

# Digital Media and Culture in Korea

**Kyong Yoon**

University of British Columbia

NOTE: This is a pre-proof version.

The final, definitive version of this paper has been published as Yoon, K. (2018). Digital Media and Culture in Korea, In JIN, D. Y. and Kwak, N. (eds). (2018). *Communication, Digital Media, and Popular Culture in Korea: Contemporary Research and Future Prospects*, Lexington Books (pp.283-300).

<https://rowman.com/ISBN/9781498562034/Communication-Digital-Media-and-Popular-Culture-in-Korea-Contemporary-Research-and-Future-Prospects>

## INTRODUCTION

South Korea (hereafter, Korea) has often been characterized by its highly developed digital media environment, as evidenced by its exceptionally high rate of digital media penetration and vibrant user communities. The extensive and intensive integration of ubiquitous digital media into Koreans' everyday lives has earned the country a number of nicknames, such as "a broadband nirvana" (K. S. Lee, 2012), "a smartland" (Jin, 2017a), and "digital Korea" (Jin, 2017b; Y. Kim, 2017). In particular, "digital" has been considered the key term that best describes contemporary Korea. However, as Y. Kim (2017) explains, "Digital Korea is not only about the growth of digital technologies but also digital culture and eventually the convergence of technology and culture" (p. 15). In this regard, Korea's digital mediascape cannot be adequately understood without examining the interplay between digital media and culture (Jin, 2017b; Y. Kim, 2017).

This chapter addresses how the cultural dimension of Korea's digital media has been addressed in the field of communication studies and adjacent areas. Drawing from a critical review of the existing English-language literature on the topic, this chapter traces the major developments in the field and compares different approaches to examining Korean digital media culture. Despite increasing global attention to the rapid growth of digital media technologies and industries in Korea, minimal research has been conducted on Korea's digital media culture. The nascent status of the analysis of Korean digital media culture can be easily observed when major communication research databases are searched. For example, according to the Communication & Mass Media Complete index, only nine scholarly articles published between January 2000 and July 2017 included the terms "digital media," "culture", and "Korea" in their abstracts. Moreover, not all eight publications necessarily addressed Korean digital media culture as their central research topic.<sup>1</sup> The lack of studies on Korean digital media culture may be unsurprising, given the marginal position of cultural analysis in communication studies. Although culture is a

---

<sup>1</sup> Given this lack of literature, the international journal *Media, Culture, and Society's* special section (Jin, 2017b; I. Kang, 2017; J. Kang, 2017; J. M. Kang, 2017; Yang, 2017) can be considered one of the first English-language collections dedicated to the study of digital Korea and its culture.

relatively new and under-examined area of communication research, cultural studies has grown over the past few decades and has been partly integrated into the communication scholarship in Korea as well as many other countries.<sup>2</sup>

Due to the limited number of studies on Korea's digital media culture, a comprehensive and systematic review of the relevant literature may be seen as premature. Thus, rather than undertaking an exhaustive examination of the literature, this chapter aims to thematically and methodologically investigate the nascent field by tracing the scholarly narratives of Korea's digital media culture that have been produced over the past two decades.<sup>3</sup> In particular, this chapter suggests that digital media has been analyzed as an integral part of Koreans' everyday lives on the one hand and as a sociocultural construct that is negotiated by its users on the other. In so doing, the chapter can serve as a toolbox for further discussion about the cultural aspects of digital media in Korea.

Any attempt to define Korea's digital media culture may be futile because the evolving digital media environments and affordances further complicate the concept of culture, which is already highly elusive (Williams, 1976). Culture is often defined in media and cultural studies as a way of life and/or a process of signification through the use of symbols. This widely adopted definition of culture, which originally referred to locally embedded practices (Williams, 1976), is challenged by the increasingly digital media-saturated, transnational cultural contexts. Digital media technologies are easily spread across local boundaries, and their production and circulation largely rely on global networks and supply chains (Goggin, 2016, p. 191). The rapid global diffusion of digital media has been accompanied by the increasing use of dominant platforms, such as Google and Facebook; this phenomenon of "platform imperialism" (Jin, 2015) might reinforce oligopolies by the global platform providers. In addition, it is claimed that the technological affordances of digital media have built on dominant cultural norms, such as Western individualism (Bowers, Vasquez, & Roaf, 2000; Wong, 2013).

Digital media is subject to homogenizing forces, as implicated in its technological affordance and global diffusion, but it also involves local processes of resignification. In this regard, the recent literature has explored the characteristic features of digital media practices in Korea, which can potentially be compared to those of other cultural—in particular, Western—contexts. Moreover, depending on their epistemological perspectives, the existing studies either explore the *media technology effects* on culture or focus on the *cultural effects* on media technology. By and large, studies of Korea's digital media culture tend to emphasize cultural influences on technology rather than technological influences on culture (e.g., Choi, 2006; Hjorth, 2009; Yoon, 2003). However, by engaging in a dialectical analysis of culture and technology, some researchers make a clear attempt to move beyond the binary opposition between technologically deterministic and culturally deterministic perspectives (e.g., D. H. Lee,

---

<sup>2</sup> The development of cultural studies in the field of Korean communication research has recently been discussed in K. Lee (2014).

<sup>3</sup> The history of digital media in Korea can be divided into three phases in terms of technological and industrial development: the early Internet period (1982–1999), the mass Internet period (1999–2009), and the social media period (2009–the present) (K. S. Lee, 2016). This chapter will focus on the latter two periods (i.e., 1999–the present) rather than on the early Internet period, during which ordinary media users' access to digital media was minimal.

2013). While the literature on Korea's digital media culture can be categorized according to several different criteria, this chapter examines how digital media–culture relations have been addressed at different analytical levels—micro (everyday life) and macro (societal)—in the existing studies.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The existing literature has engaged with the question of how culture and media technology articulate with each other at the macro and/or micro levels. One group of studies focuses on the micro level through the in-depth analysis of a small number of research participants, while the other group attempts to address the societal meanings of digital media through a macro-level analysis. Both levels of analysis are sometimes combined in one study, especially in the case of monographs or dissertations (e.g., J. Kang, 2016).

### **Digital media in everyday life**

The majority of the publications on Korea's digital media culture have addressed how digital media is integrated into the rhythm of Koreans' everyday lives among peer groups and/or families. In these studies, the role of digital media technology among particular user groups has been emphasized. Among others, young media users have been considered a group of early adopters who embody the way in which local culture is articulated by means of technologically mediated communication enabled by digital media (Hjorth, 2009; Jin, Chee, & Kim, 2015; D. H. Lee, 2010; D. H. Lee, 2013; Yoon, 2003). In comparison, several studies have examined how digital media is integrated into family interaction both within and outside the household context (Lim, 2008; Lim & Soon, 2010; Na, 2001a; Yoon, 2016a).

**Youth and digital media.** A group of studies has examined young people's engagement with the emerging forms of digital media, such as second generation wireless telephone technology (also known as 2G phones), social media, and smartphones, over the past two decades. With the rapid global diffusion of digital media technologies, studies of youth and media have tended to explore generation gaps by distinguishing young people's use of media from that of their parent cohorts. The pervasive Western discourse of "digital natives vs. digital immigrants" (Prensky, 2001), which assumes the uniqueness of young people's media literacy and use, has been observed in Korean news media (Yoon, 2006). However, challenging the stereotype of the "digital native" or "digital generation," for which lacks empirical evidence, K.-S. Lee (2016) has identified different generations of Korean digital media users as "social cohorts" who share similar media experiences: the PC Generation (born in the 1970s), the Net Generation (born in the 1980s), and the Mobile Generation (born in the 1990s). The Net and Mobile Generations have been examined more often than the PC Generation in ethnographic studies of Korea's digital media culture (e.g., D. H. Lee, 2013; Hjorth, 2009; Yoon, 2003).

The literature in the early to mid-2000s focused on the early modes of Internet and mobile phones, which allowed for individualized communication without familial mediation and were, thus, considered a challenge to neo-Confucian cultural norms (Yoon, 2003). Yoon's (2003) ethnographic study of young Koreans' use of 2G phones found that while the mobile phone might increase individualized communication, it was culturally appropriated among young people to rework communal modes of communication. In this study, teenagers attempted to

maintain local sociality and intimacy with their peers and family members through particular practices of “re-traditionalizing” the new technology. Their methods included prioritizing face-to-face over technologically mediated communication and sharing not only messages and calls but also mobile phone handsets with their peers. A more recent cohort of young Korean media users—who can be referred to as the Mobile Generation, according to K. S. Lee’s (2016) aforementioned categorization—has been examined in several studies of social media and smartphone use (Hjorth, 2009; D. H. Lee, 2013). In particular, D. H. Lee (2013) explored how young Koreans’ communication practices adapt to emerging social media. His study of young Twitter users in Korea found that they engage with Twitter to exchange information on the one hand and to establish intimate relationships on the other. Thus, social media is defined in the study as a means for generating the new sociality of a “mediated aural space,” in which users respond to increasingly uncertain social environments and seek ontological security. According to this study, young social media users form virtual ties that involve “heterogeneous social relations” and offer resources that cannot be provided by conventional strong ties.

Overall, the studies of digital media practices in everyday life reveal that digital media is integrated into existing cultural norms and social environments yet can allow young users to engage with new modes of communication. This cultural filtering of new digital media technology has also been observed in young Koreans’ use of particularly localized media platforms. A group of studies recently examined how a particular Korea-produced application is appropriated by young users and facilitates the localization of smartphone technology (Jin, 2017a; Yoon & Jin, 2016). In particular, Jin’s (2017a) study found that KakaoTalk, which has often been referred to as “a national messaging app” and has contributed to the growth of mobile gaming practices among Korean youth, affects how young people localize smartphone technology. According to the study, KakaoTalk’s technological affordances and symbolic meanings allow the user to engage in playful and social communications to negotiate urban life and peer networks. While acknowledging both the role of the particular application’s locally specific interface design and the user’s everyday contexts, Jin (2017a) emphasized the way in which the smartphone is re-signified and reappropriated in the Korean context.

These studies of young Koreans and their appropriation of digital media among peers explore how digital media is integrated into their communication practices. In so doing, they examine how digital media’s technological affordances, such as mobility, hyper-individuality, and interactivity, affect the traditional or existing modes of sociality. However, the studies do not assume a technological deterministic view; rather, they address the way in which digital media as an emerging technology is culturally reappropriated, or “cultured”, in the particular local context. Thus, despite the pervasive myth of digital media as a driving force of hyper-individuality amongst young people, these empirical studies find that local norms of sociality are not explicitly in conflict with young people’s digital media practices. Rather, they suggest that young digital media users in Korea are neither disembodied from a locally dominant sociality nor moving quickly toward a new mode of sociality, such as “networked individualism” (Rainie & Wellman, 2012).

**The family and digital media.** In addition to the analysis of young people’s media practices, the literature has examined the family or household context as a key area in which digital media is culturally negotiated (Hjorth, 2009; Na, 2001a). Empirical studies of Korea’s digital media culture have focused on the family structure and norms and familial networks as factors that influence Koreans’ adoption and appropriation of new media technologies (e.g.

Hjorth, 2007; Hjorth, 2009; Yoon, 2003). They examine the family primarily as a place in which technology is domesticated and negotiated between family members.

Family members' cultural appropriation of digital media has been addressed in a group of cultural analyses that are influenced by the technology domestication thesis (Silverstone & Hirsch, 1992), which points out that new technologies have to be reappropriated and re-signified when they are introduced into a particular local context (Silverstone et al., 1990). Examining the context of the Korean household during the early digital media era, Na's (2001a) study of home computers in Korean families illustrated how family members negotiate their use of technology with reference to their gender differences. Drawing on in-depth interviews with families in Seoul, Na (2001) explored how the motherhood ideology and gendered division of labor remain influential in contemporary Korean families and how these aspects shape women's use of home computers. In a similar vein, Lim (2008)'s and Lim and Soon's (2011) ethnographic studies of middle-class families in Korea found that domestic digital media—in particular, the home computer—is integrated into the rhythm of family life and, thus, enhances family time. According to these studies, the gendered roles of parents are highly influential factors in the adoption and appropriation of digital media in Korean families. For example, mothers who are heavily involved in children's care and education tend to restrict their own needs for the sake of their children's access to and use of digital media. In addition, some mothers used digital media to effectively mediate father-child relationships in patriarchal family environments in which fathers have distant relationships with their children (Lim, 2008; Lim & Soon, 2011). Studies exploring the household context of digital media use are especially significant, as they provide insights into understanding the gendered dimension of digital media culture, which largely reflects the neo-Confucian gender roles.

In Koreans' appropriation of digital media, the concept of family is also extended outside the household and the relationships between family members, thereby reinforcing various forms of collective ties (Chee, 2006; Choi, 2006; Hjorth, 2009; Yoon, 2003). As a few scholars have noted, Koreans' micro-group collectivism can be observed in Koreans' engagement with digital media – especially through the unique “*bang* (i.e. room) culture” (Hjorth, 2011).

Cyworld—a Korean-developed, PC-based social media platform that enjoyed phenomenal popularity in the 2000s—has often been cited as an example of how the notion of the family is reimagined as a *bang* (Choi, 2006; Hjorth, 2009; Hjorth, 2011). In particular, scholars have examined how Cyworld's technological affordances and user experiences may reflect Koreans' communication styles and cultural norms that emphasize close, family-like relationships (*chon*) on the one hand and highly urbanized and compact housing conditions (*bang*) on the other (Hjorth, 2011). While Cyworld is an example of a virtual space that reifies family-like networks among Koreans, *PC bang*—the Korean-style Internet café—has been examined as a physical space in which Koreans' group-oriented sociality is articulated with the gaming culture (Chee, 2006; Hjorth, 2009; Jin, 2010). Chee's (2006) study of gaming culture in *PC bang* found that young Korean game players tended to seek communal gaming patterns in order not to be *wangtta* (bullied).

Overall, the studies addressing Koreans' appropriation of digital media among youth or in the family context adopt ethnographic research methods and, thus, provide a close look at the way in which digital media is integrated into Koreans' daily lives. By and large, these studies claim that digital media reworks or rearticulates localized modes of sociality and identity (Hjorth & Kim, 2005) rather than prioritizing the technological effects on existing cultural norms.

## Digital media in society

The existing analyses of Korea's digital media culture are not limited to the individual, interpersonal, or family levels. In contrast to the micro-level studies addressed in the earlier section, macro-level analyses have examined digital media's sociocultural meanings and roles in relation to societal changes. At the macro level, digital media has been considered an important component in Koreans' popular memory and cultural landscape. A group of studies has explored the discursive construction of digital media in Korean society (e.g., I. Kang, 2009; I. Kang, 2017; Yoon, 2006). In comparison, several recent studies have analyzed how the dominant construction of digital media is negotiated by Korean netizens by observing digital media-driven countercultures (J. Kang, 2016; Yang, 2017).

**Discursive construction of digital Korea.** Sociocultural meanings have been addressed in studies of the discursive constructions of digital media in contemporary Korea. Several studies have examined how digital media has been signified and how such signification processes involve particular power relations among different stakeholders in digital media diffusion in Korea (I. Kang, 2009; I. Kang, 2017; Na, 2001b; Rea, 2017; Yoon, 2006). In particular, I. Kang (2009) illustrated that the Internet has been signified in Korea through the articulation of techno-nationalism (i.e., the desire to be an IT superpower), techno-centrism (i.e., nation building through technology), generational gaps, elitism, familism, and activism. By conceptualizing the Internet as a "discourse" or "ideology" that defines the relationship between the new technology and the nation, I. Kang (2009) found that digital media has become the symbol of "progress," "globalization," and "education" in Korea (p. 208) (See also I. Kang, 2017; Na, 2001b).

The hegemonic conceptualization of digital media as a set of tools for socioeconomic development has also been articulated with neo-Confucian norms, which emphasize in-group harmony and potentially serve technology-driven nationalism (Ju, 2009; Yoon, 2006). Furthermore, the hegemonic and techno-utopian discourse of digital media in Korea has sometimes been accompanied by media panic about digital "addiction." As Yoon's (2006) discourse analysis of the public imaginaries of Korea's digital media in the 1990s and early 2000s reveals, particular digital media forms, such as mobile phones, and specific groups of media users, such as youth, were associated with the discourse of "moral panic" in Korea. This discourse of moral panic implied that if a particular media technology was used in individualized ways by a certain group of people—for example, young people—without any communal control, it would be detrimental to harmonious local forms of sociality. The discourse of digital media as a resource to cause fear or panic has also been examined by Rea's (2017) analysis of the "game addiction" discourse, which has been pervasive in Korean news media and policies. Rea's (2017) study found that the hegemonic (medical and policy) discourse of normative socialities in Korea diagnoses offline, face-to-face interactions as "real" and "normal," while practices such as online-mediated communications and lone game play are conceptualized negatively and eventually defined as nonnormative activities (See also Rea, 2015).

Overall, as Na (2001b) summarizes, digital media has been represented in Korea as a sign of hope and/or fear. However, despite the seemingly opposed representations of digital media (i.e., as hope and/or fear), both discourses may have similar cultural effects, whereby the hegemonic mode of digital media use and users is reproduced. The dominant techno-utopian discourse of digital media-driven national developments has often been accompanied by the

marginalization of the other—that is, the individual who may not necessarily conform to the normative definition of digital media (Rea, 2017; Yoon, 2006). These macro-level studies on the cultural meanings of digital media in Korea primarily explore the discursive process through which digital media is *signified in* society. While these discursive analyses reveal the ideological effects and implications involved in the rapid development of digital media in Korea, they do not sufficiently explore how the constructed meanings of digital media are *negotiated in* society. In this regard, it is necessary to examine how the dominant meanings of Korea’s digital media have been challenged by the public (I. Kang, 2017; K. S. Lee, 2016; Yang, 2017). Thus, the following section reviews a group of studies that have explored the participatory or countercultural nature of Korean digital media users.

**Netizens’ counter-hegemonic media practices.** Along with the studies on the discursive construction of digital media in Korean society, a group of analyses has addressed how the dominant construction of digital media is negotiated and challenged by grassroots media practices. This group of studies has examined counter-hegemonic media users in Korea, also known as “netizens” (*netijeun*), who respond to the dominant meanings of digital media, with particular reference to Korean online communities’ activities and phenomena, such as candlelight vigils<sup>4</sup> (J. Kang, 2016), user-generated content (Hjorth, 2011; Ok, 2011), and DCInside<sup>5</sup> (S. M. Kim, 2015; Yang, 2017).

Recent studies have examined how countercultures emerge and engage in a macro-process of sociocultural transformation. In particular, as shown in several massive candlelight vigils and online communities’ social campaigns, digital media’s carnivalesque and potentially subversive roles have been integrated with social and political changes. J. Kang’s (2016) monograph on Internet-born youth activism in the 2000s analyzes how digital media has been appropriated in the process of post-authoritarian social movements in Korea. In this study, J. Kang (2016) suggested that while the Internet may not necessarily be a determining force of collective actions, netizens are captivated by images and words that are virally circulated on the Internet and are, thus, involved in larger sociocultural processes, such as candlelight protests.

In comparison, Yang’s (2017) study of the “Internet freak” (*intenet pyein*) phenomenon in Korea analyzed it as a signal of the emerging “counter-subjects” who question the rapid neoliberalization of Korean society. According to this study, the dominant national discourse about digital media—which has been referred to as “informatization,” especially after the Asian financial crisis—has been challenged by nonnormative online communities that do not necessarily comply with the hegemonic conception of subjectivity (i.e., neoliberal subjectivity)

---

<sup>4</sup> The candlelight vigil has emerged as a popular form of massive grassroots protest in Korea since the early 2000s. Korean candlelight vigils are offline gatherings for collective protests, which are often facilitated by, and combined with, netizens’ participation via digital media (J. Kang, 2016). Major candlelight vigils have taken place on several occasions since the early 2000s: the death of two school girls by Korea-based American troops during a military exercise (2002); the Lee Myung-Bak government’s decision to import American beef, which raised public concern about the danger of mad cow disease (2008); and President Park Geun-hye’s corruption scandal (2016).

<sup>5</sup> DCInside ([www.dcinside.com](http://www.dcinside.com)) is one of the most active and popular Korean online forums. While it was originally launched as an online shopping and discussion site dedicated to digital cameras in 1999, it has rapidly grown into a large forum that hosts numerous boards on various topics. For example, according to its counting system, as of July 2017, over 650,000 postings and 1,500,000 comments are generated by its users on a typical day.

and society (i.e., the techno-utopian information society). Thus, Yang (2017) claimed that the counter-subjects have disrupted the dominant narrative of Internet development as a means of national prosperity. Similarly, S. M. Kim's (2015) study examined the digital media-driven subculture of the *ingyeo* (surplus human being or loser) generation. S. M. Kim (2015) explores how young Koreans who are subject to the precarious social context of neoliberal society negotiate and construct their identities in new media environments. The study found that while internalizing the neoliberal ethos of self-improvement and competitiveness, young Korean netizens also attempt to escape to the illusionary world of cynicism and self-depreciation.

These three studies (J. Kang, 2016; S. M. Kim, 2015; Yang, 2017) address online communities in Korea as collective responses to the dominant sociocultural atmosphere. In particular, J. Kang (2016) focuses on the moments in which netizens' playful activities are articulated into a larger process of social movements and societal changes, while Yang (2017) and S. M. Kim (2015) consider online communities as symbolic challenges to or critiques of the commodification and neoliberalization of Korean society. However, with the increasing attention to the political implications of the digital media-driven counterculture in Korea, several studies have questioned the subversive nature of Korean netizens (Hjorth, 2011; Jin, 2010; Qiu & Kim, 2011; Yoon & Jin, 2016). According to these studies, technological and/or social forces can potentially restrict Korean netizen communities' countercultural activities. Yoon and Jin's (2016) study of mobile gaming culture revealed how digital media may restrict user agency through its particular technological affordances and may, thus, depoliticize users. The government has also been considered a form of power that polices and controls countercultural online activities (Qiu & Kim, 2011). Furthermore, the media industry and market have been identified as a structural force that restricts netizens' countercultural engagement with digital media. Several studies have pointed out that the participatory use of digital media often relies on the platform and services provided by media corporations, and accordingly, user activities and experiences are exposed to extensive commodification (Hjorth, 2011; Jin, 2010). As Hjorth (2011) has suggested, user-created content, which is seemingly flourishing in the Korean mediascape, is often repurposed by the media industry as a way of generating the myth of authenticity for marketing, and thus, participatory culture is increasingly subjected to the process of commodification.<sup>6</sup> These ongoing debates about the role and capability of netizens in Korea's digital mediascape suggest that digital media functions as a means of challenging the dominant sociocultural norms but can serve to reproduce the existing social order (Epstein & Jung, 2011).

Overall, the studies that have examined the sociocultural roles and meanings of digital media in Korea have addressed how digital media has been constructed in dominant cultural discourses or how the constructed meanings are negotiated and questioned by netizens' countercultural media practices. These macro-level analyses of digital media culture illustrate a larger picture, which can be compared to micro-level investigations of digital media practices in everyday life.

## INFLUENCES OF THE EXISTING MATERIALS

---

<sup>6</sup> This repurposing or commodification of user behaviors and data on social media might not be unique to the Korean context. However, the rapidly emerging neoliberal atmosphere of self-development amongst young Koreans (Seo, 2010)—along with the pervasive blog services offered by major portal sites, such as Naver.com, and popular selfie cultures—may entice the high-level use of social media for self-branding.



Due to the significant role of cultural factors in the development and diffusion of digital media, Korea has been considered an “exception to the general pattern” of the global digital mediascape because it does not necessarily fit the widely applied model of economically driven information technology development (I. Kang, 2017, p. 728). Indeed, Korea has been an intriguing case for exploring the cultural dimension of digital mediascapes. The literature on digital media and culture in Korea has explored how different digital media technologies are appropriated, signified, and negotiated by different forces: young users, the family, hegemonic stakeholders (e.g., the state and the media industry), and countercultural online communities. That is, the existing studies have examined how digital media is *cultured* at different levels, and in so doing, the literature has offered insights for addressing some of the lacunae in communication studies.

First, by examining how digital media is integrated into particular local and/or national contexts, the existing studies facilitate an understanding of digital media as a cultural form through which different meanings are constantly constructed and contested. Digital media has been conventionally referred to as a set of particular media objects that apply digital (as opposed to analogue) technology (Miller, 2011). However, the studies reviewed in this chapter suggest that digital media should be analyzed as a cultural *process* that occurs in constant negotiations between users, technologies (e.g., technological innovation and affordance), and social organizations. This perspective effectively challenges technological determinism, which was especially widespread in early digital media studies, and thus reclaims the local cultural histories of digital media (Jin, 2017b; K. S. Lee, 2016; Shome, 2016).

Second, the qualitative research methods adopted in the literature under review in this chapter contribute to expanding the methodological and epistemological scopes of communication studies, which has been dominated by a positivist approach and quantitative analysis. For example, the reviewed materials engage with interview-based technology domestication theory (Lim, 2010; Na, 2001a; Yoon, 2003), virtual ethnography (S. M. Kim, 2015; Yang, 2017), critical discourse analysis (I. Kang, 2009; Na, 2001b; Yoon, 2006), interview-based media ecology theory (D. H. Lee, 2010; D. H. Lee, 2013), and media ethnography (J. Kang, 2016; Rea, 2017; Yang, 2015). These research practices provide an in-depth understanding of digital media from an emic perspective, whereby the meanings of digital media in local contexts can be vividly explored and Western-centric communication theory can be questioned.

Third, the empirical findings of the literature that has been reviewed in this chapter provide insights for advancing locally grounded, yet globally relevant, theories of digital media. However, due to the short history of research practices on the topic of digital media in Korea, the existing literature has seemingly not yet developed a sufficiently comprehensive framework for understanding culture in Korea’s digital mediascape in relation to global media environments. Thus, further studies are needed to theorize the way in which cultural norms and codes that are specific to the Korean context are integrated into global media environments. A few preliminary studies have attempted to draw inspiration from indigenous concepts, such as *jeong* (affective tie and intimacy) and *yeonjul* (affective network), to develop media theories that are relevant to the Korean context (Shim, Kim, & Martin, 2008; Yoon, 2016b). These studies, along with the literature reviewed in this chapter, imply that locally contextualized accounts of digital media practices can potentially contribute to enriching communication studies on local and global scales.

As discussed in this section, despite its nascent nature, the existing literature on digital media culture in Korea contributes to a critical analysis of the global digital mediascape in several different yet overlapping ways: (a) by proposing a perspective on media as a cultural process, (b) by applying qualitative methodology that challenges the dominant positivist approach, and (c) by developing a locally grounded communication theory.

## FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The existing literature on Korea's digital media culture has yielded locally grounded empirical findings and insights into developing a de-Westernized theory of digital media. However, despite the literature's contribution to the field, there is room for further theoretical and methodological developments in the research on Korea's digital media culture.

First, an understanding of culture in digital media studies needs to extend beyond an essentialist view of local or national culture. While it may be important to explore cultural uniqueness in Korea's digital mediascape that can be compared to that of other national contexts, the cultural analyses of Korean digital media need to avoid the temptation to seek and imagine a homogeneous Korean culture. As I. Kang (2009) pointed out, analyzing culture in digital media studies involves the potential risk of understanding culture as "static or fixed" (p. 26). Indeed, scholarly endeavors that explore digital media culture in the local context require a balanced approach to critically examine the *universality* and *particularity* of a digital media practice without essentializing culture as a fixed, closed entity and creating binary stereotypes of the West and the East (Dissannayake, 2009). Moreover, efforts to explore the heterogeneous attributes that exist in a culture and a user cohort are increasingly important. Thus, any analysis of Korea's digital media culture should avoid homogeneously essentializing "us" (often in contrast with the West) while exploring diversities within "us."

Second, further methodological developments can enhance the depth of analysis of Korea's digital media culture. The qualitative methods that are adopted in the literature tend to be primarily semi-structured interview-based methods, which draw on a small number of interviews and subjects. Thus, qualitative methods through which Korea's digital mediascape can be historicized and contextualized are not sufficiently elaborated. Further studies that historicize Korea's digital mediascape (Jin, 2017; K. S. Lee, 2016) can contribute to a better understanding of Koreans' collective memories and practices of digital media. For example, media scholars need to engage more in historicizing Korea's mediascape by applying longitudinal qualitative studies or oral history methods. Moreover, comparative cultural analyses of digital media practices (e.g., Hjorth, 2009; Lee et al., 2016; Lim, 2008; Qui & Kim, 2011) need to be further facilitated to examine the media practices occurring across different cultural contexts. In particular, given the tendency toward media convergence, through which different media forms and practices are constantly interwoven and interconnected, cultural analyses of polymedia processes (Madianou & Miller, 2012) are required. That is, it is important to explore why and how particular digital media forms are chosen instead of (or in relation to) others and what meanings are constructed when choosing and switching between different digital media forms. Furthermore, given the increasing transnational mobility of digital media and its users, cultural analyses that focus on the transnational media practices need to be further explored. For example, a few recent studies have examined how Korean migrants engage with digital media to

connect with the home and local diasporic communities and to negotiate their in-between identities (Collins, 2009; Hjorth, 2007; Y. Kim, 2005; Yoon 2016a).

By critically seeking a non-essentialist perspective of culture and diversifying methodology, studies of Korea's digital media culture can contribute to innovating communication studies. In particular, the digital mediascape of Korea, a country that has undergone "compressed modernization" in a relatively short period (Chang, 2010), may effectively reveal how the newness of digital media is articulated with mundane everyday life and popular memories at the micro and macro levels.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has reviewed how Korea's digital media culture has been examined in communication studies and adjacent fields. The existing studies on the topic illustrate how digital media is integrated into Koreans' everyday lives and Korean society. At the micro level (i.e., the study of everyday life), a group of ethnographic studies has explored how different forms of digital media technologies are integrated into Koreans' everyday lives. At the macro-societal level (i.e., the study of society), several discourse analyses have revealed how digital media is signified by the nationalistic discourses of globalization, while a few ethnographic studies have explored how netizens challenge the dominant meanings of digital media.

Despite its nascent and sporadic (as opposed to systematic and comprehensive) nature, the existing literature contributes to identifying the role of culture in Korea's mediascape and in the academic discourse of communication studies. These studies have suggested an understanding of digital media practices as cultural processes through which different meanings are generated and negotiated. The cultural research of Korea's digital media offers insights into the global-local nexus of digital media practices. The understanding of how the local meanings of digital media are constructed and negotiated in the era of global digital platforms (Jin, 2015) can facilitate the locally grounded theorization of media phenomena. Given the increasing complexity of the global-local nexus in digital media production and consumption, it seems important to examine how global media platforms are translated through local or national filters and, in so doing, how universalizing forces that are inscribed in particular digital media platforms and technological architecture are challenged by cultural forces in the local context.

This chapter's focus on English-language publications inevitably excludes other types of studies, especially Korean-language publications. The limited scope of the literature raises questions about translation and reflexivity. First, given that studies of culture are particularly reliant on local languages and meanings, any studies that *translate* cultural aspects of Korean digital media practices for global audiences may encounter challenges. Some local meanings and concepts might not be fully translated and may, thus, be lost in translation. Further consideration is required to identify and consider what is lost (or gained) in translation. Second, for a better understanding of the literature reviewed in this chapter, it is necessary to be keenly aware of the researchers' cultural identities and their influences on research outcomes. In any social research (especially in the qualitative research of media and culture), the researcher's reflexivity—that is, his or her awareness of his or her own subject position in relation to his or her research subjects and contexts—is considered an integral component of the research process and outcomes. The majority of the authors addressed in this chapter are Korean-born, Western-trained (in terms of their final degrees) scholars whose work targets global (or Western) audiences. The authors'

subject position implies the potential and danger of examining Korea's digital media culture using Western academic tools. That is, their ambivalent positions might offer the capability to both reproduce *and* challenge the Western-centric discourse of communication studies.

The existing studies of digital media and culture suggest the need for further discussions of how local cultural phenomena can be translated via global academic platforms and how the cultural research of digital media can contribute to dismantling the universalizing and homogenizing academic grammar of communication studies. As Korea's digital media culture in Korea vividly illustrate how digital media is globalized *and* localized, it is hoped that critical studies of the digital media practices in Korea can enhance the process of interactive theory building in communication studies.

## REFERENCES

- Bowers, C. A., Vasquez, M., & Roaf, M. (2000). Native people and the challenge of computers: Reservation schools, individualism, and consumerism. *American Indian Quarterly*, 24(2), 182–199.
- Chang, K. S. (2010). *South Korea under compressed modernity: Familial political economy in transition*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Chee, F. (2006). The games we play online and offline: Making *wang-tta* in Korea. *Popular Communication*, 4(3), 225–239.
- Choi, J. H. J. (2006). Living in Cyworld: Contextualising cy-ties in South Korea. In A. Bruns & J. Jacobs (Eds.), *Uses of blogs* (pp. 173–186). New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Collins, F. L. (2009). Connecting ‘home’ with ‘here’: Personal homepages in everyday transnational lives. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 35(6), 839–859.
- Dissanayake, W. (2009). The production of Asian theories of communication: Contexts and challenges. *Asian Journal of Communication*, 19(4), 453–468.
- Epstein, S., & Jung, S. (2011). Korean youth netizenship and its discontents. *Media International Australia*, 141(1), 78–86.
- Goggin, G. (2016). Re-orienting global digital cultures. In S. S. Lim & C. Soriano (Eds.), *Asian perspectives on digital culture: Emerging phenomena, enduring concepts* (pp.191–198). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Hjorth, L. (2007). Home and away: A case study of the use of Cyworld mini-hompy by Korean students studying in Australia. *Asian Studies Review*, 31(4), 397–407.
- Hjorth, L. (2009). *Mobile media in the Asia-Pacific: Gender and the art of being mobile*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Hjorth, L. (2011). Locating the online: Creativity and user-created content in Seoul. *Media International Australia*, 141(1), 118–127.
- Hjorth, L. (2013). Relocating the mobile: A case study of locative media in Seoul, South Korea. *Convergence*, 19(2), 237–249.
- Hjorth, L. & Kim, H. (2005). Being there and being here: Gendered customising of mobile 3G practices through a case study in Seoul. *Convergence*, 11(2), 49–55.
- Jin, D. Y. (2010). *Korea’s online gaming empire*. MA, Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- Jin, D. Y. (2015). *Digital platforms, imperialism and political culture*. London: Routledge.
- Jin, D. Y. (2017a). *Smartland Korea: Mobile communication, culture, and society*. Ann Arbor, MI: Michigan University Press.
- Jin, D. Y. (2017b). Construction of digital Korea: The evolution of new communication technologies in the 21st century. *Media, Culture & Society*, 39(5), 715–726.
- Jin, D. Y., Chee, F., & Kim, S. (2015). Transformative mobile game culture: A sociocultural analysis of Korean mobile gaming in the era of smartphones. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 18(4), 413–429.
- Ju, H. (2009). Technology and social sensibility in South Korea: A case study of mobile phone advertising. *Communication, Culture & Critique*, 2(2), 201–220.

- Kang, I. (2009). *Media, technology, and social practice: The shaping of the Internet in Korea and Japan*. PhD dissertation. University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, WI, USA.
- Kang, I. (2017). Technology, culture, and meanings: How the discourses of progress and modernity have shaped South Korea's Internet diffusion. *Media, Culture & Society*, 39(5), 727–739.
- Kang, J. (2016). *Igniting the Internet: Youth and activism in postauthoritarian South Korea*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press.
- Kang, J. (2017). Internet activism transforming street politics: South Korea's 2008 'Mad Cow' protests and new democratic sensibilities. *Media, Culture & Society*, 39(5), 750–761.
- Kang, J. M. (2017). Just another platform for television? The emerging web dramas as digital culture in South Korea. *Media, Culture & Society*, 39(5), 762–772.
- Kim, S. M. (2015). *Being surplus in the age of new media: Ing-yeo subjectivity and youth culture in South Korea*. PhD dissertation, George Mason University, Fairfax, VA, USA.
- Kim, Y. (2005). Experiencing globalization: Global TV, reflexivity and the lives of young Korean women, *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 8(4) 445–463.
- Kim, Y. (2017). Korean culture and society: A global approach. In Y. Kim (Ed.), *Routledge handbook of Korean culture and society* (pp. 3–27). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Lee, D. H. (2010). Digital cameras, personal photography and the reconfiguration of spatial experiences. *The Information Society*, 26(4), 266–275.
- Lee, D. H. (2013). Smartphones, mobile social space, and new sociality in Korea. *Mobile Media & Communication*, 1(3): 269–284.
- Lee, K. (2004). Beyond the fragments: Reflecting on “communicational” cultural studies in South Korea. In J. N. Erni & S. K. Chua (Eds.), *Asian media studies: Politics of subjectivities* (pp. 116–135). Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Lee, K. S. (2012). *IT development in Korea: A broadband nirvana?* New York, NY: Routledge.
- Lee, K. S. (2016). On the historiography of the Korean Internet: Issues raised by the historical dialectic of structure and agency. *The Information Society*, 32(3), 217–222.
- Lim, S. S. (2008). Technology domestication in the Asian homestead: Comparing the experiences of middle class families in China and South Korea. *East Asian Science, Technology and Society: An International Journal*, 2(2), 189–209.
- Lim, S. S., & Soon, C. (2010). The influence of social and cultural factors on mothers' domestication of household ICTs: Experiences of Chinese and Korean women. *Telematics and Informatics*, 27(3), 205–216.
- Madianou, M. & Miller, D. (2012). *Migration and new media: Transnational families and polymedia*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Miller, V. (2011). *Understanding digital culture*. New York, NY: Sage.
- Na, M. (2001a). The home computer in Korea: Gender, technology, and the family. *Feminist Media Studies*, 1(3), 291–306.
- Na, M. (2001b). The cultural construction of the computer as a masculine technology: An analysis of computer advertisements in Korea. *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*, 7(3), 93–114.
- Ok, H. (2011). New media practices in Korea. *International Journal of Communications*, 5, 320–348.

- Prensky, M. (2001). Digital natives, digital immigrants. Retrieved from <http://www.marcprensky.com/writing/Prensky%20-%20Digital%20Natives,%20Digital%20Immigrants%20-%20Part1.pdf>
- Qiu, J. L., & Kim, Y. (2011). Global financial crisis recession and progression? Notes on media, labor, and youth from East Asia. *International Journal of Communication*, 4, 630–648.
- Rainie, H., & Wellman, B. (2012). *Networked: The new social operating system*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Rea, S. C. (2015). *Acceleration and information: Managing South Korean online gaming culture*. PhD dissertation, University of California–Irvine, Irvine, CA, USA.
- Rea, S. C. (2017). Mobilizing games, disrupting culture: Digital gaming in South Korea. In D. Y. Jin (Ed.), *Mobile gaming in Asia* (pp. 73–89). New York, NY: Springer.
- Seo, D. (2010). The will to self-managing, the will to freedom. In J. Song (Ed.), *New millennium South Korea: Neoliberal capitalism and transnational movements* (pp. 84–100). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Shim, T. Y. J., Kim, M. S., & Martin, J. N. (2008). *Changing Korea: Understanding culture and communication*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Shome, R. (2016). When postcolonial studies meets media studies. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 33(3), 245–263.
- Silverstone, R., & Hirsch, E. (Eds.) (1992). *Consuming technologies: Media and information in domestic spaces*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Williams, R. (1976). *Keywords: A vocabulary of culture and society*. London, England: Fontana.
- Wong, P. H. (2013). Confucian social media: An oxymoron? *Dao*, 12(3), 283–296.
- Yang, S. (2017). Networking South Korea: Internet, nation, and new subjects. *Media, Culture & Society*, 35(9), 740–749.
- Yoon, K. (2003). Retraditionalizing the mobile: Young people’s sociality and mobile phone in Seoul, South Korea. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 6(3), 327–343.
- Yoon, K. (2006). The making of neo-Confucian cyberkids: Representations of young mobile phone users in South Korea. *New Media & Society*, 8(5), 753–771.
- Yoon, K. (2016a). The cultural appropriation of smartphones in Korean transnational families. In S. S. Lim (Ed.), *Mobile communication and the family* (pp. 93–108). New York, NY: Springer.
- Yoon, K. (2016b). The local sociality and emotion of *Jeong* in Koreans’ media practices. In S. S. Lim & C. Soriano (Eds.), *Emerging phenomena, enduring concepts: Understanding digital cultures through Asian frameworks* (pp.85–99). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Yoon, K. & Jin, D. Y. (2016). The gamification of mobile communication among young smartphone users in Seoul. *Asiascape: Digital Asia*, 3(1-2), 60–78.