

Vlog Worthy Surveillance?: Investigating the Playful Surveillance Imaginaries of South Korea's Quarantine Vlogs

Jeehyun Jenny Lee and Chloe (Jae-Kyung) Ahn

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Article abstract

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Article

Vlog Worthy Surveillance?: Investigating the Playful Surveillance Imaginaries of South Korea's Quarantine Vlogs

Jeehyun Jenny Lee

University of Washington, USA
jenny719@uw.edu

Chloe (Jae-Kyung) Ahn

University of Pennsylvania, USA
chloe.ahn@asc.upenn.edu

Abstract

Through a case study of South Korean citizens' YouTube quarantine vlogs, this study examines the cultural narratives and practices surrounding pandemic surveillance, mainly the government-mandated quarantine monitored via the quarantine mobile app. Moving beyond the dichotomous understanding of surveillance as an act of control either to be resisted or accepted, we draw on the framework of playful surveillance and surveillance imaginaries and examine how Korean citizens creatively vlog their experience in quarantine. Through a critical visual analysis of forty quarantine YouTube vlogs, we illustrate how Korean citizens build playful surveillance imaginaries, which are imaginaries about surveillance constructed through playful frames that perceive participation in surveillance as agentive, pleasurable, and relational. Their playful surveillance imaginaries introduce novel ways of perceiving the self, surveillance technologies, and others in surveillance cultures and the relations that bring them together into a mutually beneficial and caring network. However, the subversive potential of this empowering and relational mode of surveillance may be limited by Korean society's normative understanding of care.

Introduction

When the pandemic first hit South Korea (hereafter Korea), the government's aggressive tracking measures led to the emergence of a popular pandemic genre on YouTube, the quarantine vlogs [자가격리 브이로그 in Korean], in which Korean people would record their two week experience in government-mandated quarantine. The quarantine vlogs drew on the vlog genre (a blended word of video and blog), which involves peoples' documentation of diverse topics, such as eating/cooking, fitness, beauty, and lifestyle, to narrate citizens' experiences in quarantine. With more than 670 quarantine vlogs on YouTube posted from April 1, 2020, when we first started collecting data, to when the government suspended its quarantine application on February 21, 2022 (Yim 2022),¹ the quarantine vlog became a unique genre of the pandemic connecting people together while in isolation.

¹To get a better idea of how many videos were published, we used YouTube Data Tools (Rieder 2015) to generate a list of quarantine videos published during the period from the beginning of our data collection to the end of the day when the app was suspended by the government. There were 671 videos published with the keyword when we most recently checked on March 1, 2023. Since more than one year has passed since the quarantine app has been suspended, there may have been more videos published when the quarantine mandates were in place that are now deleted. Quarantine vlogs continue to be uploaded to this day, but new uploads are documentation of people sick with COVID-19 in voluntary quarantine, without the government's supervision and the quarantine app.

As a part of the government's pandemic surveillance measures, quarantining citizens were monitored via the Self-quarantine Safety Protection App, which was launched on March 7, 2020, to contain the spread of the virus and track travelers from abroad and close contacts of COVID-19 patients (The Government of Republic of Korea 2020). For two weeks, users would have to consent to the app's access to their phone's GPS tracking system and submit their health data daily. In response to these mandates, the public's reaction was mixed, with Korean citizens not delighted at the prospect of having to give their location data to public health officials but feeling obligated to protect the nation and other citizens through their compliance with the government's health surveillance (S. C. Lee 2021). Against the backdrop of this moralized pandemic, quarantine vlogs became an outlet for citizens to creatively and playfully document their time in quarantine while also presenting themselves as responsible subjects abiding by the government's COVID-19 measures.

In this study, we conduct a "cultural study of surveillance" (Monahan 2017: 201) of Korean citizens' creative documentation of the government's mandated quarantine, moving beyond the dichotomous analysis of surveillance as an act either to be resisted or accepted to a more complex analysis of surveillance as situated in the unique cultural contexts shaped by peoples' everyday practices (Lyon 2017). In our cultural studies of surveillance, we draw on the framework of playful surveillance, which focuses on the participatory and pleasurable aspect of surveillance, as well as the surveillance imaginary, which considers how the shared understanding and knowledge about modes of visibility and behavior within surveillance cultures shape peoples' surveillance knowledge (Lyon 2017). Informed by these frameworks, we introduce the idea of "playful surveillance imaginaries" to explain Korean citizens' imaginaries of pandemic surveillance, which are surveillance imaginaries constructed through the application of "playful frames" to non-playful surveillance scenes (Whitson 2013: 165).

In our case study of the quarantine vlogs, the YouTube vlog genre functions as the playful frame employed to interpret government-led pandemic surveillance, mainly its quarantine mandates and deployment of the quarantine application to monitor citizens. While vlogging playfully about their experiences of being confined in a physical location may seem like a careless treatment of surveillance, we approach Korean peoples' quarantine vlogs as important sites to unpack the politics of how people relate to surveillance practices. Through a critical visual analysis of forty quarantine vlogs published during the first few months of when the application was implemented, we address the following questions: (1) How do Korean citizens employ the vlog genre to narrate their experiences in quarantine? (2) What kind of surveillance imaginaries do they construct and share through their quarantine vlogs? (3) Lastly, what implications do their imaginaries have for setting the norms, duties, and ethics of pandemic surveillance?

Through our findings, we argue that the surveillance imaginaries constructed by Korean citizens through the playful and participatory YouTube vlog genre show that "surveillance" in pandemic surveillance is not merely the government's unilateral monitoring of their bodies. Instead, they show how it is a complex intersection of citizens, technology, and government connected to protect the health of the country. Through a playful lens, their imaginaries construct surveillance knowledge and practices that show the potential of empowerment, pleasure, and care in state-led surveillance. Specifically, their playful surveillance imaginaries perceive (1) surveillance subjects as agentive participants partaking in shaping surveillance cultures, (2) surveillance technologies and related institutional bodies as caring rather than threatening, and (3) other fellow citizens as connected to the surveillance subjects through mutually empowering networks of "watching out for each other." Their playful surveillance imaginaries enable us to imagine novel ways of perceiving the self, surveillance technologies, and others in surveillance cultures and the relations that bring them together. However, as we discuss in the conclusion, the subversive potential of this empowering and relational mode of surveillance may be limited by Korean society's normative understanding of care.

Playful Surveillance and Playful Surveillance Imaginaries

Korean peoples' creative documentation of their experience in pandemic surveillance through the YouTube vlog genre reflects scholarly observations of contemporary surveillance cultures as dependent on the "participation of those being surveilled" (Lyon 2018: 1), where the surveilled actively partake in

surveillance cultures. According to this perspective, surveillance is “not only a top-down phenomenon always passively accepted by individuals, but a place of negotiation, interaction, and interplay” (Gangneux 2014: 446). As denizens of contemporary surveillance societies, people participate in surveillance cultures in imaginative and creative ways (Albrechtslund 2008; van Brakel 2013). Their creative participation in surveillance includes, but is not limited to, directing the surveillance gaze to the surveillant by repurposing surveillance technologies to document the injustice committed by those in power (e.g., police brutality) (Mann, Nolan, and Wellman 2003), producing artistic performances of surveillance technologies that blur the boundaries between surveillance as a policing tool and a form of spectacle (Nath 2019), and repurposing surveillance practices that empower the surveilled, such as through voluntary digital self-documentation (Bell 2009).

Following this shift in surveillance studies from the “panopticon principle” to the “pleasure principle” (Weibel 2002: 218), scholars have used the framework of playful surveillance to focus on peoples’ everyday, playful participation in contemporary surveillance cultures (Albrechtslund 2008; Ellerbrok 2011; McGrath 2004; Whitson 2013). Challenging the understanding of surveillance as an inherently disempowering act, surveillance studies scholars complicate the role of surveillance in society, highlighting how it can be “potentially empowering, subjectivity building, and even playful” (Albrechtslund 2008: para. 62). For instance, Whitson (2013: 165) examines how people apply “playful frames to non-play scenes,” such as in their usage of self-tracking technologies like the running application Nike+ as entertainment. Users of self-tracking applications like Nike+, use the application in a gamified mode. They submit their exercise data to the application, seek rewards through the app’s acknowledgement of their hard work through colored badges, and engage in a loop of fun self-surveillance through the technology’s tailored feedback based on their provision of data. Through what Whitson (2013) describes as the gamification of surveillance technologies, people shape the meaning of surveillance as something that can enrich their life.

Extending the playful lens to examining social networking services, Albrechtslund (2008) describes surveillance on social networking spaces among users as participatory surveillance, the social and playful aspect of surveillance that people voluntarily partake in. Participatory surveillance includes two major dimensions of surveillance cultures overlooked in existing literature: surveillance through online social networking can facilitate (1) “user empowerment and the building of subjectivity” and (2) the social engagement of “sharing” instead of a mere “information trade” (Albrechtslund 2008: para 59). For instance, when people check in at restaurants and shops via the geo-tagging location app Foursquare and share their check-ins on social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, people construct aspects of themselves that they want their friends to see, building their subjectivity in ways they desire (Whitson 2013). Similarly, Marwick (2012: 390) introduces the idea of social surveillance, a process in which users of social media “gather social information about their friends and acquaintances” in ways that are reciprocal and more concerned with connecting with others than monitoring. The sharing and checking up on each other through these endeavors fosters “new ways of constructing identity, meeting friends, colleagues as well as socializing with strangers,” making surveillance a “mutual,” “empowering” and “fundamentally social” practice (Albrechtslund 2008: para 61).

While many important studies have been conducted to examine peoples’ *playful usage of surveillance technologies* (Ellerbrok 2011; Whitson 2013), we direct attention to *people’s playful interpretation of surveillance*, the discursive and symbolic processes surrounding surveillance. More specifically, we bring together the framework of playful surveillance and the notion of surveillance imaginaries (Lyon 2017), which are peoples’ shared understanding about the norms and practices of visibility in their daily lives constructed through their engagement with surveillance cultures and consumption of surveillance representations via news media and popular culture. This shared understanding of surveillance shapes peoples’ surveillance knowledge, which “provide[s] a capacity to act, to engage in, and to legitimate surveillance practices” (Lyon 2017: 829). Drawing on the two concepts, we introduce the idea of playful surveillance imaginaries, imaginaries about surveillance constructed through “playful frames” (Whitson 2013: 165). By interpreting surveillance through playful frames, people can cultivate surveillance

imaginaries that involve agentive, pleasurable, empowering, and participatory engagement and understanding of surveillance.

In the quarantine vlogs, the vlog genre functions as a playful frame, or as communication and media scholars would describe it, a playful “template” (Cervi and Divon 2023; Leaver, Highfield, and Abidin 2020) to interpret surveillance. In their study of Instagram, Leaver, Highfield, and Abidin (2020: 214) define templates as “visually memorable and memorizable visual stylings, settings, and practices that can be replicated with relative ease to the extent that they become, for a period of time, iconic.” Similarly, in their study of Palestinians’ political resistance towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on TikTok, Cervi and Divon (2023) analyze TikTok memetic templates as playful, accessible, and relatable frameworks for users to employ to create and disseminate their political content. Applying these definitions of templates to YouTube vlogs, we can approach the quarantine vlog genre as a playful template that can be employed by people to make sense of pandemic surveillance.

Informed by literature on YouTube as a participatory and creative space, we approach the YouTube vlog genre as a playful frame that (1) fosters the transformation of peoples’ everyday, mundane lives into an attention worthy event (Snelson 2015), (2) provides popular, chirpy, upbeat, and positive genre conventions for users to tap into to make their content accessible to a wider audience (D. Kim 2021), and (3) invites creators to broadcast themselves and participate in content creation with fun and creativity, even in content that is meant to critique (Wood 2021). As a playful frame people can draw on to interpret surveillance, vlogs do not merely transmit information but also shape peoples’ content creation about pandemic surveillance through their popular formats, rules, and associated cultural practices.

As imaginaries rooted in peoples’ meaning making of surveillance, playful surveillance imaginaries can function as counter-imaginaries to dominant narratives that perceive surveillance as a hierarchical, top-down mode of control. They may also help us envision and foster surveillance cultures and practices that benefit citizens by centering the agency of surveillance subjects. Playful imaginaries, while seeming frivolous and fun, like any other social imaginaries, have significant implications for how we make sense of ourselves in relation to social systems and values. People’s shared social imaginaries about surveillance assist their understanding of the type of surveillance practices, subjectivities, and “duties of surveillance” that become legitimized, normalized, and reified through cultural discourse and practice (Lyon 2017: 830). The shared understanding about the duties of surveillance “inform and animate surveillance practices” (Lyon 2017: 830), which can in turn reproduce and reinforce popular surveillance imaginaries.

In the context of the pandemic, these imaginaries may be reflective of the surveillance experiences and understandings of the majority, who Milan (2020: 2) terms the “standard human” and Taylor (2020: 5) describes as the “illusory majority” governments envisioned when deploying surveillance technologies to combat COVID-19, neglecting the experiences of those socially, politically, and economically excluded from society. In this study, we are therefore mindful of the inequitable contexts in which Korean citizens’ playful surveillance imaginaries are situated.

Informed by the aforementioned cultural, critical, and interpretive studies of surveillance, we approach playful surveillance imaginaries as an important site to examine surveillance knowledge and as a “methodology” that enables us to critically examine the “making” and “circulation” of surveillance norms, values, and practices (Cahill and Newell 2021: 412). By capturing, mediating, and narrating their experiences of surveillance through the YouTube vlog genre, people construct and present their understanding of the rule and mode of governance exercised by pandemic surveillance. During this process, surveillance does not merely happen to them. Instead, people partake in establishing the terms of its acceptable presence.

Korean Citizens' Health Surveillance Imaginaries: Care through Control

In this section, we contextualize Korean citizens' quarantine vlogs in their shared memories of and experiences with previous health emergencies and how these experiences inform the expectations they have for the government. While YouTube vlogs function as a playful frame and template to translate their experience of government-mandated surveillance, there needs to be an understanding of how Korean citizens were able to perceive being under the government's mandatory quarantine as a pleasurable and vlog worthy experience to begin with.

As a part of the government's COVID-19 tracking technologies, the quarantine mobile application was launched on March 7, 2020, and became mandatory on April 1, 2020 (Korean Disease Control and Prevention Agency 2020) for all travelers from foreign countries, regardless of the travelers' nationality, and close contacts of COVID-19 patients. To monitor quarantining individuals, the application used GPS, which helped track those who violated the quarantine rules by sending an alarm to the public officers paired with them for the duration of two weeks. All individuals designated to mandatory quarantine were obligated to download the app and consent to the use of GPS. Through the app, they also had to submit their health status (temperature, cough, sore throat, dyspnea) daily, which notified the public officers (Korean Disease Control and Prevention Agency 2020).

Korean scholars note that the government's failure to contain the MERS outbreak in 2015 is the biggest factor behind these surveillance measures and the public's general acceptance of its digitally driven response (T. Kim 2020; Y. Kim 2022). During the 2015 MERS epidemic, the government led by former president Park Geun-hye was criticized for not conducting swift epidemiological investigations and lacking transparency in its risk communication (e.g., not revealing the names of hospitals with patients at the beginning), which the public attributed as the reasons for Korea's high death rate from the respiratory illness (Cho 2015). The government was reluctant to release the names of the hospitals out of concern that it could stigmatize medical personnel and residents of the area. However, the government's decision not to release the information to the public led to a significant plummeting of the public's trust in the government (Y. Kim 2022) as the lack of information made those who visited the hospitals where the patients were being treated at risk of being exposed to the viral illness. This led to calls for heightened monitoring and transparent communication about the movement of the disease, even if that meant increasing the government's surveillance powers.

In 2017, Korea experienced a change in administration following political turmoil in the nation that led to Park's impeachment. President Moon Jae-in was elected with the promise to remedy the previous administration's failure to ensure public safety (Y. Kim 2022). When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, Moon's administration faced major pressure from the public to enact stringent measures, such as closing the borders and engaging in clear, transparent communication about the virus (Park and Chung 2021). As a result, revisions were made to the Infectious Disease Control and Prevention Act (IDCPA) (2015) in 2020, building upon the changes that were made in 2015 after the MERS outbreak. For instance, government bodies, including the Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency, were given the power to override some of the privacy provisions set by the Personal Information Protection Act (PIPA) and collect peoples' personal information in cases of national health emergencies (Park, Choi, and Ko 2020). Stringent punishments were also set for those who disobeyed quarantine measures (one year in prison or 1,000,000 Korean won) (Park and Chung 2021). Rather than reading these measures as aggressive measures enacted by a paternalistic Asian government, scholars have highlighted the complex relationship between care and surveillance in Korea (Y. Kim, Chen, and Liang 2021; J. J. Lee 2022).

As Y. Kim, Chen, and Liang (2021: 10) show, care and control are carefully "engineered" into Korea's pandemic governance, with the public "feeling care through control," as evidenced by the favorable public opinion of Moon's administration at the initial stages of the pandemic (Park and Chung 2021). Similarly, J. J. Lee (2022) illustrates how Korean users' experiences with the quarantine mobile application are interpreted through the lens of shared responsibilities in care: health officials behind the app provide care

and services to quarantining citizens, and quarantining citizens show care to other fellow citizens by providing their health data to the app and isolating their potentially infectious bodies. These studies reveal how citizens expect the government to treat them as subjects to be cared for, rather than passive subjects to be controlled.

Korean citizens' expectation of care in surveillance shares similarities with what Stoddart (2012) describes as a critical ethics of care that approaches surveillance as "for" rather than "of" the people. This understanding of surveillance as care perceives the watcher as the "caring watcher" who "not only watches, but also looks out for" others, an expectation many people across the globe had for their governments (Andrejevic et al. 2021: 569). In Korea, in addition to the government being entrusted with responsibilities as the caring watcher, citizens were also encouraged to participate in the government's mandatory quarantine application as caring watchers of their symptoms to protect the health of other citizens (J. J. Lee 2022).

These observations are telling of how Korean citizens' health surveillance imaginaries are largely shaped by their shared experience with previous epidemics and the expectations they have for the government to act as a caring watcher. However, it is also important to note that public discourse surrounding "who" surveillance should be for and who counts as "subjects to be cared for" circulating in the news media have been largely constructed according to the Korean society's normative understanding of moral citizens (Y. Kim, Chen, and Liang 2021), excluding marginalized members of society such as the gay community in Korea who have been treated as subjects to be policed, rather than cared for, during the pandemic (J. Lee and J. J. Lee 2023). Therefore, the understanding of care largely characterizing Korean citizens' acceptance of surveillance technologies, while focused on empowering citizens rather than the government, reflect the unequal status quo.

Situating our study in the political and historical contexts surrounding health surveillance in Korea, we follow Nissenbaum's (2009) work on the contextual integrity of privacy, studying surveillance imaginaries as embedded and emerging from their specific contexts. We are therefore attentive to how Korean citizens' quarantine vlogs and their application of playful frames—the YouTube vlog genre—employed to interpret their experiences with pandemic surveillance are situated in the specific political and health contexts unique to Korean citizens.

Methodology

To examine how Korean citizens document their experience in pandemic surveillance, we conducted critical visual analysis of forty quarantine vlogs on YouTube. Guided by Rose's (2016: 12) conceptualization of critical visual methodology as method that takes visuals seriously, we paid attention to the "social conditions and effects of visual objects" and considered how the act of seeing is "historically, geographically, culturally, and socially specific." Approaching the YouTube vlog genre as a playful template, we relied on critical visual methodologies' interpretive and qualitative approach to studying how visuals are shaped by the intersections of technological medium, peoples' meaning-making practices, and cultural contexts (Rose 2016; Schreiber 2017).

To collect data, we gathered a list of the most-viewed videos with the keyword "quarantine vlogs" (자가격리 브이로그 in Korean) posted from April 1 to July 31, 2020, using YouTube Data Tools (Rieder 2015), which runs based on an official API provided by YouTube. YouTube Data Tools allows users to retrieve videos by including a certain search query (e.g., "Quarantine vlogs") in the video title or the description posted during a certain time range. Then, YouTube Data Tools sorts the videos with a particular keyword or a phrase using different metrics officially provided by YouTube: from the highest to the lowest number of views, in reverse chronological order, and so forth. While the quarantine application was in use from March 2020, we decided to collect videos from the beginning of April to the end of July because all travelers to Korea were required to install the quarantine application at the airport upon entry starting from

April 1 (The Government of Republic of Korea 2020), and quarantine vlogs became popularized during this period with an increase in the number of individuals in government-mandated quarantine.

To examine the quarantine vlogs produced by Korean mandatory users of the quarantine mobile application, we excluded videos by Korean people quarantining in other countries with similar quarantine regulations, such as Singapore and Hong Kong, and those who were voluntarily in quarantine because they felt sick and were not obliged to use the quarantine mobile application. We also excluded renowned microcelebrities and mainstream celebrities who were working with brands and marketing agencies because much of their content on quarantine included sponsored products. Although microcelebrity videos also contribute to the creative documentation of the pandemic, our main question was centered on how ordinary Koreans, who are not particularly well-known and are not equipped with a large-/middle-scale production team, narrate and document their quarantine experiences. Through these processes of narrowing our data, we came to our final set of forty videos, which included ten videos for each month that met our criteria and had the highest number of views for that month's search query results.

Since the data from our study are focused on the first few months of when the quarantine application was implemented, our data set and analysis is limited in describing Korean citizens' surveillance imaginaries and opinions about state-led surveillance across time. Our data, however, serve as important visual data of the pandemic, which capture citizens' active participation in cultivating and shaping narratives and imaginaries about the government's aggressive surveillance measures at the onset of the pandemic.

Following Bhatia's (2020: 9) visual analysis of YouTube videos, we viewed each of the forty videos three times: first to acquire a "holistic impression of the content," second to pay attention to recurring visual elements and themes, and third to link the themes to wider social and cultural contexts. During these stages of viewing, we paid attention to how the vloggers narrate their experience in quarantine, the experiences they highlight over others, and how they employ visuals to narrate their experiences. In the analysis stage, we engaged in inductive and latent analysis of recurring visual elements, moving the analysis beyond surface description of visual data to examine how the recurring patterns relate to each other and to the larger contexts and discourses surrounding the pandemic. Through this endeavor, we were able to examine how the creative documentation of pandemic surveillance becomes a discursive space where people make sense of pandemic surveillance, create spaces of agency, and negotiate with the rules of the government's health surveillance.

Vlog Aesthetics Meet Pandemic Surveillance: The Creative Participants of Surveillance

Drawing upon YouTube vlog aesthetics and the surrealness of the pandemic, Korean vloggers transformed their experience in government-mandated quarantine into a popular genre on YouTube. Rather than responding to government-mandated quarantine with despair, vloggers capitalized on their quarantining bodies by turning pandemic surveillance into a form of entertainment. On the surface, the vlogs may appear to be a carefree documentation of government-mandated quarantine. However, taking seriously the fun side of surveillance does not condone problematic surveillance practices. Rather, it reveals the multifaceted nature of contemporary digital surveillance and the various subject positions taken by people experiencing digitalized surveillance (Albrechtslund and Dubbeld 2002).

Many of the quarantine vlogs we analyzed largely resemble lifestyle/beauty vlogs, with hyperstylized aesthetics similar to those found on Instagram. Most of the videos have been edited with more softened and less saturated colors, mixed with relaxing music in the background. The background of their quarantine vlogs are mostly their bedrooms or Airbnb and hotel accommodations, which are depicted as aesthetically pleasing spaces decorated with their cozy bedding and pillows. Even when the vlogs depict serious moments like testing positive for COVID-19 or being instructed by government officials to self-quarantine at a location different from where they had originally planned, the sound is intentionally muted to reduce tension. Square-shaped subtitles are commonly used, and each scene is accompanied by smooth transitions between frames, creating a mellow mood.

In these quarantine vlogs, individuals make the most of their quarantine experience by engaging in various activities to be productive, such as working out and studying. Some quarantining vloggers review movies or TV dramas or show themselves watching YouTube videos on their iPads. Through these scenes, pandemic surveillance is conjured as a respite from the bustling city life, and a time to rest at home with enjoyable media content and food. As one YouTube vlogger writes, “I don’t feel the urge to go out. I feel comfortable and am doing well.” Every day, friends and family leave scrumptious meals in front of their rooms or have food delivered to them. The frequent appearance of food in the vlogs might lead one to wonder if one is watching a “what I eat in a day” video, a popular YouTube genre where vloggers document what they eat and cook on a typical day, rather than a quarantine vlog. In these videos, vloggers review different types of delivery food trending in Korea, such as pepper-flavored fried chicken and rose cream sauce *tteokbokki* (a popular Korean savory rice cake snack). The meals are presented in a way that makes quarantine look like a pleasant two weeks filled with delicious meals.

Another notable feature is the unboxing of the government care package. For those in mandatory quarantine, the Korean government sent a care package containing two weeks’ worth of food and snacks for encouragement, along with a card wishing them well. The care package also included an emergency kit consisting of hand sanitizer and masks. The government care package became the subject of interest for many users in quarantine, with different regions in Korea receiving a different assortment of snacks and refreshments. To showcase the care packages, Korean vloggers drew on the unboxing genre, a popular YouTube genre, which typically involves vloggers revealing products, such as technological gadgets they have bought or received, to their audiences (Mowlabocus 2020).

According to Mowlabocus (2020: 571), unboxing vlogs present “the act of unboxing as a happy event,” an act that comes with great pleasure. In the quarantine vlogs, the vloggers also unbox the care package with excitement, presenting the variety of goods they received, including delicious snacks, soup, food, and drinks from major food brands from Korea. One vlogger describes her process of unpacking with a subtitle, “I am at a loss for words,” implying that she is shocked by how good the care package is. The vloggers present the quarantine packages as evidence to the government’s care for people in quarantine, with the favorable presentation of the care package echoing Y. Kim, Chen, and Liang (2021) study’s findings that Korean users of the government safety quarantine application expressed appreciation for the public officers’ service.

By drawing on the different conventions of the YouTube vlog genre, Korean vloggers cultivated a distinct genre and aesthetic of pandemic surveillance. Media genres are anchored to the expectation of “what morality or aesthetics [media] texts should adopt” (Gray 2003: 73), which may shape how creators produce their content. In the context of our case study, the playfully positive norms and conventions of the YouTube vlog genre seem to have the effect of fine-tuning the pandemic surveillance in ways that are palatable to vlog cultures and that prioritize aesthetically pleasing content and circulation of positive affect, leaving little space for critical reflection on citizens’ “surveilled” lives.

While the citizens’ portrayal of the pandemic may seem uncritical, highly romanticized depictions of the government-mandated quarantine, that does not make their surveillance narratives unimportant. Their participation in cultivating narratives of surveillance can be described as a productive engagement with surveillance, as they actively employ the vlog genre to re-package pandemic surveillance in ways that center elements of pandemic surveillance that is pleasurable to them. As McGrath (2004: 2) writes, “the relevant question about surveillance today is not whether we should live in a surveillance society, but how.” Korean citizens’ quarantine vlogs respond to this statement by showing that we can live playfully and creatively as surveillance narrative shapers rather than disempowered subjects.

Quarantine App in the Vlogs: Beyond a Monitoring Tool

While the vlog aesthetics make one forget that the vloggers are under government-mandated quarantine, the appearance of the mobile quarantine application and their scenes of interacting with the public officers (either on their phones or in person) remind the viewers that the vloggers’ health and location are being

monitored by the government-issued quarantine mobile application. On one hand, when reporting on the quarantine application, news commentaries have mostly focused on its technical surveillance mechanisms, describing it as the app that is “watching” people (M. Kim 2020). On the other hand, the quarantine vlogs complicate this hierarchical imagination of the app. In the quarantine vlogs, the surveillance app is visually and discursively presented as complementary, rather than disruptive, to the playful and lighthearted ambience of the quarantine vlogs.

By design, the government-mandated quarantine application gives users little latitude in terms of physical mobility. One of the major features of the safety mobile application is its GPS-based location tracking, which tracks the movement of the individual in quarantine to make sure that the person does not leave their designated quarantine area. If the application detects movement beyond the user’s designated quarantine location, be it their home, hotel room, or governments’ quarantine facilities, the public officer in charge of the quarantining individual is notified, and those who disobey quarantine mandates receive a hefty fine (B. Kim 2020). Alternatively, if the application detects no movement for a long period, it sends a verification check-in message that people must respond to within a tight time frame to ensure that they are in their designated area. The built-in physical regulators prescribe restricted spatial and physical behaviors by reminding people of their surveilled bodies (S. C. Lee 2021).

However, in the vlogs, these constraints become secondary to peoples’ banal, comical, and intimate interactions with the app. The app appears mainly as a part of their everyday routine, where the vloggers submit their health status (whether they have a fever, sore throat, etc.) two times a day or explain instructions on how to use the app to other viewers who might also be in quarantine. While the app’s features are quite ordinary and not exciting, it invites users’ gamified engagement, like health tracking apps with rewards (Whitson 2013). Through a playful lens, vloggers transform the app from a simple monitoring tool to one that helps them complete the quarantine like a quest. To finish the quest successfully, they need to make sense of the features and rules of the app. If the quarantining individual forgets to submit their health data on time, they receive an alarm from the app or a call from the public officer paired with them, nudging them to act, similar to health tracking applications that send reminders to users if they have been inactive for a long time. If they submit their health data daily and make sure to move their phone occasionally, they can complete the quarantine peacefully. In the vlogs, some vloggers would film the moment they are deleting the app, signaling the end and successful completion of their quarantine quest.

In addition to engaging with the quarantine app as a health tracking app with rewards, the vloggers’ interactions with the app are often also transformed into comical episodes due to the app’s glitches. For instance, vloggers note how their applications are prone to errors (e.g., lack of precision in its GPS tracking system), which sends warning messages to the public officials who would call to check up on them. Some vloggers recall specific moments when they took a long nap, leaving their phones dormant, which led to phone calls by the public officials paired with them to check if they were still in their designated quarantine area. While there were vloggers who responded to the errors as a funny glitch, there were also others who expressed frustration with the app’s malfunction, diminishing the app’s surveilling power by showing how it needs humans’ care to function properly.

In one particular video, a vlogger accidentally locks herself outside her room with her phone inside, preventing her from logging in her daily health details. In the video, people can see her panicking and laughing out of frustration, as she makes futile attempts at opening the door with her pin, which eventually becomes stuck in the doorknob. Her failed attempts end with the public officer coming to her room to help her and give her a replacement phone. While the presence of the public officer and the fact that they can track when users are not submitting their logs can be quite disturbing, the vloggers humanize the act of digital surveillance by portraying government officials as performing care. Studies on the quarantine app have also shown this tendency of Korean citizens to think favorably of the public officials managing the app (Y. Kim, Chen, and Liang 2021; S. C. Lee 2021). Similarly, in the vlogs, the appearance of the public officers or the stories about them depict them as people providing care, service, and assistance to citizens in quarantine, rather than as surreptitious “little big brothers” (Andrejevic 2006: 405) planted to surveil them.

Through the quarantine vlog, citizens build playful surveillance imaginaries about the app, departing from the popular press and technical manuals' description of the app as monitoring them. Through these imaginaries, the app acquires meaning beyond its technical function as a monitoring tool of the government. The app not only extracts information about citizens but is also shaped by the different interactions, relations, and dynamics shared between people and technology.

The Duties of Pandemic Surveillance: Relating to Others in Surveillance

While the vlogs paint an optimistic picture of the pandemic, where one spends time caring for oneself, interacts with the quarantine app playfully, and receives care from the government, the context in which these vlogs were made has been a somber period full of tension, fear, and uncertainty about the rapidly spreading COVID-19 virus. The government's austere regulations and messages warning citizens against the harms that could come from their non-compliance with their health mandates has added to the tension. J. J. Lee (2022: 10) describes the government as performing "ambivalent care" through the quarantine mobile application: the direction of care becomes blurry as care by the public officers is performed alongside the possibility of punishment if individuals do not abide by the quarantine measures, leading to citizens' ambivalent feeling towards care. Caring becomes a responsibility of the quarantining citizens as well, who have the duty to isolate their potentially infectious bodies from fellow citizens.

The legal obligations of quarantine subject people to moral obligations, as the highly moralized discourse of the pandemic draws law-abiding citizens as responsible subjects and citizens who sidestep the application as deviant subjects endangering the health of other responsible citizens (Y. Kim, Chen, and Liang 2021). The Korean government has discursively constructed the risk management of the state as greatly contingent upon citizens' responsibility and cooperation (J. J. Lee 2022), fostering an environment of lateral surveillance, the non-transparent and asymmetrical surveillance of others through the gaze of the authorities and their definition of appropriate means of action (Andrejevic 2006). In this highly moralized social and political climate, citizens perceived as not abiding by government measures have been subjected to virulent trolling and social shaming (J. Lee and J.J. Lee 2023). Legal scholars and human rights activists in Korea have expressed their concern about how this lateral surveillance has led to the fear of social stigma taking a central place in peoples' surveillance imaginaries of the pandemic (Oh, Chang, and Jeong 2020).

Korean citizens' creative documentation of the pandemic is also not free from the moralized pandemic and the watchful eyes of other citizens behind the YouTube screens. Some of the ways in which vloggers depict their moral obligation to others during the pandemic include documenting their physical adherence to quarantine rules, such as by filming themselves going home directly after getting tested for COVID-19 at the public testing area as instructed by the government. These scenes are narrated through audio or subtitles, with vloggers telling the viewers about how they will leave their designated area only to get tested for COVID-19 and will be reporting back to the officer in charge of their quarantine once they are back home. In one of the vlogs, siblings take the stairs instead of the elevator on their way to get tested for COVID-19 and let the viewers know that they are doing so to protect the health of other residents who may be taking the elevator.

The depiction of vloggers' adherence to the rules, which can be seen as self-surveillance in response to the imagined gaze of citizens, has also led to affective relation building among the vloggers and viewers. For instance, in the comment section across all the vlogs, viewers leave encouraging comments, cheering on the vloggers' quarantine experiences. Viewers also congratulate the quarantining individuals on their last day of quarantine and leave comments expressing concern for those who report feeling ill. The interactions that follow these quarantine vlogs illustrate how pandemic surveillance can also be a communal, affective experience in which isolating citizens are connected through shared fear of the virus, responsibilities, and obligations. Imagined surveillance and surveillance of others in the playful vlog space resemble participatory (Albrechtslund 2008) or social surveillance (Marwick 2012), rather than lateral surveillance (Andrejevic 2006), with surveillance across the vlogs creating new ways of socializing and communicating with others in ways that help them "make sense of the lifeworld" together (Albrechtslund and Glud 2010:

239). In the context of the pandemic, vloggers communicate their duty of surveillance, and viewers reciprocate with care and encouragement. The surveillance imaginaries co-constructed in this participatory space can be described as focusing on citizens' relational commitment to each other to protect their health rather than the disempowering monitoring of each other.

Discussion and Conclusion: Vlog Worthy Surveillance for Whom?

In this study, we explored Korean citizens' quarantine vlogs as their playful interpretations of pandemic surveillance. By introducing and focusing on Korean citizens' playful surveillance imaginaries, this study contributes to literature in surveillance studies that has focused on the playful and empowering aspects of surveillance. While many important studies have looked at how people playfully transform surveillance technologies (Ellerbrok 2011; Whitson 2013), we look at how people playfully re-imagine surveillance cultures through digitally mediated interpretive processes, creating surveillance knowledge that has important implications for how people act in surveillance cultures. With the notion of playful surveillance imaginaries, we show how participants in surveillance cultures draw on the YouTube vlog genre as a playful frame to narrate their experiences and cultivate imaginaries that highlight the agency of citizens. Their imaginaries complicate the understanding of government-led health surveillance as a hierarchical monitoring of others by those in power, shifting to one that invites the interaction between citizens, technology, and government officials in pleasurable, empowering, and caring ways.

Their playful surveillance imaginaries, situated in Korean society's shared experiences with previous health emergencies, also cultivate an ethics of surveillance that emphasizes surveillance as a caring duty exercised by the government and citizens to keep the nation safe. Building on the earlier discussion of how citizens felt care through control (Y. Kim, Chen, and Liang 2021), surveillance is maintained through a loop of care and control exercised between the nation and citizens, and among citizens themselves. In this regard, Korean society's ethics of surveillance can be said to reflect Stoddart's (2012) critical ethics of care discussed earlier, which Lyon (2017: 835) defines as an approach to surveillance that should be "not merely to be of people so much as for people" and "practiced carefully and held to account." Korean citizens' acceptance of surveillance technology demonstrates their expectation for the government to effectively protect the health of the nation (T. Kim 2020), situating themselves as subjects to be cared for rather than controlled. State-led surveillance practices supported and driven by these surveillance desires may be able to cultivate ethical surveillance practices in which the government is held accountable and supported to act responsibly.

While the playful surveillance imaginaries of the quarantine vlogs illustrate the potential of ethical surveillance where citizens become subjects of care and the government and the citizen are linked through a relational commitment to take care of each other, caring surveillance has not been experienced equally by everyone. In particular, news media discourse and public discussion surrounding those who are perceived as threatening the health of the nation has been harsh, leading to unethical consequences, including online witch hunts and doxing of citizens (Oh, Chang, and Jeong 2020). More problematic has been the way in which moral policing has constructed some bodies as more suspicious than others. Rather than exercising an ethics of care that envision subjects of surveillance as composed of different people exposed to varying levels of risks and vulnerabilities, the Korean government's "ideological production of care" through tracking technologies has been argued to "neglect the conditions of people on the margins who have been unequally impacted by the pandemic" (Y. Kim, Chen, and Liang 2021: 16). This has been made most evident with the homophobic surveillance of the gay community (J. Lee and J. J. Lee 2023), in which gay men were framed as responsible for a domestic outbreak that began in May 2020 in the multicultural district Itaewon, becoming targets of online hate (National Human Rights Commission of Korea 2020) and offline harassment (Choi and Park 2020). The ethics of surveillance of the moralized pandemic seeks to hold people accountable, but it is not attentive to the ways in which marginalized members of society are made hyper visible through pandemic surveillance.

This made us critically evaluate the subversive potential of playful surveillance imaginaries, which seem to be contained in the YouTube vlog sphere and enjoyed by those who are not perceived as threatening the

mutually empowering network of care, or what J. J. Lee (2022: 11) describes as “connected vitality.” This made us wonder: For whom can this quarantine be completed playfully with fun and creativity? For whom is the government’s intrusion into their lives less of a concern? How can we foster playful surveillance imaginaries that achieve a critical ethics of care?

As a beginning, to achieve a critical ethics of care, citizens should be able to hold the government and other citizens accountable, not only to adhere to surveillance measures but also to be attentive to the prejudiced values and measures embedded in the government’s health surveillance and citizens’ participation in them. This shift will require a change in surveillance imaginaries and the norms that follow, from one that focuses on normative rules and duties to one that is attentive to how surveillance affects people differently based on their unique contexts and identities (Taylor 2020). Our relational commitment to watch over each other during national emergencies should be attentive to the different levels of vulnerabilities people are exposed to based on their social positions and identities.

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