

# METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES IN THE USE OF INTERNET MATERIAL: FROM A STUDY ON WOMEN'S INTERNET COMMUNICATION AND *GOBUGALDEUNG* IN KOREA

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The discussion throughout this paper investigates women's internet use in relation to *gobugaldeung*—female intergenerational conflict in familial relationships, with specific reference to mother-in-law and daughter-in-law.

## **Introduction**

The past ten years have seen a myriad of internet technologies and types of communication emerge. The fast growth of internet culture among younger people and its association with newer life patterns are reflected in a greater divergence in internet research and wider areas for social research. However, this has also created a challenge for internet researchers in terms of new areas of communication and the means of optimising the accessibility and availability of internet resources,<sup>1</sup> as well as persistent ethical issues. Researching cybercultures underlines various concerns in relation to using internet data. These can be summarised as: the subjectivity and textuality of social experiences of internet culture;<sup>2</sup> on-line texts in terms of analysis of the rhetoric<sup>3</sup> and their textual indication for research practice;<sup>4</sup> the connection between on-line communication and off-line reality;<sup>5</sup> practicality of on-line research;<sup>6</sup> and finally, ethical issues in the internet which need to be borne in the researcher's mind.<sup>7</sup> The expectation is that these concerns should be integrated into the methodology of internet research as its basis.

In addition, internet materials point to the ambiguity of the research environment for novel circumstances and new technologies. Subsequently, these concerns lead to a lack of confidence or fear on the part of the researcher when dealing with the

exigencies of collecting and analysing data. Such fears may be due to an awareness of possible accusations in various concerns, such as shortage of quantum display<sup>8</sup> and methodological constraints as well as ethical concerns. For instance, while the internet environment presents extensive potential for researchers to access diverse sources, the very accessibility of private information induces ambivalence in relation to responsibility and sensitivity to personal data. Researchers are subject to the laws relating to confidentiality and copyright in the unlawful downloading and publicising of data. Furthermore, the difficulty in drawing a line between the researcher's in-depth data and the information gained from the disclosure of personal experience means that the researcher is confronted by a great deal of uncertainty in the process of gathering data and is vulnerable to criticism for invading the informant's privacy (see Sharf 1999). This can play negatively for researchers who have less than distinct ideas on the extent to which data can justifiably be collected. The ethical accusation is most likely to haunt internet cultural researchers who aim to have in-depth data. Unauthorised disclosure and the consequent responsibility hold back qualitative social research, whereby the possible revelation of disclosed information has a detrimental effect on the informants.<sup>9</sup>

The foregoing is to illustrate the difficulties involved in internet research. In response to the controversies that arise in researching cybercultures, this paper discusses in general how internet data represent a broader research opportunity for ethno-cultural studies and suggests the feasibility of cultural exploration of on-line texts of internet articles. The value of internet material for researching a specific societal and cultural context is also debated. This point is derived from the argument that internet culture is not separated from the social world<sup>10</sup> and that the computer-mediated communication (CMC) environment provides more than a series of fragmented ethnographic accounts. My discussion throughout has benefited from preceding studies on the internet community,<sup>11</sup> which have testified that internet data provide a diverse and comprehensive source for cultural analysis and that participation in internet communication is a part of understanding the interactive internet culture.<sup>12</sup>

The first part of the paper gives an outline of how the newer mode of communication merges with cultural research, with reference to existing contemporary ethnographic researches on the internet, such as those by Miller and Slater (2001), Schaap (2002) and Markham (1998), and to arguments in relation to internet cultural research (Stern 1999; Kendall 1999). The second part of the paper attempts to discuss issues that have arisen in using the internet as a research source. The third part discusses the reflective nature of grounded theory and its relevance to internet research in terms of offering a way forward. Lastly, this paper tries to sketch the possibilities offered by internet materials, focusing on some of the methodological issues arising from the use of internet data, and outlines the advantages offered by internet cultural study as well as the disadvantages.

## **Internet use in Korea**

Numerous polls in the Republic of Korea (ROK) point to the rapidly increasing use by women of the internet. The total number of internet users in the ROK was estimated at approximately 30 million in January 2003, two-thirds of the population of 48 million. A census done by Internet Matrix on internet users in the ROK suggested that at the end of the year 2003 there were 17,568,000 women net surfers, reaching around 36.6 per cent of the total Korean population, and that this proportion was expected to reach 40.7 per cent by the end of 2004. Internet Matrix sees this phenomenon as the result of women, in particular in their thirties and onwards, who engage in chats, community activities and emailing as well as internet shopping, internet banking and trading in company stocks.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, a White Paper on Internet Korea 2003, prepared by the National Computerisation Agency,<sup>14</sup> points to a fast diffusion of different patterns and interests in social communication with an indication that internet use in Korea is largely focused on sources of information, entertainment and communicational channels. It suggests that almost 60 per cent of the entire Korean population over the age of six has internet access.

As such, internet communication in Korea attests to the worldwide trend in communicational development and echoes the newer trend of people's changed life style, in which leisure and entertainment form an axis, with less prominence given to industrial development, education or socio-political issues.

## **Qualitative data on the internet**

The interpretation of internet articles underpins the viability of social research in eliciting the cultural aspects of informants.<sup>15</sup> Given that computer-mediated communication is a product generated from cultural meanings, keeping references to cultural contexts is the target for internet researchers as they set out to explore such data, in which texts are produced, transmitted and received.<sup>16</sup> Internet cultural researches are engaged in the interpretation of subjective data of individual stories based on personal experiences, and data analysis focuses on the collective cultural ideas from individual cases.<sup>17</sup>

The main thrust of researching cybercultures is within the hermeneutics of interpretation in social sciences research. The hermeneutic, or interpretive, approach, as opposed to a positivistic and 'quantitative' research classification, is characterised by the 'qualitative' enquiry of the research question. This is regarded as bringing out the meaning of a text from the perspective of its own author.<sup>18</sup> Hermeneutics explicitly draws on two central tenets of the qualitative research strategy: an emphasis on the point of view of the author (of the text) and sensitivity to the context in which the research is being undertaken.<sup>19</sup> The interpretation of the context in the hermeneutic

tradition is seen by its modern advocates as a strategy that is related both to the texts of the research documents and to the social meanings (e.g. Sharf 1999). It refers to a methodology and an analysis of research data that is originally devised in relation to the understanding and interrelating of texts.<sup>20</sup> As such, internet communication articles and research manipulation of their texts represent the social community generated by shared understanding and socially constructed meaning<sup>21</sup> in which the participant is situated.

### **Internet communication and the research possibility**

An example of the potential of internet community material is found in the narratives presented particularly in the framework of the Usenet (or Newsgroup), such as Message board, Column and Cafe articles, which discuss a diverse range of topics. These types of internet community provide cultural contexts which are enhanced by the various backgrounds of people who share the understanding of the discussed topic in order to communicate their thoughts based on their own experiences. In the case of women's column sites, for instance, members on the site are invited to post their real-life stories, which in turn cause others to respond in telling their stories. Posting comments to an original article (or adding to an already posted comment) is a mode in user-group communication that works to enhance and increase interactivity in the group, functioning as an interactive communicational tool. The key role of the internet, therefore, is not just a 'resource' provision, but a driving force for communication and sociality (in which it obviates a need for actual physical contact between those using this medium).

On such community sites, posting messages is in general open to members. Thus these sites are not customarily used for personal messages. Through these sites such as message boards and columns, the author of the article gets numerous replies from the general public, to whom the message is posted anonymously, usually with a nickname. Nonetheless, these sites promote intimate conversation between those concerned and provide an open forum without fear of possible blame or of losing face, as it might be the case with their families and friends, who may judge and accuse them. Occasionally, members do get acquainted after reading each other's posted stories. However, a distinct line is drawn between people, resulting in two levels of contact: the publicly accessed message and personal contact by emailing.<sup>22</sup> The following illustrates an interaction in messages posted on one of the Korean women's sites:

Last Saturday it was the birthday of my *ajubunim* [husband's elder brother]. In the morning I visited my elder sister who is in hospital for intensive care. Thus, I went to my parents-in-law in the afternoon. All the grocery shopping had already been done by

*hyung-nim* [elder sister-in-law] and my mother-in-law. Mother-in-law said, “Why are you appearing now? Why are you always being like this? What time is it now? Couldn’t you make it earlier to come and go shopping together and help your elder sister-in-law better? Your mother-in-law, old as I am, was heavy as a log with shopping bags. You are like an outsider all the time, not my own.” I felt guilty and so said “*joi-song-ham-ni-da*” [I am very sorry], and I hurriedly went into the kitchen to assist them. I stood silently all the afternoon working in the kitchen and serving until all the guests were fed and gone. Serving continued until 10 o’clock in the evening, but I felt as if I was not fully participating in it. Also, *Hyungnim* and mother-in-law remained displeased with me throughout the evening. Maybe I am wrong, but in my opinion, the illness of my own sister deserves more care than having a birthday for my brother-in-law. I could not get my point through to them in case they became more annoyed with me. I could not tell them the circumstances I was in, but I felt like an outsider to them. Should I have told them my sister was sick in hospital? (Message abstracted and summarised in translation, accessed on 25 July 2003).

In general, messages on such sites tend to fuel argument and attract divergent and opinionated replies that are either tradition-oriented or focused on the individual. One of the former type of reply reads:

I am sorry to hear your case. It was wise of you not to tell them you visited your own family member on your in-laws’ family occasion. If you had told them, thinking to gain approval, you would have probably poured gasoline on the fire. Your mother-in-law would have assumed you think of your own family first, in addition to being insubordinate and rebellious, confirming the point that you are an outsider.

The latter type reads:

How on earth is healthy brother-in-law’s birthday party more important than your sister’s suffering in hospital? Anyway, they managed to shop, and it’s not really your business whether it was heavy or not. You should have clearly stated earlier that you have someone ill who deserves much care from you, especially as she is someone next to your mum. If you keep things hidden like this, you will never get it off your chest and will get neurotic at some point. It is because your mother-in-law is simply not prepared to understand the daughter-in-law’s position. She won’t. I know that. I have been married for ten years!

In this kind of communication, to the author of the article, the website is a space outside of family in which she can feel free to talk about what she has been through and a place for her to open herself to others. Basically what the author of the article gets from reply messages is empathy from women who have had similar experiences. However, there is also uncertainty arising from this kind of data, such as “How in-depth is the material for the research topic?” and “Is the data quality of messages representative, unbiased and fulfilling as a sample?”

*Identifying the challenges of internet material*

The opportunities for exploring the internet as a research tool and the issue of how we actually approach the internet for research needs are not as simple as one would assume. Researchers are faced with a great deal of technology<sup>23</sup> and with the diversity and integration of social cultures on the internet.<sup>24</sup> Numbers of people provide internet input with a variety of skills and abilities, and articles on internet culture cover great ranges of communicational material. Thus it is difficult to assess the quality of material. Linguistic analysis has been a conventional research method used in both ethnography and documentary analysis, but cultural researchers face difficulty in exploring internet communication effectively by applying traditional methods. This is evident from the increasing interest in the technical aspects of research rather than in the cultural aspects.<sup>25</sup> Internet communication therefore has its own value and potential as in-depth data for research practice,<sup>26</sup> in terms of the novel circumstances presented by new technologies<sup>27</sup> and personally experienced information.<sup>28</sup> The analytical position of this research environment resonates, in general, with the contemporary debate about the inevitable ambiguity and diversity in the quality of internet articles.<sup>29</sup>

In order for the researcher to gain ground for cultural work and to abstract articles from among the community articles for research evidence, there are many issues within the material that the researcher has to bear in mind. First of all, the information is vast in terms of the range of topics, and it provides researchers with numerous sequential links, which can make the research process draining as well as time-consuming. Raw materials are painstakingly wide on the internet, making it hard to find relevant information; this is due to the varieties of types of article and the unpredictable quality of articles. The research procedure, at times, takes place without plan or preparation to search for a right site. Also, if the focus is on its specific aspect, the evaluation of the content of the site is usually made later, resulting in disruption to the research plan.

A lone article, furthermore, can be short in conveying a bigger cultural frame which the researcher would want to absorb for his or her thematic concerns. Thus, while an article can involve a wide variety of social features and norms, it demands that the researcher understands the context behind the story. For example, an internet article contains many non-homogeneous cultural layers, i.e. writing style, entertainment, recent news, even a simple anecdote, and social humour, which are only meaningful in the specific community. These might puzzle a researcher who is not familiar with the particular culture. Ambiguity is there too, so researchers feel that they are in touch with something 'real' but are unsure about its extent. In addition, while a written text can be—in fact, invariably is—produced by different individuals of different abilities and skills, researching on the internet, by definition, requires awareness of a community and of its operation and management.

The following note from a research log indicates my experience of the ineffectiveness of the research procedure:

Looking for internet material as a medium for social communication production is awkward. The tasks and the researcher's role are not distinguished in my research, thus most procedures have been repeated ineffectively after having mulled over the task to take. Looking for sites which match Confucian ideology and searching focal points to and from community ideas seem to be like a hamster running in the cage. Also always more thinking is needed to support the evidence for backing-up my research theme of 'female intergenerational conflict, and for ready-made categories and subcategories of 'patriarchal Confucian ideology'.

As illustrated above, apart from the specific concerns already pointed out, the question needs to be continually asked whether the site serves its purpose (the purpose of the site), and whether it gets its message across effectively to the intended audience (the quality of the site article). In order to ensure these requirements, what is clearly needed might be a researcher's participation in the internet site. I started to participate in the community, acting like a member, rather than "staying on the veranda" to appropriate documents. What happened was: (1) I registered on several sites; (2) I enjoyed reading as many articles as possible even though an article might not be directly relevant to my research; and (3) I posted comments to articles where possible.

Participating in the group activity was helpful, particularly in developing a sense of connection to the research subjects. I got replies with appreciation from other members about my postings to existing messages. I cried about other women's sad stories and laughed together with them about a funny story. I gained a developing sense that I was part of a greater community. It was also giving me clear ideas about the limitations of engaging in this type of practice.

Additionally, this on-going participation in the site encouraged me to reflect on its value as a research tool and enabled me to find the right site to gain the right documents needed for my research. This enabled me to discern the quality of articles to study and gave an insight into the research procedure too. A further finding from researching and participating in the women's internet community was that as social norms are repeated and integrated into the communal activities, I became increasingly confident in abstracting the evidence of social and cultural concepts, and more comfortable with evaluating social norms. In this way, an internet community provided a powerful tool for me to become involved in real Korean community culture, which is essential for my research. Furthermore, the shared cultural knowledge in the women's community played an important role in this research as a window for explaining a target research context and community sentiments. This also worked in expanding my general knowledge about contemporary Korean society. At a fairly

early stage of the research, my experience as an active participant and the materials abstracted from women's stories were leading in a certain direction in delineating the tasks in the research, from detailed coverage about individual Korean women's familial life, on to more collective aspects of the 'social gaze' attached to women: such as how women interact in the family, how the roles of daughters-in-law are perceived and expectations on them are met, and how a person is perceived as acting in Korean-specific norms appropriate to the situation. Among other sources of internet articles, these community articles represent the identity of the target group and invite researchers into a forum of communication which can lead on to a focused and fruitful outcome of the research, as it naturally yields to the researcher a ground for true ethnography and a collation for discursive analysis. Different researchers may favour different approaches, and it is not possible to say that a particular approach is at all times better than others. Internet material has varied features according to the focus of the research, from examining a technical aspect to viewing language use and cultural codes for information that can shed light on useful references, such as was the case in my research.

### **Grounded theory and the emergence of data**

The distinctive characteristics of grounded theory are based on its thematic emergence in research, which derives from data collection and the interpretation of data. This includes purposive (theoretical) sampling and memos (note-taking) throughout the data procedures. Its aim is to discover the potential theory implicit in the data through the coded material, as well as to understand the discrepancy between the existent social theory and the subject matter. As such, the ambivalence and consensus of internet cultural research identified earlier are settled down in large by the interpretive position of grounded theory and its methodological approach. Methodological applications of grounded theory and research in cybercultures are largely in harmony, whereby the grounded theory approach is briefly defined as the 'emergence of theory', and its approach endeavours to gain an emergent theme out of analytical samplings in which both methodology and theory evolve.

Historically, researches in the social sciences have been informed by knowledge and assumptions from the findings of the natural sciences. As a result, non-quantifiable research methods and findings have been regarded as a weaker option among the available methods of social science research. This view has been challenged by the grounded theory approach, especially in the areas that focus on interpretive and contextual approaches to social phenomena. The grounded theory approach certifies that objectivist science and quantitative methods are insufficient to perform these tasks. It is not because these modes of inquiry are flawed, but because they



advocate views of the world that do not value the study of situated and emergent social phenomena.<sup>30</sup>

The 'grounded theory' approach is understood by its focus on the interpretation of data and on being responsive to the situation in which the research develops. Its methodology was first introduced by Glaser and Strauss (1967) with their collaborative work titled *Awareness of Dying* (1965). It was developed in 'the research situation' of qualitative research method, and has been applied as a methodological guidance extensively from ethnographic studies to psychological research methods. Its value as a research mode has been recognised as providing assistance in developing ideas in specific observation and as making theoretical sense of social life through data analysis.<sup>31</sup> As such, the assumption of grounded theory is opposite to the positivist approach<sup>32</sup>, whose discoveries are made from a preconceived hypothesis, numerical value and notions of a reality external to the observer. Thus, it is generally argued that the discovery of the 'grounded theory' method enhanced the qualitative research method in understanding both the research situation and the subject matter, with an increased chance of interpreting the research subject from the informant's experience, rather than from the presumptions and hypotheses the researcher brings about. Nevertheless, the overall outline of grounded theory indicates that the main criteria for judging the adequacy of applying the emergent 'grounded theory' to the research are about how it fits the research situation and how it works in the research.

Existing ground theorists (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1990; Charmaz 1995) attest that this mode of enquiry can be applied to varied areas of research subjects where the methodological principle cuts across different empirical settings and questions. Nonetheless, its method is verified through the rigours of a qualitative research process (Charmaz 1995:29). For instance, data is collected from the informant's experiences, and knowledge is gained from the 'inside' of the data in achieving the theoretical development.<sup>33</sup> In other words, the method of enquiry in 'grounded theory' identifies the phenomenon through the research situation (Strauss and Corbin 1990:38). Its analytic categories originate from the research participants' viewpoints, together with the researcher's interpretation in the research situation and knowledge about the research subject. The focus of grounded theory is on meanings, intentions and actions of the research participant, along with the revelation of thoughts, actions and feelings within the research environment.<sup>34</sup> Simply, the overall principle of grounded theory is allied to the research situation and is in harmony with the research data.

In practical terms, the initial coding material is used in guiding and informing the research as to how to relate the set categories to sample data, and in specifying the conditions under which they are linked to each other. Subsequent codes emerge from further sampling of the main data set in which categories relate to each other. The codes are applied back to the 'narrowed-down data set' in which the sampling for

the research is to be confirmed until different types of data are exhausted and sifted into theoretical sampling.<sup>35</sup> The whole procedure of analysis is based on the on-going process of coding, as illustrated in the diagram below.

**Diagram 1: The on-going procedure of data analysis based on grounded theory**



### Turning towards positive aspects of internet culture

What Hine (2000) terms “standing on the veranda” originally meant the untenable position of a researcher who appropriates material without real engagement in the discourse with the research participant. In my research, however, I have re-conceptualised the term positively as ‘searching thoroughly’ with more detailed exploration on the research topics raised in the material and closer attention to the cultural specifics.

Likewise, the principles behind internet research is to set out on the emerging data and to delve into neglected and avoided aspects of social interaction, directly conveying the research subject’s account. In consequence, these internet sources might not perfectly harmonise with other established research principles such as those of Stern (1999), Kendall (1999) and Mitra and Cohen (1999). Therefore, a novel application of the research method needs to be found in relation to this aspect, being atypical in eliciting the cultural aspects of internet data throughout the processes of data collection, coding and data analysis.

Arguably, articles from the internet community provide researchers with advanced forms of understanding of human communication and interaction. Internet articles, moreover, have a natural capability to yield thematic illustrations, along with the micro-level experiences of subjects in in-depth discussion. Such debate may lead to a rich production of data,<sup>36</sup> within a mode of communication in which message posters

put across their views in a natural way without being constrained by the common conversational feature of speech<sup>37</sup> and in which the informant carries and contains forms of implicit values and norms in the communication.<sup>38</sup> Internet community articles are meant for a communicational purpose and are accessed by lay persons; they are neither exclusive to researchers nor a research monopoly, and among other types of articles, they are more likely to highlight the communicative aspects of the internet. In line with this position, Stern (1999:257–82) offers a vision of internet material in terms of collectively cultural material, calling for the researcher to conceptualise it from the context in which it is developed and used. Rheingold (2000: xxviii) suggests that “looking for a group’s collective items is a way of looking for the elements that bind isolated individuals into community.”

### *Participant observation in computer-mediated communication*

The resemblance or dissimilarity of internet communication to real society is controversial among scholars,<sup>39</sup> but the general agreement in the dispute is that internet communication is shared in more than a series of fragmented social accounts among its users<sup>40</sup> and in particular in emotional support, companionship, advice and information.<sup>41</sup> The newer communication has opened a channel for participants to perceive their private lives in a public environment. The boundaries between local and global, between private and public, between reality and virtuality have become blurred.

However, in terms of research material, the internet is an advantage for cultural researchers whose research is based on ‘participant observation’,<sup>42</sup> for intense discussions of the topic and closer views to real-life situations in which information is shared among the general public.<sup>43</sup> Whilst being a public medium, cyber communication also provides researchers with additional opportunities to delve into the background knowledge of the subject and into informants’ reasoning behind the story from the text.<sup>44</sup> The indisputable aspect of internet texts is found from the internet forum, which naturally yields a research situation with sensitive topics emanating from the research subject, of a nature not found before from other forms of research data.<sup>45</sup> As Rheingold (1993:5, cited in Mactaggart 2003) defines them, virtual communities are “social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace.” This represents the capability of internet data to research social interaction and its thematic representation.

In line with this, the constraints in survey research methods (i.e. interview and questionnaire) are outlined in Robson (1999:232–3) and Bryman (2001:108), in terms of their disadvantages when applied as a research practice to a latent and sensitive research subject. Such arguments are based on the fact that information from the

survey research is subject to research variables; for example, the types of questions that are asked by the interviewer, the way a question is worded, misunderstanding on the part of the interviewee about the question, memory problems on the part of the interviewee, and the way the information is recorded by the interviewer (Bryman 2001:109). Constraints, particularly in face-to-face interviews, are to do with the informant's socialised behaviour or consciousness, which can emerge over sensitive issues. Personal factors occurring unexpectedly in the dynamics of the research environment also limit the research findings. Such inadequacies might play a role in producing only partial rather than full information.<sup>46</sup>

### *Observation of ethics in internet research*

A further point regarding controversy in the use of internet data falls on the ethical issue. There is an imminent anxiety among academics of internet culture in relation to ethics, such as obtaining consent from the data subject, confidentiality, fair data processing and netiquette. These concerns are relevant to every internet research subject and need to be dealt with at the outset of the research. Any matters related to the privacy of informants need to be protected in order to uphold the dignity of the individuals who are represented in the study and where the findings affect others' emotional and physical well-being.

However, in CMC, the content of the (personal) data is for public reading, and nickname use is the convention in such sites. Data from bulletin boards are intended for public reading, in which people posting the articles do not have an expectation of privacy. Any sensitive commentaries and articles posted are meant to be discussed within the wider public arena, unless the principle governing the site states that the article is to be read exclusively by the members only and has been systematically set up as such. Nonetheless, for most public sites, exchanging ideas with a wider social audience is common. Therefore, such an open discussion leads others to react with similar sentiments, and arguably in return makes a successful site for the internet forum and eventually to a rich source of research data.

As indicated in Sharf (1999:252), the emphasis on research intervention, such as gaining informed consent or the statement of 'participant risk' made on the research sites,<sup>47</sup> might affect the production of natural data, resulting in a reduction in the amount and quality of data, as it can potentially discourage the genuine expression of ideas and feelings of the informant<sup>48</sup> if they are aware that their communications are being monitored and there is a potential hazard from being involved in the research.

Accordingly, in order to gain such data based on in-depth discussion, and at the same time to be free from accusations of wrong-doing in dealing with internet data, the following needs to be born in mind among researchers. Firstly, the samples are to be taken from an anonymously posted message with a nickname allowing informants

to retain their privacy. This rule is also to be observed for the data extracted from public sites such as message boards and column sites, which contain numerous reply/posted commentaries from the general public. In this way, having the references and utilising articles cause least offence to the informants. Secondly, where the sampled data reveal latent feelings and private incidents, personal information is not to be displayed in the research publication. Lastly, if it is necessary to keep personal data, informants are to be asked specifically if sensitive data could be kept for the research project. In this case, 'informed consent' or 'permission' is to be gained through emailing to the informants, in order to incorporate any necessary personal data prior to conducting and publishing the research.<sup>49</sup> A database of email addresses for research back-up is to be maintained for further enquiry.<sup>50</sup>

### *Searching for community articles*

Community culture on the internet can be a particularly valuable tool in facilitating cultural specifics that can bring researchers into purposeful contact with members of their target society. Such contact brings the researcher into contexts with other people at many levels, exposes him or her directly to the issues of the research theme and sensitises him or her to the types of communication interacted in the community group. Every internet community has a definition of its purpose, has a fixed role for the site and introduces relevant documentation. These emphasise the thematic aspect and discursive analysis of the research and also mean that the researcher can pay greater attention to the social features on the internet community, such as cultural ideas and social norms, often regarded as less significant and rather difficult to deal with. For instance, in my research, the initial search for women's communication was made from three major web sites: 'Daum', and two women's-issue sites,<sup>51</sup> all three in general aimed at women, with a greater focus on women-related topics. The experiences discussed on women's sites are mostly in the style of message boards, column and discussion groups. In particular, column and message board articles were the main focus of this study among various types of internet articles such as web news, chat rooms and personal homepages.

## **A critical view in researching cyber cultures**

The points illustrated above lead us to consider the value of internet material as data for cultural research. Nonetheless, research design and methods of cybercultures also have drawbacks. In this section an attempt is made to evaluate some of the criticisms that might be directed against the design and methods employed in cultural research on the internet. Four broad areas of uncertainty are identified.

Firstly, the ambiguity of internet discourse is identified where the research

defines internet discourse as a specific cultural product to study. Although there are well documented claims about the social construction of internet communication and the interconnectedness between individual discourse and collective culture, in which individuals come together in the name of an internet community,<sup>52</sup> the internet community per se stands for the complex web of different individuals. The criticism might rest on the inability to clarify each posted article as representing community culture instead of an individual case. Therefore, when cultural aspects and communicational elements interrelate in a particular way, it is the connection that internet cultural researches should demonstrate in terms of its materialistic merit. The elicitation of cultural information through the analysis of linkages between the set of data and social phenomena might be an ideal study to which grounded theory could readily be applied, whereby the discourse within the internet community readily yields the culture the researcher is looking for. However, in order to approach the data that contain adequate samplings leading to a certain validity, researchers need to exhaust the universe of all data that exist.

Secondly, the possible accusation of data appropriation is identified in relation to internet data. Such an accusation would be made against the researcher who is not engaged in a natural conversation with the research subjects. The researcher can fall into the pitfall of collecting data that is only representative and appropriate for the data 'analysis' and thus of ultimately undermining what value and uniqueness the internet resource might present. As a result, he or she might inadvertently fix the data around the approval of dominant paradigms and on to existing research methods rather than focusing on extracting the data's own unique values.<sup>53</sup>

Thirdly, within this research setting, a critique might be made of the truthfulness of the information contained in the sample articles, which relates to a further question about samples taken on one sector of the internet generation.<sup>54</sup> This also concerns the overall representativeness of the data, since the data selection might lead to the consequent bias in the information,<sup>55</sup> as evident in internet usage in Korea. In this event, the researcher will tend to interpret only the information of persons who gain access to the CMC environment, while other and possibly more valid data exist in reality (as opposed to the virtual reality or articles represented in favour of one side). In particular, this will be the case where the sample articles provide subjective accounts in the sample. This position is legitimate according to the grounded theory approach, in which the emphasis is on the definition of properties and categories that have emerged rather than being the product of a pre-determined sampling strategy. Decision-making in the data analysis should be made through the researcher's full awareness of the research subject and by way of realising the data in terms of research themes. Furthermore, where the internet data are essential, the researcher will need to be open to multiple or different interpretations. Such necessities include approaches towards data that lead to a certain validity and the bigger cultural frame

and thus subsequently attain an impartial sampling in the research. As such, while the interpretation is claimed as valid, its account is yet to be explicated.

Finally, the cultural meaning in the discourse needs to be convincing. This is because internet communication discourses are produced by the symbolic meaning of written languages. The unobservable and underlying structures that compose the target culture exist within linguistic use. It is no less true in internet discourse that language use is a crucial element in shaping and measuring culture in a society.<sup>56</sup> Cultural studies cannot be adequately analysed without linguistic understanding of the target culture.<sup>57</sup> What people think about, their beliefs, their opinions and the consequent actions they have taken and are contemplating, are conveyed through the symbolic meaning of the specific language. It is the reason that many studies have investigated stereotypical representations of research subjects in print media and in films, in which language, both vocabulary and linguistic usage, defines and confines the research subject.<sup>58</sup>

Specifically, the honorific expression of politeness which is an outward demonstration of hierarchy in relationships, is prominent in certain languages like Korean. Accordingly, the analytic reference to 'politeness language use' is also necessary when research is based upon subtle human interactions. Linguistic usage will vary in relation to the closeness or distance of the relationship between interlocutors, one's relevant position to others and what the socially acceptable verbal uses are.<sup>59</sup> However, the presence of a specific structure in the linguistic paradigm means that applying linguistic analysis to internet articles is inevitably tentative.<sup>60</sup> In order to categorise items, inference and interpretation out of the situational background is inevitably required in order to obtain valid information in research.<sup>61</sup> The reliability rate, if not validity, is lowered when the researcher intervenes too much with her own interpretation. The background to an event or situation which the researcher catches and interprets might affect the base for objective data. Thus, it is difficult to shake off the assumption that in such a research setting, the success of the research largely depends on the researcher who deals with the data.

## Conclusion

This paper has attempted to discuss the viability of internet data in research, outlining their cultural manifestation in computer-mediated communication. It has argued for a broad view to be taken of internet material from cultural<sup>62</sup> perspectives in order to assess the methodological approach to research.

Grounded theory was also discussed to suggest a methodological approach in relation to collecting, coding and analysing internet data. However, the adoption of the grounded theory approach alone would not cover all necessary accounts of internet cultural research. The golden rule for researching cyber cultures is to take

data in the thematic representation which might have been veiled and minimised in social research conventions, and would therefore have not been accessible in the ordinary communicational discourse (Charmaz 1995:30). In relation to researching cyber cultures, Sterne (1999:276) stresses that “Internet research in general needs to be further integrated with research on other related phenomena. Cultural studies should apply its collective wisdom to the construction of the Internet as an object of research rather than continuing to abstract the Internet from the media environment of which it is a part.”

As Sterne suggests, in order to implement cultural study on the internet, computer-mediated communication might require methodological flexibility from researchers in dealing with internet articles, as well as decoding them in a balanced way regarding the subject in which the social discourses surrounding the objects are encoded.<sup>63</sup> In this way, the internet will gain in verification and importance as a social research field, with ‘electronic communication’ recognised as a modern form of social discourse. While the best approach is related to the appropriateness of the research theme, the question of internet material is probably less about how fine the resources are; rather it is about how the researcher relates the diversity of the materials to the thematic concerns. This presupposes that researchers define their needs and select resources accordingly. It further presupposes that they need to monitor the effectiveness of their research procedures and adapt their methods if necessary.

From the panoply of internet resources, it is the researchers who go out and mine the treasure out of it with all the supporting evidence in order to achieve the realisation of their task. Although different insights apply to the different selections of research practices, any research material can only be used productively if it fits into the research theme and with key tasks organised around the theme.

In conclusion, a successful way forward in approaching internet material might rest on the realisation of thematic representation in the data. Realisation of the research will depend, furthermore, on the sensitivity of the researcher who deals with the data in such a way that he or she convinces readers of his or her thesis.

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## Notes

1. Sharf 1999; Mann and Stewart 2000:39–62.
2. Sterne 1999; Smith and Kollock 1999. Jonathan Sterne (1999) puts forward a number of points in relation to cultural studies on the internet. In particular, he emphasises the meaningful representation of culture on the internet discourse which is realised through textual analysis (*ibid*:260–82). He maintains that internet mediated communication needs to be explored in order to have textual representation of social culture in the internet medium.



3. Sosnoski, 1999.
4. Mitra and Cohen 1999.
5. Kendall 1999; Wellman and Gulia 1999; Smith 1999; Bell 2001:chapter 5.
6. Mann and Stewart 2000.
7. Sharf 1999.
8. Balsamo 2000:272; Bell 2001:chapter 4.
9. Smith 1999.
10. Smith and Kollock 1999; Wellman and Gulia 1999; Miller and Slater 2000.
11. Miller and Slater 2000; Rheingold 2000.
12. Kendall 1999; Sharf 1999; Bell 2000.
13. Abstracted from junjashinmun (1/7); <http://www.internetnews.com/bus-bews/articles.php/871421>, accessed on 27 October 2003.
14. This publication (White Paper on Internet Korea 2003) reports that in December 2002, the number of internet users had reached 26.27 million.
15. Bell 2001; Smith and Kollock 1999.
16. Bryman 1993:1558.
17. Bell 2001; Sterne 1999; Smith and Kollock 1999.
18. Bryman 2001:383; Charmaz 1995.
19. Bryman 2001:383.
20. Bryman 2001:382–3.
21. Mitra and Cohen 1999; Kendall 1999; Sosnoski 1999.
22. In my research, some participants, when asked, were willing to contact me through personal email contacts. I have a database of email addresses for research back-up.
23. Reid 1999; Bell 2001; Wise 1997.
24. Smith and Kollock 1999; Rheingold 2000.
25. Bell 2001.
26. Sterne 1999; Kendall 1999.
27. Bell 2001.
28. Sharf 1999.
29. Bell 2001:chapter 9; Mitra and Cohen 1999.
30. Lindolf 1995:22.
31. Charmaz 1983,1995; Glaser and Strauss 1967.
32. The hypo-deductive positivist approaches aim to explain the research subject's 'outside world' and reduces qualities of human experience to quantifiable variables, largely relying on the observer's concerns and the research participants' behaviour, with all the logic and objectivity of a scientific tool. Such methods were claimed to be short of providing the basis for theory building (Charmaz, 1995).

33. Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1990.
34. Charmaz 1995.
35. Glaser and Strauss 1967.
36. Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1990; Strauss 1998; Charmaz 1995.
37. Brown and Levinson 1987.
38. Rheingold 2000; Wellman and Gulia 1999; Reid 1999.
39. Wellman and Gulia 1999; Smith 1999; Bell 2001:chapter 5.
40. Wellman and Gulia 1999.
41. Wellman and Gulia 1999:173; Kerr 1982.
42. Kendall 1999.
43. Wellman and Gulia 1999; Reid 1999.
44. Sosnoski 1999.
45. Bell 2001:chapter 9; Mitra and Cohen 1999:186–189; Sosnoski 1999.
46. Denzin 1999; Robson 1999:229.
47. Mann and Stewart 2000.
48. This aspect was no less true in the sites adopted in my research, because after announcing my research intrusion and the definitions of the objects of my research, several message posters were alienated from further involvement. My action subsequently had the effect of disrupting the natural flow in the communication. In the long run, therefore, such announcements could undermine the original function of personal discourse and the information shared among the internet community which has made internet research possible (Sharf 1999). For example, I contacted research informants in the sample articles in my research by email and asked if they agreed to their contributions to the forums being used as part of my research findings. The reason for this was my gesture as a researcher to be open with the informants, as the research follow-up might cause worries for those who had posted messages related to their own family members in such a public forum. Nonetheless, my intervention must have made the message posters hesitant. In general, posting messages are only open to members in such community sites. This is not to say that membership is exclusively for women only. On occasions male members' articles are also shown on the women's site in relation to women's issues. My action further suggests to women that their articles can be read by anybody and be potentially identified by their close circles, including other family members and their husbands. For instance, it is not a rare sight to spot an article on the bulletin board which is deleted later by the person who originally posted the message, resulting in the original content being removed while titles of the messages and replies to it still exist.
49. Sharf 1999.
50. Occasionally, members do get acquainted after reading each other's posted stories. However, a distinct line is drawn between people, resulting in two levels of contact, i.e. the publicly accessed message and personal contact by emailing.
51. <http://daum.net>, <http://miztalk.daum.net/> and <http://miclub.com/>. <http://daum.net> is the most popular website for Korean net surfers.

52. Slevin 2000; Wellman and Gulia 1999.
53. Bell, 2001:chapter 9.
54. Mann and Stewart 2000:196.
55. Wise 1997; Mann and Stewart 2000:201; Silverman 2000:54–60.
56. Hodge and Kress 1988.
57. Brown and Levinson 1987.
58. Kuhn 1995.
59. Brown and Levinson 1987.
60. Gurevitch *et al.*,1988.
61. Robson 1993:276.
62. Internet use not only reflects an individual level, but also shows cultural notions of the individual in society, i.e. familial duties and expectations of familial life will be different according to the society and will reflect in a different way.
63. Hall *et al.*1980.

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