

The Gamification of Mobile Communication among Young Smartphone Users in Seoul

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Abstract

This study explores how mobile media and gaming practices are integrated with urban young people's lives in Seoul. Drawing on qualitative interviews with young Koreans, the study examines mobile gaming as the process of 'gamification', which refers to the increasing and seamless integration of gameplay with daily media use. In the study, the young people extensively used gameful apps for the efficient management of their everyday lives. In so doing, they thought that they were in control of the technology and the rhythm of their everyday lives. However, while the young people attempted to appropriate gameful technology as a manageable medium, there was little evidence of the subversive aspect of play in the gamification of mobile communication.

Keywords: gamification; Korean youth; mobile gaming; mobile communication; smartphone; app (application).

Introduction

The smartphone has increasingly transformed meanings and patterns of communication, as it leads various modes of media to converge and mediates human senses in multiple ways (Goggin 2012). While the technology has been rapidly diffused across the globe – with penetration rates of 9.6% in 2011 to 24.5% in 2014 –, its penetration is significantly higher in some regions (Statistica 2015). In particular, South Korea (hereafter Korea) is known for its smartphone ownership rate of 79.4% (2014), which is 4.6 times higher than the average of countries in the OECD (the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development; Seo 2014). The technology was owned by 90% of Koreans in their twenties in March 2012 (Gallop Korea 2014). With the increasing popularity of smartphones, the country's mobile game market has substantially expanded since the early 2010s.

Given this context, this study explores how young people's increasing use of smartphone technology are redefining the practice of online gaming and mobile communication. In particular, the study discusses how mobile media and gaming practices are integrated with urban young people's lives. Some scholars have disagreed with the idea that mobile gaming substantially transforms game cultures and industries (e.g. Dymek 2012). However, it is still noteworthy that the convergence between gameplay and smartphone use blurs the boundaries between gaming and everyday life (Fuchs et al. 2014). Thus, the present study aims to examine mobile gaming as a social practice by adopting the notion of 'gamification', which refers to the increasing and seamless integration of gameplay with daily media use (see Deterding et al. 2011).

This study analyzes qualitative interviews with 20 young Koreans conducted in Seoul at two different times: the summer of 2012, when the domestically-made games Candy Pang and Anipang became national sensations, and the summer of 2015, when foreign made mobile games, including Candy Crush Saga, were popular. In the field studies, the participants were recruited using convenience and snowballing methods of sampling; research assistants majoring in media-related subjects recruited volunteers amongst groups of their current and former colleagues, and then initial participants introduced friends of theirs to the project. The 20 research participants – eight males and 12 females – were in their twenties and were students or professionals in media-related sectors. They appeared to be relatively early adopters of smartphone technology, as their first smartphone was owned in 2010 or earlier, which was significantly earlier than the country's general tendency.¹ In the interviews, the young people were asked to elaborate on how they use smartphone apps and games, and more specifically how smartphone-based, mobile gameplay is different from their earlier and other internet experiences. They were also asked about their favourite mobile games in tandem with the mobile game applications they used. Their accounts were transcribed and analyzed through different phases of coding.

This study offers empirical findings of and insights into how mobile communication practices playfully engage with urban space and its users through particular modes of technological affordance, sociality, and power relations. In particular,

¹ It was after 2010 that the smartphone penetration rate in Korea began to pick up fast; the rate remained only 2% in 2009 yet increased to 14.0% in 2010, which is still a considerably small number in comparison to 67.6% in 2012 (Kim 2013).

the study's attention to the convergence between gaming and mobile communication may reveal how social media platforms reify and reorganize the playfulness of communication practices. That is, the increasing popularity of gameful elements in smartphone interfaces and use implies that technologically mediated gaming – as a specific mode of play – may condition the potential of playfulness in a particular way, especially through a set of technological affordances. By critically appropriating the recent gamification thesis (Walz & Deterding 2014), the study considers the game as the formalized and specific part of *play* (Raessens 2014), which may not fully facilitate the various potentials of play.

Exploring the Gamification of Communication

Given the relatively short history of the use of personal mobile technologies, it may not be surprising to learn that theoretical or empirical studies of mobile gaming are scarce in the literature of game studies. With rapidly emerging communication technologies, such as smartphones, social media, and locative apps, gaming practices appear to be evolving at a remarkable rate, and thus it seems increasingly difficult to identify the boundaries and components of gaming.² Game studies have by and large focused on the game as a text, or gamers' play as performance; games have been examined in terms of genre, narrative, and representation (semiosis), while game players' ludic and sociable experiences (ludosis) have also been explored (Mäyrä 2008).

With the popular use of mobile apps and social media, the binary framework of gaming as text or play (performance) needs to be reconsidered. Enhanced mobility and ubiquity enabled by personal mobile technologies substantially blur the boundaries between text and play. In particular, the increasingly pervasive use of smartphones and gameful apps appears to obscure the division between gaming and non-gaming activities. Mobile gaming has constituted a rapidly growing social sector that makes significant impacts in various realms of society. For example, education, banking, marketing, and government sectors have adopted the logic of gaming. This increasing gamification of various social areas that used to be demarcated clearly from gaming practices demonstrates how gaming as a subcultural practice is now integrated into a wider scope of mundane living (Dymek 2012). Notably, mobile media undoes 'seams' between media and its context (Cumiskey & Hjorth 2013), as media practices and other mundane activities are increasingly blurred and are thus rarely demarcated with each other.

Given the pervasive diffusion of casual mobile gaming as an integral part of urban youth culture, it is necessary to examine technologically mediated gaming in the context of the 'gamification' of communication, rather than in the narrow scope of the 'game' per se. Not unlike mobile gaming itself, gamification is subject to ongoing debates about its definition and scope. The term gamification, which has been utilized in industries and academia since the 2010s, by and large addresses two aspects of contemporary online activities: first, it refers to the 'ubiquity of (video) games in everyday life' and, second, to the application of game elements to non-game sectors and activities (Deterding et al.

² In order to refer to technologically mediated online games, games studies scholars and critics have used such terms as 'video games', 'computer games', 'computer and video games', 'online games', and 'digital games'. The existing terminologies may not address the increasingly expanding scope of games – mobile gaming or gameful apps in particular. Thus, the present study defines 'games' inclusively, so that gameful mobile apps such as locative apps and social networking apps are also included as a type of technologically mediated game.

2011). Both aspects of gamification may be helpful in understanding mobile gaming as a social practice. In particular, gamification may help us understand gaming in relation to various other daily activities (Feijoo et al. 2012). The notion of gamification is distinguished from games (or gaming) as the former includes practices in non-game contexts; gamification ‘explicitly concerns moving game elements outside game systems and into the world’ (Khaled 2014: 304). Thus, gamification may offer a lens through which the social and cultural implications of gaming practices can be critically examined.

Gamification has been criticized for its ideological effect that elides the commodification of the media platforms (Bogost 2014). In particular, the recent appropriation of the term gamification in a wide range of media platforms and e-marketing appears to apply the commercial potential of gameplay and playfulness to every aspect of media activities. The blurred boundary between gaming, play, and labour in the discourse/practice of gamification appears to accelerate the process of ‘playbour’ (Kücklich 2005), which involves its users’ voluntary, unwaged labour as a form of user created content. Game-mediated exploitation is not limited to an economic aspect, but also involves governing and shaping particular subjectivities. For example, the increasing use of playful apps in marketing and consumer activities may enforce a deceitful ideology of the freedom of playful subjects, which may be no other than a new form of governmentality (Schrape, 2014).

This perspective that defines gamification as an exploitative mechanism can be contrasted with a more nuanced perspective on the integration of gaming practices within a wider social context (Frith 2013, Koivisto & Hamari 2014). Frith (2013) finds that, while mobile apps and games can encourage certain behaviour such as an individual’s mobility choices, different groups of users may engage with gamification differently in terms of subject positions. Koivisto and Hamari’s (2014) findings more specifically reveal that women are more likely to positively recognize the social aspects of gamification.

Given that gaming has deeply been integrated with communication practices, the recent discussions of gamification offer insight into how particular playability or play-literacy have been facilitated by smartphones’ affordances and their articulation with user agency. Thus, the gamification thesis seems to reify what Raessens (2014: 110) predicted in his claim for the ‘playful turn in media studies’, which refers to the introduction of playful media as the object of media studies and a new interpretive framework to analyze tensions and ambiguities involved in playful media and ordinary lives.

The Meanings of Mobile Gaming in the Smartphone-Driven Society

With the rapid adoption of smartphones amongst young Koreans since the early 2010s, mobile communication has increasingly merged with gaming. On the one hand, online computer games have been adjusted for smartphone handsets; on the other hand, new types of mobile games, inherent in smartphone technology, have been produced (Mäyrä 2012). In the present study, the interviewees seemed to engage with the gamification of communication by appropriating various apps. Mobile apps have applied game-like design elements, such as points, badges (marks of achievement), leader boards (graphic comparison with other players), mayorships (recognition of distinguished players), and rewards (Walz & Deterding 2014).

Most interviewees tended to have already played other video games, such as PC-based online games (e.g. Lineage and League of Legends) and 2G phone-mediated mobile games (e.g. Zoozoo Club), before beginning to use smartphones. In comparison, a few female interviewees were novices to technologically mediated games until they were introduced to smartphone apps. The participants frequently used mobile gaming apps. This tendency may echo the findings of a recent Korean survey (Korea Creative Content Agency 2013) in which young people aged 15 – 29 were identified as the most enthusiastic mobile gamer group, who regularly played six mobile games on average at any given period; in the same survey, ‘having fun’ was the most important reason for adopting smartphones for the cohort of 15 – 24 years, while the age group of 25 – 29 prioritized ‘dealing with stress’ (which was followed by ‘having fun’). Notably, the use of gaming and entertainment apps (rather than communication per se) is one of the prime motivations for purchasing smartphones amongst young Koreans in their teens and twenties (Cho 2013).

With the phenomenal penetration of smartphones in the 2010, its mobile game industries have increasingly been integrated with Korea’s economy of mobile platforms. In particular, the platform-driven digital economy was triggered by the Korean-based mobile platform Kakao. Its ‘over-the-top’ (OTT, or ‘value added’) messaging tool KakaoTalk has aggressively released its game publishing services since its launch in 2010. As evidenced by the national success of such mobile games as Moddo Marble, Every Town, and Wind Runner, Korea has witnessed heated competition between platform-based mobile games over the past several years. As of 2014, over 450 mobile games have been released via the KaKao platform alone (Pierce 2014). In fact, KakaoTalk has played a significant role in creating the nationwide spike in mobile gamer numbers because many Korean smartphone users were first exposed to mobile gaming through Kakao Talk (Jin et al. 2015). More recently, another Korean-developed platform, LINE, and the global social media giant Facebook have emerged as popular mobile platforms among young Korean smartphone users. For example, Sun Woo (male, 20 years old)³ noted that he liked Pokopang, a game created by and played on LINE, the Korean developed mobile platform, because it was not only cute and colourful, but also because it was easy to play on the mobile platform that he used most frequently.

According to the interviewees in the present study, mobile gaming apps were considered to be convenient to play anywhere and anytime, in comparison to other forms of online video games. In addition, gameplay was integrated with other activities as mobile gaming apps allowed users to easily restart gaming from where they stopped. Jun Gi (male, 25 years old) depicted the casual nature of mobile gaming:

Playing mobile games is one of people’s casual activities, not a special activity, involving complex steps, such as turning on the computer, logging into the website, and so on. People can enjoy playing games everywhere. My first experience of playing mobile games also happened casually. It was in a car which I hopped into for vacation with my friends.

³ Whenever a particular participant and his/her accounts are introduced in this paper, a pseudonym is used. Each pseudonym is followed by the subject’s gender and age.

Similarly, Hong Bin (male, 28 years old) commented on his casual play of a baseball gaming app:

I can enjoy playing the game on a smartphone anytime because it proceeds quickly and automatically saves the progress. For example, I can finish the baseball game on the smartphone right after I make a hit; then I can continue the game later or anytime.

Mobile gaming, due to the compact screens and mobility of smartphones, requires only sporadic attention compared to PC-based online gaming (Richardson 2012). Mobile gaming's simple rules may lower barriers of gameplay in terms of time and skills; thus, those who were not typically hard core gamers can now easily engage with gameplay (Hjorth 2009). Its ephemeral and casual nature seems to define mobile gaming, especially in comparison to 'hard core' online gaming. At a first glance, several interviewees considered mobile gameplay simply a pastime rather than a 'serious' activity. For example, the aforementioned interviewee, Jun Gi (male, 25 years old), compared mobile games with PC-based online games which he used to play. For Jun Gi, the former PC-game enthusiast and current technology major student, mobile games were characterized by their inferior forms of gaming interface:

In terms of complexity, online PC games are much more advanced than smartphone games. App-based games [such as casual/social games and quiz games] fit well on a smartphone, which is different from that on a PC. For example, arcade games fit well on a smartphone as they pursue instant responses, simplicity, and fun for a brief time. PC games pursue a high quality of interface as a player can even create and solidify his/her own identity in the game. (...) Such games, with long storytelling and extensive scale, cannot be realized on a smartphone yet. Smartphone games seem to concentrate on maximizing the advantage of the smartphone interface including touch inputs and instant responses.

Interestingly, several interviewees appeared to downplay their interest in mobile gaming, while considering it a fad. This perception appears to resonate with Hjorth and Richardson's (2011: 116) study of Australian youth, who perceived gameplay mainly as 'a non-productive, leisure activity'. It seems that the young smartphone users' conceptualization of mobile gaming as an unproductive activity in the present study might be influenced by the hegemonic stereotypes of smartphone and video gaming, which have been associated with hedonistic and addictive behaviour rather than with creative practices. According to Seol Hui Lee (2013), the public discourse of technologically mediated gaming in Korea has largely involved the rhetoric of 'addiction' and thus gamers have been stereotyped as those who lack self-discipline and require social regulation. In the present study, some young people did not seem to be entirely free from such stereotyping and expressed their concern about engaging with mobile gaming. For example, Song Ji (female, 25 years old) noted her hesitation about gameplay: 'I have

removed Rule The Sky just a few days ago because I felt I was getting addicted to it. Frankly speaking, I removed and installed this game again at least three times’.

Despite the concern about game addiction, and the devaluation of the mobile game as an inferior form of technology, some young people sought continual progress, a sense of achievement, and consistency through frequent engagement with different mobile gaming apps and mobile apps. For example, Ji Woo (female, 24 years old) enjoyed the ongoing process of gameplay seamlessly integrated with her daily life:

I play Rule the Sky, The Smurfs Village, Bakery Story, and Restaurant Story. I find it convenient that the games let me know when to come back to the games by push notifications.⁴ So, I can keep doing my usual work or other activities [without spending too much time on the games] until getting alerts. Upon receiving notifications, I can easily get back to the games to continue playing them.

In a similar vein, Hyun Bin (male, 21 years old) stated:

My favourite mobile game is Candy Crush. I enjoy this game very much, although it is addictive. By crushing the candies non-stop, I can continuously progress up the levels and it feels rewarding. The game progresses quickly and we have to react fast in order to successfully crush the candies. Thus, it keeps me excited while playing the game and helps me to relieve my stress as well.

For some interviewees, the smartphone was depicted as a haptic object, especially since they could *control* it much better than a PC; however, there were also a few respondents who felt uncomfortable about the smartphone’s small screen, due to the ‘downsizing experiences’ in which ‘users have to reorient themselves to a small screen-based interface’ (Jin & Yoon forthcoming: 7). Despite the ambivalent feelings about the control of mobile apps, depending on the materiality (of the screen) and the interface of particular apps, most interviewees appeared to consider themselves ‘app-enabling’ (those who seek the new possibilities of mobile apps) rather than the ‘app-dependent’ (those who allow apps to determine their behaviour; Gardner & Davis 2013: 10). Overall, mobile gaming was a practice increasingly embedded in the interviewees’ mobile communication. In particular, mobile gaming appeared to introduce playful and gameful elements to the smartphone users’ everyday lives.

The Gamified Coordination of Urban Life

Gaming apps on the smartphone functioned to help the young people cope with mobile urban life. Expansion and urbanization accompanied by the rapid modernization of the country after the Korean War (1950 –1953) has shaped today’s Seoul as one of the most densely populated megalopolises in the world. In terms of population density, Seoul has been ranked highest among the major cities of OECD member countries; the population

⁴ For example, Restaurant Story, a social dining game, requires its users to wait for particular foods to be ready to serve. Thus, the user’s response to push notifications is an important element in participating in the game.

density of Seoul is three times that of Tokyo and eight times that of New York (Hankyoreh 2009).

The participants here tended to frequently play mobile games on the move, as a way to respond to the temporal and spatial rhythm of Seoul. Yu Ri (female, 26 years old) noted, ‘Whether I play mobile games or not depends on how many times I take a subway’. For Yu Ri, mobile gaming was an important tool to live out urban life in Seoul, which requires long commuting time on public transport. The residents of the metropolitan Seoul area who use public transportation spend 68 minutes on average (one way) for commuting to their workplaces, which is significantly longer than their counterparts in most other overseas cities of similar size (Seoul Institute 2014). However, Korea’s advanced LTE and WiFi-equipped public transport – the subway in particular – allows commuters to easily play games on the move. Seoul is equipped with one of the world’s leading wireless connections on public transport, while its residents – young people in particular – have an expensive data plan so that they can play in any places with no WiFi (Acuña 2013).

The smartphone and its gameful apps often seemed to be utilized for ‘micro-coordination’ of everyday life, as they helped users manage time, space, and sociality in a relatively tangible way (Dong-Hoo Lee 2012). First, for management of time and space, several interviewees frequently used locative gaming apps when engaging in physical movements or activities (such as commuting or exercising). For example, for Na Rim (female, 25 years old), the locative app Naver Map was an essential tool of her daily life:

I like this sort of app (i.e. the location-based app) because it helps me not to get lost on the street and to get to the place fast and effectively. Even though I know how to get to the place, this app (i.e. Naver Map) provides me with a fast route at that time reflecting the real-time traffic situation. This sort of app also helps me check out the status of upcoming buses so that I can manage my time more effectively.

Na Rim’s account appears to resonate with Frith’s (2013) claim that locative mobile apps influence the users’ interaction with space and encourage particular mobility decisions; particularly for those who often use locative apps, the apps seems to influence where to go and how to move. Locative apps, such as the aforementioned Naver Map, represent urban space as a set of calculative and visualized maps, in which pedestrians and commuters can imaginatively project themselves into their journeys. Virtual mapping of urban locations via smartphones often involves, albeit limited, users’ involvement in a few possible scenarios of different routes to a destination.

Locative apps can help its users move more frequently and/or effectively. For example, Jong Su (male, 26 years old) used a particular GPS/locative app while running:

Recently, I have been using an app to help me when jogging outside. This app shows the distance, the time, the calculated pace, and the route based on GPS. While running, it reads the information to me. It can also save the records and publish the records on Facebook or others (i.e. other social networking platforms) (...) I like this app as it helps me concentrate better on jogging, and consequently I can exercise more and effectively.

For Jong Su, jogging appeared to be transformed as a more routinized calculable activity. Furthermore, the gamification of his jogging practices seems to redefine the lens through which he viewed his surroundings (Frith 2013: 257).

Second, in addition to the management of time and space, mobile apps appeared to enable the young people to explore and cope with different social networks. Mobile gaming apps tend to be played either personally or collaboratively with others. While approximately half of the interviewees preferred mobile games that could be played alone, the other half enjoyed games that were often played with close friends. For example, Shin Ja (female, 25 years old) was one of the interviewees who avoided playing 'social' games that requires continuous communication with others, and preferred individualized play time: 'I don't like games that keep asking about my interest and requiring me to interact with others. I prefer simple games that I can play alone'.

In comparison, some interviewees enjoyed interacting with other players via mobile apps. The mobile games communally played often rely on social networking platforms such as Facebook and KakaoTalk, and thus have been referred to as 'social games' (Paavilainen et al. 2013).⁵ Notably, it seemed important for the interviewees to manage and choose with whom to play. Via online gameplay, they maintained close relationships and/or explored unknown players via mobile apps. For example, Myung Su (male, 25 years old), played a Korean-developed social networking app, entitled Hi There, while expanding his networks:

This app [Hi There] allows me to communicate with strangers. With this application, people can post comments about themselves or leave comments to any other members. Using this application, I can even find strangers near my current location.

Shin Hye (female, 21 years old) also explained that she liked Clash of Clan most because the game made connections between her friends:

I used to play Clash of Clan because all of my friends played it. It is a competitive game in which I have to build my own empire in order to defeat my enemies. It does not require a lot of time to understand how to play and it allows me to socialize with my friends because the game is connected to Facebook.

In this manner, young Koreans in the present study developed techniques to manage different layers of social interaction. Referred to as 'differentiating techniques' in Dong-Hoo Lee's (2012) study of Korean smartphone users, some young people in the present study were inclined to 'differentiate among their interactants based on the characteristics of social ties as well as the main communication channel for contact'. Differentiating can involve roughly two different practices: the maintenance of (old) strong ties ('bonding') and the exploration of new weak ties ('bridging')(Ling & Campbell 2011).

⁵ However, it is also important to acknowledge that the leading role of Kakao as a major mobile game platform has declined because several mobile game corporations have established their own platforms. For example, the prominent Korean game corporations Gamevil and Com2us, which were merged in 2012, have introduced their own platform, HIVE, in 2014.

The introduction and use of various mobile apps also appeared to lead the young people to strategically cope with different social circles and communication patterns. Several social networking apps help to explore new relationships and create bridges between strangers. As Dong-Hoo Lee's (2013: 277) study has observed, Korean young people often take part in *bungae* ('lightning', metaphorically meaning an impromptu offline meeting), which is frequently initiated via mobile technologies. Meanwhile, mobile apps and gaming practices could enhance the sense of being connected between those who already knew each other offline. Hong Jun (male, 24 years old), who was a frequent player of such mobile games as Draw Something, described how he managed sociality while using mobile apps:

By playing smartphone games with my close friends, I can interact with them and thus develop more intimate relationships with them. For example, when playing Draw Something, I send a game request only to people who I consider close friends. In contrast, PC games are only for fun, to relieve stress. PC games hardly allow me to pay attention to my friends playing the same game.

Interestingly, a few interviewees noted that they shared their ID and passwords with their friends in order to access and download the same app. Chang Min (male, 23 years old), who enjoyed a mobile game app titled Infinite Blade, noted: 'I play this game for free as it was shared by my friend. You can download the same game several times by using your friend's ID on your smartphone, as I did'. Although the smartphone and its apps are considered personal properties for the majority of the research participants, a few cases showed how young people might collaboratively own and play mobile apps. By gift-giving or sharing with group members, technology seemed to be humanized and integrated with the local norm of sociality; such examples may show how the group-oriented culture of communication in Korea filters the logic of social media, which is designed to facilitate forming a wide range of networks and widely spreading information (Yoon 2016).

The micro-management of everyday life via smartphone apps may involve embodied connection with the lived context on the one hand, and diversion from the stress of the urban context on the other hand (Cuminskey & Hjorth 2013: 8–9). With the app-mediated management of daily routines, young people appeared to experience a sense of control over their surroundings at least temporarily. Mobile apps and games seemed to contribute to the re-imagination of the city as a meaningful space. Gameful media practices in cities may engage with 'soft urbanism', which refers to the appropriation and reprogramming of a space, rather than 'hard urbanism' which involves the physical reconstruction of a city (Alfrink 2014: 533-534). In particular, social media, such as Facebook, and gameful apps, such as Foursquare, recreate users' sense of urban space by sharing their space. While some critics argue for the emerging public sphere that can be initiated through social media and apps (e.g. Frith 2015), the gameful sharing of space via mobile media may not necessarily facilitate the substantial re-appropriation of the hegemonic spatial order of urban space (Massey 1991).

Power Relations in the Gameful World

As evidenced by the emergence of pervasive mobile gaming practices and the popular introduction of social media platforms amongst young people, the gamified processes of

communication is an undeniable trend in Korean youth culture. However, it is uncertain how the gameful affordances of smartphones and gaming apps enhance and reify the carnivalesque potential in human communications, which is identified as a key component of play (Sicart 2014). At a glance, it can be argued that the gamification of mobile culture might allow young smartphone users to engage more with mobility and performance. However, some accounts of young people in the present study implied that the mobility and performance of gamification might be restricted by existing power relations and cultural norms. In this respect, it is noteworthy that a smartphone's gameful elements and practices appeared to involve a gendered process. Several female users became able to easily access gaming activities due to the smartphone and apps, which did not require the institutionalized settings of gameplay – *PC bang* (Korean Internet café) in particular. Several male interviewees tended to recall vividly their experience with PC gaming and hanging out at the PC bang, while female interviewees appeared not to recall much their earlier PC-based online gaming experiences. As suggested in recent media studies, female smartphone users' increasing gameplay on mobile platforms can be at least partly explained by the fact that mobile gaming does not seem to have such clear barriers of access, availability, and literacy (Hjorth 2009). Thus, it can be argued that mobile gaming may in part enhance female agency, which has been silenced in the mainstream representation of technology in Korea (Na 2001).

In the present study, while many female respondents were frequently playing mobile games, they did not seem to be 'hard core' players. Again, mobile gaming seemed to be so casual (rather than being committed) that some interviewees were not even aware of the precise titles of mobile games they had played. Indeed, several female (and a few male) interviewees preferred simpler games. Na Rim (female, 25 years old) noted, 'I don't like any complicated games. (...) I only play free games. (...) I get easily bored with a game. I hardly play the same game for more than a month'. Na Rim's casual gaming practices continued for several years since she owned her 2G phone. For her, the main reason for playing mobile games was not the strategical aspect of games, but the aesthetic/emotional aspect of games:

I have tried every game that has cute characters and pretty images. (...) I am not good at strategically controlling the character or fighting against other characters. Thus, I usually design my character to be a production worker, a fisher, or a craftsman, so that I could just let the character do its work, not involving any fighting or strategic moves.

In this manner, a few female interviewees conceptualized mobile games as aesthetic and visual tools while being largely uninterested in the competitive or goal-oriented aspects of gameplay. This user experience might resonate with the aesthetic appropriation of technology amongst young Asian women; in her Japanese case study, Hjorth (2006) has interpreted female users' aesthetic customization of mobile phones as their efforts to engage with the technology as producers but not merely as consumers. In this respect, the few female respondents' aesthetic engagement with gamification processes in the present study may reveal users' experiences of appropriating, if not controlling, the emerging technology in their own ways, rather than conforming to the dominant mode of consuming it.

Overall, due to its low entry barrier, mobile gaming has appealed to a wide range of smartphone users, and thus more and more ‘casual gamers’ are involved in the practices of technologically mediated gaming. However, the increasing gamefulness of mobile apps may not necessarily guarantee techno-utopian worlds. The process of gamification may not contribute to resolving existing power relations. In addition, the benefit of gamefulness may not be universally distributed. Gameful elements may often be distributed unevenly and thus certain groups of people remain relatively marginalized. For example, the aforementioned female smartphone users’ increasing engagement with mobile gameplay may not simply enhance the users’ mobility, but may rather rework the existing gendered sense of mobility – that is, the relative immobility of women in public space. As addressed in the account of Yu Ri (female, 26 years old), a sense of immobility might be implicated in the allegedly gameful world: ‘I can study in a subway but I don’t, because I am conscious of the gazes of others around me. So, I while away the tedious hours of the subway ride by watching video clips and playing mobile games’. Yu Ri’s account implies that an individual’s use of a smartphone is highly influenced by others’ gaze; accordingly, she felt compelled to do what others do in a subway car – passing times via the smartphone, rather than doing what she really wants to do. In this manner, however mobile and gameful they appear to be, the use of smartphone apps may be governed and surveilled by the dominant social order. That is, individual mobile gamers’ practices can be subject to the ‘gaze culture’ (Hjorth & Richardson 2011), which may be particularly evident in the collectivism-oriented context of Korea (Yoon 2016). Moreover, as Yu Ri’s case implies, mobility and playfulness promised by smartphone and mobile technologies may not be necessarily distributed to all users regardless of their social positions. Despite the utopian discourse of the gamification of mobile communication, existing power relations and users’ subject positions appear to influence the way in which gamification is exercised. The smartphone users’ sense of the gamified control of contexts and space might be an ideological effect that obscures offline power relations.

Conclusion

As the present study relied on qualitative interviews from a small sample to explore the meanings of gaming and gameful communication practices amongst smartphone users, further studies into the structural factors behind the emerging gamification of mobile communication can be beneficial. A study of the political economy of online gaming culture in Korea can be conducted. For example, we may examine how the national ICT (Information and Communication Technology) industries’ transition to a mobile platform-based economy (from a sedentary content-based economy) is articulated with the neoliberal, yet paternalistic, state’s cyber-policing in the 2010s. Acknowledging the need for future research, the present study provides valuable insights into how young people appropriate mobile media to redefine urban space as a more manageable site.

The present paper has explored how mobile communication adopts gameful elements and is thus gamified by analyzing young people’s account on their use of mobile (gaming) apps and smartphones. Mobile gaming blurs the boundaries between gaming and ordinary lives and, more specifically, gaming and communication. Currently, smartphone-mediated communication, mobile gaming, and social media use are largely intermingled with each other. The intermixture implies the ever increasing gamification of everyday communication (Hjorth 2009). Various mobile games have increasingly

become popular add-ons on smartphones, and many of them have offered casual involvement in gaming in daily moments, such as commuting, waiting, and eating times. In particular, social networking platforms, such as Facebook and Kakao, often link smartphone users to casual games.

By appropriating gameful apps on the smartphone, young people in the study seemed to cope with urban space, time, and sociality. However, their coping strategies did not necessarily involve vibrant engagement with the physicality of the urban context. That is, the gameful appropriation of urban space via locative mobile media often seemed to allow them to ‘remove themselves’ from socio-cultural relations of urban space (Bull 2007: 28). The young people were keen to use the gameful apps to enhance the efficient management of their everyday lives. They tended to think that they were in control of the technology *and* the rhythm of their everyday lives. By seeking self-disciplinary control of gameful media, the young people seemed to implicitly or explicitly distance themselves from the stereotypical gamer as an anti-social addict. While the young people attempted to appropriate gameful technology as a manageable medium, the technology also appeared to function to manage the young users as self-disciplinary subjects.

Gamification can be seen as a mediated process by which the mobility and freedom of individual users are reorganized and controlled (Schrape 2014). In contrast with some young people’s accounts of mobile gaming practices as the process of self-management, there was little evidence of the ‘subversive capacities of play’ (Sicart 2014: 74) in the seemingly accelerated process of gamification. In this respect, the gamification of mobile communication amongst the young people in the study might mean a technologically mediated form of pseudo-play, rather than play as ‘being in the world, of making sense of it’ through engaging with objects and others (Sicart 2014: 18).

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