# An exploratory study on the cultural characteristics of alley commercial districts and the impact on sales after COVID-19: Unibore vs. Omnivore

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#### **Abstract**

This study investigated whether alleyway commercial districts in Seoul exhibit either univorous or omnivorous characteristics, influenced by the cultural capital of residents in their hinterlands. Findings revealed that as the income and cultural expenditure of hinterland residents increased, alleyway commercial districts tended to display stronger omnivorous traits. Moreover, it was observed that prior to the pandemic, alleyway commercial district sales were influenced by their omnivorous tendencies, but this influence diminished post-pandemic. This suggests a shift in consumer behavior during the pandemic towards more stratified and purposeful cultural consumption, rendering the omnivorous characteristics of commercial districts less advantageous. However, the study has limitations, primarily relying on data from the Seoul Metropolitan Government's Commercial District Analysis System, which may not fully capture cultural consumption characteristics and spatial features. Future research should incorporate surveys and interviews targeting residents and users of alleyway commercial districts to better understand cultural consumption tendencies and behaviors. Additionally, further investigation is needed to establish causal relationships between pandemic-induced changes and cultural consumption behavior. Overall, this study contributes to our understanding of how cultural consumption patterns evolve in alleyway commercial districts, particularly during periods of significant societal disruption like the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: COVID19, culture capital, alley commercial districts,

## **COVID-19 and Alleyway Commercial Districts**

The outbreak of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) brought unprecedented changes to our lives. Following the onset of COVID-19, numerous countries implemented policies such as urban lockdowns and social distancing measures to reduce population mobility. These measures aimed to prevent mass infections, leading to a decrease in mobility within cities and a shift towards remote work and online activities. The physical constraints on urban mobility and the prolonged contraction of economic activities due to social distancing guidelines resulted in unique impacts on local communities (Kwon & Jeon, 2022). Facing the unprecedented challenge of the initial COVID-19 response without benchmarks for comparison (Jin, 2020), many countries encountered difficulties and sought additional solutions.

The occurrence of COVID-19 began to manifest prominently across various commercial districts within urban cores (Park, 2022). Not only did it lead to significant declines in domestic tourism and private consumption (Hyundai Economic Research

Institute, 2020), but it also caused substantial reductions in the revenue of businesses, particularly those in sectors reliant on face-to-face transactions such as restaurants and services (Bonet-Moron et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2020). The damages inflicted on alleyway commercial districts, where many small businesses operate, were severe (Seoul Guarantee Foundation, 2021). These districts experienced continuous declines and crises, with a decrease of approximately 21.8% in revenue and about 17.7% in net profit (Korea Economic Research Institute, 2021). Additionally, due to their proximity to residential areas, alleyway commercial districts are highly susceptible to changes in the surrounding environment (Yoo, 2021), accounting for approximately 67.5% of the total commercial areas (Lee, 2022). Given that around 54% of Seoul's essential daily life businesses are located within alleyway commercial districts (Kim, 2022), examining these districts is suitable for elucidating changes in consumer behavior and market utilization during the COVID-19 period.

Studies examining the impact of COVID-19 on alleyway commercial districts have predominantly focused on factors contributing to revenue declines or interactions with COVID-19 exacerbating revenue losses (Yoo, 2021; Park & Song, 2022; Kwon & Jeon, 2022; Hong & Kim, 2022). Alternatively, using concepts such as vitality and resilience, some studies have explored the decline and growth of commercial districts (Park et al., 2023; Lee et al., 2022). Summarizing these studies, alleyway commercial districts have generally experienced decline after COVID-19. Particularly, areas with high levels of revenue or a high proportion of restaurants faced significant revenue declines due to COVID-19 (Yoo, 2021; Park et al., 2023). Research examining recovery resilience found that alleyway commercial districts centered on residential demand exhibited higher resilience than those focused on office workers (Park & Song, 2022; Lee et al., 2022). These studies provide valuable insights into alleyway commercial districts' responses to the pandemic, offering potential strategies for pandemic response in these districts.

However, more detailed research is needed to address consumer behavior changes and the resulting crises in alleyway commercial districts during future pandemics. Alleyway commercial districts exhibit diverse characteristics influenced by the socio-economic, cultural, and psychological factors of their hinterlands. Thus, securing pandemic resilience in various alleyway commercial districts based on general characteristics is challenging. Accordingly, it is essential to examine alleyway commercial districts from various theoretical perspectives and track consumer behavior changes accordingly. Nevertheless, few studies have approached COVID-19 and alleyway commercial districts from the perspectives mentioned above. Given that conducting exploratory analyses to examine the applicability of theories is crucial for subsequent studies focusing on causal relationships between changing consumer behaviors and alleyway commercial district changes, this study aims to explore whether cultural consumption, focusing on cultural capital theory and related discussions, can be applied to Seoul's alleyway commercial districts (Study 1) and examine how different alleyway commercial districts with varied cultural characteristics experienced revenue changes due to COVID-19 (Study 2). As mentioned earlier, this study is an exploratory analysis of the applicability of theories. Based on this, conducting subsequent research that causally examines changes in consumer behavior and alleyway commercial district changes due to COVID-19 is desirable.

**Cultural Consumption and Spatial Structuring: Omnivore or Univoire** 

Theoretical discussions on cultural consumption have proceeded in two main directions. Bourdieu's analysis of French cultural consumption (Bourdieu, 2005[1979]) detailed how cultural tastes, practices, and lifestyles become differentiated across social classes and class fractions. He extensively examined the tastes of French citizens across various domains, including music, art, literature, interior design, fashion, and cuisine. Tastes are arranged within social space based on individuals' differing amounts and compositions of capital. According to Bourdieu, the upper class in France exercises symbolic domination by denigrating the tastes of other classes as vulgar while valuing their own tastes as refined and justifying them.

However, when applying Bourdieu's framework to the United States, Peterson and his colleagues (Peterson and Kern, 1996; Peterson, 2005) found that the tastes and attitudes of elites in American society are closer to tolerance and openness rather than snobbish exclusion, referring to them as 'omnivores.' Consequently, individuals with consistent cultural consumption tendencies came to be generalized as 'univores.' In this context, 'omnivore' and 'omnivorous taste' refer not to literal omnivorous animals or eclectic appetites but to individuals with a wide range of preferences for culturally produced goods from diverse backgrounds, as a form of cultural capital in modern society. Omnivorous taste is not unconditional tolerance but rather a way of distinguishing associated with social inequality. The ability to embrace diverse and heterogeneous cultural tastes is not evenly distributed among all members of society (Bryson, 1996). Cross-national empirical research has observed that middle-class members in many societies prefer above-average diversity in the foods they consume and enjoy exotic and cosmopolitan tastes.

Thus, patterns of cultural consumption can vary according to the cultural and social characteristics of a country. In Korea, analyses based on cultural capital theory and the omnivore thesis have not led to a single conclusion. Various patterns of cultural consumption, including both univorous and omnivorous characteristics, are observed depending on income, childhood cultural consumption experiences, education level, and the types of culture consumed. However, Korean studies on omnivores consistently highlight that younger age groups and those with higher cultural capital prefer a greater variety of genres (Kim & Seo, 2011). It is evident that individuals do not exclusively possess univorous or omnivorous tendencies; these tendencies coexist and can manifest differently depending on the types and methods of cultural consumption.

However, the spatial reorganization and structuring resulting from differences in cultural capital tell another story, especially in the case of alleyway commercial districts. According to Bourdieu, differences in cultural tastes and lifestyles among different class fractions can be explained not only by the amounts and compositions of capital individuals possess but also by geographically unevenly distributed cultural resources. Additionally, interaction with neighbors who benefit culturally from such areas and a sense of collective belonging are included in the benefits obtained through such cultural environments. From this discussion, it can be inferred that upper-class residents reside in areas where cultural capital is concentrated, strengthening the characteristics of the local commercial districts based on their cultural consumption. However, it is not clear whether the cultural environment of the upper class signifies univorous bonding or omnivorous tolerance and diversity. As previously mentioned, in the case of Korea, omnivorous tendencies in cultural consumption are observed, which are reinforced as generations change. However, whether univorous or omnivorous tendencies are reflected in the spatial reorganization and

structuring, especially in the context of Seoul's geographical characteristics, is a different story. For example, even individuals with omnivorous tendencies can consume lower-class culture elsewhere, and vice versa. This possibility is even more significant in cities with high mobility and minimal class-based regional differentiation. Therefore, it is essential to first explore how cultural capital and associated cultural tastes manifest spatially. In this study, we first examine how cultural preferences are reflected in space within Seoul's alleyway commercial districts.

### Alleyway commercial districts.

The concept of commercial districts varies from study to study, but its dictionary definition refers to the 'scope influenced by commercial forces' (Yu, 2021). When examining the classical definition of commercial districts, Douglas (1949) pointed out the existence of retail sales areas reflecting the diversity and distinctiveness between retail stores and customers, while Applebaum and Cohen (1961) defined commercial districts as areas of demand, encompassing clear geographical boundaries where potential consumers of goods and services exist (Song, 2021). Lalondae (1962) defined commercial districts as the space preferred by consumers themselves, and Huff (1964) defined commercial districts as areas including potential customers for the purchase of goods and services where the probability of sales and service purchases by specific shops in urban areas exists.

Alleyway commercial districts have been expressed in various ways in numerous previous studies, including 'Alley,' 'Side Street,' 'Hinterland,' 'Gol-Mok Retail Area,' 'Small Business Sectors, 'Alley Markets,' Side Street Trade Areas,' and 'Commercial Alley' (Yu, 2021). In particular, in domestic previous studies, the conceptual definition and characteristics of Seoul-style alleyway commercial districts provided by the "Seoul Our Village Store Commercial District Analysis Service," based on statistics from the Statistics Korea and Seoul Metropolitan Government, have been specified since 2015. Seoul classifies the entire commercial district into four categories: 1,090 alleyway commercial districts, 253 developed commercial districts, 227 traditional markets, and 6 tourist special zones. Among them, the conceptual definition of alleyway commercial districts is specified as "a commercial area formed along narrow roads within residential areas, not on main roads, with a minimum of 30 food service, retail, and service-related stores established," while the dictionary definition defines it as a commercial area with a high density of alleyway stores including livelihood-oriented businesses, with a certain number of stores or more. The dictionary and conceptual definitions of alleyway commercial districts are as shown in Table 1.

In early studies related to alleyway commercial districts, the concept was initially framed within the perspective of gentrification, encompassing areas with small-scale shops that face low competitiveness due to being pushed out by large capital (Kim & Lee, 2019). It was initially defined as commercial areas formed along narrow streets in physical terms (Heo et al., 2015; Kim, 2015; Lee, 2017). However, as the importance of protecting and supporting small business owners engaged in small-scale restaurant, retail, and service industries grew, the concept of alleyway commercial districts expanded to include areas densely populated with livelihood-oriented businesses (Won & Jeong, 2017). The territory of alleyway commercial districts falls within the domain of areas with a certain number of shops and a high density of 'alleyway shops', which refer to stores located in residential dense areas that include livelihood-oriented businesses (Seoul Metropolitan Government;

Kim, 2018). It encompasses shops located on streets other than 'main roads' or 'roads' that can be accessed on foot and includes shops located within streets with a length of 400 meters or more, housing approximately 100 livelihood-oriented businesses (Yu, 2021).

Unlike other commercial areas, alleyway commercial districts have relatively small-sized shops with low entry barriers but high competition, resulting in comparatively lower survival rates of businesses than those in developed commercial areas (Kim & Lee, 2019). Additionally, they are structured on a street-by-street basis, accessible by foot, and heavily influenced by the characteristics of residential areas responsible for back-end demand (Yu, 2021). Considering these characteristics, alleyway commercial districts can be seen as areas where spatial reorganization and structuring occur relatively quickly based on the cultural preferences of the residential areas they serve. Therefore, they are considered ideal units of analysis for highlighting differences in cultural consumption characteristics among commercial areas.

# Research Method: Study 1 Research Subject and Scope

The spatial scope of the study is Seoul, and the research subject is defined as "alleyway commercial districts" as defined by the Seoul Metropolitan Government's Commercial District Analysis System. Certain types of stores that are overly dominant or lacking due to the conceptual and spatial characteristics of alleyway commercial districts were excluded. The temporal scope of the study ranges from 2019, when COVID-19 emerged, to 2022, when the pandemic persisted.

#### **Research Hypotheses**

This study is divided into Study 1 and Study 2. In Study 1, we aim to clarify whether the cultural characteristics of commercial spaces are omnivorous or univorous based on the characteristics of the hinterland of alleyway commercial districts. For this purpose, the research hypotheses set according to two research models are as follows:

- 1. If the cultural capital of residents in the hinterland of alleyway commercial districts increases, the proportion of cultural service establishments mainly consumed by the upper class will increase (Model 1).
- 1-1. If the average income in the hinterland of alleyway commercial districts increases, the proportion of cultural service establishments mainly consumed by the upper class will increase.
- 1-2. If the average cultural expenditure in the hinterland of alleyway commercial districts increases, the proportion of cultural service establishments mainly consumed by the upper class will increase.
- 1-3. If the average educational expenditure in the hinterland of alleyway commercial districts increases, the proportion of cultural service establishments mainly consumed by the upper class will increase.
- 2. If the cultural capital of residents in the hinterland of alleyway commercial districts increases, the proportion of cultural service establishments mainly consumed by both upper and lower classes will increase (Model 2).

- 2-1. If the average income in the hinterland of alleyway commercial districts increases, the proportion of cultural service establishments mainly consumed by the lower class will increase.
- 2-2. If the average cultural expenditure in the hinterland of alleyway commercial districts increases, the proportion of cultural service establishments mainly consumed by the lower class will increase.
- 2-3. If the average educational expenditure in the hinterland of alleyway commercial districts increases, the proportion of cultural service establishments mainly consumed by the lower class will increase.

If both hypotheses 1 and 2 are true, it suggests that the cultural consumption preferences influencing spatial composition are univorous. Conversely, if hypothesis 2 is false, it implies omnivorous cultural consumption preferences.

# **Definition of Variables and Analysis Methods**

In this study, data on alleyway commercial districts provided by the Seoul Metropolitan Government's Commercial District Analysis Service were processed and utilized. Certain alleyway commercial districts were excluded from the analysis due to conceptual and spatial characteristics, such as excessive presence or absence of specific types of stores, as well as discrepancies in scale compared to other alleyway commercial districts. As a result, 365 out of 1,090 alleyway commercial districts were included in the analysis. The dependent variable, such as the number of stores, was classified into "upperclass stores" and "lower-class stores" based on the classification criteria of lifeline stores provided by the Seoul Metropolitan Government's Commercial District Analysis Service through literature review. The variables to control for the characteristics of commercial districts were derived through literature review, and the variable settings are shown in Table 2. Multiple linear regression analysis was used for statistical analysis.

#### Research Results: Study 1

Descriptive statistics for each variable are shown in Table 2. The estimated results of multiple regression analysis are shown in Table 4.

The estimation results revealed that estimated income, cultural expenditure, and educational expenditure in the hinterland all influence the proportion of upper-class stores. However, educational expenditure had a negative impact. This is partly due to the limitation of the study because it is difficult to consider average educational expenditure in the hinterland as an indicator of education level. Further detailed follow-up studies are needed on this issue. Additionally, income level influenced the number of lower-class stores in the hinterland, but cultural expenditure and educational level were not statistically significant. This suggests that elements of cultural capital, such as regular cultural consumption and education, have a significant impact on revealing omnivorous tendencies spatially. Furthermore, in Model 1, variables such as employee population, and in Model 2, variables such as sales, employee population, and attraction facilities were found to be significant.

# Research Method: Study 2

#### Research Subject and Scope

The research scope is the same as Study 1. The spatial scope is Seoul, and the research subject is defined as "alleyway commercial districts" as defined by the Seoul Metropolitan Government's Commercial District Analysis System. The research subjects were limited to alleyway commercial districts with decreased sales. In Study 2, we aimed to analyze whether the omnivorous characteristics of the cultural aspects of commercial districts affect the decrease in sales, thus selecting 100 alleyway commercial districts with a high number of upper-class stores. The temporal scope of the study is from 2019, when COVID-19 emerged, to 2022, when the pandemic persisted.

# **Research Hypotheses**

In Study 2, we aimed to analyze whether the omnivorous characteristics of the cultural aspects of commercial districts affect the decrease in sales. The hypotheses formulated for this purpose are as follows:

- 1. Before the pandemic (2019), if the omnivorous characteristics of the hinterland in alleyway commercial districts are high, the sales of the alleyway commercial district will be high (Model 1).
- 2. After the pandemic (2020), if the omnivorous characteristics of the hinterland in alleyway commercial districts are high, the sales of the alleyway commercial district will be high (Model 2).

## **Definition of Variables and Analysis Methods**

The variable settings are the same as Study 1, with the addition of variables indicating omnivorous characteristics. This are shown in Table 5. Similarly, multiple linear regression analysis was used for estimation.

#### Research Results: Study 2

The estimated results of multiple regression analysis are shown in Table 6. The estimation results showed that before the pandemic (2019), the omnivorous characteristics of alleyway commercial districts had a positive impact on sales. However, after the pandemic, it was not statistically significant. This implies that the omnivorous characteristics of commercial districts do not influence consumer cultural consumption behavior after the pandemic, suggesting that consumer preferences have become more purposeful and stratified after the pandemic.

# **Conclusion and Limitations**

This study examined whether alleyway commercial districts exhibit univorous or omnivorous characteristics influenced by the cultural capital of hinterland residents. The results revealed that the omnivorous characteristics of alleyway commercial districts are strengthened as the income and cultural expenditure of hinterland residents increase. Furthermore, it can be inferred that the omnivorous tendency influenced alleyway commercial district sales before the pandemic, but this trend disappeared after the pandemic. This suggests that during the pandemic, consumer cultural consumption behavior

became more stratified and purposeful, rendering the omnivorous characteristics of commercial districts no longer advantageous.

This study explored whether omnivorous characteristics manifest spatially and how they affect sales during the pandemic period, thereby partially investigating changes in cultural consumption behavior during the pandemic. However, this study has several limitations. Firstly, it relied solely on data from the Seoul Metropolitan Government's Commercial District Analysis System to operationalize cultural consumption characteristics and spatial features. This indicates insufficient validity of the variables. To clearly elucidate cultural consumption tendencies and behaviors, surveys and in-depth interviews targeting residents of alleyway commercial district hinterlands and users of alleyway commercial districts are necessary. Additionally, it does not causally prove the changes in cultural consumption behavior during the pandemic period. In the future, research that employs more rigorous and valid analysis methods is needed to thoroughly examine cultural consumption tendencies and behaviors in alleyway commercial districts.

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Table 1. Definition of alley commercial district

conceptual definition	dictionary definition
alleyway commercial district	alleyway commercial district area
Commercial area including restaurants, retail, and service industries Commercial area accessible on foot Commercial district formed in a residential area	Commercial area with more than a certain number of stores Commercial area with high density of alley stores alleyway commercial shop area
Commercial district with more than 30 stores Commercial area of stores excluding large distribution facilities	Stores included in 100 industries closely related to everyday life Stores whose hinterlands are included in dense residential areas Street-level stores excluding 'Daero' and 'Ro' Stores not included in developed commercial districts

Table 2. Definition and explanation of variables (Study 1)

classification		variable	explanation	Measure
Dependent	Model1	H_shop	upper tier store	Number of upper-tier
variable				stores/total stores (%)
	Model2	L_shop	Lower tier stores	Number of lower tier
				stores/Total number of
				stores (%)
Independent	Explanatory	lcn	estimated income	million won/month
variable	variable	Cul	cultural spending	million won/year
		Edu	education spending	million won/year
	Control	Sale	commercial area sales	10 billion won/year
	variable	Pr	Resident population	thousand people
		Pw	working population	thousand people
		Fac	Number of facilities	Number
			attracting customers	
		Apt	Number of apartment	Number
			complexes	
		T_shop	Total number of stores	Number(thousands)

 Table 3. Descriptive statistics

variable	mean	median	variance	
H_shop	5.16	4.27	20.46	
L_shop	6.57	5.65	30.54	
Icn	2.53	2.60	1.23	
Cul	0.30	0.29	0.03	
Edu	1.30	1.25	1.09	
Sale	1.09	0.58	2.13	
Pr	2.18	1.71	4.20	
Pw	0.68	0.28	2.36	

Fac	12.1	10	82.10	
Apt	3.95	2.4	25.38	
T_shop	0.54	0.42	0.18	

**Table 4.** Estimation results (Study 1)

classification		변수	Mod	Model1		lel2
			coef	std err	coef	std err
Dependent	Explanatory	lcn	2.3000*	0.342	-0.8696*	0.419
variable	variable	Cul	8.9784*	2.934	6.2950	3.600
	_	Edu	-1.2434*	0.016	-0.7474	0.632
	Control	Sale	0.0639	0.196	0.5745*	0.240
	variable	Pr	-0.4397	0.229	-0.4410	0.281
	_	Pw	-0.3314*	0.144	-0.3960*	0.177
	_	Fac	-0.0019	0.032	0.1762*	0.039
	_	Apt	0.0778	0.073	0.0373	0.089
	_	T_shop	0.4730	0.938	-0.8699	1.150
	Intercept		-1.2602	1.139	7.6893	1.397
No. Observations			3	81		
Adj. R-squared		0.150 0.119		19		

<sup>\*\*</sup> p < 0.05, \* p < 0.1

**Table 5.** Definition and explanation of variables (Study 2)

classification		variable	explanation	_ Measure
Dependent	Model1	Sale(2019)	commercial area sales	10 billion won/year
variable	Model2	Sale(2022)	commercial area sales	10 billion won/year
Independent	Explanatory	omr	Omnibore	Lower tier store
variable	variable			ratio/upper tier store
				ratio
	Control	lcn	estimated income	million won/month
	variable	Cul	cultural spending	million won/year
		Edu	education spending	million won/year
		Pr	Resident population	thousand people
		Pw	working population	thousand people
		Fac	Number of facilities	Number
			attracting customers	
		Apt	Number of apartment	Number
			complexes	
		T_shop	Total number of stores	Number(thousands)

Table 6. Estimation results (Study 1)

classification		variable		odel1	Model2	
			coef	std err	coef	std err
Independent variable	Explanatory variable	omr	0.3184*	0.180	-0.0444	0.035
	Control	lcn	0.0168	0.099	-0.0976	0.099
	variable	Cul	-0.1668	1.004	-0.5445	0.788

	Edu	0.0821	0.157	0.1690	0.137
	Pr	-0.2002	0.107	-0.0906	0.061
	Pw	-0.0196	0.042	0.0296	0.039
	Fac	0.0299*	0.013	0.0138	0.008
	Apt	0.0918**	0.046	-0.0250	0.019
	H_shop	-0.0037	0.021	0.0091	0.016
	T_shop	2.0621**	0.308	3.0576*	0.208
Intercept		-0.5844	0.446	-0.1498	0.305
No. Observations				377	
Adj. R-squared		0.559		0.580	

<sup>\*\*</sup> p < 0.05, \* p < 0.1