The Impact of Surveillance Technology on Women in Contemporary East Asia

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On my honor as a University Student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments

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Introduction

One contemporary technological issue that I am passionate about is the universality and pervasiveness of surveillance technology in East Asia. In South Korea, there are hidden cameras called *molka* that are ubiquitous in both public and private spaces, violating the privacy and security of women. According to Gong in a 2018 article, "police data show that the number of 'illegal filming' crimes sharply increased from 1,353 in 2011 to 6,470 in 2017." In Japan, there have also been some *molka* cases. In China, there is an extensive facial recognition system in place throughout the country, which limits citizens' right to privacy. I explore this complex issue through the lens of actor-network theory (ANT), sociological analysis, and normalized deviance in order to understand and evaluate the depth of impact on women in East Asia; the focus of this project is on South Korea. While investigating these issues through various avenues, an ethical framework is considered because ethics evaluates the rightness of an individual's or government's actions. I conclude with addressing a few possible ways these issues could be ameliorated.

The possible and current impacts of surveillance technology in East Asia merit research. *Molka* are ubiquitous in South Korea, hidden in places such as public restrooms, motels, and private homes. These pieces of technology have been violating South Korean women's privacy in their personal, intimate, and sexual moments. As a result, there have been feminist movements that protest the ubiquity and lack of government action against *molka* (Gong, 2018). On June 9, 2018, more than 30,000 women gathered in Seoul to challenge the prevalence of *molka.* It is considered the "largest women-led protest in South Korean history," granted that Seoul is a city

of almost 10 million (Lenamon, 2018). Given that China and Japan have also undergone rapid economic development and technological advancement in the past fifty years, they can also experience issues related to how the universality and pervasiveness of surveillance technology can be exploited.

My research question is: *How can surveillance technology target young women in contemporary East Asia? Why does this occur?*

Definitions of the Issues

One of the current ubiquitous technological issues in South Korea is the practice of using *molka*, or hidden cameras, in places such as public restrooms, motels, and private homes. These pieces of technology have been violating South Korean women's privacy in their personal and even sexual moments. *Molka* are aided by the quickness and omnipresence of South Korean internet connectivity; it might be the best in the world ("Internet in South Korea," 2020).[1]

Not unique to South Korea, *molka* have also been found in Japan. For instance, my Japanese friend attended Seikei University; one time university officials found *molka* in one of their ladies' restrooms. Although *molka* are not in the public eye as often as in South Korea nowadays, various relatives and friends living in Japan are cognizant that *molka* are definitely found in Japan, especially in public toilets (Conversation[2]).

On the other hand, China does not appear to have a very obvious problem with *molka* like South Korea or Japan. Instead, there have been cases of the Chinese government exploiting commonplace CCTV for facial recognition of their citizens, perhaps even targeting non-Han

[1] When discussing culture, there are common traits to both Koreas which will be referred to as Korean, versus those that are more distinctly South Korean.
[2] Two female respondents - one South Korean citizen, one Japanese citizen.

Chinese minority groups like the Uighurs (Wee & Mozur, 2019). This suggests that surveillance technologies can be manipulated in different ways depending on the unethical natures and nefarious interests of the perpetrators.

Establishing the Actor Network

The actors that I identify are the camera sellers (both legal and illegal), criminals, citizens, governments, histories and cultures. The interaction between all these actors generates and exacerbates the abuse of surveillance technologies. The following actors - governments, histories and cultures - are explored later in the *Public Response, Cultural Effects* and *Normalized Deviance* sections.

Molka Sale, Misuse, and Victimization in South Korea

The South Korean *molka* issue initially stems from small camera sellers, who make them available to the broader public. These small cameras are sold in stores and are not tracked. One store owner, Shin, who sells small cameras as a minor part of his business remarked that they could be used for "capturing evidence of domestic violence or child abuse" (AFP-JIJI, 2019). While it is true that recordings from *molka* could in fact provide crucial evidence in court for an abuse case of a victim, it is nearly impossible to ascertain the true purpose of someone's purchase. For example, although Shin told the reporter that he does not sell small cameras to anyone he suspects would use them for nefarious purposes, it is impossible to be completely sure of their intentions. Additionally, he could have made that claim to save face (AFP-JIJI, 2019). It is not hard to understand that some people sell small cameras because they need to make a living, no matter what their sales are being used for.

Small camera sellers knowingly or ignorantly endow *molka* criminals their power. Shin was approached by the news outlet the Japan Times Online for an interview because he sold a small camera to a female customer who was caught for *molka* filming. Other small camera sellers have been investigated because their customers used their cameras to livestream about 800 couples having sex in motel or hotel rooms; these *molka* are easily hidden in cubbies such as hairdryer holders, wall sockets, and digital TV boxes. As for other cases, *molka* have been used to secretly film women in schools, universities, restrooms, offices, and other public places. Some of the most notorious *molka* crimes revolve around "revenge porn," where ex-boyfriends, ex-husbands, or malicious acquaintances relase private sex videos containing the victim without their consent. Some news articles believe that "revenge porn" crimes are almost on equal footing with *molka* crimes in public places (AFP-JIJI, 2019).

There is no principal statistic for the proportions of *molka* crimes committed with mobile phones or small cameras. One measure in place that attempts to prevent mobile phone *molka* crimes is the mandatory installation of a shutter sound in camera apps of South Korean phones, but tech savvy criminals are able to turn it off (AFP-JIJI, 2019).

Comparison with Japan and China

Despite their lower prevalence than in South Korea, *molka* crimes are still an issue in Japan. As mentioned earlier, *molka* have been found in female toilets in Japanese universities (Conversation[3]), which is a similar phenomenon in South Korean universities; for example, Hongik University in Seoul (Conversation[4]). In addition, there has been a case where a man

[3] One female Japanese respondent.
[4] One female South Korean respondent.

might have filmed up a girl's skirt in a bookstore in Tokyo using his mobile phone (Conversation [5]).

Based on the lack of discussion in Chinese media sources and a few conversations with friends, there appears to not be much concern about *molka* in China compared to South Korea. However, there are still agents who seek to exploit private photos or videos. According to one friend, a program called Campus Loan has a reputation among university students for granting loans on the basis of providing a "private photo," which can be used as collateral (e.g. blackmail) if a female student cannot pay back her loan. Some of these female students could be forced to provide private photos or videos as incentives for their repayment of their loans (Conversation[6]). Not everyone sees Campus Loan as a predatory loan service, but another Chinese friend of mine would not be surprised if they track their debtors' locations and movements (Conversation[7]).

South Korean Case Studies

Jung Joon Young Scandal

This scandal is a prime example of *molka* criminals taking advantage of the easy access to small cameras, female victims, lenient laws and punishment, and South Korea's excellent internet connectivity. Singer Jung Joon Young was the leader of a chat room ("dantokbang") composed of various male celebrities (e.g. Choi Jonghoon), businessmen, and other powerful men. Jung was most likely in cahoots with high-ranking police officials in order to avoid punishment. In this chat room, Jung shared videos he secretly filmed of himself sleeping with young women. In 2016, Jung and his friends went to Gangwon province and Daegu to get young

[5] One female Japanese respondent.
[6] One female Chinese respondent.
[7] A different female Chinese respondent.

women extremely drunk then sexually assaulted (e.g. raped) them as a group (Kim, 2020). Jung later shared the sex tapes recorded with *molka* in this infamous chat room.

More often than not *molka*, sexual assault, and rape cases are not treated seriously in South Korea; male perpetrators normally receive light sentences while their female victims are left to deal with the aftermath alone. However, the Jung Joon Young scandal trended for enough time that there was sufficient attention on his case to encourage the South Korea judiciary to give him and his singer friend Choi Jonghoon hefty punishments. As of November 29, 2019, Jung and Choi were sentenced for gang rape; Jung was also sentenced for filming the assaults and distributing the footage. They have to do 80 hours of sexual violence treatment courses and are banned from working with children ("Two K-pop stars sentenced to prison for gang rape," 2019). Jung and Choi were only sentenced to six and five years respectively (Wright, 2019), which seems a bit low in comparison to the US where similar charges face up to 15 years imprisonment ("Rape in the United States," 2020). Nevertheless, this scandal has shed light on the misogynistic, sexist culture that permeates South Korea.

K-Pop Star Goo Hara

Goo Hara is just one of the K-pop stars who has committed suicide in recent years. She is an example of a female "revenge porn" victim. After breaking up with her boyfriend Choi Jong-bum, he blackmailed Goo by threatening to release the intimate videos he filmed of her while dating. She sought justice against her ex-boyfriend, but he was acquitted of all charges in August 2019 by male judge Oh Duk-shik; Choi was charged for assault among other things. Oh reportedly decided to acquit Choi because Goo and Choi were in a serious, sexual relationship and Goo herself took some personal, sensitive pictures of her ex-boyfriend. Although she took

but did not share her pictures, the judge concluded that Choi's action of circulating videos of Goo was not enough to justify jail time; the videos definitely were not consensually shared and the judge was not capable of understanding the situation from the position of Goo. After struggling by herself for a long time, Goo committed suicide last November (Kang, 2019).

In the current South Korean legal structure, *molka* offenders face up to five years in prison, but they are most likely only fined as punishment. In addition, *molka*-related bills tend to stall in the South Korean National Assembly. Given current South Korean *molka*-related laws, *molka* footage does not have to be removed from the internet or dark web even after the offenders are punished. The lack of response in addressing the *molka* issue and its lingering effects is due in part to the consumption of *molka* videos as "natural porn," as well as the lack of gender sensitivity among the police force and judiciary, which are fields traditionally dominated by men (Kang, 2019). As seen in both the Jung Joonyoung scandal and the suicide of Goo Hara, *molka* criminals are unintentionally being encouraged by the South Korean police and legal systems due to the relatively low severity of punishments for *molka* crimes.

Public Response in South Korea

Protests

As a result of *molka*, there have been feminist movements that protest the ubiquity and lack of government action against *molka* (Gong, 2018). On June 9, 2018, more than 30,000 women gathered in Seoul to challenge the prevalence of *molka.* It is considered the "largest women-led protest in South Korean history," granted that Seoul is a city of almost 10 million

(Lenamon, 2018). This particular protest reminded me of the 2017 Women's March on Washington, DC and worldwide; women united to get their voices heard.

In Korean culture, we like to voice our opinions, especially through strikes and protests (not unlike the French). That is why it is not surprising that many women marched out to protest the prevalence of *molka* and the lack of punishment for *molka* misusers. However, this protest did not drastically change any legislature as shown by the legal proceedings in the cases of Jung Joon Young and Goo Hara.

On Television

The growing social consciousness towards *molka* misuse can be seen in its increased presence on South Korea television. Two TV shows that each had an episode centered on *molka* are a *Korean Odyssey* (2018, also known as *Hwayugi*) and *Hotel del Luna* (2019); these two shows were both written by the Hong sisters.

A *Korean Odyssey* is a tvN show about mythical beings who dispel ghosts and demons from this world to hell. Its *molka* episode involves commentary on motel room *molka*. A real estate agent and her assistant visit a motel whose owner has been so spooked by strange happenings that he has put the place up for sale. Her assistant explains that the rumors involve unsettling happenings that interrupt couples in the throes of passion. When the real estate agent and her mythical guardian investigate one of the motel rooms, they discover a demon that feeds on human passion. It was lured to the motel by the greed of the motel owner, who installed *molka* to film illegal pornography to sell on the black market in order to make extra profit from his customers (Park, 2018). The vivid personification of human avarice and unethical behavior as

a demon is fitting to describe those who profit through deliberately filming people's intimate moments.

A Korean Odyssey had good ratings of up to 6.9% nationwide and 7.7% in Seoul; its *molka* episode was one of the most popular episodes at 6.1% nationwide and 6.5% in Seoul, which contributed to the next episode having the highest ratings of the show's run ("A Korean Odyssey," 2020). Given the fact that the following episode experienced the best ratings, it appears that this episode helped the show gain traction with the South Korean public; possibly because the public appreciated how it dealt with a relevant social issue. According to foreign reviews written in English, viewers liked how the motel situation emphasized humans as the ultimate evil and that demons can easily exploit that evil; in the eyes of viewers, *molka* are seen as impermissible ("Hwayugi: Episode 5," 2018).

Hotel del Luna is a tvN show about a hotel that guides ghosts to their next life. Its *molka* episode criticizes revenge porn distribution that led to the suicide of a young woman. Given that this show was released only a few months after the Jung Joon Young scandal, there are obvious parallels to that case. The ghost character committed suicide because the illegally-filmed sex tape with her *sunbae* (*senpai* or senior male student at university) was circulated online by him and his friends. Now an angry ghost, she haunts a fake viral sex tape, which is sent to each of her perpetrators so she can kill them. This malevolent group of men shared sex tapes among themselves for many years until the main characters were tipped off by the ghost's sister. She revealed that those who distributed the video only got punished with small fines, while her sister was ridiculed by her classmates daily. Not only that, but the man who filmed and sold the video now owns a successful video-sharing company. When confronted, this man has no recollection

of the dead girl until he is punished by a grim reaper (Oh, 2019). While watching this episode with my cousin in Seoul, it gave us the impression that this type of scenario is not just limited to the Jung Joon Young case.

Hotel del Luna had excellent ratings of up to 12% nationwide and 13.9% in Seoul; ratings steadily increased after this episode, which had a rating of 8% nationwide and 8.7% in Seoul ("Hotel del Luna," 2020). This suggests that this episode helped generate interest for the show because it dealt with a pressing social issue. *Hotel del Luna* also won the Best Drama Series - Regional at the 2nd Asian Academy Creative Awards. According to foreign reviews written in English, the audience appreciated that the focus of the episode was on the story of a victim of a relevant social issue instead of being cluttered with product placements, which are a common feature of tvN programs ("Hotel del Luna: Episode 7," 2019).

While both *A Korean Odyssey* and *Hotel del Luna* focus on the supernatural, they still both capture the idea that *molka* crimes are very human yet unforgivable. In addition, these episodes led to better ratings for the shows because they gained traction with the public for their treatment of an infamous social issue. Since they are TV shows, events may have been dramatized, but the scenarios still echo past *molka* crimes like Jung's chat room and the events leading to the suicide of Goo Hara.

How Culture Affects the Propagation of *Molka*

One of the research decisions I made was to discuss the impact of surveillance technologies on East Asian women with my family and close friends who live in South Korea, Japan, and China. Since I did not grow up in East Asia, I sought to ask purposeful questions that

would help me better understand contemporary South Korea and countries I do not trace ancestry to.

South Korea

Before exploring South Korean views towards sexual assault and rape, the Confucian group culture of South Korea merits discussion. In stark contrast to the United States and other western nations that promote individualism, Korean culture traditionally frowns upon individualism and uniqueness, instead affirming conformation with the general public and strong filial family bonds (Chang et al., 2019). As a result, being different or attracting attention are traits that encourage censure from fellow Koreans. Especially concerning female victims of sexual assault or rape, they can be seen as promiscious if they were able to be exploited (Interview).

Since extramarital affairs often take place at motels, motel room *molka* could even be seen as "collective moral policing"; granted the motel owners who install *molka* are also behaving immorally. My reasoning is that there are illegal videos being collected on the adulterers, which might not be valid as evidence in court, but could still cost them their marriages and careers if their identities are confirmed. Thus, these risks might lower the rate of such motel affairs.

On the surface, South Korean culture frowns down upon *molka* crimes because they are lascivious and degrading; this view is supported by news outlets, TV station productions, and the people I conversed with while preparing this paper. Unfortunately, public censure does not stop criminals from exploiting *molka* or people from consuming *molka* videos; these behaviors are not exclusive to men.

Comparison with Japan and China

Although Japan shook off most of its Confucian ideals during the Meiji Restoration at the end of the 19th century ("Meiji Restoration," 2020), it still shares some similarities with South Korean culture. For example, if the *molka* victim is female, some Japanese would still criticize her for wearing a short skirt because it can be seen as audacious and enticing. This type of cultural attitude can be summarized as placing blame on a female victim due to her behavior rather than the male pepratrator's immoral whims. However, the compulsory school uniform policy requires female students to wear short skirts on a regular basis, so this cultural attitude is somewhat hypocritical (Interview).

Similar to South Korea, China has a concept of privacy that is much looser than that in the United States. In South Korea, this is because Korean homes traditionally have paper walls and *ondol* floors that are hollow underneath for heating purposes. Thus sound travels easily in traditional homes, considerably limiting the amount of privacy between family members; historically, three generations of family members lived together and this practice still persists somewhat nowadays. In addition, South Korean cities are densely populated; Seoul and the surrounding province are the home of half of the country's population at 25 million people (Chang et al., 2019). Chinese have had similar living arrangements to Korean over the centuries, so their concept of privacy is similar except that China has a totalitarian government (Tam, 2018).

Although *molka* are not a major issue in China, the scale and invasiveness of Chinese surveillance technology have made headlines around the world in recent years. According to a Time article, Chongqing has the "dubious distinction of being the world's most surveilled city"

because it has about one security camera per 5.9 citizens for a city of 15.35 million people; that is about 30 times the presence of security cameras in Washington, DC. From a western perspective, China has an "unparalleled system of social control" (Campbell, 2019). While surveillance is a Chinese cultural practice, this system could be exploited by either the government or individuals to secretly film citizens (Monahan, 2011). One of the most controversial aspects of the Chinese surveillance system is the AI software used to track the movements of the Uighur minority group. Relating back to the South Korean motel room "moral policing" scenario, this type of AI software could also be utilized as "moral policing" by the government. It is also used to prevent illegal subletting, which may not exploit people as much as with other uses (Simonite, 2019). Given the amount of surveillance technologies available, it is quite possible that they could be exploited to target women.

The Evolution of Normalized Deviance in South Korea

Since one is born into a culture, cultural beliefs and values shape one's development and ideology. As previously discussed, cultural values in East Asia are quite different from those in western societies. In addition, the South Korean government has become normalized in their legal systems and political goals. Thus, I suspect that some of these cultural traits have contributed to normalized deviance across broader society.

Although society at large considers *molka* unethical and unacceptable, some people still install them and/or view *molka* videos online. I propose that this behavior is a consequence of the high pressure nature of South Korea; my family calls it a "pressure cooker" society. There is an expected life path that parents desire for their children: obtain good grades in high school, get

admitted to one of the top three SKY universities (Seoul National, Korea and Yonsei), then get a respectable company job at a conglomerate[8]. Getting a good job is very difficult due to the high number of university graduates nowadays, and it is expected that good employees work abroad for the company for several years[9]. Furthermore, housing in Seoul, where most companies are located, is extremely expensive and has led to many subpar housing units as depicted in the award-winning film *Parasite*. Besides the one ideal life path, South Koreans frown upon differences ranging from little things like makeup[10] to more controversial issues like racial and transgender identities; insults are expressed not only directly, but also viciously over the internet. That is why when one visits South Korea, one of the most ethnically homogeneous countries in the world, all girls wear the same style of makeup and everyone follows the same fashion trend.

Not surprisingly, constant pressure about the "proper" way to live and unemployment has led to feelings of depression and giving up on normal life expectations among South Koreans in their 20s and 30s. Called the N-po generation in English, there are three groups of young people who either give up 3, 5, or 7 things in the order of dating, marriage, childbirth, home, career, hope/hobby, and human relations ("N-po generation," 2020). Compared to the United States, this is an extremely normalized attitude toward life. Since Koreans like to speak bluntly, strangers question one's life decisions like salary and marriage[11], which can intensify insecurity.

[8] The South Korean economy is dependent on several large conglomerates such as Samsung, LG, Lotte, and Hyundai.
[9] Often in Southeast Asia. I have relatives who have worked in Singapore. There is a joke about housewives not wanting to move to Indonesia (or elsewhere in SE Asia), then not wanting to move back to South Korea after enjoying a break from the "pressure cooker."
[10] Women are expected to wear makeup daily. Bosses and older women are infamous for backhand comments like "you're pretty, but you'd be prettier if…"
[11] For example: "Why aren't you married?" Or: "Why did you marry him/her?"

I conjecture that the accumulation of all the pressure I just enumerated changes people and can even normalize them to things that they would otherwise find immoral. For instance, if a person has the following - a stable marriage, strong familial and friend networks, a steady job that provides at least enough to get by, hobbies and hopes - then he or she can feel content often enough to not be extremely frustrated about his or her life. However, among the young South Koreans who feel hopeless and that they do not have enough or cannot meet society's expectations, they might be inclined to release life and/or sexual frustrations through the consummation of *molka* films. That being said, there are still people who act immorally despite fame and success like singer Jung Joon Young. In contrast with the various local legal regulations in the United States and Europe, gambling, drugs, and prostitution are all illegal nationwide in South Korea; transgressions face strong punishments. Without easy access to avenues for releasing frustration and unhappiness, *molka* films are much easier to obtain because they are posted online. In short, the "pressure cooker" culture has most likely normalized a significant amount of South Koreans to unethical *molka* practices.

Possible Routes for Amelioration in South Korea

In general, the regulations for the sale of small cameras are very loose, so perhaps small cameras should be regulated strictly like firearms in South Korea; owners should be recorded in a national registry. In addition, government crackdown on the black market for both small cameras and *molka* films is necessary. Perhaps a government office can be established for the removal of illegal pornography online, arresting the criminals, and protecting the anomymity of the victims from the general public. There especially needs to be harsher punishment for *molka*

criminals because if they are just easily let off the hook, they will probably continue their *molka* misuse. Sufficient justice and psychological counseling is needed for the victims; free state-provided psychological counseling would be helpful for victims who cannot afford it. Beyond punishments, there is a need for cultural change starting with education in schools to teach kids that using *molka* or consuming their videos is unethical; this could support "collective moral policing." Hopefully in the future, the adversity that victims face in the aftermath can be ameliorated by both fellow Koreans and the government.

Conclusion

The pervasiveness of *molka* has made certain places unsafe for South Korean women, such as public restrooms, motels, and private homes. Aided by the internet, these spy cams have captured many women (and men) in their private and intimate moments and are normally not taken down regardless of sentencing. Their prevalence is a result of a network of actors that indirectly supports criminals, a "pressure cooker" culture that is intolerant of difference and individualism, and discontentment with life that normalizes behaviors that are generally considered immoral. Any hopes of amelioration call for stronger small camera regulations, harsher punishments for criminals (tied hand in hand with more government cooperation), and education geared at changing cultural attitudes and mindsets.

Recommendations for future STS students include exploring the relationship between privacy and surveillance in general, especially in China due to its bad reputation for targeting minorities with surveillance technologies. In addition, it would be enlightening to research how socioeconomic status and gender correlate to *molka* crimes and consumption (data permitting).

While this STS thesis has explored a darker side to South Korean culture, the country still has plenty of good qualities like delicious food, appealing music and dancing, popular movies and dramas, good partying culture, and generosity to others (even strangers). There is no country that has only good or bad traits, so one should not toss aside South Korea as an abhorrent culture. The current situation is such that behaviors that are normally considered immoral by society have unfortunately become normalized as acceptable underground activities.

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