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## **CARE-LESS DATA POP CULTURES: AN INVESTIGATION OF THE DATA IMAGINARIES AND DATA CULTURES OF THE PANDEMIC**

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### **Introduction**

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, many studies have examined the care-less legal and technical aspects of governments' data disclosure of COVID-19 patients' information (Ibrahim, 2020; Jung et al., 2020; Oh et al. 2021). Yet little attempt has been made to understand how citizens utilize and engage with such data provided by the government. While many democratic states advocated their data-driven solutions as "democratic technologies of control" (J. J. Lee, 2022, p. 1) that empower citizens with information to protect their health, citizens did not necessarily engage with the data of COVID-19 patients in considerate, caring, and democratic ways (Murphy, 2020), with many circulating the data across social media platforms beyond their initial context of the disclosure. Against the backdrop of the current climate of call-out cultures, where any mistakes can become the target of collective shaming in line with existing power dynamics (J. Lee & Abidin, 2021), data ownership – rights to appropriate public data and power to produce particular discourses and imaginaries from the data – has often been weaponized to mobilize collective acts against COVID-19 patients.

A prime example of this has been the "Itaewon outbreak" in South Korea. In May 2020, the gay community in Korea became the target of public surveillance after it was revealed that a person who tested positive had visited a gay club in Seoul's multicultural district Itaewon. At the time, the Korean government was disclosing COVID-19 patients' anonymized demographic and location data to the public as a part of their quest to protect the citizens' right to know about the spread of the virus (J. J. Lee, 2022). The disclosure of their data to the public without stringent privacy safeguards and consideration for how it would impact the gay community in a notoriously homophobic society has led to "care-less" surveillance (Oh et al., 2021). While purporting to share data to care about the safety of citizens, the government had a "standard human" in

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mind (Milan, 2020, p. 2), failing to perform “careful surveillance” – the “careful monitoring” of others that is considerate of how surveillance might impact them (Hjorth, Pink & Horst, 2018, p. 122). In this setting, the news media sensationally reported on the anonymized demographic and location data of the people related to the case, highlighting their presumed gay sexuality. When human rights organizations and concerned citizens critiqued the news media’s sensational reporting of the Itaewon outbreak, many pushed back, defending the media’s reporting as representing “factual data” about the virus necessary for citizens’ safety (e.g., comments under K. Lee, 2020). Encouraged by the news media’s homophobic reporting, citizens widely circulated the data across social media to speculate and blame the people behind the data.

Through the case study of the Itaewon outbreak, we investigate citizens’ care-less engagement with the data about the Itaewon outbreak on social media. We specifically focus on how they carelessly circulate and storify the data in relation to networked surveillance culture of social media, where one’s private data are shared among the anonymous public and scrutinized for fun and pleasure. We describe this process of cultural interpretation and shaping of pandemic data through social media’s participatory culture as *data pop culture*. To analyze data pop culture, we first examine the dominant data imaginaries cultivated through news media and government reports and technical manuals on COVID-19 data disclosure and how they inform the public’s understanding of the data related to the Itaewon outbreak. Next, we examine how these dominant data imaginaries create power relations between people on social media as data owners – those who set the meaning and conditions on how to use data – and data objects – those who are perceived as undeserving of data rights. Lastly, we examine how these dominant data imaginaries and relations are shaped through social media popular culture and how these engagements with data shape peoples’ data imaginaries in return.

## **Methodology**

To address the aforementioned dimensions of data pop culture, we collected four different data sets: major news media reporting on the government’s pandemic data governance; government reports and technical manuals by the Korean Disease Control Prevention Agency (KDCA), the Ministry of Health and welfare (MoHW) and Ministry of Interior and Safety (MoIS) laying the groundwork for pandemic data governance; 50 most watched YouTube videos on the Itaewon outbreak, and comment sections of those videos. Following critical data studies and media studies scholars who focus on the politics of discourses surrounding data and technology (Hoffmann, 2021; J. J. Lee, 2022; Kim et al., 2021), we approached these texts as discursive processes that “animate” (Hoffmann, 2021, p. 4) peoples’ understanding and relation to data.

With the first two data sets, we focused on how news media and government discursive constructions of data served as “forms of knowledge that set conditions of possibility” (Clarke, 2005, p. 14) shaping peoples’ understanding and engagement with data. With the latter two data sets, we explored how the dominant data imaginaries cultivated through data governance discourse become shaped by social media popular cultures. We chose YouTube as our primary site as YouTube became the central platform where

influencers and everyday people storified the data of the Itaewon outbreak, taking the data beyond health contexts to sensational topics surrounding the gay community. In our analysis of the videos, we made note of the 1) videos' storification of data, 2) users' comments and reflections, and 3) how they together cultivate the interpretations surrounding the data related to the Itaewon outbreak.

## Conclusion

Through our findings, we show that while care-less data pop culture is frivolous and playful, it carries significant normative implications, constructing boundaries on whose data is worth protecting and caring for. Korean citizens' care-less engagement with the data of people related to the Itaewon outbreak across social media illustrates how the unequal, homophobic status quo of Korean society and harmful online participatory cultures shape and are reflected in peoples' interpretation of data. But more than anything else, our study shows how calls for democratic ideals such as data transparency, data as a public good, and the public's right to know are not equally enjoyed by everyone, often serving the interests and cultures of dominant members of society.

In fact, the dominant imaginaries surrounding data, bolstered by the government's discursive construction of data as a public resource and social media popular culture of surveillance and call-outs that treat data of minoritized identities as undeserving of care commit what Hoffmann (2021) describes as "data violence," the "material, symbolic, and other violence inflicted by and through data technologies" (P. 2) and mechanisms. Our findings indicate that when we discuss the harms and violence of data cultures, we need to consider not only institutional bodies' responsibilities, but also that of the wider culture and everyday participation of people.

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