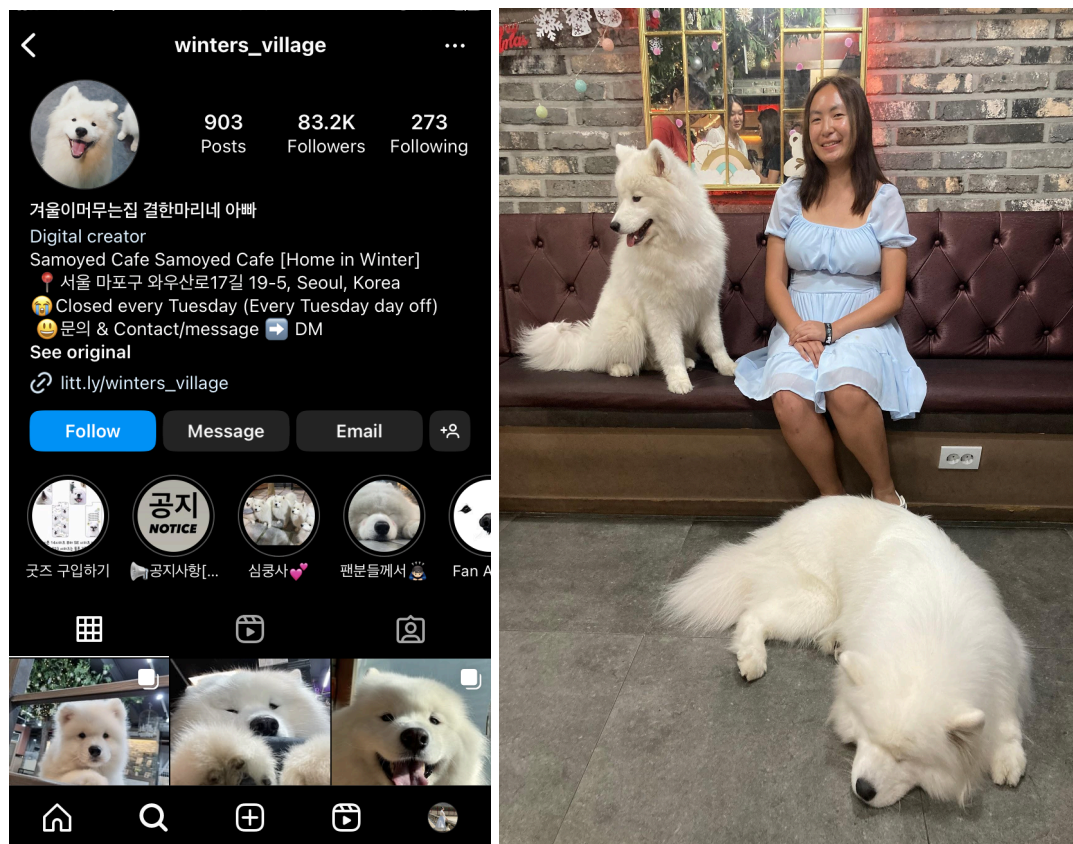


*A short video of @clarissaacindy's experience at the Samoyed café. Courtesy of Instagram*

This post is one of many examples of foreign and Korean visitors alike using the social media platform to share their experiences with the entire online world. And consequently, this brings more people into the space both physically, due to the free advertising, and digitally by showing the space and placing it in the minds of viewers. This way, those who cannot currently be in the physical space get a glimpse of the theme café experience and can talk about it with others. With the *Hallyu* social media influence, this provides a unique take on the Korean theme café social dynamics. Unlike previous eras of Korean cafés, the element of social media creates a new social dynamic about the space itself, and *Hallyu* puts it at the forefront of other themed dining experiences in current popular culture.

It was through social media posts like the one above and the café's own profile that brought me to visit with my friend during my studies in Seoul after getting out of class. It was a

very communal space where everyone could bond with the animals and have a fun time with those around them. I got to speak to a couple visiting from the United States and have a pleasant chat about both of our times in Korea. The café is an excellent drawing point for people from all walks of life to strike up conversation.



*Left: Instagram profile for Gyeongju's House café featuring photos of the dogs as a way to open up the space to a wider audience*  
*Right: A photo from my visit to the café in July 2023*

Another way of introducing the Korean theme café space to wider audiences is to incorporate it into elements of popular culture such as film or television. Oftentimes, seeing a café depicted in a movie scene does not mean much since it is typically a setting that is meant for conversation and focusing on character interactions. This type of scene can be noticed in many movies from different global cultures. However, if a theme café is depicted in a film, it is more

akin to advertising the characters enjoying the café experience while having their conversations rather than the dialogue being the focal point. In a way, it acts more as a subtle advertisement for the café. Youjeong Oh describes this sort of product advertisement through the lens of K-pop idols:

“As K-pop fandom has grown, the goods market has also thrived. Since fandom is about desiring the same lifestyle as idols, celebrity goods...have diversified into everyday products such as sticker books, accessories, cell phone cases, art toys, candles, necklaces, cushions, pillows, cups, pouches, and eco-bags.”<sup>14</sup>

If we apply this idea to the theme café space, it is a visually desirable, marketable experience that people want to pay for. Therefore, seeing it represented in various forms of media, like film, brings the Korean theme café space into a consumer spotlight where usually cafés are not seen in this sort of light.

One example is a scene from the Netflix film titled *To All the Boys: Always and Forever*, which is the third movie in the popular young adult *To All the Boys* trilogy. The main character and her sisters are half Korean, and in the beginning of the film, they take a trip to Seoul to learn more about their Korean heritage. The compilation of the trip shows the family going to the most popular tourist/cultural spots of the city. One of the scenes shows the three sisters eating dessert at a very popular theme café called *Greem café*. The concept of the café is to make everything appear as a 2D animation where customers are a part of the scenery. However, in this particular scene, the setting is not only a tourist stop but also a place where the three sisters have a serious conversation about what directions they want to go in life.<sup>15</sup> Not only does this show turn the space into one for family bonding and conversation between the fictional characters, but also fans of the film will often go to this café in real life to retrace the steps of the beloved characters.

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<sup>14</sup> Oh, 120.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Fimognari, “*To All the Boys: Always and Forever*” *Netflix*, 2021.

In a way, it allows for fans to feel like they are a part of the story and enjoy that with friends. Also, it consequently expands the social aspect of Korean café space into the realm of fandoms along with social media.



*Scene from To All the Boys: Always and Forever where the characters spend time at Greem café. Courtesy of Netflix.*

With the help of *Hallyu*, theme cafés have become an important staple of Korean pop culture. The growing interest in Korea in the younger generation have led many youths to flock to these kinds of cafés to share a desired experience. Especially in a time where everyday life is chaotic with work, school, and problems going on in society, many people often feel isolated or lonely in the world around them. Not only do cafés make an excellent third space outside of home and work/school, but theme cafés in particular provide their own one of a kind space that integrates itself into the social experience. And the evolution of the Korean café space has also led to a shift in the social dynamics within that space. It is through social media that they can share their love of Korean culture and have conversations that span beyond if the relationship

becomes even more personal. This social phenomenon is not really seen in cafés in other parts of the world. Korean theme cafés bring people together in a multitude of ways and integrate themselves into the greater social aspect of modern Korean culture.



## Chapter Three: Chain Cafés

When walking through a big city, chances are a person will encounter a chain café location every few blocks or so. Korean cities, especially Seoul, are no exception. Practically as abundant as convenience stores, chain cafés can be spotted on every block. Whether it is a worker who needs to grab a quick cup of coffee to go, or students who need to get work done, the classic café environment is a popular choice for meeting, socializing, and getting a daily fix of caffeine.

In the previous chapter, I discussed how the theme café acts as a space for socialization through an atmospheric experience and being social media friendly. Chain cafés also have a rich social function of generating and/or maintaining a sense of community and connection among individuals. However, this social function is different in the way that the café itself is not the drawing point for conversation or visiting. Rather, chain cafés serve as a third space that everyone from all backgrounds can come and use the space for whatever function they need it to. It harkens back significantly to the *dabangs* mentioned in Chapter One. The cafés now, however, reflect a more contemporary setting and are more of an upscale European-style institution that many are familiar with. So how does the Korean public use these chain cafés as a social space? And how similar is it to other cafés in other countries?

There are many popular chain cafés or coffee houses in South Korea. Since it is a global company, many would be familiar with Starbucks Coffee. Therefore, Starbucks Korea is one of the most popular cafés to visit. However, there are other local Korean café chains that can be seen just as often on Seoul streets and have a strong presence in Korean culture and media. One of these local chains is called A Twosome Place. The company is owned by a U.S.-based private

equity firm called The Carlyle Group who describes the brand as, “one of the leading premium café chain operators in South Korea, offering a variety of high-quality cake and dessert choices for consumers which differentiate it from peers.”<sup>16</sup> This also shows that despite the chain originating in South Korea, there is a transnational interest in the café’s success and now there is a global influence in how it is run. It also speaks to the attention that South Korean cafés garner from other countries in recent years.



*A Twosome Place location in Jongno-gu, Seoul. Courtesy of TripAdvisor.*

All Twosome Place locations have a uniform color scheme and environment. This uniformity gives customers an idea of consistency and reliability that establishes its own kind of social presence. While not as exciting and aesthetically interesting as theme cafés, A Twosome Place serves as a reputable and familiar establishment that all Koreans know and are comfortable going to. Therefore, when all one needs is a simple chat with another person or to get some work done quietly, grabbing a drink and dessert while sitting at a table at one of A Twosome Place’s many locations is a popular option.

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<sup>16</sup> “A Twosome Place | Carlyle.” Accessed February 23, 2024.

Speaking from personal experience, one time after a day of lectures, one of my friends and I stopped by one A Twosome Place location in the neighborhood of Sinchon near our university to grab a drink and a dessert before heading out on our evening tourist adventures. Something as simple as catching up on our days over a warm drink and a slice of cake felt like it could become routine. Going to cafés in general became a significant part of our social lives during our time in Korea. It was one of the best ways to get to know someone new or make plans to meet with someone I had not seen in a while. I also could use the space to work on class projects with my peers or have a quick meal and chat before going on with my day. Not every café I went to was a chain café, but local establishments that were not theme cafés have the same core structure where one orders a drink or dessert and then sits down to accomplish whatever they need to do while in the space. The main function of this sort of space was to accomplish my personal social or work goals. It was less about which café I went to and more about having a reliable space that would function pretty much as I expected it to.



*Some photos of my visits to A Twosome Place in the summer of 2023*

Not only does A Twosome Place have an existing reputable brand status among native Koreans, but they also integrate themselves into pop culture to promote themselves to a wider audience. This is similar to one of the points I discussed in the theme café chapter about the café appearing in film and television. In instances like these, even two types of cafés in Korea have

similarity to each other yet also have their distinct roles in Korean social culture. For example, cafés are popular settings in Korean dramas when characters need to have conversations or meet with work colleagues. Not only does this perpetually establish the café's role in the characters' social lives, but it also weaves itself into the fabric of modern Korean culture and popular culture as well.

Korean dramas are watched by people from South Korea and, thanks to the *Hallyu* movement, the rest of the world. It is a transnational means of engaging with stories and characters that provides an escape from everyday life. Sometimes, people will create this imagined identity of themselves in the storyline and can place themselves in the scene. Dramas are collectively in the public imagination.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, incorporating drama scenes with relatable situations like visiting a café further establishes an emotional and social association with the space to the audience.

In a 2020 drama called *Start Up*, the main group of characters goes to an A Twosome Place location to celebrate a big work triumph. In this particular drama, the clear visuals of A Twosome Place are a direct promotion of the café. In other dramas, it is not always the case and the setting is simply a generic café space. After they cheer about passing the preliminary competition screening, the scene cuts immediately to the exterior of one A Twosome Place location. This is one of the most explicit examples of a particular chain café being depicted in a drama. It comes across as a form of advertisement for A Twosome Place. However, even so, the drama manages to depict a typical social interaction that would occur in a major Korean café chain in everyday life. Furthermore, we once again see the café 'product placement' concept that

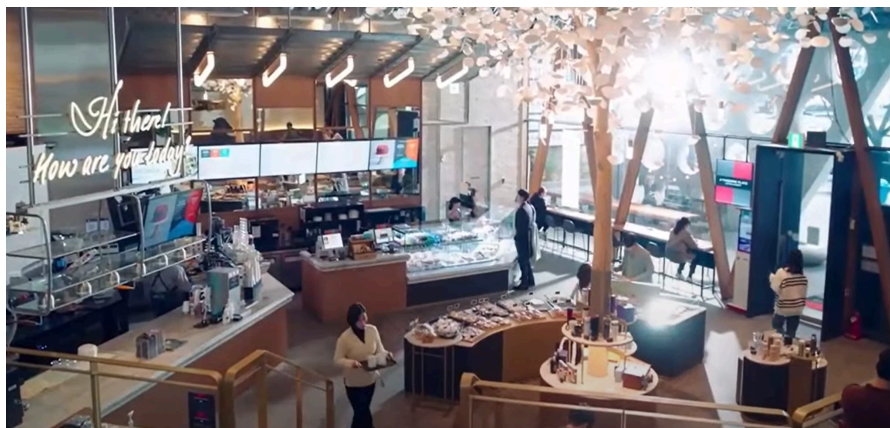
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<sup>17</sup> Grace MyHyun Kim and Delila Omerbašić. "Multimodal Literacies: Imagining Lives Through Korean Dramas." *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 2017, 557.

I discussed in the previous chapter on theme cafés. In this case, it follows the same scene/promotional logic except in a well-known chain café setting.



*Exterior shot of A Twosome Place from Episode 16 of Start Up. Courtesy of Netflix*



*Interior shot of the same A Twosome Place also in the same episode of Start Up. Courtesy of Netflix*

This particular episode highlights the use of the café both as a way to socialize with friends and to discuss work-related matters with colleagues outside the office. It is also worth noting that this social function has remained an integral part of café spaces in Korea from the days of the *dabang* all the way up to the present. And this scene also displays a consistency with



many audience members' personal experiences with cafés both in Korea and all over the world. The team goes to A Twosome Place to celebrate a successful work project by selecting some nice desserts and then sitting down at the table to eat and talk about their excitement for the next stages of their careers. The camera cuts to the cakes themselves giving viewers a blatant advertisement of A Twosome Place's signature products that many Korean viewers would be familiar with. This goes to show how influential the company is even in this fictional setting. However, this depiction of this particular café chain also provides a psychological connection to those watching this drama since it mirrors real life experiences of going to A Twosome Place and sitting down to have a hot drink or a dessert. So Koreans associate these fictional social dynamics with those in real life.



*Main characters from the drama Start Up buy desserts at A Twosome Place. Courtesy of Netflix*



*Scene cutting to the signature cakes of A Twosome Place, therefore highlighting the major impact on the modern Korean café landscape. Courtesy of Netflix*

Meanwhile, extras can be seen sitting in the café as well doing tasks on their phone and having a hot drink. This reflects how communal the space is in everyday society. The group of friends/coworkers then gather around a table and eat cake in celebration of their bright future as a growing start-up.<sup>18</sup>



*Customers sitting at neighboring tables on phones and computers doing work like people would in a real café setting. Courtesy of Netflix*

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<sup>18</sup> “Scale Up.” *Start Up*, season 1, episode 16, HighZium Studio, Netflix, Dec. 6 2020.



*Social gathering of a group to celebrate their achievements with treats from the café.  
Courtesy of Netflix*

While *Start Up* contains a direct mention of a well-known café, there are many other dramas with scenes that take place in a café without a lot of the focus being on the café itself. Oftentimes, scenes taking place in a café have serious tones. In romance dramas, the café is a setting where the two romantically linked characters have a serious conversation about their relationship. One example is from a popular drama called *Guardian: The Lonely and Great God*, *Sseulsseulhago Challanhasin – Dokkaebi* in Korean, or more well-known as simply ‘Goblin’ by fans in the West. In one scene, two of the characters meet in a café to have a conversation about the direction of their relationship.<sup>19</sup> In this instance, the café serves no other function but to be a public space where both parties are comfortable socializing. Being in one person or the other’s personal space would make serious conversations more uncomfortable. Therefore, a neutral public space, such as a café, where just sitting at a table for an extended period of time is socially acceptable is an ideal choice. Furthermore, this shows an essential component of the café’s social function where it serves as an ideal, publicly available, shared space for these types of interactions. (e.g. business and casual friendship meetings)

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<sup>19</sup> Eung-bok Lee, director. *Guardian: The Lonely and Great God*. Hwa&Dam Pictures, 2016.





*Two characters from the drama Goblin have a serious conversation over a cup of coffee at an nonspecific neighborhood café. Courtesy of Netflix Korea*

With this in mind, the café space is pretty ubiquitous in Korean society. Therefore, it is one of the top places for people of all ages and backgrounds to go while not at home, work, or school. The impact this space has on daily life is present even through everyday media. It is fascinating to see that when crafting a storyline set in the modern world, cafés are frequently incorporated into many scenes as a way to reflect the social habits of actual Koreans. This also shows that Koreans associate the café space with socializing and think of it first when needing to write a scene that involves conversation.

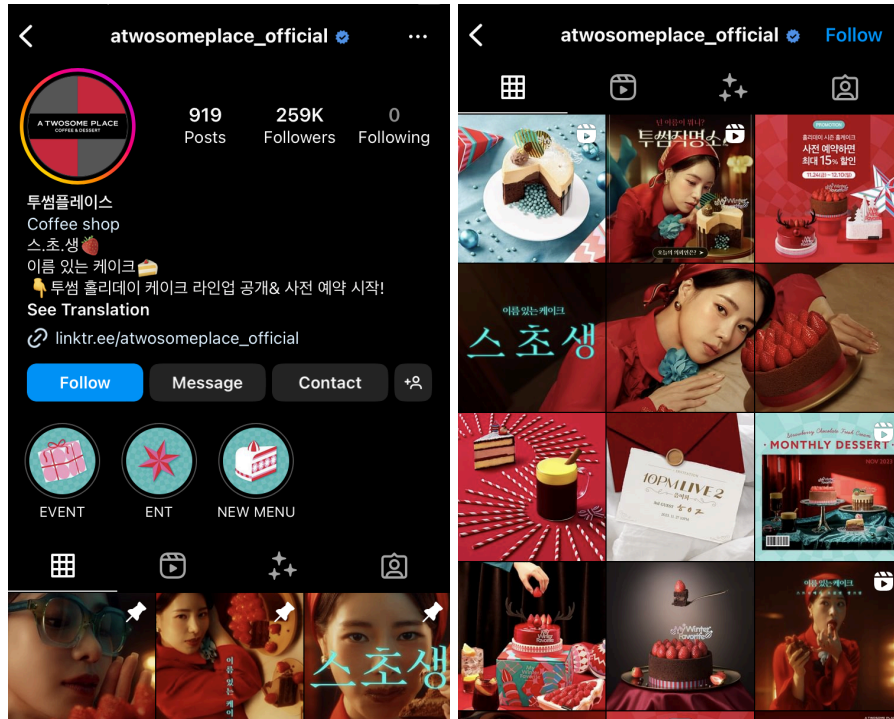
The business benefits of social media have not gone unnoticed by the corporations in charge of chain café locations. With the café space being used by many, chains often compete with each other to gain a wider range of customers. Therefore, some of them take advantage of forms of media like dramas or social media to showcase their brand and try to draw in customers to their locations across Korean cities. Going back to A Twosome Place, they use their official Instagram account to post about promotions and even hire celebrities to be brand ambassadors. A recent example of this occurred when they announced that actress Lim Ji-yeon, known for her role in the renowned drama called *The Glory*, would be their ambassador for their strawberry,

chocolate, and whipped cream cake during the Christmas season. The goal was to grow their customer base by using a reputable actress with a large fanbase. As a result, A Twosome Place would present themselves as more than just a café with locations across the country. It demonstrates how it and other chain cafés influence socialization with more than just a physical presence, but also in the contemporary social fabric of Korean society as well since most people in Korea use the internet to socialize. Furthermore, it reasserts the presence of the café in the cultural landscape of modern Korean society.

Even the name, A Twosome Place, refers to their slogan: “**A** cup of coffee, **TWO** of us, **SOME** dessert, **PLACE**.”<sup>20</sup> They advertise themselves as being the place for meeting and socializing. And for solo customers, the two parties are the person and the café itself. The slogan implies that A Twosome Place wants to insert itself into the café social culture scene and really connect with its customers. The services they provide make themselves a part of the contemporary chain café social experience.

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<sup>20</sup> n.d. A Twosome Place. A Twosome Place. 2024..



*A Twosome Place's official Instagram account featuring their advertising campaign with actress Lim Ji-yeon. Courtesy of Instagram*



*More posts from A Twosome Place advertising their latest products (without the use of celebrity ambassadors) to keep making their presence known. Courtesy of Instagram*

In chain café locations, the space is practically synonymous with meeting and socializing. They are such a staple throughout the city landscapes which makes it very easy for most people to access them. As a result, they open up a reliable space to sit, eat, drink, and take a step back from the monotony of frequenting work, home, or school. This is a common association that people who frequent cafés would understand no matter where they are. Café culture definitely has its variations depending on what country one visits, but it is very much a transnational experience that many are familiar with. In South Korea, chain cafés integrate themselves into one's routine and social life rather seamlessly. This is often reflected in movies, television, and on the internet. So if one is in Seoul and sees a café on a busy street, note its impact on everyday social culture and media of its consumers. It is truly something fascinating to think about.

# Conclusion

In the South Korean café, we can see the interplay of social dynamics, culture, and the idea of space. From the early establishment of *dabangs*, we can see the early concept of the café being a social space that did not involve alcohol and was separate from home and work. With American and Japanese influence, coffee consumption became very popular, so establishing a place where people could have easy access to it was essential.

And through the decades, the *dabang* saw major shifts in its customer base. It went from a space where only elites could afford to go to an intellectual space where artists, writers, and more would go to discuss their work. From there, it progressed to people with elite intellectual status or successful businessmen. After the Korean economic boom, the *dabang* finally became a space where people of all ages and classes could stop by and socialize. For many decades, *dabangs* served as the go to places for meetings until rapid urbanization and modernization made them more obsolete and people turned elsewhere. However, they will always be the first Korean coffee houses that set the stage for the present-day Korean café social culture.

And now in recent years, we have seen a rise in a different type of café that is more centered around the experience of being there or knowing about it: the Theme Café. Here the space is the social experience itself. People go to theme cafés to see or do something unique that is special to that individual café. Whether it is petting an animal or having drinks themed after Hello Kitty and Friends, the café itself is the main reason for socialization. The aesthetics make it excellent for social media which further expands its presence in the greater society. And with many people in the younger generations on social media, they see these theme cafés and want to visit in person. And oftentimes, they go with their friends or loved ones to spend time together.

In the realm of themed dining experiences, the theme cafés in South Korea are taking the world by storm, largely thanks to the *Hallyu* cultural movement.

Finally, we have the chain café which is currently the most widely frequented of the three café types. Chain cafés have established themselves a dominant public social space that is friendly for everyone (unlike bars or nightclubs for example). They have integrated themselves into the social and cultural scene which is evident through the constant use of the generic café space in Korean media like dramas. It shows how widely popular and integrated these cafés are in social life. Whether it is work-related or personal, a chain café location can become whatever sort of space the consumer needs it to be, much like how we associate cafés in the West to be. This flexibility is needed given our ever-changing society and social habits.

In recent years, the concept of Korean café culture grew more well-known thanks to *Hallyu* and social media. As a social culture, it shares a lot of common traits with cafés in Europe and the United States. And yet, people are drawn to Korean cafés specifically now more than ever. The social and cultural role the space plays in Korea in particular is at the forefront of a changing perception on café culture. As time passes, this unique social culture may grow even more beyond one's imagination. And the space will continue to adapt as social culture adapts as well.

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