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The Korean 'Minbak' as an environmental bubble: motivations, experiences, and the paradox of cultural immersion among Korean travellers

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ABSTRACT

This study examines Korean travellers' use of Minbaks (Korean guesthouses) in Europe, introducing the 'pulsating bubble' framework that challenges static conceptualisations of environmental enclaves. Through netnography of 192 Korean travel blogs (2023–2025), we demonstrate that Minbaks function as re-pressurisation chambers enabling sustained cultural immersion. Korean travellers engage in cyclical rhythms, whereby daytime exploration depletes physiological and psychological resources while nighttime Minbak stays restore capacity through Korean food, linguistic comfort, and social networks. Integrating Cohen's bubble theory with Maslow's hierarchy reveals how satisfying lower-order needs creates capacity for higher-order cultural engagement. The Korean concept of *jeong* (정), affective bonds transcending transactional exchange, illuminates how cultural specificity shapes belonging needs that Maslow's universalist hierarchy cannot capture. These findings reframe ethnic enclaves as enabling infrastructure for sustained independent travel by non-Western visitors.

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Introduction

Korean outbound tourism has grown substantially, with the Korea Tourism Organization (2024) recording over 28 million overseas departures annually. Europe has emerged as a prestige destination for extended independent travel, driven partly by Korean television dramas and variety programming set in European cities. Unlike the packaged group tours that once characterised Korean outbound travel, a growing segment now undertakes multi-week independent itineraries across multiple European cities, exposing them to sustained cross-cultural challenge in ways earlier formats did not.

This shift has created demand for a distinctive accommodation form, namely the Minbak, a Korean-run guesthouse offering Korean food, Korean-language hospitality, and the social infrastructure of a co-ethnic community, embedded within tourist destinations worldwide. Despite its prominence in online planning communities, where user-generated reviews significantly influence accommodation decisions (Gretzel & Yoo, 2008; Yoo & Gretzel, 2011), the Minbak has received virtually no scholarly attention.

This claim can be situated more precisely within adjacent literatures rather than asserted in isolation. Co-ethnic and diaspora accommodation has received scholarly attention in contexts such as commercial home hospitality (Di Domenico & Lynch, 2007; Lynch et al., 2011), halal-certified enclave accommodation for Muslim travellers (Cohen & Neal, 2010), and welcome and belonging within commercial hospitality settings (Steffen et al., 2021). None of these studies, however, address the specific configuration examined here, namely a tourist-facing, transient, Korean-run guesthouse embedded within non-Korean host destinations. Parallel scholarship on Korean outbound travel (Bae & Chang, 2021; Han et al., 2019, 2024; Kang & Gretzel, 2012; Lee et al., 2023; Park et al., 2020), reviewed further below, documents motivational and risk-related patterns in Korean tourists without examining the accommodation form through which these patterns are operationalised. The gap addressed by this study therefore rests not on an absence of proximate literatures but on their consistent failure to converge on the Minbak as a distinct object of empirical and theoretical attention.

The Minbak is theoretically significant. It is neither a standardised international hotel nor a culturally inclusive backpacker hostel, but an ethnic enclave embedded within the host destination's tourism infrastructure,

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designed to serve culturally indexed needs of Korean independent travellers. It sits at the intersection of established debates on environmental bubble function and ethics (Cohen, 1972; Edensor, 2008), motivational hierarchy cultural universality (Hofstede, 2001; Maslow, 1943), and authentic travel experience construction (MacCannell, 1973; Wang, 1999). Through netnography of 192 Korean travel blogs, this research investigates three questions. First, what motivations drive Korean travellers to choose Minbaks over other accommodation? Second, how travellers experience social, informational, and comfort-related dimensions of Minbak stays? Third, how travellers negotiate tension between cultural familiarity and authentic European experience? We focus on extended independent travellers.

The theoretical gap addressed in this paper is not the absence of research on Minbaks alone. Rather, it lies in the underdeveloped explanation of how co-ethnic accommodation can function as a dynamic recovery infrastructure rather than a static shield from host-culture contact. Existing environmental bubble theory has emphasised insulation (Cohen, 1972), authenticity debates have often cast comfort as opposed to immersion (MacCannell, 1973; Wang, 1999), and motivational accounts have treated basic needs as culturally neutral (Maslow, 1943). This paper problematises these assumptions by showing that Minbaks enable a cyclical pattern of contraction and expansion in which culturally indexed food, language, and belonging restore travellers' capacity for further host-culture engagement. Drawing on Lim's (2026b) typology of theoretical contribution, the contribution advanced here is an extension of environmental bubble theory through the pulsating bubble framework, a modification of Maslow's hierarchy through culturally indexed need fulfilment, and a contextual specification of belongingness through *jeong*. Its theoretical interestingness lies in its paradoxicality, in that selective retreat into a cultural bubble is shown to enable, rather than weaken, sustained cultural immersion.

Literature review

Tourist environmental bubble theory and tourism enclaves

Cohen's (1972) seminal environmental bubble concept describes the home-like environment the tourism industry constructs around tourists to shield them from unfamiliar host cultures, enabling an encounter with the 'strangeness' of a host culture while remaining insulated from the discomfort of authentic social immersion. Manifested through package tours, tourist-oriented facilities, and co-national gatherings, these bubbles provide linguistic, culinary, and social familiarity that reduces the strangeness of foreign settings, enabling what Cohen classified as 'recreational' rather than 'experimental' tourism.

Subsequent scholarship has extended and critiqued this framework. Lett (1983) demonstrated how charter tourists create liminoid 'touristic cultures' distinct from both origin and host societies, while Edensor (2008) argued that enclaves are performative sites of cultural production and negotiation rather than static shells. Ek and Tesfahuney (2019) extended this spatial perspective, showing enclaves as topological formations with distinct power relations and boundaries. More recent work suggests environmental bubbles serve more sophisticated functions than simple cultural insulation, particularly for non-Western travellers navigating Western destinations (Feng & Page, 2000; Jaakson, 2004).

The concept has proven particularly relevant to Asian tourism patterns, where ethnic enclaves facilitate international travel for tourists with lower English proficiency or greater cultural distance from Western hosts. Chinese tourists gravitate towards Chinese restaurants, shops, tour groups (Tse & Hobson, 2008; Wong & Tolkach, 2017), with vast majorities using Chinese-speaking guides and ethnic restaurants (Arlt, 2013). Middle Eastern Muslim tourists establish halal-certified Bangkok enclaves maintaining religious practices (Cohen & Neal, 2010), whilst Japanese tourists historically relied on co-ethnic accommodations and Japanese-speaking guides (Nozawa, 1992), though studies have documented generational shifts towards independent exploration (Yamamoto & Gill, 2002). These patterns suggest environmental bubbles serve functional purposes beyond cultural comfort, addressing practical barriers to independent navigation. The present study extends this literature by examining experiential dimensions, specifically how Korean travellers describe, negotiate, and reflect upon Minbak experiences.

Authenticity, immersion, and the limits of the bubble critique

Authenticity in tourism scholarship has been conceptualised in three principal ways. Objective authenticity refers to the genuineness of toured objects as verified by experts (MacCannell, 1973). Constructive authenticity holds that authenticity is socially constructed through tourists' interpretations, expectations, and cultural frameworks (Cohen, 1979, 1988). Existential authenticity denotes a state of being activated through tourism whereby tourists feel they are in touch with their 'true selves' regardless of the objective authenticity of

toured objects (Wang, 1999). Cultural immersion refers to deep engagement with host cultures through direct participation in local practices, sustained interaction with residents, and exposure to unfamiliar cultural environments (Rickly, 2022; Timothy, 2011).

The presumption that environmental bubbles necessarily diminish travel authenticity merits re-examination. Bruner (1991) argued tourist spaces are not simply false fronts but constitute legitimate cultural forms. Edensor (2008) contended highly orchestrated tourist experiences can generate genuine personal meaning. Applied to ethnic accommodation, this suggests Minbak experiences, combining Korean cultural elements with European travel contexts, may create hybrid authenticities rather than negating European encounters. Cohen and Cohen (2012) suggest travellers negotiate multiple authenticities according to changing needs rather than pursuing single authentic experiences. Scott and Campos (2024) argue psychological approaches can reconcile authenticity perspectives by focusing on how tourists construct authenticity subjectively. Korean travellers thus are not simply retreating from Europe but constructing layered travel experiences in which ethnic enclave stays and host-culture engagement both contribute.

The social dimension of travel has gained prominence as solo travel becomes globally more prevalent. O'Regan (2010, 2018) and Wilson and Harris (2006) documented how backpacker hostels function as temporary communities, providing solo travellers with companionship, safety, and information exchange. These transient social networks reduce loneliness, facilitate experience-sharing, and enable collaborative problem-solving, transforming solitary journeys into socially embedded experiences.

Korean traveller behaviour: accommodation preferences and ethnic enclave use

Research on Korean outbound travel remains limited, as scholarship principally focuses on inbound and domestic tourism within South Korea. Growing attention nonetheless reveals distinctive cultural patterns. Kang and Gretzel (2012) identified self-development and social status as significant motivational factors, while Park et al. (2020) emphasised media influence, particularly Korean television dramas and variety shows set in European locations. Post-pandemic research documented further transformations. Han et al. (2019) and Lee et al. (2023) indicate that South Korean travellers exhibit heightened risk perceptions and pronounced uncertainty avoidance overseas, leading to stronger preferences for domestic or 'safe' alternatives. Han et al. (2024) demonstrated that post-COVID Korean tourists show strong preferences for destinations perceived as safe and culturally proximate, whilst Bae and Chang (2021) documented the emergence of 'untact tourism' (non-contact tourism) as a response to pandemic anxiety.

Despite these insights, existing studies rarely examine the practical challenges Korean travellers face during extended European travel, including dietary adjustments, language barriers, and navigation difficulties, or how accommodation choices mediate these issues. Whilst Lynch et al. (2011) found that commercial home hosts occupy ambiguous positions between service providers and surrogate family, and Di Domenico and Lynch (2007) documented the emotional labour inherent in commercial hospitality, research on tourist perceptions of welcome and belonging in commercial hospitality settings (Steffen et al., 2021) has not extended to ethnic accommodation contexts. The specific trust dynamics between hosts and guests in ethnic accommodation remain underexplored in tourism literature.

The phenomenon of Korean ethnic accommodation is not itself new, as evidenced by Koreatown enclaves in major diaspora cities worldwide. The strategic embedding of Minbaks within tourist infrastructure, however, represents a distinctive adaptation in that, unlike Koreatowns serving permanent residents, Minbaks cater specifically to transient tourists by offering services tailored to travel needs. The psychophysical demands of extended travel may necessitate periodic cultural respite. Pearce and Gretzel (2012) discussed the concept of travel career patterns, suggesting that tourist needs evolve throughout trips. For multi-week European travel, initial enthusiasm for total immersion may give way to fatigue, dietary stress, and loneliness, making cultural bubbles not signs of failure but adaptive strategies for sustaining engagement. This aligns with recent work challenging the heroicisation of extreme traveller independence and discomfort (Molz, 2009; White & White, 2004).

Maslow's hierarchy and environmental bubbles

This study integrates Cohen's environmental bubble theory with Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs. Maslow's model posits that humans prioritise physiological needs (food, rest) before safety, followed by belongingness, and finally self-actualisation. Applied to tourism, this hierarchy suggests travellers must satisfy basic needs before fully engaging in cultural exploration and personal growth. A critical question arises. The Korean travellers documented here are not economically marginalised or inexperienced. They are predominantly

affluent, independently mobile adults who have already satisfied basic physiological and safety needs at home. Why, then, do lower-order needs re-emerge so powerfully once they arrive in Europe? The answer lies in the cross-cultural specificity of need fulfilment.

Standard European accommodation satisfies physiological needs in a generic sense, providing calories, shelter, and safety. What it cannot provide is the culturally indexed form of those needs, namely the restorative properties of Korean food (*hansik*) after extended Western dietary exposure, the cognitive relief of Korean-language communication after days of vigilant linguistic navigation, and the social warmth of *jeong*-mediated belonging rather than the transactional civility of an international hostel. These are not the unmet needs of an unprepared traveller but the culturally specific needs of a traveller whose baseline of restoration is constituted differently from that assumed by European hospitality infrastructure. This distinction between physiologically adequate and culturally adequate need satisfaction is the central theoretical contribution of the study.

Maslow's hierarchy has attracted substantial criticism regarding Western cultural origins and sequential rigidity (Hofstede, 1984; Wahba & Bridwell, 1976). Hofstede (2001) noted its self-actualisation prioritisation reflects individualistic values, potentially misaligning with collectivist societies. We employ Maslow heuristically to organise findings about basic travel requirements, not ultimate life goals. Lower-order needs demonstrate greater cross-cultural stability (Taormina & Gao, 2013; Tay & Diener, 2011) and provide systematic vocabulary for discussing how basic requirements must be addressed before higher-order activities. Korean emphasis on *jeong* and interpersonal harmony may heighten belongingness importance, making co-ethnic support particularly salient. Rather than viewing bubbles and immersion as mutually exclusive, this integrated framework posits dynamic relationships in which bubbles enable authentic engagement through Korean food addressing physiological deficits, Korean-language communication reducing anxiety, host/guest relationships fulfilling belongingness, and gained information enabling higher-level European cultural engagement.

Conceptual framework: the pulsating bubble

We define the pulsating bubble as a temporally cyclical, co-ethnic accommodation space that alternates between contraction, in which travellers withdraw for culturally indexed need restoration, and expansion, in which restored travellers re-enter the host environment with renewed adaptive capacity. The bubble contracts nightly as travellers withdraw to Minbak spaces for ethnic re-pressurisation and expands daily as restored travellers re-enter European public life. The contraction–expansion rhythm is constitutive rather than incidental, since it is precisely the nightly contraction that makes sustained daily expansion possible. Without the recovery function of the Minbak, the trajectory of extended cultural engagement would be progressively depleted rather than maintained.

Three features distinguish this construct from the static tourism enclave (Edensor, 2008; Ek & Tesfahuney, 2019) and from Cohen's (1972) original environmental bubble. First, it is temporally cyclical, meaning bubble use is a scheduled interruption rather than a permanent state. Second, it serves an enabling function. Rather than merely insulating the traveller, these periods of contraction provide the necessary recovery to sustain further expansion. Finally, it relies on cultural indexation, where the bubble's restorative power is derived from the traveller's specific cultural baseline rather than generic, international hospitality. These three features jointly constitute the construct. A space that satisfies only one or two of them (for example, a language-matched hotel with no cyclical withdrawal, or a static diaspora enclave occupied continuously) is not a pulsating bubble in the sense developed here.

The mechanism linking structure to outcome is depletion–restoration coupling. Extended navigation of culturally distant environments progressively depletes lower-order needs identified by Maslow (1943) in culturally indexed form, namely culturally adequate nutrition, linguistic safety, and belongingness. The pulsating bubble restores these needs, and *jeong* specifies restoration's qualitative character for Koreans. These theoretical strands occupy distinct positions. The pulsating bubble is the structure (cyclical spatial–temporal form), Maslow's hierarchy is the mechanism (depletion/restoration of culturally indexed needs conditioning higher-order engagement), *jeong* is cultural specification (relational register restoring belongingness for Korean travellers). Together they address phenomenon's 'what', 'how', and 'cultural specificity'. The Minbak functions as culturally specific infrastructure fulfilling lower-order needs in ways European lodging cannot replicate, creating psychological and physiological headroom that enables higher-order engagement, namely cultural exploration, self-development, and aesthetic experience. The framework reframes ethnic enclave use and cultural immersion from opposition to sequential enablement.

Jeong denotes an affective bond that accumulates gradually through sustained mutual care, shared vulnerability, and reciprocal obligation, developing a quasi-kinship quality that Western concepts of friendship or

warmth do not fully capture. Unlike transactional warmth, *jeong* carries moral weight, in that once established it implies ongoing responsibility towards the other, making it a structurally distinct register of social connection. Maslow's hierarchy identifies belongingness as a universal lower-order need but does not theorise the cultural specificity of its fulfilment. The Minbak data demonstrate that Korean travellers require not simply social contact but the affectively warm, reciprocally obligated, and culturally resonant contact that *jeong* describes.

Four falsifiable propositions follow:

P1 (Cyclicality). Minbak use exhibits a predictable rhythm of periodic contraction and expansion rather than continuous occupation. Travellers structure itineraries so that co-ethnic and host-environment phases alternate over the course of a multi-week trip.

P2 (Enablement). Contraction phases are associated with recovery of reported capacity for subsequent host-environment engagement. Contraction is sequentially antecedent to, not substitutive for, cultural immersion.

P3 (Cultural indexation). Generic accommodation meeting physiologically adequate standards does not restore the same needs as co-ethnic accommodation. Lower-order needs operate through culturally specified rather than culturally neutral criteria, and the degree of indexation scales with cultural distance between origin and host societies.

P4 (Reflexive calibration). Travellers consciously negotiate the ratio of contraction to expansion, articulating trade-offs between comfort and immersion. This indicates agency rather than passive retreat and distinguishes the pulsating bubble user from Cohen's (1972) recreational tourist.

Three scope conditions bound the framework. First, it applies to independent rather than packaged travel, where travellers retain discretion over accommodation and daily routeing. Second, it applies to multi-week rather than short-stay travel, where depletion–restoration dynamics can accumulate sufficiently to generate a cyclical pattern. Third, it applies to movement between culturally distant origin and host societies, such that baseline restoration cannot be supplied by generic host-country hospitality. The pulsating mechanism is contingent upon these specific conditions. In instances of brief weekend trips, all-inclusive package tours, or travel between culturally similar societies, the model likely collapses into the standard patterns of static enclave use.

This theoretical integration is not incidental but meets established criteria for theory selection. Following the IMPACT framework (Hollebeek et al., 2025), the present paper draws on Cohen's environmental bubble theory as the macro-foundational lens, Maslow's hierarchy as the motivational mechanism, and *jeong* as the culturally specific relational specification. The matching is strong. Environmental bubble theory explains the spatial form of co-ethnic accommodation, Maslow's hierarchy explains the depletion and restoration of basic needs, and *jeong* explains the culturally specific belongingness that Korean travellers seek. The integration is interesting in that it challenges the prevailing view that bubbles dilute cultural immersion, showing instead how culturally indexed respite can enable sustained host-culture engagement. It is parsimonious, as each lens performs a distinct function. Bubble theory specifies where restoration occurs, Maslow specifies why restoration matters, and *jeong* specifies how belongingness is culturally fulfilled. The framework is applicable to destination and accommodation contexts serving culturally distant tourist segments. It is conceptually rigorous, in that its core construct, the pulsating bubble, is defined through cyclicality, enablement, and cultural indexation, and testable, in that its four propositions (P1–P4) can be examined through future qualitative, diary-based, and survey-based research on co-ethnic accommodation among Korean and other non-Western tourists.

Methodology

This study uses netnography (Kozinets, 2015) to analyse Korean travel blogs. Blog analysis offers three methodological advantages. Blogs provide rich lived experience narratives, they are produced voluntarily without researcher intervention (minimising social desirability bias), and they capture reflections during and after trips, offering temporal depth (Banyai & Glover, 2012; Bosangit et al., 2015; Enoch & Grossman, 2010; Volo, 2010). The approach has proven valuable for examining non-Western travellers' experiences in culturally distant destinations. We adopt an interpretive paradigm, understanding meanings Korean travellers ascribe to Minbak experiences rather than measuring objective outcomes, aligning with calls for culturally situated tourism research (Jamal & Hollinshead, 2001; Tribe, 2006). Korean travel narratives for Korean audiences offer insight into culturally specific motivations potentially obscured in researcher-administered surveys.

Data collection occurred August–December 2025, targeting Korean-language blogs on NAVER describing European travel involving Minbak stays. Search terms included '유럽 민박' (Europe Minbak), '한인민박 유럽' (Korean guesthouse Europe), and city-specific terms. Sampling prioritised blogs providing detailed Minbak experience descriptions, personal rather than

commercial content, and publication since 2023 for contemporary practices. The final sample comprised 192 blog posts spanning multiple European destinations, namely London (n = 42), Paris (n = 38), Rome (n = 31), Barcelona (n = 28), and Prague (n = 19). Trip durations spanned 1–8 weeks, providing extended exposure underpinning the pulsating bubble argument. Most Minbak stays were short (2–4 nights, median 3 nights). Whilst blogs constitute publicly available data exempt from typical informed consent requirements, ethical considerations were observed, including no identification attempts of anonymous bloggers, quoted material used for analytical purposes only, and pseudonyms retained at the blogger-chosen level.

NAVER was selected, rather than Instagram, YouTube travel vlogs, or Kakao-based communities, because it hosts the longest-form, text-dense narrative content among Korean digital platforms and remains the dominant search-indexed blogging platform for Korean-language travel writing, making it the most tractable source for systematic netnographic sampling of detailed, retrospective trip accounts (Choe, 2022). Instagram and YouTube content is typically shorter, more visually and commercially oriented, and less amenable to thematic textual coding, while Kakao-based communities are largely closed or semi-private, raising access and research-ethics complications not present for public NAVER blogs. This choice nonetheless introduces platform-specific bias, discussed further below, and future research triangulating NAVER with these other Korean digital spaces would strengthen the evidentiary base. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was judged to have been reached. Sampling stopped once successive additions of new blogs ceased to generate codes not already represented in the coding frame and instead reproduced existing categories, which aligns with conventional data-saturation criteria in netnographic research (Kozinets, 2015).

Analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework, comprising familiarisation, initial coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition, and report production. The process was iterative, with constant comparison between emerging codes and theoretical frameworks. MAXQDA 2022 facilitated systematic coding whilst interpretation remained grounded in close reading of full blog posts rather than decontextualised excerpts.

Initial coding identified 847 discrete meaning units relating to food, language, social interactions, information exchange, and reflections on authenticity. These were organised into 23 preliminary themes, consolidated through iterative review into 12 sub-themes nested within four overarching themes. These were Safe Haven Effects (dietary comfort, language relief, cultural familiarity), Social Dynamics with hosts and guests (parental care, cultural brokerage, spontaneous companionship, information exchange), Culturally Mediated Knowledge (trusted local knowledge, logistical support), and Negative Experiences (forced socialisation, privacy limitations, bubble insularity). Thematic prevalence was calculated as the percentage of blogs containing at least one reference to each theme. Inter-coder reliability was established through independent coding of 25% of blogs (n = 48) by two researchers, achieving Cohen's kappa of.84, indicating substantial agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977).

Beyond data saturation at the level of individual codes, sample adequacy was additionally assessed through theoretical saturation (Lim, 2026a). After the initial corpus had established recurrent references to Korean food, Korean-language relief, co-ethnic sociality, and information support, further sampling was evaluated against whether additional blogs altered the explanatory structure of the pulsating bubble framework rather than merely adding illustrative instances. Later blogs in the corpus added descriptive richness but did not change the core relationships among cultural depletion, Minbak-mediated restoration, and renewed host-culture engagement, indicating that the 192-blog sample was analytically, and not only numerically, sufficient. Disconfirming cases, including accounts of privacy loss, forced socialisation, and bubble insularity (reported in Theme 4 below), were retained throughout as boundary evidence specifying the limits of the framework rather than treated as analytic noise to be discarded. This procedure supports theoretical saturation as explanatory sufficiency, in which additional material no longer improves the framework's range, subtlety, complexity, resonance, or validity (Lim, 2025).

To render the audit trail from raw blog material to theoretical claim transparent, Table 1 illustrates this progression for a representative excerpt from each of the four overarching themes, showing the meaning unit, initial code, subtheme, and theoretical interpretation from which each theme was built. Quotations reproduced in the Findings section were translated from Korean to English by the bilingual first author. A 15% random subsample of translated quotations was independently back-translated by a second bilingual rater and checked against the original Korean text for semantic equivalence, with no material discrepancies identified.

Several limitations merit acknowledgement. The sample is restricted to NAVER users, skewing towards younger, digitally active Korean travellers and potentially underrepresenting older or less digitally engaged

Table 1. Illustrative audit trail from raw data to theoretical claim.

Data Source	Meaning Unit	Initial Code	Subtheme	Overarching Theme	Theoretical Interpretation
Blogger Claire, Paris blog (Jan 2026)	Craving Korean food after 1–3 weeks of Western cuisine, especially given the high Paris meal prices	Dietary fatigue / food as necessity	Dietary comfort and physical recovery	Safe Haven Effect	Culturally indexed physiological restoration (Maslow lower-order need, culturally specified)
Blogger Sooyeon, London blog (Nov 2024)	Host called guest by name, asked if she had eaten, waited up to ensure safe return	Host care exceeding service norms	Hosts as parental figures / cultural brokers	Social Dynamics	Jeong-mediated belongingness distinct from transactional hospitality
Blogger Sujin, Rome blog (Sep 2024)	The host phoned the museum in Italian to confirm a reservation that guests could not manage alone	The host served as a linguistic and logistical mediator	Practical assistance beyond information	Information Authority	Bridging social capital enabling host-culture navigation (enablement)
Blogger Seohyun, Paris blog (Nov 2024)	Guest reflects on spending more time with Koreans than locals and questions whether this was 'real' travel	Reflexive authenticity doubt	Reflexive concerns about authenticity and immersion	Negative Experiences	Reflexive calibration (P4); boundary condition on bubble enablement

visitors. This skew has substantive implications for interpretation. The motivational and experiential patterns reported here should be read as characteristic of digitally active, blog-writing Korean travellers rather than the Korean outbound travel population as a whole, and older or less digitally engaged travellers may exhibit different accommodation preferences, risk tolerances, or thresholds for cultural fatigue not captured in this corpus. We consider this population appropriate for the study's exploratory aims. However, because digitally active travellers are also the demographic most likely to undertake the independent, multi-week European itineraries that the pulsating bubble framework is designed to explain. Positive experiences may be over-represented, as dissatisfied travellers may avoid mentioning Minbaks or choose not to blog, and social media's inherent positivity bias may encourage idealised accounts obscuring mundane or frustrating aspects. Additionally, one author is a Korean scholar based in the United Kingdom, potentially influencing interpretation despite reflexive measures. To mitigate this, coding decisions were discussed with a non-Korean co-researcher, and themes tested against disconfirming cases. Blog analysis nevertheless offers ecological validity that structured methods may lack, as bloggers write for peer audiences rather than researchers, producing accounts reflecting authentic preoccupations. Narrative richness compensates for non-representative nature, providing depth valuable for exploratory research on understudied phenomena.

Beyond inter-coder reliability, several further strategies were used to strengthen methodological rigour. Credibility was supported through prolonged engagement with the full corpus, rather than isolated excerpts, triangulation across coders, and the deliberate retention of disconfirming cases described above. Confirmability was supported through the audit trail linking raw data to codes, subthemes, and theoretical claims (Table 1), and through discussion of coding decisions with a non-Korean co-researcher, reducing the risk that interpretation reflected a single researcher's cultural standpoint. Transferability, rather than statistical generalisability, is offered through thick description of context, participant excerpts, and destination settings, allowing readers to judge the applicability of findings to other co-ethnic accommodation contexts. The scope conditions specified in the Conceptual Framework section make explicit the boundaries within which such transfer is likely to hold (Lim, 2025).

Findings

Analysis of 192 Korean travel blogs revealed four major thematic domains characterising Minbak experiences, namely the Safe Haven Effect (n = 167, 87%), Social Dynamics with hosts and guests (n = 190, 99%), Information Authority (n = 187, 97.4%), and Negative Experiences (n = 120, 62.5%). The high prevalence of multiple themes within single blogs indicates that Minbak experiences are multidimensional, simultaneously fulfilling various needs whilst generating complex reflections about travel authenticity.

Theme 1: the safe haven effect and Minbak as an environmental bubble

The Safe Haven Effect emerged as the most visceral and physically grounded theme, with 87% of blogs describing relief, comfort, or recovery specifically attributed to the Korean-ness of Minbak spaces. This effect manifested across three interconnected dimensions, namely dietary comfort and physical recovery, language relief, and cultural familiarity through material and sensory elements.

Dietary comfort and physical recovery

The single most frequently cited motivation for Minbak stays was access to Korean food, which travellers framed not as mere preference but as physiological necessity after extended Western cuisine consumption. This discourse of dietary fatigue appeared remarkably uniform across blogs, suggesting a shared cultural understanding of food's restorative function. One traveller explained the strategic timing of Minbak stays, 'Usually I can tolerate local food for 1–2 weeks, but by the 2, 3-week mark, I desperately crave Korean food. Especially in Paris where meal prices are steep' (Blogger Claire, Paris, January 2026).

Several blogs described travelling with family members, particularly children, who refused to eat Western food, making Korean meal access non-negotiable. This necessity-based framing challenges interpretations of ethnic food-seeking as merely conservative or unadventurous. For some travellers it represents practical problem-solving for extended travel sustainability. Several bloggers made the restorative function explicit, 'After a proper Korean meal I finally had the energy to do the museums properly' (Blogger Yuna, Paris, October 2024). 'Once I had a decent sleep and real food, I actually wanted to explore' (Blogger Junho, Rome, September 2024).

Language as sanctuary: cognitive relief and emotional safety

The second dimension concerned language, though blogs described this less as communication difficulty than as cognitive exhaustion and psychological stress. Despite their proficiency in English, participants found constant linguistic 'code-switching' to be a significant drain on their energy. The Minbak offered a reprieve from this effort, providing a familiar linguistic sanctuary that allowed for mental recovery. One representative quotation captured this relief, 'Speaking Korean freely without worrying about pronunciation or grammar; it was the first time I relaxed in 2 weeks' (Blogger SeoYeon, London, January 2026).

This linguistic relief was particularly valued by solo travellers, who lacked co-national companions for Korean conversation during daytime sightseeing; 'I'm traveling alone, being able to freely speak Korean; even just greeting people in Korean at the Minbak felt so comfortable' (Blogger JiHye, London, January 2026). The cumulative effect of all-day English use made even brief Korean exchanges emotionally significant, suggesting language operates at affective as well as instrumental levels; a finding consonant with Lee and Lee's (2023) grounded-theory study demonstrating that Korean tourists experience 'communicative vigilance' and cognitive exhaustion when navigating overseas environments in a foreign language, with relief from linguistic pressure functioning as a restorative rather than merely a communicative resource.

This affective dimension resonates with the Korean cultural concept of *jeong*, bonds of emotional attachment and mutual care that transcend transactional exchange. One blogger captured this quality; 'At the Minbak, the host called me by name, asked if I had eaten, and stayed up to make sure I returned safely. It felt like family, not a business' (Blogger Sooyeon, London, November 2024).

The environmental bubble in sensory register: material and spatial familiarity

Beyond food and language, travellers described comfort derived from material and sensory elements of Korean domestic culture present in Minbak spaces. These references appeared fleeting but emotionally charged, suggesting cultural familiarity operates through subtle, often unconscious recognition. One blogger wrote, 'Seeing Korean slippers at the entrance and smelling *doenjang* – it felt like visiting relatives, not a hotel' (Blogger Sunhee, Rome, October 2024). Several blogs mentioned Korean toiletries, bidet controls labelled in Korean, Korean television channels, and *ondol*-style heated floors. These elements, whilst not functionally necessary, provide subliminal reassurance. Simply seeing Korean text on everyday objects reduced the sensation of being in an alien environment.

Taken together, the three Safe Haven Effect dimensions demonstrate a consistent pattern, in that these travellers do not simply miss home but the culturally indexed form of basic need satisfaction that Korean food, language, and hospitality uniquely provide. These micro-material signals expand Cohen's (1972) 'environmental bubble' beyond social and linguistic insulation into embodied, sensory experience. It is accumulated small familiarities that collectively construct the bubble's 'felt experience'. European accommodation satisfies physiological needs generically. It cannot provide the restorative properties of Korean food after extended Western dietary exposure, the cognitive unloading of Korean-language communication after days of communicative vigilance, or the affective warmth of *jeong*-mediated belonging. This is the Minbak's enabling function, addressing Maslow's lower orders not generically but in culturally indexed form and creating physiological and psychological capacity that enables higher-order cultural engagement.

Theme 2: social dynamics – hosts as cultural brokers and guests as instant community

Social interaction constituted the near-universal Minbak experience, with 99% of blogs discussing guest interactions and 77.6% describing meaningful host relationships. These social dimensions transformed Minbaks from accommodation into social infrastructure enabling forms of connection difficult to achieve in conventional lodging.

Hosts as parental figures and cultural brokers

Minbak hosts appeared in blogs through two recurring roles, namely protective parental figures and cultural interpreters. The parental framing emerged strongly, with travellers describing host care in familial terms exceeding typical hospitality industry relationships, 'The owner waited up until we returned at midnight, worried we might get lost. Like my mom would do' (Blogger Hyejin, Barcelona, September 2024). Beyond basic hospitality, hosts functioned as cultural brokers (Lynch, 2005), actively translating European social behaviours through Korean cultural frameworks to mitigate culture shock. By contextualising local norms as structural differences rather than personal slights, a Frankfurt host 'explained why locals seemed cold is not rudeness, just cultural difference. That changed my whole perspective' (Blogger Mina, Frankfurt, November 2024).

What distinguished resonant host relationships was not competence alone but relational warmth. Corpus analysis identified 107 *jeong*-related expressions including 'affectionate warmth', 'warmly familiar', 'Korean warmth', 'like family' formulations. One Salzburg post describes owners as 'full of warmth and kindness', framing hosts as affectively generous rather than merely efficient. A Swiss Interlaken post characterises hosts as 'warmly familiar', signalling more than politeness. Minbak value is not exhausted by tangible amenities (breakfast, laundry, transport advice). Practical help becomes meaningful when interpreted as genuine human concern. Bloggers frequently describe hosts who checked in after arrival, stored luggage outside hours, offered unprompted food, and informally looked after travellers. Any one act might appear minor in isolation. Together they produce a feeling that guests are not merely processed as customers, as evaluative vocabulary consistently moves from commercial language towards kinship and emotional registers.

These accounts gesture towards *jeong*, the accumulation of affective bonds through shared experience, mutual care, and reciprocal obligation. *Jeong* is not a state granted at the outset, but one that accumulates through sustained, small-scale gestures, such as a follow-up message, a host who waits up for a late arrival, or a personally vouched pharmacy transaction. These actions pivot the *Minbak* relationship away from a mere service transaction towards a temporary community defined by mutual responsibility. Whilst only a minority of bloggers name *jeong* explicitly, the pattern recurs across posts and cities, distinguishing Minbak from mainstream European accommodation through what might be termed a relational surplus, that is, social and emotional care exceeding what market hospitality normally provides.

This finding carries theoretical significance. It suggests that what Maslow identifies as 'belongingness' is not a culturally uniform category but is experienced and satisfied differently across cultural contexts. Korean travellers' belongingness needs require the culturally specific relational texture that *jeong*-inflected host relationships provide. The Minbak is not simply a familiar space but one of the few European contexts in which *jeong* can be reliably encountered.

Guest interactions: rapid bonding and information networks

The near-universal presence of guest interaction themes (99%) reflects Minbaks' fundamental social character. Shared Korean identity enabled rapid bond formation, evolving from breakfast introductions to day-long companionships, 'We met at breakfast, had beer together that night, and travelled together for the next 3 days. Instant friends' (Blogger Eunji, Prague, October 2024). Solo travellers described Minbak relationships as transforming lonely trips into social experiences, 'I was traveling alone but never felt alone after staying at Minbaks. There was always someone to share meals with' (Blogger Jiwon, Multiple cities, November 2024). This alleviation of loneliness was particularly valued by first-time European travellers. Guests functioned as peer information sources with particular credibility, 'Other guests told us which metro lines to avoid, where pickpockets operate; information no guidebook has' (Blogger Yuna, Paris, December 2024). This tacit knowledge proved invaluable precisely because it was current and filtered through shared Korean sensibilities. The rapid bonds exhibited *jeong* hallmarks, namely quick formation, reciprocal obligation (sharing rooms, maps, medications), and emotional residue, bloggers described as genuine connection, 'like we'd known each other for years' (Blogger Minji, Barcelona, September 2024). This acceleration reflects *jeong's* conditions, namely shared vulnerability, cultural background, and compressed travel intensity.

In social capital terms (Putnam, 2000), Minbaks generate dense bonding capital (intra-ethnic ties providing practical information, emotional security, and logistical assistance), whilst hosts simultaneously function as bridging capital, translating European contexts through culturally aligned interpretation. This dual function is structurally distinctive, as no other European tourist accommodation combines both. International hostels generate bridging capital across nationalities but lack co-ethnic bonding (O'Regan, 2010, 2018; Sorensen, 2003). Minbaks invert this, generating deep bonding capital, while hosts supply bridging functions guests cannot access from one another. Resulting networks are not Minbak by-products. They are primary draws, explaining why travellers return across multiple trips and cities (Huang & Hsu, 2009), even those with sufficient language skills to stay elsewhere. Minbaks consistently outperform both international hostels and language-matched hotels on this relational dimension, underscoring the pulsating bubble framework's structural argument.

Theme 3: information authority – Minbaks as knowledge hubs

The Information Authority theme (97.4% of blogs) revealed that Minbaks function as crucial information nodes whose knowledge is trusted more highly than guidebooks, travel websites, or advice from international travellers. For Korean travellers, information acquisition is often a socially embedded process, encompassing contextual advice, warnings, and recommendations filtered through shared cultural understanding (Kim & Tussyadiah, 2013). This trust stems from hosts' unique cross-cultural competence, in that having navigated European environments whilst maintaining their Korean identity, they are simultaneously Korea-culturally aligned and Europe-locally expert, anticipating Korean travellers' specific needs in ways neither guidebooks nor international travellers can replicate.

Culturally aligned local expertise

This culturally filtered information proved particularly valuable for navigating implicit local norms. Blogs described hosts explaining European customs that could potentially confuse Korean travellers, such as when tipping is expected, free water isn't automatically served, reservation times are strictly enforced, and shops close on Sundays. One traveller learned from hosts that ordering cappuccino after 11 AM marks tourists in Italy, whilst Korean travellers habituated to all-day coffee culture would naturally commit this faux pas. One blogger wrote, 'I definitely recommend the Minbak near Termini Station. The location is good for getting around Rome, and having Korean hosts was a huge help for organising our itinerary' (Blogger Yoni, Rome, August 2025). Hosts advised on optimal visiting times, avoiding crowds, suggested lesser-known sites, warned about tourist traps, and drew on information that requires years of local residence to accumulate.

Practical assistance beyond information provision

Hosts provided logistical assistance exceeding typical accommodation services, particularly linguistic mediation. 'She called the museum in Italian to confirm our reservation. We would have missed it otherwise' (Blogger Sujin, Rome, September 2024). This active intervention, which included making calls, translating documents, and negotiating with providers, distinguished Minbak hospitality from hotel concierge services. Blogs described hosts assisting with transport bookings, navigating bureaucracy, and even accompanying guests to resolve problems. One traveller recounted when their credit card was declined at a pharmacy, the Minbak owner personally vouched and helped complete the transaction. Such personalised assistance transformed hosts from service providers into cultural advocates actively facilitating foreign system navigation. This support was particularly valuable for older travellers or those with limited English. One blogger with elderly parents emphasised that host assistance with medical translation and prescription acquisition proved indispensable.

Theme 4: negative experiences – costs of the bubble

Whilst positive experiences dominated blogs, 62.5% acknowledged tensions, disappointments, or reflective concerns about their Minbak choices. These negative themes revealed the social, experiential, and existential costs associated with environmental bubble utilisation, demonstrating travellers' sophisticated awareness of trade-offs inherent in comfort-seeking.

Pressure to participate and loss of autonomy

The communal atmosphere that made Minbaks appealing to some felt oppressive to others, 'I wanted quiet time after sightseeing but felt obligated to join the group dinner every night' (Blogger Ara, Barcelona,

November 2024). The shared Korean identity that facilitated rapid bonding also created implicit expectations of friendliness, participation, and reciprocal conversation that introverted travellers or those exhausted from daily touring found burdensome. Several blogs described feeling guilty for declining group activities, suggesting Minbak social intensity can paradoxically create new stress even whilst alleviating others. One traveller noted that other guests expected her to be sociable simply because they shared nationality, whereas international hostels permitted solo travellers anonymity without judgment.

Physical and acoustic privacy deficits

Practical complaints about Minbak facilities appeared frequently, particularly regarding noise and privacy. One blogger wrote, 'The walls were thin; I could hear everything. Sometimes I missed the anonymity of a hotel' (Blogger Anonymous, Prague, October 2024). The anonymity reference is telling, as it suggests hotels offer not merely better soundproofing but freedom from social observation and the emotional labour of maintaining communal friendliness. Shared bathrooms, lack of private lockable storage, and thin walls were common friction points, reminding travellers that Minbaks, despite their home-like framing, remain commercial spaces with compromises inherent to budget accommodation.

Reflexive concerns about authenticity and immersion

The most theoretically significant negative theme involved travellers questioning whether excessive Minbak reliance limited authentic cultural immersion, 'I realised I spent more time talking to Koreans than locals. Did I really experience Paris?' (Blogger Seohyun, Paris, November 2024). This concern appeared particularly among first-time Europe travellers who anticipated transformative cross-cultural encounters but gravitated towards familiar spaces. Several described internal conflicts between comfort and authentic travel, 'Part of me felt I was cheating by staying in Korean places, like I wasn't really traveling abroad' (Blogger Jieun, Multiple cities, October 2024). These reflexive concerns rarely led to avoiding Minbaks entirely. Most strategically balanced Minbak stays with hotels or hostels, or limited duration, 'I stayed 2 nights at Minbak for recovery, then switched to a hostel to force myself to practice English' (Blogger Haeun, London, December 2024). Some actively defended their choices, 'People say using Minbaks isn't real travel, but I think taking care of yourself is important. Why suffer unnecessarily?' (Blogger Nari, Multiple cities, September 2024). This pragmatic framing rejects romanticised travel-as-endurance, positioning self-care as enabling meaningful experiences. These accounts indicate reflexive calibration is a recurrent structural feature of contemporary Korean independent travel, whereby bloggers evaluate their positioning, test it against authenticity ideals, and adjust itineraries accordingly.

Table 2 synthesises the chain of inference from research question to theoretical proposition, mapping each research question set out in the Introduction to its corresponding theme, core evidence, proposition, and theoretical implication.

Discussion

Returning to the three research questions guiding this study (Table 2), the findings support the four propositions derived from them. The 1–2-week tolerance pattern before requiring respite (P1), the reported recovery of engagement capacity after Minbak stays (P2), the inadequacy of generic European accommodation to meet culturally indexed needs (P3), and the widespread articulation of trade-offs between comfort and immersion (P4) together substantiate the pulsating bubble framework.

Environmental bubbles as enabling rather than limiting structures

Cohen's (1972) original environmental bubble concept positioned such spaces as defensive mechanisms for psychologically unprepared travellers unable or unwilling to engage with foreign contexts. The present findings suggest a more sophisticated relationship, in which Minbaks operate as strategic recovery stations enabling sustained cultural engagement over extended trips. The temporal pattern bloggers describe, tolerance for one to two weeks followed by dietary fatigue and linguistic exhaustion, indicates that human capacity for continuous cultural adaptation is finite (Ward & Rana-Deuba, 1999). By providing periodic respite, Minbaks extend rather than diminish immersion capacity.

This enabling function challenges binary framings of bubble versus immersion. Recent tourism scholarship increasingly rejects such dichotomies, recognising that 'authentic' experiences are constructed rather than discovered (Cohen & Cohen, 2012; Wang, 1999). The Minbak case extends this critique by demonstrating that even ostensibly insular ethnic spaces can facilitate meaningful cultural encounter, provided they function as temporary rather than permanent refuges. The

Table 2. Synthesis of research questions, themes, evidence, and propositions.

Research Question	Corresponding Theme(s)	Core Evidence	Proposition	Theoretical Implication
RQ1: Motivations for choosing Minbaks	Safe Haven Effect (87% of blogs)	Dietary comfort, language relief, sensory/material familiarity	P3 (Cultural indexation)	Motivation is driven by the need for culturally indexed, not merely generically adequate, restoration
RQ2: Social experience of Minbak stays	Social Dynamics (99% of blogs)	Host-as-family framing, 107 *jeong*-related expressions, rapid guest bonding	P1 (Cyclicality) and *jeong*-mediated belonging	Experience is structured by a culturally specific relational register (*jeong*) that generic hospitality cannot supply
RQ2: Informational and logistical experience	Information Authority (97.4% of blogs)	Host cultural brokerage, linguistic mediation, logistical assistance	P2 (Enablement)	Co-ethnic accommodation enables host-culture navigation through trusted, bridging-capital information
RQ3: Negotiating comfort versus authentic immersion	Negative Experiences (62.5% of blogs)	Privacy loss, forced socialisation, reflexive authenticity doubt	P4 (Reflexive calibration)	Travellers consciously negotiate bubble use, defining the framework's boundary conditions

reflexive awareness of 62.5% of bloggers suggests contemporary travellers possess sophisticated meta-awareness about their bubble utilisation. Korean Minbak users explicitly recognise trade-offs, consciously negotiate authenticity tensions, and strategically balance comfort with challenge, behaviours indicating agency rather than passive retreat.

Negotiating the authenticity paradox

The widespread awareness of dissonance between comfort-seeking and authentic immersion is theoretically significant. The 'cheating' metaphor reveals internalised ideologies about legitimate travel rooted in Western backpacker culture (Cohen, 2003; Noy, 2004), which position discomfort, isolation, and linguistic struggle as authenticating markers of 'real' travel. By this logic, seeking comfort constitutes failure whilst suffering demonstrates commitment. Yet this ideology encodes particular cultural values, including individualism and personal challenge, that may not resonate equally across societies. Korean travellers' defensive articulations ('taking care of yourself is important' and 'why suffer unnecessarily?') signal emerging counter-narratives rejecting suffering-as-authenticity. These implicitly argue for alternative travel values, namely sustainability over intensity, wellbeing over endurance, and strategic adaptation over rigid immersion, values aligning with collectivist orientations prioritising social harmony and practical wisdom over individualistic heroism (Hofstede, 2001).

The sequential strategies travellers described, alternating Minbak stays with hostels and limiting duration, demonstrate sophisticated negotiation of authenticity tensions. Rather than choosing bubble or immersion categorically, travellers create hybrid itineraries. This suggests authenticity is better understood as a spectrum than a binary, and mixing modes produces experiences no less meaningful than total immersion. The tension between comfort and authenticity is continuously recalibrated across trip duration. Wang's (1999) existential authenticity is useful here, as rather than authentic culture encountered, this framework centres authentic self experienced through tourism. By this criterion, Minbak experiences possess authenticity insofar as travellers genuinely feel restored and enabled to continue journeys. Rapid friendships, Korean conversation relief, and familiar food constitute authentic experiences regardless of European cultural engagement depth. Not all travellers prioritise authentic cultural immersion as primary goals. Many legitimately prioritise comfort and enjoyable experience (Crompton, 1979; Pearce & Lee, 2005). The present study examines how travellers themselves describe and justify accommodation choices, revealing complex negotiations between comfort and challenge.

Jeong and the cultural specificity of belongingness

A distinct contribution lies in the empirical specification of *jeong* as a structuring feature of Minbak social life. Whilst *jeong* is well established in Korean social psychology (Choi et al., 2007), its operation within tourism accommodation contexts has not previously been documented. The present data show that *jeong* is not simply a background cultural value but an empirically visible feature of Minbak interactions. It manifests in the accumulation of small, sustained gestures, namely the follow-up KakaoTalk message, the host who waits up past midnight, and the guest network that shares medications and warnings alongside sightseeing tips. Together these constitute a relational register qualitatively different from the transactional warmth of standard commercial hospitality.

This has implications for theories of tourist motivation and accommodation choice that extend beyond the Korean case. If *jeong* represents a culturally specific mode of fulfilling the universal need for belongingness,

analogous phenomena may operate in other culturally cohesive diaspora tourism contexts, such as the relational warmth of Moroccan family-run riads for Muslim travellers from North Africa or the communal fabric of Japanese ryokan networks for Japanese sojourners in East Asia.

Environmental bubble theory has tended to treat the social dimension of ethnic enclaves generically, as co-ethnic gathering rather than culturally textured community. The *jeong* findings show this dimension is more culturally differentiated than existing scholarship acknowledges, and that enclave sociality's affective architecture is itself a primary draw rather than a secondary benefit.

Cross-cultural re-reading of Maslow's hierarchy

The pulsating bubble data demonstrate that physiological and belongingness needs, Maslow's most 'universal' lower-order levels, are culturally indexed in their expression and fulfilment. Korean food is not interchangeable with any food. It satisfies a physiological need that is simultaneously a culturally constituted form of restoration. This challenges Maslow's implicit assumption of cultural universality, aligning with Hofstede's (2001) evidence that need prioritisation varies across cultures and with Taormina and Gao's (2013) finding that lower-order needs, whilst cross-culturally present, are expressed in culturally specific ways. The practical implication is significant. Travellers from non-Western backgrounds may require ethnically specific rather than merely physiologically adequate resources to restore capacity for higher-order cultural engagement. Environmental bubbles, in this light, function as the cultural infrastructure that makes sustained independent travel possible.

This cross-cultural re-reading has methodological implications. Surveys asking whether travellers' basic needs were met may systematically underreport cultural need deficits if instruments are built around physiologically rather than culturally adequate standards. The blog data reveal this inadequacy. Travellers who reported eating, sleeping, and communicating in English also reported feeling depleted, exhausted, and isolated in ways standard measures would not capture. Future research using experience-sampling or diary methods may better document the temporal dynamics of cultural need depletion and Minbak-mediated restoration identified here at aggregate level.

The pulsating bubble framework extends beyond the Korean context. Chinese outbound travellers exhibit structurally analogous patterns, gravitating towards Mandarin-speaking guides and co-ethnic accommodations to satisfy renqing-mediated belonging, felt obligations of mutual favour and social warmth (Cai et al., 2019; Tse & Hobson, 2008; Wong & Tolkach, 2017). Similarly, Indian travellers rely on regional-language hospitality and specific dietary networks to restore resources depleted by navigating culturally distant environments. The underlying mechanism mirrors the pulsating bubble dynamic, whereby ethnically specific enclaves enable nightly re-pressurisation that facilitates sustained daytime engagement. While cultural substance varies (language, food, relational registers), the structural logic of contraction enabling expansion remains constant. This suggests genuine generalisability for non-Western travel, where *jeong* and renqing represent culturally specific instances of a broader global phenomenon.

These parallels are offered as propositions for future comparative research rather than as evidence of established generalisability. The present netnographic corpus contains no Chinese or Indian traveller data, and the structural analogy to renqing-mediated or regional-language hospitality has not been empirically tested here. We therefore propose, rather than conclude, that the pulsating bubble mechanism generalises beyond the Korean case, and we specify its boundary conditions explicitly. The framework is expected to apply to multi-week independent trips between culturally distant origin and host societies, using tourist-facing co-ethnic accommodation, and is not expected to apply, without modification, to short weekend stays, all-inclusive package tours, permanent diaspora neighbourhoods, or standard ethnic restaurants, each of which lacks either the cyclicality or the trip-embedded, transient character that defines the construct.

Theoretical contributions and practical implications

This study makes several contributions to environmental bubble theory. First, we extend Cohen's (1972) concept by demonstrating that bubbles can function strategically and adaptively rather than merely defensively, acting as enabling structures that prevent burnout and sustain long-duration travel. This reframes them from impediments to authentic experience into facilitators of sustained engagement.

Second, we introduce temporal dynamics absent from Cohen's static model. Korean travellers describe predictable rhythms of bubble utilisation, typically

tolerating cultural immersion for one to two weeks before requiring ethnic respite, a pattern suggesting bubble usage follows cyclical adaptation limits rather than a fixed disposition.

Third, we integrate Maslow's hierarchy with environmental bubble theory. By demonstrating how bubbles simultaneously address physiological provision, safety through linguistic comfort, and belongingness through social networks, our findings reveal bubbles as multifunctional resources rather than one-dimensional retreats, explaining why ethnic enclaves persist despite globalisation.

Most significantly, we extend Maslow's hierarchy, in that lower-order needs are not culturally neutral universal categories but are interpreted and fulfilled culturally specifically. Korean travellers seek not food but Korean food, not language but Korean communication, and not social belonging but *jeong*-mediated community. This reframing challenges Western-centric, universalist foundations of Maslow's model (Hofstede, 2001; Taormina & Gao, 2013) and builds on efforts to adapt the hierarchy to culturally specific contexts, such as Shahidul Islam's (2026) integration of Halal principles for Muslim travellers. The Minbak functions not as a retreat from higher-order travel aspirations but as a culturally specific mechanism through which lower-order needs are fulfilled, creating capacity for cross-cultural engagement. For Korean travellers in Europe, Maslow's hierarchy operates from a culturally indexed base.

Fourth, the reflexive awareness of bubble insularity demonstrated by most bloggers challenges assumptions that bubble users lack critical consciousness about their travel choices. This extends Cohen's (1972) model of the unreflective 'recreational' tourist by showing that contemporary ethnic-enclave users actively negotiate comfort-seeking against authenticity, often structuring itineraries to balance both. Rather than categorising travellers as either 'bubble dwellers' or 'independent travellers' (Duignan et al., 2022), scholars should recognise fluid, self-aware movement between enclave and immersion as a distinctive mode of contemporary tourism practice.

These findings carry practical implications. For destination marketing organisations, recognising that many international travellers require periodic ethnic respite suggests value in facilitating rather than resisting ethnic accommodation development. For accommodation providers, the findings reveal unmet needs in conventional lodging, whereby hotels offer privacy but no community, while international hostels offer community but linguistic barriers. Minbaks fill this niche by combining social infrastructure with cultural-linguistic alignment, a model that might inform how other accommodation types serve ethnic market segments through language-matched services or cuisine options. For the Korean outbound tourism industry, operators could systematise their local knowledge through apps, guidebooks, or online platforms, preserving ethnic accommodation's competitive advantage whilst extending its value.

These implications can be specified more concretely at the level of individual tourism actors. For destination managers, design principles include actively supporting, rather than discouraging, co-ethnic accommodation development as complementary infrastructure that sustains rather than displaces host-culture visitation, and incorporating ethnic-enclave accommodation into destination information systems so that its restorative function is visible to, rather than hidden from, official tourism planning. For Minbak operators, design principles include providing culturally adequate food and language-safe information channels as core, rather than peripheral, service components; enabling opt-in rather than obligatory co-ethnic sociality, given the privacy and autonomy costs documented in Theme 4; protecting guest privacy through improved acoustic and spatial separation without eliminating optional communal space; and supporting host brokerage functions, such as translation, local navigation, and problem resolution, as a distinct, marketable service dimension rather than an informal extension of hospitality. For conventional lodging providers, design principles include offering opt-in language-matched information services or partnerships with co-ethnic community networks for guests from culturally distant origin markets, and positioning ethnic-specific comfort provisions as a means of sustaining, rather than substituting for, guests' engagement with the host destination.

Future research should explore whether optimal bubble–immersion ratios exist for different travel durations or personality types; how digital technologies (translation apps, social media) alter bubble functions and boundaries (Sharma et al., 2025); whether bubble utilisation patterns differ across ethnic groups; and how hosts' dual positioning as cultural insiders and local experts creates unique forms of cultural brokerage warranting theoretical attention. Cohen's environmental bubble concept, now over fifty years old, requires updating to reflect how ethnically based tourism infrastructure has evolved from improvised solutions to professionalised industries serving globalised populations.

Conclusions

This study shows Minbaks (Korean guesthouses) function as multifunctional resources addressing physiological, social, and informational needs. The central theoretical contribution, the pulsating bubble framework, integrates Cohen's environmental bubble theory with Maslow's hierarchy of needs, reconceptualising environmental bubbles as dynamic, enabling structures, whereby nighttime re-pressurisation following daytime immersion creates cyclical rhythms that satisfy successive layers of physiological, safety, and belongingness needs and sustain long-duration travel rather than hindering authenticity. The research identifies *jeong*, a relational register of reciprocal care, as a distinctive hospitality pattern transforming commercial lodging into a community of emotional investment. These findings challenge Western-centric assumptions that authentic travel requires continuous immersion. Strategic bubble use instead reflects culturally self-aware management of adaptation limits. The Minbak thus serves as essential infrastructure through which culturally indexed needs are met, enabling higher-order engagement. Future research should explore immersion-respite ratios and cross-cultural comparisons of affective bonds across ethnic groups.

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