

YOUTUBE DIGITAL STORYTELLING OF KOREAN UNINHABITED ISLANDS

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Abstract

South Korea, with its extensive coastline and numerous islands, such as Jeju, Ulleungdo, and Dokdo, is home to several uninhabited islands. These uninhabited islands embody dual roles as nostalgic symbols and territorial entities while also enduring marginalization and distortion stemming from their inhospitable conditions. Nonetheless, the emergence of recent trends in *YouTube* digital storytelling within South Korea has propelled uninhabited islands into the spotlight, as a result of which these islands have received considerable attention. By examining the creation and reception of *YouTube* narratives, we can gain valuable insights into the ever-evolving landscape of digital culture and its broader implications for society. This article explores how uninhabited islands, which have been narrativized as sites of exclusion and misrepresentation arising from their harsh circumstances, are represented in *YouTube* digital storytelling through alternative approaches. By analyzing these approaches, this research aims to contribute to the broader understanding of digital storytelling, cultural representation, and the intersection of digital media and place-based mobility.

Keywords

Digital storytelling, mobility, South Korea, uninhabited islands, *YouTube*

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INTRODUCTION

In the context of South Korea, uninhabited islands are understood to be islands devoid of permanent human inhabitants. These islands are characterized by limited or no infrastructure and minimal human activity (Seo and Shin 343–44). South Korea, with its extensive coastline and numerous islands, such as Jeju Island, Ulleungdo, and Dokdo, is home to several uninhabited islands. As will be discussed later, the perception of uninhabited islands in South Korea goes beyond their idyllic and nostalgic allure. Uninhabited islands have become marginalized spaces as Indigenous populations struggled to sustain their livelihoods.

The understanding of uninhabited islands is further complicated by the influence of Western media. The idealized portrayal of uninhabited islands has been distorted by Western literature and movies, which often depict them as enigmatic and unexplored realms. However, it is crucial to recognize that uninhabited islands hold substantial significance in the real world and are regarded as territorial resources managed by nations¹. Thus, uninhabited islands embody dual roles as nostalgic symbols and territorial entities, while also enduring marginalization and distortion stemming from their inhospitable conditions.

The emergence of recent trends in *YouTube* digital storytelling within South Korea has propelled uninhabited islands into the spotlight, garnering considerable attention. These digital narratives align with the growing significance of ecological environments, effectively conveying the significance of uninhabited islands to viewers. Unlike traditional forms of storytelling found in literature, film, and theater, which focus on constructing thematic discourse or portraying interconnected relationships to evoke the reader's subconscious, digital storytelling is more straightforward in its presentation. It utilizes various techniques to craft a targeted message and evoke empathy from viewers. While viewers consume this content, it is crucial to engage in meaningful analysis of these materials (Park 39–41).

The decision to investigate *YouTube* narratives of uninhabited Korean islands is driven by the growing impact of *YouTube* as a platform for content creation and storytelling, particularly within the unique context of these remote Korean islands. By examining the creation and reception of *YouTube* narratives, we can gain valuable insights into the ever-evolving landscape of digital culture and its broader implications for society. With its widespread popularity and inestimable user base, *YouTube* has become a dominant platform for individuals and communities to express themselves, entertain others, and share information on a global scale (Lee et al. 102–03).

By studying *YouTube* storytelling about uninhabited Korean islands, this research seeks to address the following questions: How has the concept of uninhabited islands been historically understood? In the sampled storytelling videos about uninhabited Korean islands, what thematic elements, motifs, and storytelling techniques are employed? How do viewers engage with and respond to these narratives? Furthermore, what are the implications of these narratives for cultural representation, identity construction, and the perception of uninhabited Korean islands? By addressing these questions, this research aims to contribute to the broader understanding of digital storytelling, cultural representation, and the intersection of digital media and place-based mobility.

WHY UNINHABITED ISLAND?

Idyllic Yet Excluded Uninhabited Islands

Uninhabited islands are often perceived by Koreans as rugged and desolate. In the famous song “Uninhabited Island” (“무인도”; my trans.) that was popular in Korea in the 1970s, the uninhabited island was personified and sung about to instill hope, providing solace to endure the roaring waves of the dark night. Loneliness, desolation, and sadness became associated with uninhabited islands in the minds of Koreans.² The lyrical essence of islands depicted in the song resonates for both inhabited and uninhabited islands, often expressed through somber poetic expressions. A popular Korean children’s song called “Island Baby”³ (“섬집 아기”; my trans.)³ is said to capture the lyrical essence of island life. However, in contrast with reality, this nursery rhyme contains a tinge of sadness (Sang-kyu Kim 49–50).

Koreans hold a sentimental view of islands, perhaps due to the land-centered nature of the Korean Peninsula. In particular, land and coastal areas differ significantly in infrastructure. There exists a famous Korean proverb that goes: “Send horses to Jeju Island, and people to Seoul” (“은 제주도로 보내고 사람은 서울로 보내라”; my trans.). This phrase represents a national communal imagination that represents a land-centered sentiment. This phenomenon can be explained by Benedict Anderson’s concept of “imagined communities.” In the context of imagined communities, the ideology of the Korean imagined community excludes islands (Yoon 266).

If we substitute Korea’s situation with Benedict Anderson’s imagined communities, we can see that they belong to a rigid, centralized political system.

Through the phantasm of imagined communities, people try to place their lives as close to the center as possible, the further away they become from it. The further away they are from the center, the more the phantasm of imagined communities works as a system of exclusion. People living on the shores of continents perceive themselves as closest to the center. In comparison, islanders, though farther from this center, still feel closer than those on uninhabited islands.

This sentiment among Koreans stems from the historical context of a centralized political system. Throughout Korea's history, the capital city, Seoul, has held significant political, economic, and cultural importance. As a result, there is a strong cultural inclination for many Koreans to aspire to live in Seoul, which is considered the head of the country. Moreover, the desire to gain admission to a university located in Seoul⁴ is deeply ingrained in Korean society. Seoul is home to many prestigious universities, and attending one of these institutions is often seen as a pathway to success and social mobility. Overall, the preference for living in Seoul and attending a university there reflects the long-standing influence of centralized governance and the cultural significance attached to the capital city in Korean society. The unequal relationship between islands, which are considered subsidiary to the land within the binary thinking of land and sea, is not unique to South Korea. The perception of islands as entities dependent on the mainland is not simply a matter of perspective but rather the accumulated result of long-standing historical experiences (Paik 112). The perception raises questions about how historical factors have shaped this dependency and its implications for island communities. Implicit in Young-Gyung Paik's point is that Korea, historically an agricultural society heavily focused on rice production, may have neglected the development of its islands, which offer valuable fishery resources. As a consequence, these islands may have lacked sufficient educational and cultural infrastructure, representing an unequal distribution of national resources.

Islands began to garner attention in modern times due to the recognition of their significance as territorial boundaries. One notable instance is Japan's 1876 invasion of Ganghwa Island, situated west of Korea. The Joseon government was overwhelmed and ultimately signed the Ganghwa Island Treaty with Japan. This historical event underscores the resulting colonization founded on the critical link between effective territorial management and the failed establishment of a cohesive nation-state. The ongoing dispute between Korea and Japan over the Dokdo issue further exemplifies the complexities surrounding territorial management, exploitation of fishing resources, and historical grievances.

Moreover, in contemporary times, islands are increasingly under the spotlight as destinations for leisure activities, driven by ecological concerns and advancements in mobility development. While the infrastructure on many islands lags behind

that of mainland regions, urban dwellers have a newfound fondness for islands, viewing them with a sense of affection and interest. Urbanization perpetuates a focus on land, paradoxically reinforcing it. However, the complexities of urban life also give rise to various challenges, such as suicide, arson, accidents, and stress.

Ironically, mobility technology, while promoting urbanization, also provides an avenue for escaping the constraints of city life. Mobility, which encompasses the movement of people, objects, and ideas, is both a condition and a consequence of the technology, such as trains and mobile devices. Mobility includes the transformation of mobility and ideas, mobility and life world, and mobility and textuality.⁵ The fragmented self-narratives shared on social media platforms create diverse personal narratives. These narratives include travel photos, images of bountiful food, self-styled outfits, photos devoted to self-development, houses built in the countryside, or daring adventures. Can we argue that these are attempts to break free from the center-oriented imaginary community? In the modern world, imaginary communities have played a significant role, but the influence of postmodernism has expanded awareness of the periphery. In the case of Korea, this increased interest in the periphery offers an opportunity to shift perceptions of islands situated at the edge of the nation's territory. As noted earlier, these islands have historically relied on the mainland and suffered from inadequate infrastructure, leading to a trend of urbanization as islanders seek opportunities in cities and inevitably leave the islands.

Nevertheless, amid the tide of urbanization, there has been a growing recognition of the value of islands, coupled with romantic admiration and heightened awareness of their ecological resources. The technological advancements in mobility have facilitated both escape from the islands, hastening urbanization, and the convenience of exploring islands to rediscover their charms.

This article proposes a hypothesis: the city's expansion and the renewed quest for the meaning of the island represent divergent paths yet are intertwined in a tense relationship. This tension is observable in the narratives of individuals fatigued by urban life, who yearn for the tranquility of island living. While some of these fragmented personal narratives may become centralized trends, not all personal accounts follow that trajectory. The desire to assert oneself as the protagonist by sharing personal experiences stems from an individual's heightened desire for self-expression. It could be argued that, finding themselves among the urban masses, individuals pursue self-discovery.

The Storytelling of Islands, a “Dangerous Place”

Perceptions of uninhabited islands vary across continents and countries, and it is evident that these perceptions mutually influence one another. This phenomenon is also observed in Korea, where the notion of islands is not solely shaped by traditional perspectives but also influenced by Western narratives. For example, a narrative of disaster and survival, such as *Robinson Crusoe*, which depicts survival on an isolated and uninhabited island, has played a significant role in creating a myth around such a place (Siwon Kim 212). The well-known plot of the adventure story overshadows *Robinson Crusoe*'s poetic and lyrical aspects, thereby reducing the portrayal of the islands as untamed spaces that bring nothing but hardship to human beings. The narrative emphasis tends to revolve around the need to escape these challenging environments. The urban perspective, as depicted in the *Robinson Crusoe* narrative, has been translated and introduced, thereby influencing the formation of the Korean perception of uninhabited islands.

One notable example illustrating this influence is the highly acclaimed Korean variety show “MBC Infinite Challenge” which aired special episodes titled “10주년 무인도 1편” (“10th Anniversary Uninhabited Island Episode 1”; my trans.) and “10주년 무인도 2편” (“10th Anniversary Uninhabited Island Episode 2”; my trans.). Infinite Challenge (2005-2018), MBC's flagship entertainment show, garnered immense popularity for its daring portrayal of performers engaging in various extreme challenges. While the show featured survival stories on uninhabited islands as a unique element, it differed from individual *YouTubers* narrating similar experiences. In essence, the performers were simply left on an uninhabited island to fend for themselves, devoid of the lyrical aspects, ecosystem harmony, and scenic beauty typically associated with such locales.

The narrative unfolds as famous comedians arrive at the island using cars, ships, and helicopters. This island, stocked with coconuts and oysters planted by the production crew, requires the participants to be self-sufficient (Figure 1). Aware of the potential danger of poisonous oysters, one performer crafts a fishing pole to supplement their diet with coconuts. To alleviate hunger, the production team sporadically delivers a minimal supply of food via drone, fostering cooperation among the members. As a final challenge, the cast, each of whom is provided with a life jacket, is tasked with constructing a raft to escape from the island and board a waiting ship. However, their escape attempt is thwarted by strong currents, leading to a humorous yet heartwarming rescue by the production crew's boat, leaving the participants feeling both disheartened and relieved. In this episode, the participants are suddenly transported to the island while dressed in suits, who experience hunger and fear of being trapped. Of course, this fear is staged and manipulated for entertainment purposes. Viewers are fully aware that the

participants will eventually be rescued, allowing them to enjoy the show without genuine worry. As a result, the manufactured sense of fear generates heightened laughter among the audience. The unique setup of the participants wearing suits and being stranded on the island provides valuable insights into the interplay between mobility infrastructure and immobility.



Fig. 1. Participants arrive on the desert island, with the program sponsor giving last-minute instructions. (Screenshot from “10주년 무인도 1편” [“10th Anniversary Uninhabited Island Episode 1”] (05:43)

First and foremost, the characters dressed in suits and stranded on a stranded island suggest that they had been living their everyday lives in an urban environment prior to the situation. Furthermore, this stark contrast between their formal attire and the untamed wilderness of the island accentuates the theme. It symbolizes the loss of a well-established mobility infrastructure found in cities, where wearing suits allows for convenient and pristine movement.

Furthermore, in this portrayal, uninhabited islands are depicted as places where characters are trapped and unable to leave. Moreover, their arrival on the island is not by choice but rather a circumstance imposed upon them. However, both the crew and cast effectively create suspense by crafting distressing narratives, which serve as a device for humor. The audience is aware of the common trope in uninhabited island survival movies where characters become immobile due to accidents involving planes or ships. This familiar pattern is replicated in the entertainment media of “10주년 무인도 1편” (“10th Anniversary Uninhabited Island Episode 1”; my trans.) (Jeon). Of course, viewers are aware that it is a

manipulated state of immobility rather than a real-life situation, allowing them to laugh without experiencing the fear associated with being stranded.

However, even the humor-driven content heavily touches upon themes of hunger and scarcity of daily necessities, resonating with viewers by highlighting these struggles. Comedians evoke laughter by recounting tales of failure or occasional success in coping with these challenges of scarcity. Ultimately, the storytelling of uninhabited islands emphasizes the actors conveying the poor infrastructure and the nature of immobility.⁶

Managed Territory, Ecological Issues

Uninhabited islands play a crucial role in preserving biodiversity and protecting fragile ecosystems, serving as habitats for various plant and animal species (Lee and Park 20). In recent times, uninhabited islands have gained familiarity among Koreans from the perspective of nature preservation and utilization. People are showing interest in these islands and seeking ways to explore them without damaging the ecosystem. In terms of tourism and recreation, uninhabited islands offer opportunities for nature exploration, hiking, birdwatching, fishing, and other outdoor activities. They provide a serene and secluded environment, away from the hustle and bustle of urban areas, attracting nature enthusiasts, photographers, and individuals seeking solitude (Lee and Park 20).

The Korean government and local organizations have established guidelines for the preservation of uninhabited islands, aiming to create a balance between conservation efforts and making these islands accessible for humans without damaging their ecosystems. Conservation efforts focus on maintaining the natural ecosystems, promoting responsible tourism practices, and protecting cultural heritage. In particular, within uninhabited island legislation, management is divided into categories such as “absolute preservation” where entry is strictly prohibited, “quasi-preservation” where entry is allowed with permission, but any damage is prohibited, “permissible use” where entry and utilization are allowed within limits without altering the natural forms, and “allowable use” where certain development is permitted. These initiatives aim to strike a balance between promoting access to these islands for recreational and educational purposes while also ensuring their long-term preservation (Lee and Park 23).

As observed above, uninhabited islands have been understood and interpreted from various perspectives. Then, in order to explore new understandings of uninhabited islands, what perspectives should be emphasized? It is crucial to highlight that the perspectives on uninhabited islands are deeply rooted in a dichotomy between the natural and the human-influenced environments. The romantic notion of uninhabited islands also originates from the emotional connection evoked by the feeling of being disconnected from civilization, while the concern about the need for escape is likewise influenced by this perception. This is due to the belief that uninhabited islands exist in a state devoid of human presence, serving as a counterpart to the constructs of civilization.

However, uninhabited islands are rediscovered in modern times as havens of untouched and preserved ecological environments precisely because they have been overlooked by land-centric thinking, avoiding human interference and ensuring their natural integrity. The fact that we are witnessing a surge in dynamic storytelling centered on uninhabited islands is indicative of a significant trend. Uninhabited islands represent secluded parcels of land with natural environments distinct from those of inhabited islands. Recreational activities on uninhabited islands or narratives shared by *YouTube* documentarians recounting their solitary experiences allow those living inland to discover these remote locales in a new manner. Conservation is important to those approaching uninhabited islands. As people become increasingly acquainted with uninhabited islands, perceptions of these areas in Korea will undergo positive changes. This shift may lead to the development of more infrastructure on inhabited islands, while also facilitating ecological research and exploration on uninhabited ones. Hence, we view stories of uninhabited island survival in a more favorable light.

So, how should we perceive the phenomenon of uninhabited island storytelling on platforms like *YouTube*? We are accustomed to encountering documentaries featuring public agencies, environmental advocates, and researchers who venture into and document the exploration of uninhabited islands. An example is the KBS documentary “보물섬 무인도” [“Treasure Island Uninhabited Island”]. The documentary explores uninhabited islands scattered along the southern coast of Korea, shedding light on their ecological environments (Figure 2). The central concept conveyed is that uninhabited islands possess a breathtaking beauty akin to paradise on earth, representing “treasures” that necessitate ongoing care and protection.



Fig. 2. Composite shot depicting the places that the boat's passengers will be exploring. (Screenshot from “보물섬 무인도” [“Treasure Island Uninhabited Island”] 02:48)

Apart from producing documentaries aimed at enhancing knowledge and education, there are also instances where ordinary individuals share their temporary ecological experiences during travel. For example, KAKTUBE, a female *YouTube* documentarian, recounts her adventures in “boat alone, nearly killed during an uninhabited expedition ep1. #camping” (Figure 3). This illustrates the attitude of average travelers towards uninhabited islands. Even amid challenging situations, the act of cleaning up marine debris underscores the importance of ethical considerations regarding the ecosystem for travel *YouTube* documentarians.



Fig. 3. KAKTUBE panics as her raft begins to drift away. (Screenshot from “boat alone, nearly killed” 14:08)

These digital stories of uninhabited islands are gaining popularity and spreading through *YouTube* videos that creatively weave together characters, backgrounds, and events into captivating stories. The narratives that revolve around people’s experiences on islands predominantly follow a storytelling strategy that invites viewers to directly immerse themselves in the everyday events that take place in these mysterious locations. Analyzing these storytelling approaches can provide valuable clues about people’s perspectives on uninhabited islands:

- First, the stories shed light on the strategies employed in uninhabited island narratives, including the narrators sharing their experiences and the portrayal of the island’s natural elements. This analysis reveals how these storytelling strategies are implemented and their resulting effects.
- Second, the stories highlight the placemaking of uninhabited islands within the immobility of space. Uninhabited islands are represented as locations on maps, symbolizing places with no human mobility. However, uninhabited island narratives transform them into places where life unfolds through the platform of *YouTube*. This insight can provide an understanding of how the high-mobility era facilitated by platforms like *YouTube* transforms Korean lives.

- Third, the stories examine how *YouTube* narratives from uninhabited Korean islands contribute to the construction of cultural identity. It investigates how these narratives negotiate the tension between tradition and modernity, and how they reflect and challenge cultural norms and values. The findings contribute to the understanding of the role of digital media in shaping and expressing cultural identity.

In summary, this essay fundamentally seeks to provide insights into how storytelling about life in uninhabited islands can lead to a transformation in our perception of these places.

THE STORYTELLING OF THE IMMOBILITY OF UNINHABITED ISLANDS

Digital Storytelling of Ecological Resources in Uninhabited Islands

Efforts to use uninhabited islands as educational settings can be observed through the activities of 무인도섬테마연구소 [Uninhabited Island Theme Research Institute] This public interest corporation has launched a *YouTube* channel to promote uninhabited island experience activities. In this context, we can explore sites associated with the theme of uninhabited islands. The website claims to be “a place for rediscovering overlooked and abandoned uninhabited islands” (“방치되고 버려진 무인도를 재발견하는 곳입니다.”; my trans., “Brand Identity”). The operators define their brand identity as follows:

“Brand Essence : 새로운 경험(New Experience)

Brand Vision : 무인도에서의 다양한 생태환경을 접하고 알아가는 교육 기업

Brand Mission : 낯선 곳에서의 경험과 의미 있는 체험을 통해 참가자 스스로가 ‘활동가’가 될 수 있도록 한다

Brand Brand Personality : 활동적인(Activity), 유연한(Flexible), 자발적인(Spontaneous)
 (“Brand Identity”)

Brand Essence: New Experience

Brand Vision: An educational company that immerses in and learns from ecological environments on uninhabited islands.

Brand Mission: Empower participants to become proactive ‘activists’ through immersive and meaningful experiences in unfamiliar settings

Brand Personality: Activity, Flexible, Spontaneous
(my trans.; “Brand Identity”)

This social contribution project, focused on uninhabited islands, amalgamates a flexible and active life with a spontaneous one. Essentially, an uninhabited island represents a space where a flexible and active lifestyle occurs naturally. Hence, the core strategy of uninhabited island education is to refine people's perception of uninhabited islands through the art of digital storytelling. Participants delight in the natural scenery of the uninhabited island and engage in activities such as catching fish for meals or gathering shellfish from the tidal flats. By taking a dip in the mudflats and swimming in the sea, they organically encounter the romantic and lyrical nature of the surroundings as well as other uninhabited islands. This approach effectively allows individuals to embrace uninhabited islands with a voluntary and adaptable mindset through the concept of "experiential activities" of directly interacting with the environment. New ecological environments create a personal narrative of meaningful experiences in unfamiliar places.

Founded in 2016, the 무인도섬테마연구소 [Uninhabited Island Theme Research Institute] has been documenting its activities on a *YouTube* channel named 무인도사 [Muindosa] for approximately five years, amassing a subscriber base of 10,000. This channel produces digital video content covering a broad spectrum of topics related to uninhabited islands, both domestically and internationally. This includes providing comprehensive overviews and information about these islands, encompassing laws, policies, leisure activities, and guidance on how to visit them. Prior knowledge and ethical awareness of ecosystem protection are deemed prerequisites for enjoying the natural beauty of uninhabited islands. Additionally, the channel also features content focused on uninhabited island experiences and explorations.

Exploring an uninhabited island conveys the mystery of an unknown world to viewers. Most individuals express their joy of being on an uninhabited island through their body language and facial expressions. This storytelling is expressed more strategically by the *Youtuber* actively capturing camera angles. From the video footage, it appears that the participants do not object to this approach.

The unfamiliar experience of the uninhabited island provided by digital storytelling elicits a similar effect of defamiliarization that arises from reading the text (Iser 320). These storytelling strategies effectively create a thematic awareness that transcends the notion of unfamiliar uninhabited islands from merely being "a certain place" to a space that is filled with future alternatives. Such storytelling strategies ultimately pique the interest of urban dwellers in uninhabited islands. By fostering a positive perception of these islands, they are no longer seen as abandoned places but as integral parts of our surroundings. To achieve this goal, the "uninhabited island experience" program is designed with the following content:

무인도에서 주운 해조류 등으로 양초 만들기, 생태 환경 전문가의 생태 해설,
 캠프파이어, 생존팔찌 만들기

무인도 해양쓰레기 업사이클링, 해양쓰레기 수거 봉사(봉사시간 부여), 자급자족
 먹을 것 구하기, 불 피우기

지도 보고 목표물 찾기, 베이스캠프 구축, 스노쿨링, 낚시, 무인도 트레킹, 아무것도
 안하기

나에 대해 알아보는 시간 - 무인도 보드게임, 질문카드, 성향분석 등
 (“Program”)

Candle-making from seaweed collected on an uninhabited island, ecological
 interpretation by environmental experts, campfire activities, and crafting survival
 bracelets;

Upcycling marine debris from an uninhabited island, marine clean-up activities
 (with volunteer hours credited), practicing self-sufficiency by sourcing food from the
 environment, and learning essential fire-making skills;

Targeted map reading training, base camp building, snorkeling, fishing, uninhabited
 island trekking, and learning to do nothing; and

Self-reflection, uninhabited island board games, question cards, and personality
 analysis.
 (my trans.; “Program”)

The program content includes immersive experiences on uninhabited islands as part of specialized ecological education. Participants can engage in social contribution activities by collecting marine debris, enjoying recreational activities, and then taking time for self-reflection. Through digital storytelling posted on the *YouTube* channel, participants of this social contribution project perceive the uninhabited island not merely as “a certain place,” but as a sanctuary of romantic lyricism and healing.

The thumbnails of Muindosa *YouTube* channel also highlight the transformation from a “certain place” to an “ecological report” in their content. A good example is the digital video titled “Uninhabited Island Exploration,” with a thumbnail labeled an “uninhabited island survival experience video,” which is quite provocative (“Muindosa”). The digital storytelling technique here twists the conventional image of an uninhabited island escape and presents it to the viewers as an enjoyable and unfamiliar experience (Figure 4). Contrary to the thumbnail, the participants appear happy and cheerful, exhibiting curiosity about an unfamiliar place. The main videos beautifully depict a range of activities, including gathering resources from the sea, honing survival skills such as fire-making, savoring meals prepared

with foraged ingredients, actively participating in marine cleanups, enjoying recreational pursuits, and capturing breathtaking scenes of the sunset before bidding farewell to the uninhabited island. Although the participants may vary, the content of the videos remains largely consistent. The digital storytelling strategy employed in these experiential programs aims to eradicate the conventional negative perception associated with uninhabited islands and transform the notion of empty time and space from being “just a place” to a realm of possibilities and alternatives.



Fig. 4. Participants in the UITRI’s island exploration program in Palawan, shortly suspended because of the global pandemic. (Screenshot from “무인도 생존 체험 영상(1기)_살아돌아와~~” [“Uninhabited Island Survival Experience Video (Part 1) Come back alive~~”] 00:15)

The unfamiliar text of this uninhabited island is supported by the ecological environment. The lessons derived from these uninhabited isles carry significant weight, particularly in the face of environmental degradation caused by waste, which has contributed to a global environmental crisis (Nam and Kang 233). The Island Volunteer Union, from which this educational company originated, has evolved into an NGO with 800 members, 45 teams, and 100 regular sponsors.

The activities of these education companies focusing on uninhabited islands have gained significant public recognition, as they are covered by numerous media outlets in Korea and are generating attention (“Writing while traveling to the polar region . . .” Figure 5). Exploring an uninhabited island in an ecological, educational

way sends out a record of human-island interactions. Uninhabited islands serve as a canvas for fostering a deeper connection with nature and promoting sustainable practices. Indeed, an uninhabited island is just nature that communicates with humans.



Fig. 5. Yoon Seungcheol in a drone photo showing the entirety of his island. (Screenshot from “극지를 여행하며 글을 쓰다...무인도 탐험가 윤승철” [“Writing while Traveling to the Polar Region ... Seungcheol Yoon, Explorer of an Uninhabited Island”] 06:19)

Why Do *YouTubers* Want to Live on an Uninhabited Island?

An uninhabited island is an island devoid of human habitation. However, recently, there has been a trend of people choosing to live on uninhabited islands in Korea. Why would they want to show their lives on an isolated and uninhabited island? Certainly, here, the focus is on the story itself rather than the personalities of the YouTube creators. In this context, stories revolve around narrating one’s experience of living alone on an island, positioning oneself as the main character in the narrative.

This aspect is crucial as it captures the public’s interest by highlighting the existence of uninhabited islands through their storytelling. By willingly living alone in an uninhabited place, individuals bring forth the presence of something that was previously absent—the island itself. This act of human presence and

the dissemination of island-related information allows society to recognize the existence of uninhabited islands. In addition, digital storytelling on platforms such as *YouTube* transcends geographical boundaries, breaking through the barriers and enabling the mobility of information (Taeyong Kim 22). The dynamic between absence and presence in uninhabited islands differs from that of any expansive uninhabited wastelands or frozen lands. Logically, there is bound to be land that is in contact with human presence. However, an uninhabited island is a distinct space in the middle of the sea, completely separated from the mainland and with its own unique coordinates. The narrative of an uninhabited island unfolds when a person starts living there, blending the narrative styles of absence and presence that are unique to uninhabited islands. This juxtaposition creates a peculiar tension, which is exemplified in the following example.

황도이장 (“The Head of Hwang-do”; my trans.)² is a *YouTube* channel with 106,000 subscribers (as of June 12, 2023) that records the life of a man struggling alone on an uninhabited island. Hwang-do was an uninhabited island located at the western end of the West Sea, about a two-hour boat ride from the midwestern part of the Korean peninsula. Lee Yong-oh, who began residing there in 2015, has been uploading videos to *YouTube* for six years.

Lee Yong-oh’s life was also documented in the EBS documentary titled “무인도의 도로명주소는?(What Is the Street Address of the ‘Uninhabited Island?’; my trans.), a man recounts his decision to leave behind his family and settle alone on an uninhabited island devoid of electricity, water, or gas. Lee yong-oh, the subject, was previously engaged in IT-related work in Seoul before he left for an island six years ago. The documentary probes into his motives in uprooting his life and living through the challenges in the uninhabited island as its sole resident and village head (figure 6).

In “What Is the Street Address of the ‘Uninhabited Island?’” an EBS Documentary, a man recounts his decision to leave behind his family and settle alone on an uninhabited island devoid of electricity, water, or gas. Identified as “Lee yong-oh,” he was previously engaged in IT-related work in Seoul before he embarked on an island six years ago. Driven by a lifelong spirit of adventure, Lee yong-oh chose to abandon his previous life and embrace the challenge of solitary island living (Figure 6). Why did this man, the only resident and village head, abandon his family and come here?



Fig. 6. “Lee Yong-oh” prepares to catch some fish on an uninhabited island. (Screenshot from “무인도의 도로명주소는?” [“What Is the Street Address of the ‘Uninhabited Island?’”] 12:31)

In the documentary, Lee Yong-oh proudly declares, “I am a person who witnesses the latest sunset in this province.” “무인도의 도로명주소는?” [“What Is the Street Address of the ‘Uninhabited Island?’”] [16:22-16:27). Exhausted by urban life, he sought solace and fulfillment amidst nature on the uninhabited island. Despite its lack of civilization elements, Lee Yong-oh remains steadfast in his commitment to preserving the untouched essence of the island, refusing to compromise its uninhabited character.

Technically speaking, this uninhabited island, lacking a dock, electricity, and water facilities, transformed into an inhabited island during Lee Yong-oh’s stay. He arrived on the island with a young dog and initially lived in a tent. Later, he built a house using materials (mostly debris) that had washed ashore, all without the aid of power tools. The house, although rudimentary, provided protection against the strong sea winds. Lee Yong-oh sourced mineral water, solved the issue of drinking water, and established basic residential infrastructure using solar chargers.

Lee Yong-oh narrates the challenges of living on an uninhabited island, including the absence of a dock, electricity, and water facilities, as well as the preparation of temporary shelters during strong typhoons. Each aspect of his story unfolds to depict a life far removed from civilization. However, these *YouTube* videos do not portray Lee Yong-oh seeking sympathy or being in distress. Instead, the storytelling focused on the lack of household goods and simplicity with a will to preserve the

ecosystem of an uninhabited island. Lee Yong-oh's adventure is sublimated into an effort to find a point of contact between civilization and an uninhabited island, ultimately drawing support from viewers.

On the expansive 560,000-square-meter island, Lee Yong-oh raises dogs (initially one, later two) and grows egg-laying chickens. He cultivates vegetables and prepares meals over a wood fire. Occasionally, he ventures to the mainland in a fishing boat to acquire daily essentials such as tents, rice, and kimchi. However, the primary focus of his narrative revolves around his life on the island. What is noteworthy is that he refrains from introducing new infrastructure to the uninhabited island. The core storytelling strategy employed by this *YouTube* channel is to portray the desolation and preservation of non-civilization in uninhabited islands. The narrator shares their mundane everyday experiences in an unrefined and flat tone. The content revolves around aspects of everyday life, such as settling in, gathering meals from nature, improving living facilities, exploring the vast outdoors with a pet dog, dealing with marine debris, witnessing the power of nature like typhoons, and even welcoming visits from *YouTube* subscribers as documented in the 황도이장 (“The Head of Hwang-do”; my trans.) channel. Immediately, it's evident that the camera angles in these *YouTube* videos are amateurish, and the audio often gets interrupted by natural sounds. Lee Yong-oh comes across as a genuine, unaffected individual, living a humble life on an uninhabited island. The uninhabited island is a perfect setting for this storytelling, allowing the uninhabited island to be transformed into a vibrant place teeming with natural life.

By refraining from overtly interacting with the uninhabited island's ecology, Lee Yong-oh preserves its essence, facilitating the transformation of a mere space into a lively environment where natural life flourishes.

In this *YouTube* channel, the issue of marine debris and its impact on the ecosystem is initially raised. The thumbnail of a video titled “혼자 사는 황도에서 한끼 밥을 하기 위해서는.” (“In order to make a meal in the Hwang-do, where I live alone.”; my trans.) depicts a man struggling to secure food. However, the *YouTube* documentarian goes down to the beach to collect driftwood swept by the waves, loads them onto a cart, and uses them as firewood to cook a meal. Although this site features content that depicts marine waste in its thumbnails, there is also a significant emphasis on utilizing waste materials in everyday life. This storytelling strategy aligns with the current era's demand for renewable energy as an alternative to the climate crisis. In the present world, where the restoration potential of islands, including uninhabited islands, is gaining attention as a solution to anthropogenic issues, this strategy becomes even more relevant (Paik 95-96).

Regarding the mentioned content, subscribers empathize with environmental issues through comments such as: “밀려오는게 장난아니네요... 고생하십니다... 어촌계도 고기만잡는게 아니라 본인들의 망·단지등 수거에노력해야하는데... 재활용하신 수고 감사하네요” (“It’s really concerning how waste keeps flowing in. You work so hard. Coastal communities should not only catch fish but also make efforts in collecting their own nets and trash. Thank you for your efforts in recycling”; my trans.)” from @user-hs3ri1uu9c. Another user, @myungokcorner907, commented “도대체 누가? 아니면 태풍에 휩쓸려 떠내려왔나요? 프락스틱, 스트리플, 나리롱줄 등등등.... 배사람들이 필요한 자제들인데... 환경오염의 댓가는 무서운줄 알아야 합니다. 힘차게, 꿈을위해 건강하게 지내시길요. (담당구역구청? 시에서 환경오물 처리 해주시길 부탁드립니다)” (“Was it someone or typhoons that brought all the plastic, styrofoam, nylon ropes, and other materials used by fishermen?”; my trans.) highlighting the significant cost of environmental pollution. They encourage the *YouTuber* to lead a healthy lifestyle in pursuit of their dreams and request that the local government or municipality take action to address the issue of environmental waste.

Out of a total of 115 comments (excluding replies, last checked on June 11, 2023), approximately 17% shared concerns about marine debris, while four comments criticized the *YouTuber*’s use of detergent while doing the dishes. This indicates a significant response from viewers who reacted to the seriousness of environmental issues while watching the *YouTuber*’s daily meal preparation videos.

Out of a total of 117 comments (excluding 66 replies), less than 10% (11) were negative, with the majority unrelated to the topic and instead focused on the *YouTuber*’s profit generation. There were criticisms suggesting that the *YouTuber* was using Hwang-do Island as a means for generating revenue. However, there were counterarguments (replies) refuting the criticism in 35 out of 37 cases. User @davidchung9538 criticized Lee Yong-oh, stating, “You’re so pathetic. Stop selling Hwang-do Island and find another path!” (“너도 참 한심하다 황도그만 팔고다른 길 찾아 · !”; my trans.) The channel operator, Lee Yong-oh, chose not to delete this comment and instead pinned it as a fixed comment. In response, there were comments criticizing the trolls, and user @user-qv9if9fn2f’s statement stood out, which read: “Even to this day, I yearn for a place where I can truly be free, where I can escape all constraints and find solace. These videos provide me with a sense of satisfaction, allowing me to immerse myself in the beauty of such a place. (“저는 지금도 아무도 없는 그런곳으로 그어느 것도 구속받지 않으며 내 자신에게 자유를 선사 해주고 싶기도 하지만 이런 영상을 보며 위안도 삼고 대리만족도 하곤 합니다.”; my trans.). Among the comments, over 70% (85 comments) express a sense of longing for a sense of healing and romanticizing the life on an uninhabited island, indicating that the digital storytelling strategy of this *YouTuber* channel was quite successful.

The narrative surrounding this uninhabited island has made a significant impact, prompting the public broadcaster KBSF to feature the image of a *YouTuber* living self-sufficiently on the island as part of its content. It was featured as a five-episode series on KBS' program *Human Theater* and even had a sequel (Figure 7).



Fig. 7. Lee Yong-oh bids farewell to the crew who brought him back to Hwang-do. (Screenshot from “황도로 간 사나이 1부” [“The Man Who Went to the Hwang-do Part 1”] 09:02).

YouTube documentarians often capture the mundane aspects of their daily lives in a straightforward manner, whereas public broadcasting takes a different approach. While we will not go into the details of public broadcast storytelling here, there is a recurring theme of human triumph evident in everything from camera angles to the portrayal of ordinary individuals living on an uninhabited island. This creates a distinct context from *YouTubers* who seek solace from their urban lives. However, KBS' natural portrayal of uninhabited islands can be seen as advantageous in garnering public favor toward these remote locales. After watching KBS programs like *Human Theater*, some viewers become intrigued. They then encounter an unembellished uninhabited island devoid of camera angle techniques, narration, or background music. This simplicity reflects the original appearance of an uninhabited island. As mentioned earlier, reactions to such *YouTube* content vary, with comments ranging from admiration for the island's natural beauty and romanticized depiction of life on an uninhabited island to concerns about the influx of garbage onto the island. Of course, there were also negative comments, including sarcastic remarks about profiting from acting. However, most of the messages overwhelmingly expressed support for Lee Yong-oh. It is evident

that the uninhabited island has now become a familiar place for people, one they desire to visit and preserve, akin to a real-life living environment.

The Immobility of the Uninhabited Island and Its Spatial Localization

This article has focused on the fact that the idyllic narrative of the pristine island has been made possible by the development of mobile technology, particularly the internet. Uninhabited islands, once shrouded in mystery and lacking information, have become familiar to people through mobile media platforms such as *YouTube*. This presents an opportunity to reshape the public's perception of uninhabited islands, as these narratives transform the island's image into something recognizable when experienced in real-time through *YouTube*.

Digital storytelling through a platform such as *YouTube* are interconnected phenomena that have revolutionized the way narratives are created, shared, and consumed in the digital age. Digital storytelling through *YouTube*, a dominant video-sharing platform, has revolutionized the creation, sharing, and consumption of narratives in the digital age. This relationship between digital storytelling and *YouTube* has democratized the narrative process, offering an accessible platform for anyone to create and share their stories. Moreover, *YouTube* facilitates the integration of uninhabited islands and urban areas, bridging the gap between these distinct environments. Lastly, *YouTube*'s global reach enhances awareness of islands and facilitates the discovery of the value of uninhabited islands on a global scale.

YouTube has democratized storytelling by providing an accessible platform for anyone to create and share their narratives. It has empowered individuals and communities to become content creators, allowing diverse voices and perspectives to be heard. This has led to a more inclusive and participatory storytelling culture. *YouTube* enables the integration of visuals, audio, and other multimedia elements, enhancing the storytelling experience. Content creators can utilize video editing tools, special effects, music, and narration to create engaging and immersive narratives. This multimedia aspect of *YouTube* culture has expanded the creative possibilities for digital storytelling. *YouTube*'s global reach allows narratives to transcend geographical boundaries and reach a vast audience. Content creators can engage with viewers through comments, likes, shares, and subscriptions, fostering a sense of community and interaction. *YouTube* culture encourages active

audience participation, feedback, and the formation of fan communities around specific content creators or genres.

Mobile technology transforms the space of an island, or even an uninhabited island, into a place. In other words, the uninhabited island was a simple space, but it was given a sense of place by the people who shared it on *YouTube*, and they projected themselves there. Most *YouTubers'* digital storytelling strategies revolve around experiencing and conveying the events taking place on an actual uninhabited island. They find joy in lighting a fire where there were no traces of human presence, interacting with animals, and celebrating the laying of eggs by chickens. Maybe Korean viewers feel as if they have an uninhabited island in their own living rooms and empathize with the challenges posed by the environment. The key for these videos lies in effectively conveying their simple and unadorned experiences to the viewers. Viewers' expectations of an uninhabited island are not centered on a convenient life. Instead, elements such as mobility, the narrative of hardships, the process of place-making through storytelling, and communication with viewers on the *YouTube* platform can serve as substitutes for traditional plot development.

The YouTuber, by candidly depicting the arduous life on the remote and challenging island, can tell stories that transform the uninhabited island into their own unique space. Indeed, despite showcasing seemingly mundane daily life on an uninhabited island without a clear plot, the ability to create tension for viewers stems from the element of mobility. Uninhabited islands are the most vulnerable places in terms of mobility. While they can be reached by boat, these are a space of immobility. When this space is photographed aurally or videotaped, only rocks, grass, and trees that contain the land or seascape are visualized. However, what if there is momentum to move in the space of immobility? We can then imagine the catharsis of overcoming the oppression of mobility. The human desire to dominate mobility is suppressed or restrained for many reasons, but readers and viewers experience catharsis when they see this desire overcome and realized.

CONCLUSION

In contrast with many uninhabited disaster films that often depict narratives involving unwanted individuals struggling to survive, *YouTube's* narratives surrounding uninhabited islands take a different approach. These narratives showcase people who willingly seek out these remote islands, not in a struggle for survival, but to find romance and build a life there. However, they also encompass a significant element of hardship as they portray the challenges and struggles faced by individuals as they grapple with the process of adapting to their newfound environment. This aspect of clumsy adaptation is indeed a fundamental principle that shapes the narrative of an uninhabited island. Consider, for instance, a scenario where individuals arriving on the uninhabited island bring with them the infrastructure and conveniences of the outside world. In such a case, the essence of the uninhabited island narrative would be compromised as it would no longer capture the essence of living in an isolated and untouched environment. The inhabitation of uninhabited islands involves facing hardships, but rather than seeking escape from them, narratives emerge as people adapt to island life.

This transformation of the island into a narrated space has been made possible through advancements in mobile technology, enabling the recording and description of this immobile space. These narratives are then delivered as easily accessible images to the public. Without the platform of *YouTube*, their lives, and the isolated existence they lead on these lonely islands would remain unknown, potentially lacking motivation. Mobile technology, through *YouTube's* ability to transmit personal narratives, connects viewers to places they once considered unreachable, bridging the gap between distant locations and their perception of accessibility.

Through digital storytelling on *YouTube*, Korea's uninhabited islands are being imbued with a new identity—one that is closely tied to the concept of “ecology.” Various websites and channels exist that showcase uninhabited island experiences purely for entertainment purposes. Additionally, there are platforms centered on the idea of living alone on an uninhabited island with 12 dogs, or similar concepts. However, the core storytelling surrounding uninhabited islands on *YouTube* originates from a deep respect for the pristine beauty and untouched nature of these locations. An example mentioned earlier was the storytelling of uninhabited island ecological education and the role of a caretaker for the island, which demonstrates a heightened awareness of environmental issues. This signifies a shift in the cultural identity of uninhabited islands, with ecology becoming the foundation upon which this new identity is being constructed.

Notes

1. In the case of Dokdo, an island subject to territorial disputes between Korea and Japan, there is presently one registered resident asserting Korean sovereignty. The island also has 21 other residents including security personnel and lighthouse keepers. This exemplifies how nations undertake the management of uninhabited islands, aiming to convert them into inhabited territories (“General Status of Dokdo”).
2. Lee Jongtaek wrote the song composed by Lee Bongjo titled “Uninhabited Island” in 1974.
3. “Island Baby” was created in 1946 by lyricist Han In-hyeon and composed by Lee Heung-ryeol (*Encyclopedia of Korean Culture*).

(Lyrics)

As mother leaves to pick oysters in the island’s shade,
The baby remains alone, watching over the house.
With head over arms, he falls into sleep,
To the sound of the lullaby sung by the waves.

The baby is fast asleep, but mother hurries back.
She runs down the sandy path, holding upon her head
A basket not yet filled with oysters.
Her heart is aflutter from the cries of the seagulls. (qtd. in Shin 163)

4. It is pointed out that this tendency toward concentration in the Seoul metropolitan area is not unique to Korea, but it seems extreme. It can be seen just by looking at the fact that the top 12 universities in Korea are universities based in Seoul.
5. See Shin and Lee 2–4; Taehee Kim 100–06.
6. Consider alternative settings that can replace the uninhabited island in contrasting narratives between urban and deserted areas. For example, one can imagine getting lost without water in vast deserts, being isolated in the mountains after a hiking accident, or being adrift on a wreckage in the open sea. However, it is important to note that these survival scenarios often highlight the struggle between human life and the unforgiving aspects of nature, rather than focusing on the imagery of the wilderness. What sets the narrative of

being stranded on an island apart is its unique portrayal, rooted in a binary perspective, of urban versus wilderness, which accentuates the contrasting elements between the two.

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