



# Gender, Place & Culture

A Journal of Feminist Geography

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: [www.tandfonline.com/journals/cgpc20](http://www.tandfonline.com/journals/cgpc20)

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Meera Choi & Youngcho Lee

To cite this article: Meera Choi & Youngcho Lee (12 Sep 2024): Spatial norms as traversable and gendered: A study of parental experiences of no-kids zones in South Korea, Gender, Place & Culture, DOI: [10.1080/0966369X.2024.2396879](https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2024.2396879)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2024.2396879>



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Published online: 12 Sep 2024.



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# Spatial norms as traversable and gendered: A study of parental experiences of no-kids zones in South Korea

Meera Choi<sup>a</sup> and Youngcho Lee<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Sociology, Yale University, New Haven, CT, USA; <sup>b</sup>Department of Sociology, Pusan National University, South Korea

## ABSTRACT

This study examines the emergent yet understudied cultural phenomenon of ‘no-kids zones’ in South Korea, a business policy in commercial establishments prohibiting children and their caregivers from entering its premises. Drawing on 32 in-depth interviews of mothers and fathers with active caregiving responsibilities for young children, we examine the impact of the no-kids zone policies on parents’ everyday childcare experiences in urban consumption spaces. We argue that the rise of no-kids zones, indicative of a lack of social ethos of care, has further intensified unwelcoming sentiments towards children and parents, with mothers particularly subject to gendered stigma and blame around caregiving. We first find that spatial norms traverse; the acceptance and popularization of no-kids zones have in turn led to an expansion of hostile sentiments in urban consumption spaces beyond no-kids zones. We also find that such exclusionary norms manifest in gendered ways, with mothers reporting notably heightened levels of wariness and consciousness about how they are perceived by other consumers. We offer novel perspectives and insights on the intersection of societal norms and spatial configurations which, together shape caregiving experiences within urban consumption spaces. Our work highlights a gendered understanding of the challenges and dynamics parents face as they navigate child-unfriendly spaces.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 5 January 2023  
Accepted 16 July 2024

## KEYWORDS

Exclusion; gender; no-kids zone; parenting; urban consumption culture

## Introduction

The increase in commercial spaces introducing the ‘no-kids zone (노키즈존)’ policy has emerged as a contentious phenomenon in the urban cultural landscape of South Korea in recent years. First surfacing in 2014, no-kids

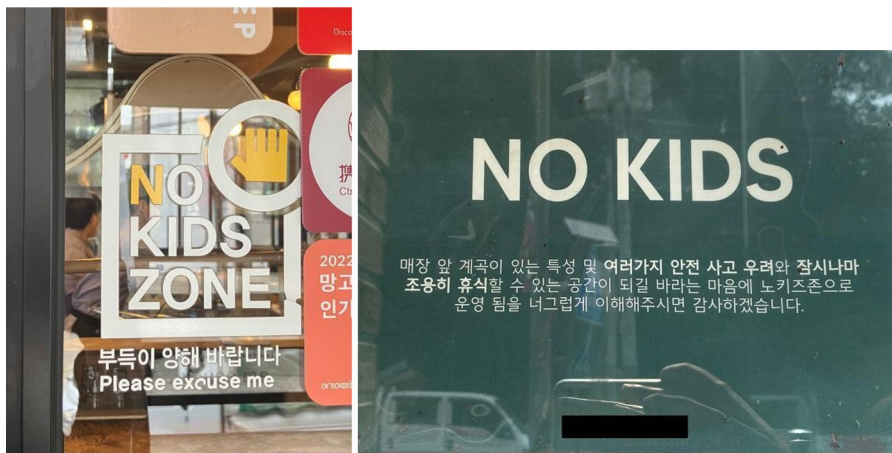
**CONTACT** Youngcho Lee  [youngcholee725@gmail.com](mailto:youngcholee725@gmail.com)  Department of Sociology, Pusan National University, South Korea.

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zones are policies implemented by individual establishments –typically independent cafés and restaurants –that prohibit the entry and use of their businesses by children under certain ages, usually toddlers and preschool children but possibly even those as old as teenagers (Lee 2021). It has become a widely accepted convention for businesses, especially those clustered around trendy and touristy areas in large cities, to openly indicate their no-kids zone policies with signs on their doors (see Figure 1). While the precise number of businesses with no-kids zone policies is unknown, an internet user who created and compiled the ‘No-Kids Zone Map’ (Anon 2017) estimated them to account for approximately five to ten percent of all cafés in Korea in 2022, possibly having increased since.

The most well-known incident that was critical to the expansion of no-kids zones involved a mother allowing her child to urinate into a coffee mug at a franchise café and leaving it on the table in 2015 (Shin 2015). This event sparked significant social outrage after another customer posted about it on social media. Less extreme but more common examples cited to justify no-kids zones include parents failing to discipline their children for disruptive behaviors such as running around or making loud noises (Lee 2015). As such, no-kids zones go hand in hand with moral judgments and expectations around what constitutes appropriate parenting in consumption sites. Furthermore, these ‘problematic’ behaviors by ‘some’ parents are used to legitimize blanket policies that exclude children and their caregivers as a whole, regardless of the actual prevalence of such incidents.

The emergence and proliferation of no-kids zones have not been without criticism or resistance. Human rights activists and feminists have expressed concerns over how the expansion of no-kids zones is emblematic of Korea’s wider lack of social ethos of care. For instance, in 2017, the National Human



**Figure 1.** Images of businesses indicating their no-kids zone policy (photo taken by Meera Choi).

Rights Commission of Korea declared no-kids zones as discriminatory against children (National Human Rights Commission of the Republic of Korea 2017). Similarly, Ryu, the head of UNICEF Korea's child rights and policy team, pointed to the harsh judgments and discrimination that children and caregivers experience as major obstacles to fostering a child-friendly culture (Kim 2022). Despite such criticisms, the support for no-kids zones is expanding to other commercial spaces such as theaters and airplanes (Ham 2023; Kwon 2019). Such a trend indicates that the expansion of no-kids zones is increasingly being justified and favored over family- and child-friendly consumption spaces. In this sense, the emergence of no-kids zones not only amounts to a business policy but furthermore signifies a pervasive cultural shift that spatially demarcates consumers by their care-giving/receiving status.

Despite the considerable attention, coverage, and controversy that no-kids zones have garnered on popular media and social network platforms, there has been a striking dearth of academic research examining parents' experiences and perceptions of no-kids zones. The only academic studies on no-kids zones to the authors' knowledge have analyzed tweets, finding mixed and divided opinions on the topic (Lee and Chun 2023; Oh et al. 2023). The current study seeks to deepen the understanding of the impact of the no-kids zone policy from the perspectives and experiences of parents with active caregiving responsibilities in urban Korea. The question that guides our study is how no-kids zones in Korea's urban consumption spaces contribute to parents' gendered experiences of exclusion. We situate the no-kids zone phenomenon within the feminist geography literature on gender in/exclusion in consumption spaces, alongside conceptual discussions on space and caregiving. By analyzing spatial norms as traversable and gendered, we show how the rise of no-kids zones has intensified unwelcoming atmospheres towards children and parents, especially mothers. By doing so, our research advances the understanding of how spatial structures not only reflect but also (re)produce social norms within and beyond these spaces. In what follows, we will first offer a review of the relevant literature and the Korean cultural context as well as the data and research methods that inform our study. After presenting our findings, we will discuss the contribution of our study and reflect on its broader implications and further research directions.

### **Cafés as sites of gendered spatial exclusion and caregiving**

Previous studies have highlighted how consumption spaces serve as venues where marginalized individuals find liberation through consumption as an activity that enables free expressions of identity and exploration of subcultures (Haslop, Hill, and Schmidt 1998). Consumption spaces have been perceived as egalitarian by some because all consumers are ostensibly treated equally so long as they pay for goods and services (Curran and Chesnut

2022; Sack 1988). However, others have argued that the ideal of consumer equality is often superficial and precarious, serving to disguise gendered and spatial exclusions and inequalities occurring in these spaces (De Oliver 1997; Fincher 1998). In particular, feminist geographers have critiqued how the notions of cosmopolitan and rational consumerism mask the exclusion of individuals in consumption spaces based on gender, sexuality, race, and class (Binnie and Skeggs 2004; van Eeden 2006).

Cafés in particular embody sites of contention where contradicting layers of gendered meanings shape differential experiences for its visitors. On one hand, cafés are celebrated as a temporary haven from patriarchal systems and a space for a sense of belonging and (partial) liberation (Ghafarinasab and Esfahani 2021; McDowell 1999), constituting a 'third place' beyond the home and workplace (Oldenburg 1999). For instance, in Iran, coffee shops have been perceived as alternative venues to traditionally male-dominated tea houses, providing a space where young women can carve out their lifestyles and identities, free from gendered expectations (Shaker Ardekani 2015). Similarly, Korean women have perceived global franchise cafés as a temporary haven from Confucian patriarchal systems operating at home and as an alternative to other male-dominant cultural consumption spaces in Korea such as Internet game rooms or bars based on the idea that individuals can claim space without being bothered as long as they pay for coffee (Lee 2008; Song 2014).

Other studies have shown that cafés can reinforce social inequalities through gendered stigmatization and the performance of masculinity and femininity attached to the space and act of coffee consumption. Historically, gendered attitudes towards smoking effectively barred women from entering coffeehouses in England, the Netherlands, and Germany in the late seventeenth century (Koslofsky 2017). A study on youth cafés in Ireland revealed that these spaces, contrary to being inclusive, allowed men to exercise social power and portray their masculine selves through gendered insults disguised as humor (Bolton 2024). In the Korean context, coffee consumption has traditionally been tied with gendered and classed meanings, evidenced by how the act of serving coffee in office settings has been feminized (Kwon 2017). In mid-2000's, young Korean women's Starbucks consumption was harshly criticized as an obsession over extravagant and materialistic consumption of foreign culture and capital (Song 2014) and cafés are perceived as 'effeminate spaces of intimacy' even today (437).

If studies have presented somewhat diverging views on cafés as gendered spaces, how do caregivers, specifically mothers, experience these environments? A limited body of research sheds light on how parents and children navigate urban cafés, with studies suggesting a trend toward greater inclusion in a range of European societies. Karsten (2019) notes that while children were traditionally considered 'out of place' in urban contexts (192),

recent decades have seen a trend of pubs, cafés, and restaurants in major European cities becoming family-friendly spaces that welcome children. For instance, cafés and restaurants in Amsterdam have introduced child-friendly spaces (e.g. play spaces with toys), furniture (e.g. high chairs), and menus (e.g. 'babyccinos') to attract and cater to the so-called YUPPS (young urban professional parents), a new and emerging consumer demographic (Karsten 2014, 2019; Karsten, Kamphuis, and Remeijnse 2015). By supporting feminist ideals of consumption infrastructures that welcome families, women, and children, such changes signal a move towards greater gender-egalitarianism in cities. Similarly, middle-class mothers and fathers in Helsinki report feeling 'welcome in most cafeterias and restaurants' (Lilius 2017, 114), further experiencing traditional gender roles as blurred in these spaces. In the UK context, Boterman and Bridge (2015) find that cafés in London are tailored to the social needs of white middle-class mothers, described as 'yummy mummies' who 'colonize the cafes' with young children based on their class and racial privilege (256–257). As such, research across various European contexts indicates that cafés are becoming increasingly accommodating at least to middle-class children and their parents including mothers, marking a stark contrast to the trend of no-kids zones observed in Korea.

To better understand the distinct no-kids zone phenomenon in Korea, we situate our research within the conceptual scholarship emphasizing how space and caregiving practices mutually constitute each other. According to Bowlby (2012), carescapes/caringscapes, understood as the ways in which care activities are organized within spaces, hold 'complex, contested, and emotionally intense social meanings' (2111). In a similar yet more specific vein, Holloway (1998) conceptualizes the 'moral geography of mothering' as encompassing two key aspects on the local level: firstly, a discourse that delineates the good and bad in childcare, and secondly, the social organization of material resources and childcare services that extend beyond parents. Together, the cultural-discursive ideals and the spatial-material infrastructure of care interact to mold gendered caringscapes that facilitate or restrict caregiving by dictating standards of 'good' mothering (see also Barker 2011; McDowell et al. 2005). We complement such an understanding of landscapes or geographies of care with a theorization of spatial structure 'not merely as an arena in which social life unfolds but as a medium through which social life is produced and reproduced' (Rose 1993, 19). In other words, spaces constitute not only the medium of social processes but also their outcomes.

In short, (caregiving) spaces and cultural norms interact to shape gendered experiences of inclusion and exclusion for their users, especially in the context of consumption. While the extant literature has documented gendered exclusion in consumption sites to some extent, studies focusing on caregiving in European cities suggest that urban cafés and restaurants are becoming increasingly accommodating toward caregivers and children.

However, we contend that this trend is not evident in the Korean setting, where parenting and childcare remain highly gendered. To address this gap, our study builds on and expands the aforementioned theoretical insights by examining the intersection of gendered parenting responsibilities and the emergence of no-kids zones within Korea's specific cultural context. In the next section, we explore the cultural landscape that shapes the gendered geography of parenting within urban consumption spaces in Korea.

### The South Korean cultural landscape of caregiving

The expansion of no-kids zones reflects Korea's deeply rooted gendered social realities and the recent emergence of misogynist discourses that expect women to be responsible for childcare while marginalizing and stigmatizing them as caregivers. First, Korea boasts one of the most gender-inegalitarian divisions of unpaid domestic and care labor among OECD countries. Even when limited to dual-income couples, Korean husbands spend an average of 54min per day on unpaid labor, while wives spend 3.5 times that amount, of 187min (Statistics Korea 2020a). Korean women face significant structural disadvantages in the labor market, as they have to balance the lion's share of domestic labor with paid employment. This is illustrated in 'The Birth of Mothers (translation ours, original title: *엄마의 탄생*)' where Kim, Kim, and An (2014) introduce the story of a mother who sums up her experience of being solely responsible for childbirth and childcare in the following sentence: 'I felt like I was left alone in this world' (70, translation ours).

Mothers' sense of isolation stems from changes in their identities and daily routines encompassing both spatial and cultural dimensions. The scarcity of easily accessible and family-friendly public recreational spaces such as parks exacerbates the isolation and marginalization felt by mothers within the Korean urban landscape. For example, Seoul's per capita park and green area is less than half of London's, with the vast majority of its greenery concentrated in the peripheries of the city, unlike London's parks which are evenly distributed throughout the city (The Seoul Research Data Service 2023). In Korea, only 14% of all playgrounds (11,251 out of 78,717) are located within public urban parks which often suffer from poor maintenance and are not easily accessible (Kim, Kim, and An 2014), while 52% are situated within apartment complexes, excluding non-resident children (Kim et al. 2022). Furthermore, a 2022 policy report underscored a significant shortage of public indoor play areas for children (GWFF 2022). With few viable options where parents can take their children without concerns – limited mostly to shopping malls, community centers, and 'kids' cafés' (indoor commercial playgrounds for children typically of preschool age) – Korean parents feel the brunt of this exclusion, lamenting, 'There is no place I can

bring my child!' (Kim, Kim, and An 2014, 111). In other words, children and caregivers are often unwelcome in most places in Korean cities, due to the expectation that childcare should occur primarily in private or child-targeted consumption spaces. As such, Jang (2017) posits that Korean mothers frequent cafés out of 'desperation' for social interaction, suggesting that the no-kids zone debate is intricately linked to gendered and structural barriers in Korea.

Adding to this, Korean society is often ignorant of or apathetic toward mothers' severe social isolation and desperate need for social interaction. Lee (2020) links the proliferation of no-kids zones to the concurrent emergence of the term 'mom-choong (맘충); suggesting that the rise of misogyny has become so powerful that it has demolished the myth of motherhood, previously considered sacred and inviolable. This term which is a portmanteau that combines the word 'mom' with the word 'choong' which means 'insect' or 'pest', is intended to demean and degrade mothers as rude, selfish, and ill-mannered parents who care only for their children with no respect for others. This stigma is described aptly in Cho Nam-joo's international best-selling novel 'Kim Ji Young, Born 1982' (2020). In one scene, Ji Young, who becomes a stay-at-home mother after giving birth, visits a café with her child for the first time in a while. As she settles in, she feels the weight of stares and overhears other customers discussing her presence with her child in a stroller. One man remarks, 'I wish I could live off my husband's paycheck... bum around and get coffee... mom-roaches got it real cushy' (89). Hurt by being labeled a mom-choong, Ji Young hastily leaves the café. As this scene demonstrates, mothers' feelings of isolation and stigmatization are intensified when they are maligned as 'parasites' who 'feed off' their husbands' incomes to 'enjoy' 'leisurely time' in cafés. The prevalent gendered blame, as seen in the term mom-choong that underlies the wide acceptance of no-kids zones, fails to challenge why mothers, and not fathers, bear the brunt of childcare. It also neglects to question why it is children, but not others (such as drunk customers) who are potentially disruptive, let alone whether the representation of mothers as parasites is fair.

To summarize, we contextualize the emergence and expansion of no-kids zones in urban Korea as a symptom of structural gender inequalities, hostility toward children and caregivers, and the marginalization and stigmatization of mothers. This socio-cultural landscape enriches our understanding of the gendered carescapes and the geography of parenting in Korea, based on the localized cultural discourse of good and bad caregiving (i.e. mom-choong discourse emphasizing the gendered blame on 'bad' mothers) and the socio-spatial basis of childcare (i.e. the notable lack of spaces and resources that are friendly to family and children). Collectively, these elements shape the gendered experiences of parents in no-kids zones.



## Data and methods

The current study seeks to examine how no-kids zones contribute to parents' experiences of exclusion in Korea's urban consumption spaces and how such narratives are gendered. To do so, we draw on qualitative data generated from two research projects with a total of 32 interviewees (16 women and 16 men, all parents except for one expectant mother who was pregnant with her first child at the time of the interview, see Table 1) that involved conversations around their experiences, feelings, and positions in relation to no-kids zones. The interviews asked about views and feelings toward no-kids zones as well as experiences in places both with and without no-kids zone policies, such as parents' typical experiences out with children and places visited, where they feel comfortable, welcomed, and safe, and how they are treated differently depending on whether they are with their children. The two research projects each obtained ethical approval from their respective institutions of affiliation at the time of data collection. In both projects, most of the interviewees were recruited through major online communities for parents, while a few were recruited through personal connections. The interviews were conducted either in person or virtually, depending on the personal circumstances of the interviewees or constraints posed by the COVID-19

**Table 1.** Interviewee demographic information ( $N=32$ ).

	Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Age of child(ren)
1	Hyeyoon	Female	35	2, 2
2	Hyeju	Female	37	5, 4
3	Jihee	Female	35	2
4	Subin	Female	31	2
5	Yeeun	Female	34	Under 1
6	Yura	Female	32	Under 1
7	Soyun	Female	34	2
8	Youngjin	Female	31	Under 1
9	Yoonju	Female	38	Under 1
10	Taeun	Female	36	2
11	Taehee	Female	32	6
12	Hyerim	Female	29	4, under 1
13	Seungji	Female	38	6, 4
14	Junghee	Female	36	7, 2
15	Ellie	Female	41	7, 5, 2
16	Jihye	Female	29	(7 months pregnant)
17	Joonsoo	Male	36	5, 3
18	Minjae	Male	40	6, 3
19	Jaejoon	Male	34	3
20	Chanyoung	Male	39	5, 1
21	Hyojoon	Male	42	8+, 6
22	Jungwoo	Male	41	8+, 7
23	Sangyoon	Male	37	4, under 1
24	Taein	Male	39	4
25	Woojin	Male	37	6, 4
26	Yohan	Male	37	5, 3
27	Inwoo	Male	40	Under 1
28	Joombum	Male	38	2, 2
29	Sunggho	Male	31	1
30	Daniel	Male	39	2
31	Jinwook	Male	36	5, 3
32	Jaeyong	Male	42	7, 2

pandemic. All interviews were audio recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and selected quotes were translated into English jointly by the authors.

Because the authors were interested in how parents' experiences and narratives around no-kids zones were gendered, it was important to include both mothers and fathers in the study. The project by Meera which was composed of an exploratory phase in the summer of 2018 and a subsequent phase in the winter of 2020 conducted interviews with 16 mothers of preschool children on their experiences navigating everyday urban spaces. The study sampled mothers who resided in the Seoul/Gyeonggi area and were raising preschool children. The sample encompassed a variety of employment statuses, including two full-time working mothers, four part-time working mothers, three mothers on parental leave, and seven stay-at-home mothers who had either left their full-time jobs after childbirth or had never been in paid employment. This sampling strategy was designed to include a broad range of childcare experiences in urban settings, reflecting the diversity of motherhood experiences. Meera had originally intended to secure a balanced sample of mothers and fathers for her study to analyze gender differences in experiences around no-kids zones. However, recruiting fathers to discuss their child-rearing experiences proved to be an extremely challenging task. Fathers were difficult to recruit in the first place, and most who agreed to be interviewed were women. Even when a few fathers agreed to be interviewed, their minimal involvement in childcare meant they had little to say about their experiences of exclusion as parents/caregivers in urban consumption sites, which was the primary focus of the research. This difficulty is not surprising, given that Korea boasts one of the lowest rates of male involvement in childcare and housework among OECD countries (OECD 2023).

The challenge of including fathers' views was resolved through collaboration with Youngcho, whose research project, carried out during the summer of 2020, centered on the experiences of caregiving fathers in Korea, specifically targeting those who had parental leave experience. The paper draws on interviews with 16 caregiving fathers of preschool children from this project. Most of these fathers resided in the Seoul/Gyeonggi area, with the exception of five who lived in other urban parts of Korea (one each in Daejeon and Gwangju, two of the largest and most populated cities in Korea, and three in Jeju, a popular tourist destination for Koreans and foreigners alike, making them suitable sites to study urban consumption culture). At the time of the interview, eight of the fathers were on parental leave, six working full-time, one working flexible hours as a freelancer, and one was a stay-at-home father who had previously been in full-time employment. One of the issues Youngcho sought to examine in her project was fathers' narratives of daily activities and exclusion as caregivers, including their experiences of and views toward no-kids zones, making the data collected suitable and complementary for comparative analysis with data from Meera's project. It must be noted

that the interviewed fathers are distinct rather than representative of Korean fathers, given that in 2020, when the data collection took place, only two to three percent of Korean fathers took parental leave (Statistics Korea 2020b). Due to the sampling strategy used, all interviewees had experienced being a primary (or co-) caregiver for their children, except for one soon-to-be mother who was included in our sample because her experiences provided valuable insights into how spatial knowledge and feelings of unwelcomeness evolved leading to the transition to motherhood. This unique and comparable structure of the dataset, which includes a balanced sample of both mothers and fathers with active involvement in caregiving, is a particular strength of this paper.

Our coding and analysis were informed by the Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) Method (Hill et al. 2005; Hill, Thompson, and Williams 1997). CQR allows multiple researchers to independently and collectively conduct analysis inductively, focusing on each research participant's distinct narrative. To conduct CQR, each researcher independently reviews and reads the transcribed data multiple times to identify core domains, concepts, and/or themes. After this, the team collectively cross-analyses the data to deliberate and reach a consensus on the main themes and sub-themes. In line with this, the two authors alternated between analyzing the data individually, discussing the analysis, and comparing their coding through frequent, regular, and extensive meetings and discussions. All other aspects of the drafting of this paper followed a similar deliberative and consensual manner, including the selection and translation of illustrative quotes and the writing and editing of the paper. In what follows, we organize our findings into two broad themes respectively focusing on the analysis of spatial norms in urban consumption sites as traversable and gendered.

## Findings

### *Spatial norms as traversable: the diffusion of exclusionary norms beyond no-kids zones*

We first examine how no-kids zones mediate parents' experiences of spatial exclusion in urban consumption sites. On the most basic level, parents spoke of both first and second-hand accounts of being excluded from/in various establishments when accompanied by their children. For instance, several parents, Daniel being one of them, had angering and/or disheartening experiences when visiting a café only to find out that they were banned from entering. Others, such as Inwoo and Ellie, visited cafés that did not have a no-kids zone policy, yet felt unwelcome due to hostile and judgmental looks from other customers. These instances explicitly demonstrate the type of exclusion that parents have come to experience upon the emergence of no-kids zones.

My wife had been recommended this very cool café. We got on a bus and traveled half an hour, and it's not easy when you've got a young kid, right? We get there, and we get told it was a no-kids zone. (Daniel, father)

Since Jeju Island is a tourist destination, tourists often visit these nice and cute cafés. When I bring my infant, [...] I can notice younger people giving me a look that seems to say, 'I came here to chill, damn it.' (Inwoo, father)

I had just checked how many diapers I had in my bag and put them back, but people were staring at me as if to think, 'When is she going to change the baby's diaper in the café?' [...] I think that stopped me from going to cafés [with my children] because I thought such misapprehensions would continue to haunt me. (Ellie, mother)

Although it is not surprising that Daniel was unable to enter the café due to its no-kids zone policy, Inwoo and Ellie further highlight that the impact of no-kids zones and the associated norms and behaviors expected within these spaces extends beyond their physical boundaries. While undoubtedly acknowledging that the establishment of no-kids zones results from the increasing hostility toward children and childcare in Korea, parents also suggested that the creation and explicit labeling of such child-exclusionary spaces have contributed to the further amplification of such exclusionary norms in other commercial spaces more generally. This is evidenced by Subin, who explained how she keenly felt a marked cultural shift before and after no-kids zones came to be.

Before no-kids zones existed, [...] if children ran around, we may wonder 'oh why do the parents let their children run around?' but it doesn't irritate us that much. However, after no-kids zones were created, it strengthened this perception that parents who let their children roam around are ill-mannered. [...] Even in places that do not have a no-kids zone policy, we are aware [...] that people may dislike it if a child talks loudly. (Subin, mother)

Yeeun and Ellie further alluded to the influence of the mom-choong discourse in the emergence of no-kids zones and its contribution to the proliferation of antagonistic sentiments towards children and mothers across various spaces. Yeeun suggested that the increasing hostility and misogyny towards mothers, epitomized by the mom-choong discourse, paved the way for the rise of no-kids zones. Meanwhile, Ellie highlighted that such a cultural shift has intensified gendered stigma, consequently escalating her self-consciousness and discomfort in consumption spaces, even in those without no-kids zone policies, when accompanied by her child.

Before no-kids zones, we had the term 'mom-choong. I feel the misogyny created through [this term] is what created no-kids zones. (Yeeun, mother)

Even though I'm very cautious, there's this look from people as if I am a potential mom-choong. [...] Especially after the term mom-choong emerged, I started

self-censoring, wondering if any of my behaviors might be seen as mom-choong-like. [...] I don't think I was so conscious before the term came about. (Ellie, mother)

In short, the emergence of no-kids zones has profoundly impacted parents' experiences in the Korean urban landscape. Parents have experienced explicit spatial exclusion, manifested not only through direct denial of access to places with no-kids zone policies but also through more subtle forms of marginalization, such as unwelcoming looks and hostile attitudes from fellow customers, even in places without such policies. Indeed, the growth of child-unfriendly urban culture alongside the rise of the mom-choong discourse has facilitated the establishment and proliferation of no-kids zones. Conversely, the presence of the no-kids zones has also played a significant role in reinforcing and perpetuating child-unfriendly atmospheres in a broader range of commercial spaces.

As a result of these exclusionary norms, parents like Soyun and Sungho spoke of their newly acquired knowledge of spatial boundaries in various consumption sites, including businesses both with and without no-kids zone policies, based on their level of child-friendliness.

When I realized that the only place to go with a baby seemed to be kids' cafés, I felt quite bitter. Even though I now want to visit good restaurants and more pleasant cafés, it feels like there aren't many options available. I get why most parents end up going to places like Starfield or COEX [shopping malls] with their strollers. (Soyun, mother)

Because of no-kids zones, I look for places where I can comfortably take my child. I tend not to visit cafés like this one (where the interview was being conducted), and even if I go to cafés, I look for spacious places with grassy yards so it is okay for the child to run around and yell. When eating out, I only go to places that have children's play areas. (Sungho, father)

To avoid explicit rejection, parents learned to identify child-unfriendly neighborhoods and establishments and deliberately steered clear of them. In contrast, they found it easier to harmonize their caregiving routines and leisurely consumption in child-centric spaces like shopping malls, department stores, and kids' cafés, which are designed to cater to families. Even among cafés without a no-kids zone policy, they preferred to visit places with open outdoor fields where children could run around and make noises without disturbing others. As such, parents had to constantly spatially discern where to go and where to avoid when navigating consumption spaces with children. Given the arduous nature of this continuous spatial assessment and navigation, some parents preferred businesses to explicitly state their no-kids zone policy to avoid the extra effort of determining whether they would be welcomed and the potential disappointment of being unwelcome.

We hence find that the norms created in places with no-kids zone policies traverse to places where children are allowed, mediated by gendered norms produced through the mom-choong discourse. Such an understanding of the

traversability of spatial norms is crucial as it highlights not only the immediate exclusion of parents from no-kids zones but furthermore a broader, secondary exclusion stemming from altered perceptions and expectations among consumers visiting businesses more generally. The interplay between gender norms and spatial norms further suggests that the consequences of these norms are not uniform for mothers and fathers in consumption sites, a theme we continue to investigate in the subsequent section.

### *Spatial norms as gendered: diverging narratives of mothers and fathers*

Parents, particularly mothers, expressed heightened consciousness of others' judgments in navigating the norms of consumption spaces where they were allowed to enter. Yura and Hyojoon are two of the parents who explained efforts made to keep children from disturbing others to keep children from disturbing others. Yura recalled scolding her child for minor behaviors out of concern that people were judging her. Meanwhile, Hyojoon expressed judgments towards other parents, specifically mothers, who do not try to keep their children under control. These actions all involved parents needing to be wary of others' emotions and thoughts through (unspoken) cues and subsequently policing and adjusting their and their children's behaviors to conform to social expectations.

I worry that a café may introduce a no-kids zone policy because of my children. So I let them watch more media and keep telling them to be quiet. I worry about my children growing up to be self-conscious [...] when I tell them 'Be quiet!' or 'No, you can't do that!' over really trivial things. [...] It's typically me who needs to be wary, never the father. (Yura, mother)

When I visit restaurants with [my wife], we constantly warn our children if they are loud or run around and tell them to be quiet and scold them. If they can't be controlled, we take them outside to calm them down. [...] But there are parents, the so-called mom-choong's who don't control their children. (Hyojoon, father)

What is interesting is how Yura's and Hyojoon's accounts illustrate gender differences in the narratives of mothers and fathers in consumption spaces. While Yura emphasizes her fear of being judged, Hyojoon judges other parents, particularly mothers. Such gendered distinction becomes even more pronounced in other parents' accounts. Mothers suggested that societal expectations and judgments were unevenly placed upon them compared to their male counterparts. Similar to how Yura explicitly pointed out that it is always her and 'never the father' who worries endlessly about how others may judge her, Hyerim and Junghee further discuss below the gendered disparity in the level of self-consciousness, stigma, and moral responsibility that mothers and fathers respectively encounter or are expected to hold.

In Korean society, mothers often predominantly take on the role of raising children. Therefore, while the underlying implication [of no-kids zones] might be towards parents who don't discipline their children appropriately, it's often mothers who are singled out, given their primary caregiving role. (Hyerim, mother)

You notice when a child makes a mistake, people often say, 'What kind of mother [do they] have?' but they rarely mention the father in the same way. (Junghee, mother)

Many interviewed fathers were also familiar with the term *mom-choong* and alluded to perceptions of moral judgment, expectation, and responsibility in consumption spaces as being gendered. For instance, the interviewed fathers often referred to mothers when describing their encounters with parents who were rude or otherwise did not conform to social expectations in public spaces. In addition to Hyojoon, this perspective is evident in Yohan's response, where he connects no-kids zones and *mom-choong* based on a characterization of mothers as problematic.

When it comes to no-kids zones or *mom-choongs*, I think it's inevitable because mothers only consider their children precious. (Yohan, father)

In a slightly different vein, Minjae acknowledges that until his wife alerts him, he was unaware that requesting a free spoon of rice at a restaurant could be judged upon. This suggests that his wife seemed to be exercising a much higher level of self-consciousness and censorship than he does, based on the fear of coming across as a *mom-choong*. Such accounts are particularly striking, given that the interviewed fathers were those who partook in childcare substantially more actively than the average Korean father.

My wife and I went to a restaurant, and I asked the [server] if she could give us just one spoon of rice since our child doesn't eat much. My wife said, 'You shouldn't do that. It'll cause a scene.' (Minjae, father)

Sangyoon is among the fathers who contemplate the possibility of being perceived as a '*choong*' when their children create a scene. However, he acknowledged the absence of a terminology equivalent to the male version of *mom-choong*, suggesting how the culture of gendered blame tends to be directed more strongly toward mothers. It is thus important to note the absence of an equivalent term or label that frames fathers in the same harsh light as mothers. In this sense, while being finger-pointed as a *mom-choong* was a daily reality for the mothers, it appeared more as a hypothetical scenario for the fathers.

Even though we speak of *mom-choong*, we don't say things like '*man-choong*'. [...] Middle-aged men take up a greater proportion of people who speak on the phone loudly in public places [...] but there is no such thing as 'no middle-aged men zones'. Having raised a child and been to public places, someone might point their finger at me and consider me a '*choong*'. But I think it is ultimately connected to

misogyny. People think mothers are to blame for damage to business owners and customers. (Sangyoon, father)

The gendered contrast in the level of self-consciousness becomes clear when juxtaposing mothers' and fathers' accounts. Mothers speak of being subject to a constant fear of judgment, policing their and their children's behaviors in order not to come across as a mom-choong (Ellie, Yura), while the same expectation or blame is not directed at fathers (Hyelim, Junghee). On the other hand, fathers mainly spoke of judgment and blame toward other mothers as responsible for the emergence of no-kids zones (Hyojoon, Yohan), highlighted mothers' greater self-consciousness in consumption spaces (Minjae), or acknowledged the absence of a term directed at men who are disruptive in public (Sangyoon). In all these cases, fathers' experiences of exclusion did not come near bearing the same societal weight as that of mothers who constantly faced the fear of being judged and labeled as mom-choong.

To sum up, our findings demonstrate that both mothers and fathers were aware of the fact that parents need to take extra caution to control their children from disturbing others in consumption spaces. However, the degree of self-consciousness or self-censorship expressed by mothers and fathers was markedly different, despite the fact that the fathers in our study had been actively engaged in childcare. Whereas mothers constantly feared being labeled as a mom-choong for their actions or inactions, this was less the case for fathers. Ultimately, the ways parents experience consumption spaces in the presence of their children are inherently gendered when mothers and fathers are subject to fundamentally differential expectations and moral responsibilities to care.

## Discussion and conclusion

This article examines the unique yet understudied phenomenon of no-kid zones in Korea based on parents' narratives. Our research sheds light on the exclusion parents face in urban consumption spaces within Korean society due to the rise of no-kids zones and illustrates how these experiences are gendered. By examining the traversable and gendered nature of spatial norms, we reveal how cultural norms and caregiving landscapes together shape parents' experiences of exclusion in urban consumption sites. Furthermore, our study adds to the limited literature on parenting in cafés, an emerging site of urban consumption and caregiving culture. Geographical research so far has focused on the home (Milligan 2003), local community (Holloway 1998), public transportation (Boyer and Spinney 2016), and professional caregiving environments (Ivanova, Wallenburg, and Bal 2016) as key sites of caregiving (Power and Hall 2018). Addressing the oversight of consumption spaces in previous research, the current study positions cafés as



contested spaces of care where a distinctive landscape and geography of caregiving emerges and evolves.

Our analysis of spatial norms builds upon earlier theorization which has highlighted the role of spatial structures not only in reflecting but also in (re)producing social norms within these spaces (Rose 1993). Going beyond, we further illustrate the traversability of spatial norms, namely that the rise of no-kids zones has intensified unwelcoming atmospheres towards children and parents, particularly in light of the gendered discourse of parental blame. This has resulted in parents not only being barred from no-kids zones but also experiencing increased hostility and self-consciousness even in places without the no-kids zone policy. Based on this analysis, we contend that spatial norms extend beyond their physical boundaries, creating new patterns of exclusion. Our analysis adds nuance to the previous research focusing on the physical movement of individuals (i.e. parents and other consumers navigating consumption spaces) (Bowlby 2011; Boyer and Spinney 2016; Clement and Waitt 2017; Middleton and Samanani 2021), by illustrating how spatial norms are transmitted and enacted through the movements of individuals and their embodied experiences across different spaces (i.e. places with and without the no-kids zone policy).

Understanding spatial norms as traversable illustrates that no-kids zones are not just a business policy limited to certain premises that implement them, but a wider cultural phenomenon that impacts consumers' expectations, behaviors, and experiences across urban consumption sites by actively (re)producing hostile norms. This explains why no-kids zones or similar policies have increasingly been introduced or considered in spaces that were previously open to children and families, such as theaters and airplanes. Our research proposes that care within urban consumption spaces should be considered a 'shared accomplishment' (Conradson 2003, 508) rather than individual responsibility (Barnes et al. 2015; Brown 2003). Based on such understanding, private businesses need to acknowledge the wider ramifications of policies excluding parents and children. This requires critically examining how such policies exacerbate and justify spatial segregation of parents and children, effectively offloading the responsibilities of childcare onto the realm of individual families.

A second contribution of our study lies in our close examination of the gendered nature of spatial norms in urban consumption spaces for mothers and fathers. We discover that the rise of child-unfriendly cultures has necessitated parents to display heightened self-consciousness and discipline to discern and navigate spatial norms, policing and adjusting their and their children's behaviors in response to perceived hostility and societal expectations. While research in European settings often portrays parents' inclusion in cafés as gender-neutral or focuses primarily on mothers' narratives (Boterman and Bridge 2015; Karsten 2014, 2019; Karsten, Kamphuis, and Remeijnse

2015; Lilius 2017), our analysis includes both mothers and fathers who have assumed primary caregiving roles within a sociocultural context where child-care duty and blame falls heavily on mothers. Our findings uncover gendered patterns; mothers experience increased self-consciousness, stigma, and judgment, intensified by the negative discourse of mom-choong, whereas fathers consider such discourse as relatively less relevant to them. Such pronounced gender disparities that emerge among actively involved mothers and fathers highlight the significant impact of the mom-choong discourse in shaping a gendered dynamic of urban parenting in Korea.

Our study contends previous geographic literature that conceptualizes consumption as a seemingly gender-neutral activity, revealing how societal expectations and misogyny surrounding motherhood intertwine with parents' experiences of exclusion in urban consumption landscapes. Given that Korean parents have few places to visit with their children, the increasing prominence of gendered exclusion in consumption sites is very concerning in that it may push parents further to the margins. This, along with Korea's unparalleled low fertility rate, epitomizes its lack of social ethos of care. Such findings could inform the understanding of similar phenomena in other contexts such as Germany's 'kinderfreizones' (Anon 2010) or the pervasive gendered discourse that criticizes 'bad' mothers across different cultures (Hays 1996; Longhurst 2012; Sutherland 2010). Even if childcare in Western countries exhibits less gendered patterns than in Korea, it is important to note that these societies are also far from achieving complete gender egalitarianism. Therefore, we advocate for further research to explore how gendered parenting experiences manifest in urban consumption spaces in various cultural settings.

While this study adds to the scholarship on gendered spatial exclusion in urban consumption sites in various ways, there is much left to be examined. One issue central to the no-kids zones is that of parents' agency and moral judgments around no-kids zones. This includes puzzling questions of why both mothers and fathers, despite the exclusion they experience, overwhelmingly support the establishment of no-kids zones (Hankook Research 2021). A related question is whether to understand parents as passive victims or active contributors to the no-kids zone phenomenon and the exclusionary consequences that it entails. As such further questions suggest, urban consumption sites such as cafés offer a rich and fruitful context to explore the complex intersections between morality, care, and culture—a realm that the current paper has only begun to explore. Hence, we invite future research to pick up where we have left off here. Finally, given that the exclusion based on no-kids zones manifests in culturally specific ways, we hope to see more studies examining spatial segregation along gendered and parental lines in diverse cultural and spatial landscapes across the globe.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributors

*Meera Choi* is a sociology Ph.D. candidate at Yale University. Her research interests include gender, sexuality, family, and feminist movements.

*Youngcho Lee* is an incoming Assistant Professor at Pusan National University, Department of Sociology. She received her PhD in Sociology at the University of Cambridge and has worked as a postdoctoral fellow at the London School of Economics and Political Science, Department of Social Policy.

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