Remembering the Unseen: Memory and Life Histories of Male Fashion Models in 1970s South Korea

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Introduction The emergence of male fashion models in 1970s South Korea marked a pivotal moment in the country's fashion history. This decade saw the rise of Western ready-to-wear clothing that gradually replaced traditional hanbok, as well as the institutionalization of fashion as a recognized industry. While this shift reflected broader modernization efforts, male models faced challenges shaped by Confucian ideals that associated masculinity with stable income and social authority. Despite their foundational contributions, their stories remain largely undocumented. This study explores how early male models navigated professional identity, financial insecurity, and social stigma during this transitional period. By highlighting these underrepresented voices, the study addresses critical gaps in gendered labor history and Korean fashion scholarship.

Method This life-history study used purposive sampling to capture narrative depth from a small number of information-rich cases. Recruitment was difficult due to the scarcity of surviving male models and general hesitation to revisit past experiences. Two participants in their seventies were interviewed twice over two months. Each session lasted about two hours and followed a timeline-based protocol (Adriansen, 2012). The analysis drew on Mandelbaum's (1973) framework of dimensions, turnings, and adaptations and applied holistic-content coding (Lieblich et al., 1998). A memory-studies lens interpreted recollections as socially constructed (Roberts, 2002; Thomson, 2007). Ethical procedures, including IRB approval and anonymization, were rigorously observed.

Results 1) Dimensions: Living as a Male Fashion Model in 1970s South Korea Government-led modernization policies and the rapid expansion of mass media fundamentally reshaped Korean everyday life, including emerging fashion culture. Western ready-to-wear styles systematically replaced traditional hanbok, establishing entirely new visual ideals and consumer expectations (Kim & Farrell-Beck, 2005). Within this expanding yet culturally rigid environment, male modeling occupied a precarious cultural margin. Both participants reported experiencing chronic and severe income disparities, often earning less than ten percent of the fees paid to female models for identical work. They described sleeping on tailor-shop floors, borrowing outfits to appear "presentable" at castings, and facing family disapproval. Nevertheless, both men described modeling as a crucial site for exploring modern masculinity and forms of creative self-expression that were unavailable in conventional career paths.

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2) Turning Points: Self-realization as Models and Responsibilities as Breadwinners
Two decisive structural shifts shaped their professional trajectories. Career entry differed dramatically between participants: Participant 1 abandoned a promising singing career after winning Korea's inaugural male modeling contest, receiving sudden national publicity alongside intense family disapproval. Participant 2 spent months strategically frequenting fashionable Myeong-dong cafés in immaculate suits until a modeling agency hired him for commercial catalogue work, which represented a more deliberate entry strategy. Career redirection occurred when traditional breadwinner responsibilities intensified during economic downturns. Participant 1 leveraged contest fame to transition into directing fashion shows for major conglomerates and overseas Korean communities. Participant 2 converted his catalogue modeling expertise into comprehensive photo production services for Dongdaemun garment manufacturers, noting that catalogue work provided steadier income and higher fees than runway modeling. These strategic pivots demonstrate how professional identity was continuously recalibrated under mounting economic and familial pressures.

3) Adaptations: Resilience and Legacy in a Changing Landscape
Aging within a youth-obsessed industry prompted innovative responses to career sustainability. Participant 1 championed senior model runway shows under the empowering phrase "clothes have no age," actively mentoring older amateur models and strategically reframing advanced age as valuable cultural capital. Participant 2, expressing more caution regarding recent fashion industry inclusivity trends, concentrated his efforts on systematically archiving the historically significant 1969 Royal Model Club, digitizing deteriorating scrapbooks for future researchers and younger models. Each man transformed private experiences of aging into meaningful public projects: one through direct advocacy, the other through cultural preservation. Their retrospective narratives also reconstructed past stigmatization; sidelong glances they once ignored were later reinterpreted as evidence of pioneering labor, aligning with Thomson's (2007) theoretical framework that memory is continually rewritten through contemporary social contexts.

Discussion This study reveals the complex intersection of personal agency and structural constraint faced by male fashion models during Korea's modernization period. Their narratives reflect broader themes of masculinity, economic transformation, and cultural change in 1970s South Korea. The wage disparities they experienced highlight a striking reversal of traditional gender-based economic hierarchies, showing how the emerging fashion industry valued labor quite differently from mainstream social norms. Participants demonstrated remarkable resilience and adaptability in responding to economic precarity. Their strategic career shifts into event production, education, and cultural promotion illustrate how creative workers navigate unstable industries while effectively leveraging their expertise. The use of oral history methodology also underscores how personal memory becomes a powerful medium for interpreting collective cultural transformation, contributing to a deeper understanding of identity formation amid rapid social change.

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Conclusion This research documents the foundational contributions of male fashion models to Korea's fashion industry and preserves narratives that risk being forgotten amid the country's current global prominence. Their experiences show how individuals can challenge social norms while adapting to structural pressures, offering valuable insights into how creative labor evolves in transitional societies. These findings suggest that Korea's present-day fashion success builds upon the resilience and ingenuity of earlier practitioners who laid critical groundwork despite severely limited resources. Future research should further explore how gender roles continue to evolve in Korea's fashion industry and examine how contemporary male models experience continuity or change compared to their predecessors.

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