

DOMESTICATING COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES IN KOREAN FAMILIES

KYONGWON YOON
KOREA UNIVERSITY

Introduction

In recent media discourse in the Republic of Korea (Korea hereafter), new technology has been frequently equated with the loss of local identity in favour of an individualised mode of communication. In media representation, young people in particular tend to be described as moving rapidly out of a family-oriented social framework, assumed to be essential to Korean identity.¹ However, empirical evidence provided in cultural studies of youth and technology shows a different aspect. Indeed, it has been demonstrated in those studies (e.g. Facer *et al.* 2003; Holloway and Valentine 2003; Yoon 2003a), both in Korea and elsewhere, that most forms of technology are embedded within household and family contexts, rather than being consumed completely individually. In addition, such studies argue that the home has increasingly become the central place of youth culture, because of young people's extended period of dependency, and therefore of the provision of more material resources by the family than ever before.² In this regard, it is significant to keep in mind that technologies are incorporated into the 'moral economy' of the household, "operating according to moral and economic values more or less distinct from the dominant sets of public values."³ This theorisation of technology in the process of 'domestication'⁴ suggests that the internal dynamics of households are differentiated according to gender, generation and social class.

This study examines how young Koreans engage in the environment of 'new' and 'old' communication technologies, including the home computer, the domestic telephone and the mobile phone. In particular, it explores the way in which traditional norms and the material conditions of the family affect young people's access to, and ways of using, communication technologies and how power relations in terms of gender and generation are re-articulated in the domestication of communication

technologies. The data used in this article were generated from qualitative research in Seoul, based on in-depth interviews conducted in 2002 with 33 young people aged 16–17, on a one-to-one basis or in small groups. The sample was collected in the urban middle-class area on the south bank of the Han river and among lower-middle-class families on the north bank.

The family and communication in the Korean context

Despite the nation's rapid urbanisation and subsequent changes in family structures, family-oriented society still remains crucial in every aspect of Korean everyday life. Indeed, while modernisation has resulted in the nuclear family becoming the most common form of household (82 per cent in 2000),⁵ the majority of Korean nuclear families remain closely bound to extended familial networks.⁶

In the present study, the role of familial norms in young Koreans' everyday lives was noticeable, with the identification of an individual with his or her family in Korean society appearing in my respondents' narratives. Young people in the study noted that they were often being evaluated in public places not as individuals but as 'the property' of their family:⁷

If old women or middle-aged women with heavy bags get on the bus, we think we had better give our seat to them. But some old people get angry and lose patience before I have even offered them my seat. Then I feel upset ... They tend to say, "You, student! How dare you sit when there is an old person carrying heavy bags in front of you ... What sort of family are you from?" It is really annoying. It hurts me when they criticise my parents rather than me. They always say, "You are badly educated! Where were you brought up?"

(North Bank female 10, 16 years old)

It was also apparent in my research, as in the excerpt below, that young people themselves internalised this family-oriented value in that they perceived the family to be an indivisible extension of the self.

Sometimes kids call their mum "that woman" without calling her "my Mum". I can't stand it when they talk like that. They even say, "Why is my Grandma [living in the same house] living so long!" when they are told off by their grandma. I am easily upset about these peers and I often argue with them about this ... I am generally liberal, but, you know, I really hate someone who does not do what we should do.

(South Bank female 07, 17 years old)

As such, criticising other family members was regarded as taboo, since the family was embodied as an extension of the self for many of my interviewees.

Interviewees also described the family not only as a place of emotional bonding but also as a place of material resources shared between the family members. The

sharing of resources within the family appeared evident in the use of physical rooms and of communication technologies, amongst other things. Above all, for most informants, especially those from the North Bank, home did not generally provide much personal space:

My room is a section of my parents' room ... [giggling a little bit as if he feels ashamed] ... so, there is no question of any privacy [since I know my family cannot afford another room for me].
(*North Bank male 07, 17 years old*)

It should be noted that such physical restrictions as a lack of personal bedroom space are often combined with the cultural adherence to familism, militating against the establishment of clear personal boundaries in the home. For this reason, it was common for the respondents' parents to go into their children's rooms without warning. In the case of many respondents, a young person's room was normally open to other family members, such as parents and siblings, even without the young person's permission. Many of my respondents noted unclear boundaries between family members in terms of space in the home, but it seemed to be evident that the boundaries were applied differently to male and female:

My Mum, Dad and elder brother don't knock on my door when they come in. But my Mum and Dad knock on my older brother's room. I don't know why. Maybe because he is a man, or because he is older than me.
(*North Bank female 05, 16 years old*)

This implies that, although in previous youth studies the home has been considered as the place of girls' bedroom culture,⁸ in contrast with boys' outdoor culture, boys tend in fact to occupy and control more physical space than girls in the home.⁹ However, many young Koreans in addition did not have a clear sense of the possibility of the personal possession of space in the home. Several informants supposed that this vague boundary between members meant a sense of familial harmony and affection.

The restriction on personal space in the home also influenced access to communication technologies and therefore communication itself. In particular, access to, and the use of, the home computer, the telephone and the mobile phone were incorporated into the power structure of age and gender in the family, as discussed in the following sections.

The home computer

In my field study, as of 2002, it was common, with some exceptions on the South Bank, that families had a computer rather than allowing members to have individual computers. In most families, access to the home computer was likely to be managed and mediated by parents, and was fought over with siblings. In this process, the age and gender of individual family member played a significant role. This may be

similar to what a number of previous empirical studies (e.g. Lohan 2000; Na 2001) have shown: that there are significant differences in accessibility and use patterns of the home computer in terms of gender. In particular, Na (2001) has pointed out that in Korean families, access to a computer in the home has a certain hierarchy which generally consists of a chain from the father to the children and then to the mother, in terms of gender as well as age.

A home computer tended to be shared by family members, so that young people were in a position where they had to compete for access with mainly the father or siblings. This was reported by informants in the North Bank, or those having one or more siblings. For example, one informant, who shares a computer as well as a room with his younger brother, stated that sharing the computer had repeatedly resulted in tensions between them:

It is not funny for us [the informant and his younger brother] to argue about going on the Internet. We each say, "I will go first. It won't take long." Always something like that. We have only one home computer and both tend to use it in the evening. It may be one reason why our relationship has recently been getting very much worse.

(North Bank male 06, 17 years old)

In several cases in the North Bank sample, the lack of material resources discouraged young women from developing their interest in technology; the relatively restricted access to the home computer influenced young women's interests and literacy:

I cannot actually use the home computer in my home very often because of my older brother! He always uses it ... So, I am not interested in the computer any more ... I use it only when my older brother is watching TV. *(North Bank female 02, 17 years old)*

It was frequently the case that an older, male child was given priority in the use of, and more individual access to, the use of a home computer, demonstrating how the practice of the sharing of resources operates within the strictures of an age and gender hierarchy within the family. That is, although the family was perceived as a place of affection and attachment, actual resources provided to each of the members were different, constructing gendered identities.

Eligibility to access a computer outside the home is also related to young people's gendered use of the computer. At least at the early stage of using a computer, there were some differences related to the user's gender in the area of leisure activities via the computer on which young people spent much time. While gaming was the main activity only for boys, chatting was one of the main activities for both girls and boys. These differences seemed to derive from peer-influences, which were likely to be gendered; information about the game, and the software itself, were often circulated only between boys. Indeed, for some male interviewees, a computer game, especially

an interactive game, played via the internet, meant having a pleasant time with their friends, rather than only being excited about the game itself. This implies that the different patterns of internet use are related to the fact that young men are allowed greater access to a computer outside the home (such as in an internet café) as well as in the home, while females are more likely to use it only in the home. Contrary to the stereotyping in previous studies¹⁰ of players of computer games as young males, my field study shows that a certain content of technologies is not naturally gendered but is influenced by social context.¹¹

While young people's access to the computer showed a familial power structure in terms of gender, age hierarchy in the family appears to be strong in parental control over the children's use of the computer. I found that young people constantly had to negotiate parental control over use of the home computer, a control that derives from the parents' awareness of the discrepancy between the initial motive for purchasing the home computer—education and actual uses—entertainment. Although the initial motive for purchasing a home computer was children's education, as time went on, it turned out in most families that the children used the computer not only for learning activities but also for other purposes such as gaming and chatting.

Young people's use of the home computer in general, with the exception of learning-related uses, brought about parents' concerns. Parents' worries led to control over the children's use of the computer in the home. In particular, in my respondents' narratives, parental supervision of children's use of the home computer was frequently described as a gendered activity. Technology-literate parents, often fathers rather than mothers, were inclined to control their children's use in subtler ways, while technology-illiterate parents were likely to focus more on the control of the time used:

I cannot use the computer properly at the moment. I can only check my emails under the supervision of my Dad. The computer is in my parent's room and a password is necessary to access it [but only my father knows the password].

(South Bank female 08, 17 years old)

I used to do internet chatting a lot. But my Mum considers my chatting to be a terrible thing. She says "I have watched a TV programme and they said chatting was not a good thing. Don't do that", something like that.

(South Bank female 09, 16 years old)

In the excerpts above, the informant described the mother as a person with a kind of technology-phobia, acting on the basis of uncertain knowledge from the media, while the father was literate enough to restrict the children's use by controlling the computer itself. Young people's description of their parents' supervision reflects the dominant representation of the computer as a masculine technology in Korea.¹²

To summarise, as young people adopt the home computer in competition with

other family members and negotiate parental control, the computer seemed to be incorporated with gendered and aged relations of power in the family.

The home telephone

Young people's access to the home telephone, in comparison with access to the home computer, was limited and mediated more directly by parents. This was due to the fact that, for North Bank respondents in particular, the home telephone was frequently used by parents and located in the living room or parents' room rather than in a child's room. Although most families had more than one home telephone, sharing one or two phone number(s), the handsets were not sufficiently allocated to all the family members. Some female respondents, not having their own home handset in their room, stated that their male sibling had a home telephone (although he had a mobile phone as well).

I am not very happy with the fact that there are lots of good things in my younger brother's room. He has everything, the computer, the telephone, and so on. It may be because he's boy and I am a girl? *(South Bank female 02, 17 years old)*

In most cases, the home phone was located in the living room and parents' room first and then the older male child's room. For this reason, the use of the domestic telephone by many young people had to be mediated by family members. Parents tended to instruct their children not to make many phone calls on the home telephone, with the mother in general, and housewife mother in particular, controlled the children's use of the telephone. As previous studies (Frissen 1995: 85) have shown, women are frequently in a position to be 'operators' in the household's appropriation of the home telephone. In my study, it was also the case that mothers played the role of an operator for calls on the home telephone. In particular, in some families, the father did not answer the home telephone, even when he was near the telephone, so that other family members had to answer.

My Dad is kind of patriarchal. He likes to show his authority. For example, even if the telephone rings just in front of him, he does not answer it if anyone is in the house. So, others have to respond. Unless my Mum picks up the phone, I have to go and do it.

(South Bank male 03, 17 years old)

This comment suggests that someone's role as an 'operator' in the use of the home telephone is related to a division of labour by gender and age in the family. In particular, as a result of a hierarchy of power according to the gender, in the first instance, 'operating' the external to the internal is offered to women as a domestic labour which men are not supposed to do. However, it should be noted here that, while the telephone is often considered women's technology,¹³ young women in my study,

in contrast to their mothers, had relatively limited access to the 'feminine' device. This may be because the Confucian habits in Korean families position young people as part of the family on the basis of the structure of gender and age; within the same gender, age hierarchy seems to play a role in prohibiting young women from accessing the domestic telephone. In controlling the children's use of the phone, the role of the mother as an operator implies her management of domestic power especially within the boundary of activities such as disciplining children. In comparison with the use of the home computer, housewife mothers are likely to play 'manager', strengthening their control over the children in their use of the home telephone. For instance, some mothers hid from their children the fact that a phone call had come for them during exam time.

In my study, it appeared that parental control inhibited young people's use of the home telephone to a considerable extent. Most respondents were reluctant to make a call to their friends' home telephone because of parental mediation. They claimed that they were unwilling to have a conversation with their friends' parents, either via the telephone or in person.

Interviewer: Do your friends call your house to contact you?

South Bank male 02 (17 years old): No. But they may call my mobile phone and then, if I let them know that I can answer the home phone myself, they call me again on that one.

Interviewer: Do you call your friends at home?

South Bank male 02: No, because someone else [family members] may answer; [so I call my friends on their mobile phone] because the mobile phone lets me talk to my friends directly.

Because personal communication via the home telephone was interrupted by parents (their own and their friends'), young people preferred to use their mobile phones: "How can my friends call me if I don't have my mobile phone? Do you believe they can call my house? They will *never, never* do that!" (*North Bank female 08*, 17 years old). This implies that the familial use of the home telephone in families does not simply enhance familial bonding as previous studies have suggested,¹⁴ since existing power relations are involved in the management of the home telephone.

Such familial mediation and control of the telephone may lead young people to have "a powerful desire to have technology that is personalized" (Lally 2003:165). Indeed, my respondents considered the mobile phone particularly useful for its role in reducing interruptions to personal communication by family members. As Ling and Yttri (2002:152) have argued, the mobile phone can provide young people with "the advantage of being outside the purview of authority figures". Personal ownership of mobile telephones can also be an alternative to familial competition for communal resources.¹⁵

The mobile phone

While young Koreans' initial motivation for ownership of the mobile phone is usually the quest for an individual communication tool, the actual use of the mobile is not entirely individual but is affected by the family in many ways. That is, the mobile phone is contextualised within family relations, although it is often used outside the household.

It became clear in my field study that, because of young people's financial dependence on their parents, the role of the family in their use of the mobile phone was apparent from the beginning of ownership. In the current research, parents bought the first phone for young people, in most cases, as a middle school graduation gift at the age of 15–16; otherwise, it was passed down from other family members as a second-hand phone. In addition, the respondents had their phone bills paid by their parents. As well as financial factors, cultural norms influence young people's ownership patterns. For example, a few respondents had tried to purchase and manage their own mobile phone by saving their pocket money, without their parents helping or even noticing. However, such attempts turned out to be unsuccessful, not only for the management of bills but also because of familial norms:

When I bought my mobile for the first time, which was in final year of middle school [15 years old], I did not tell my Mum and Dad. I didn't feel I had to because I bought the mobile and managed it on my own. I saved my pocket money for that ... I kept its use secret. But one day my Mum found out ... My Mum said, "It's very rude behaviour to decide such a thing on your own. Stop using it!" So I had to stop. Then, a year later, when I entered high school [16 years old], I asked my Mum to buy me a mobile again. She said "Yes", so I had one.

(South Bank female 07, 17 years old)

The implication in this excerpt is that access to, and the purchase of, their own mobile phone depends strongly on the parents' decision as to whether or not the child has the ability to manage his or her own mobile. Thus, mobile phone use without consulting parents is considered a break in familial norms, because a young person's ownership of a personal mobile phone means social recognition of their transition into a later stage of adolescence.

The importance of familial norms is also seen in the process of using the mobile phone following purchase. While the use of the mobile phone between peers appeared to be popular among my informants, their frequent communication with family members by text-messaging and calling also strengthened young people's family-oriented social activity. For most informants, calls and messages from parents were still more important than calls from other people, although they could be perceived as parental control: "I need to pick up my Mum's call. I knew it would be more important than the others." *(North Bank male 01, 17 years old)*

In this process of re-articulating social and psychological relationships via

telecommunication, young people's dependence on the family even outside the home is likely to increase more than ever before. Many informants tended to contact their parents immediately (especially mothers) whenever they needed any emotional help:

My classteacher was a kind of old fox... who is very prejudiced and treated me harshly. I never really got used to her. She really hated me. She kept hating me. One day in school, I called my Mum, saying, "I don't want to attend this school. I hate this school."

(North Bank female 03, 16 years old)

For some respondents, the mobile phone was used to increase security by being in touch with their family whenever they wanted. This increased emotional dependency may limit young people's involvement in an expanded scale of sociality. As the Sussex Technology Group (2001) has suggested, enhanced physical mobility via the mobile phone can result in "a lessening internal or psychological mobility".

It is the case that familial bonding strengthened via mobile communications re-articulates gender relations. Above all, I found significant gender differences in the ways of parenting via mobile phones. On the whole, keeping track of the child via mobile communication tends to be done by the mother, whilst the father is somewhat ignorant of the details. It appeared that the mother's role as 'manager' in the home was extended outside the home as far as her parenting via the mobile phone was concerned. In addition, the familial contact via the mobile phone leads young people to construct gendered identities as different rules are applied to children according to gender. Girls were more often instructed to speak quietly or to speak in specific ways on the phone by parents, especially by mothers. Male and older children had more freedom from parental control via mobile communication.

Interviewer: Do you often have calls on your mobile from your Mum?

South Bank female 07 (17 years old): She calls me, saying, "Where are you?" "Why haven't you come home?" "You should know that you are still a high school *student* and a *girl!*" Something like that.

In my respondents' narratives, parents were inclined to attempt to confine daughters to the home for longer than sons. Accordingly, in mobile parenting, the time to come home was usually set differently according to a child's gender. In this process, young women were categorised by their parents (especially by their mother) as 'domestic' persons, while young men were allowed relatively free access to non-domestic locations. However, girls were not necessarily opposed to their mothers' rule. In using the mobile phone, despite being aware of the parental control, girls were more likely than boys to strengthen gender-specific solidarity with their mother. Indeed, some female informants, in comparison with male informants, noted that they kept in touch with their mother through the mobile phone more intensively than before.

If my Dad goes for some external work, he does not come home for a while. My older brother [who is a university student] also sometimes does not come home [because he studies at his friends' house] when he prepares for term exams. Sometimes I hang out with my friends until late, which means my Mum is alone in the home all day long ... She does not like such a situation very much. She is likely to say as a joke, "Why do I have to be alone? Am I a housekeeper?" (*South Bank female 07*, 17 years old)

For the respondent in this excerpt, exchanging messages with her mother had the aim of reducing her mother's loneliness. In a similar vein, other female respondents often expressed their appreciation of their mother who had devoted herself to family welfare and harmony. For them, their mother is a person 'inhibited' by familial norms: "From my viewpoint, my Mum's life seems so inhibited ... The reason is that she has not been able to earn money ... I think I should be a woman with the capability [to earn money]." (*North Bank female 03*, 17 years old). This underprivileged condition of women is considered to be due to the idea that women such as their mothers are not involved in paid labour and are located in the domestic sphere.¹⁶ In this manner, young women internalise to some extent the dominant perception based on the binary division between 'public' men and 'domestic' women, while sympathising with their mother's position. There have been debates about whether communication technologies lessen the opposition between the public as a male-dominated sphere and the private as a female-oriented sphere.¹⁷ In the current study, as shown above, the distinction was internalised and articulated by young women's use of technology.

To summarise, while it is true that young Koreans with their personal devices for communication are becoming more mobile than ever before, their increased physical mobility can be accompanied by re-articulated forms of familism. In this process of domestication, the mobile phone is constructed by, and is also constructing, certain identity positions in terms of gender and generation in the family.

Conclusions

This study has explored the role of the family, where gender and generation are articulated in the use of communication technologies. Traditional norms of family-oriented social relations are engaged in the 'moral economy' of the family, thereby familialising technologies on the basis of gender and generation. However, power relations arising out of family-oriented sociality may not necessarily mean the oppressive positioning of youth in the family. Representations of youth as victims in the use of technologies risk ignoring the active negotiation of young people in the family context. This reiterates what social studies of gender and technology are tempted to do—stereotype women as victims with no explanation of the "active practices of women themselves" (Frissen 1992:45).

In this regard, it should be noted that young people can appropriate the familial

norms as resources for affection, attachment and security. For example, in my study, the familial environment based upon traditional norms and the power structure did not mean directly the restriction of personal communication to outside the family. Many of my interviewees often considered family intervention in using communication technologies as an expression of familial affection. Therefore, it must not simply be assumed that new technology loosens traditional norms and ties. This was evident when my respondents were keen to reinforce attachment by being in constant touch with their family. Such familialising forces, which are likely to be exclusive rather than inclusive, may provide “crucial social and psychological support”, while at the same time they may boost narrower social bonding rather than generate extensively social trust.¹⁸

The increased emotional bonding and articulated familism, viewed as exclusive social capital and accessed via communication technologies, reflect the ways in which young Koreans cope with their transition to adulthood in their “lived use of technology”.¹⁹ Young people’s articulation of traditionalising forces in the family context without clearly searching for independence may echo the “mode of deferment”²⁰ as a strategy of coping with uncertainty and risk in their transition to adulthood.

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Notes

1. See Yoon 2003b.
2. See McNamee 1998; Mitterauer 1992.
3. Silverstone 1993:286; see also Silverstone *et al.* 1992.
4. Silverstone *et al.* 1992.
5. Korean Ministry of Culture and Tourism 2002:28–9.
6. Lee 1999.
7. See Kim 1991:112.
8. McRobbie and Garber 1976.
9. See McNamee 1998.
10. See Bryce and Rutter 2003.
11. See McNamee 1998.
12. See Na 2001.
13. See Moyal 1992.
14. Moyal 1989.

15. Haddon 2003.
16. Na 2001.
17. See Frissen 1992.
18. Putnam 1999:23.
19. See Facer *et al.* 2003:129.
20. Brannen and Nilsen 2000.

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