The Korean Internet Freak Community and Its Cultural Politics, 2002–2011

by

Sunyoung Yang

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Graduate Department of Anthropology
University of Toronto

© Copyright by Sunyoung Yang Year of 2015
Abstract

In this dissertation I will shed light on the interwoven process between Internet development and neoliberalization in South Korea, and I will also examine the formation of new subjectivities of Internet users who are also becoming neoliberal subjects. In particular, I examine the culture of the South Korean Internet freak community of DCinside.com and the phenomenon I have dubbed “loser aesthetics.” Throughout the dissertation, I elaborate on the meaning-making process of self-reflexive mockery including the labels “Internet freak” and “surplus (human)” and gender politics based on sexuality focusing on gender ambiguous characters, called Nunhwa, as a means of collective identity-making, and I explore the exploitation of unpaid immaterial labor through a collective project making a review book of a TV drama Painter of the Wind. The youth of South Korea emerge as the backbone of these creative endeavors as they try to find their place in a precarious labor market that has changed so rapidly since the 1990s that only the very best succeed, leaving a large group of disenfranchised and disillusioned youth. I go on to explore the impact of late industrialization and the Asian financial crisis, and the nationalistic desire not be left behind in the age of informatization, but to be ahead of the curve. I argue that DCinside users are ambivalent subjects who try to become a desirable and successful neoliberal subject but, at the same time, are aware of their subordinated status in which they can easily become a
failure and fall into a position of social loser. The culture “anything goes” of DCinside enables its users to speak out their voice and belie the consequences of neoliberalization, which makes up the politics of loser aesthetics in DCinside. As DCinside users challenged the protocols of their predecessors the netizens, so now a more extremist group has evolved to challenge the current status quo.
Acknowledgments

I would like to thank most of all the users of DCinside who have created such a unique space of humor and satire pertaining to our tough lives as well as a space of warmly abrupt reciprocal support. In particular, I would like to thank my interviewees, who welcomed me to their online communities and shared their experiences and insights about the culture of DCinside. You guided me to the world of Internet freaks and taught me how to enjoy the zest of its culture. Your stories culminated into my dissertation, in which I tried to faithfully translate your voices into its fullness. I am deeply indebted to your generous help.

I would like to sincerely thank my supervisor Jesook Song for her insights and support during the whole of my PhD period. You have always been generous with your time for and patient with my progress. Even when I gave up on myself, you didn’t, but encouraged me to keep going. I’m grateful for your faith in your students, including myself. I would also like to thank my committee members, Bonnie McElhinny and Joshua Barker, for their valuable insights and comments over different versions of my dissertation. I would not have been able to elaborate my thoughts to the extent that I have without your help. Thank you for inspiring me in many ways.

I would like to thank Francis Cody and Katie Kilroy-Marac for being members of my examining committee. The questions Francis asked me in my defense helped me to refine my thoughts on the politics of loser aesthetics. I would like to sincerely thank my external examiner, Gabriella Lukacs. I really appreciate your insightful comments and suggestions. You’ve given me a lot to think about and they will be a big help in turning my dissertation into a book manuscript.

The Department of Anthropology offered me crucial resources and an inspiring intellectual context within which to think through my dissertation. Gavin Smith’s and Tania Li’s courses
offered valuable insights pertaining to anthropology during my coursework period. I attended the department’s dissertation writing workshop in the year 2010-11. I thank Girish Daswani and the other members of this workshop for their input and feedback. I also thank the members of Jesook’s and Joshua’s graduate student writing groups for fruitful conversations over the years. Among many of my department colleagues, I especially thank Jessica Taylor and her partner Anna Wilson for their valuable input on fandom studies, Eugenia Tsao for her insights on issues relating to neoliberalism and mental illness, Jeffrey Stark for his ongoing support, and Sandy Oh and Melinda Vandenbeld Giles for their enthusiastic feedback on my work as well as life. Many thanks must go to my dear friend, colleague, and editor, Kris Meen. Your comments and insights enabled me to delve deeper into my questions and challenge my own thinking. Thank you so much for all you have done for me as well as for accompanying my long journey while reading and editing my dissertation hundreds of times. I would also like to thank the administrative staff for their help and support: Natalia Krencil, Sophia Cottrell, Diane Yeager, Josie Alaimo, Annette Chan, and Kristy Bard in the Department of Anthropology as well as Norma Escobar at the Department of East Asian Studies.

I also have other mentors to extend my gratitude to from outside of my department. I would like to thank Haejoang Chohan, Kilnam Chon, and Dongjin Seo for their valuable insights on my work, from my master’s thesis to my PhD dissertation. I would like to thank Yullim and Sabong for their endless love and inspiration. I am grateful to Andre Schmid for inspiring conversations on my work and warm support over the years.

I also thank Michelle Szabo and Sungjo Kim, who were my writing partners as well as inspiring discussants and supporters. I am thankful to Claudia Urlic for her thorough copy editing. I am indebted to Ju Hui Judy Han, Jennifer Jihye Chun, and Hae Yeon Choo at the Center for the
Study of Korea at the University of Toronto as well as the other participants, especially Minjeong Kim for their helpful comments on one of my dissertation chapters at the workshop “Gender and Politics in Contemporary Korea” held in 2013. I would also like to thank the advisors of the SSRC Korean studies dissertation workshop held in 2010, Nancy Abelmann, Seungsook Moon, Sun Joo Kim, and Jun Yoo, the other graduate student participants, especially Kathy Lee, June Hee Kwon, and Seo Young Park, and the director, Nicole Levit for their helpful comments and encouragement.

This research was supported by a Connaught Scholarship from the University of Toronto, a Doctoral Completion Award from the School of Graduate Studies at the University of Toronto, a travel grant from the Center for the Study of Korea at the University of Toronto, and trainee grants from Jesook Song.

Last but not least, I would like to thank my friends as well as family in both South Korea and Toronto: Namu, Grace, Dubu, Crystal, P’ungdaeng-i, hiiocks, Scholar, Hwal, Q-Ho, Pengdo, Hato, Sanha, P’obi, Sun Jung, Jong-ok, Jong-seok, Jangmoon, Kyuyeon, Jiwon, Soheon, Haeyoung, Woojin nuna, Kodong, Park-kkwang, Youngsam hyong, Woojin oppa, Namilttang, Parkgun, Im Hye-Young sonsaengnim, Gracie, Alvaro, Chantal, Maryjane, Sandy, Zak, Karma, Marley family, Joa, Haebong, Youna, Sena, Bora, Sunja, Sunny, Sunmi, and Sunkyung. I would like to dedicate this humble result of my long journey to my mother, Chunji Park, and to the memory of my father, Jongmoon Yang.
Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................... ii
Acknowledgments .......................................................................................................................... iv
Table of Contents .......................................................................................................................... vii
List of Figures ................................................................................................................................ x
Introduction ..................................................................................................................................... 1

1 DCinside.com, Field Site ........................................................................................................... 5

2 Translating Internet Freak ........................................................................................................ 13

3 Subjects, Technologies, and Politics: Theoretical Considerations ...................................... 16
   3.1 Becoming Neoliberal Subjects .......................................................................................... 17
   3.2 The Medium is the Message: What is the Message of the Internet and the Internet Freak? 20
   3.3 Politics of Aesthetics in Carnivalesque Online Space .................................................... 24

4 Methodologies ............................................................................................................................. 27

5 Outline of the Dissertation ........................................................................................................ 29

Chapter 1 ....................................................................................................................................... 33
Networking South Korea: Internet, Nation, and New Subjects .................................................. 33

1 Nation and the Internet .............................................................................................................. 38

2 Figure of an Internet “Pioneer” ............................................................................................... 46

3 Evolving Online Communities and Living Figures: From Netizen to Agorian .................. 56
   3.1 The Netizen ..................................................................................................................... 59
   3.2 Freechal avatar and Cyworld Mini Me .............................................................................. 62
   3.3 Agorian ............................................................................................................................ 67
Chapter 4..................................................................................................................................... 151

“Feel Free to Hit on Lee Joon Gi as Much as You Want”.......................................................... 151

Playing with Gender Norms among Korean Fans in Online Space........................................ 151

1 The Contempt for Fandom and the Emergence of the Joon gallery ................................. 153

2 Nunhwa and Her Mask: Characterizing Joon Gallers, Characterizing Gender .............. 159

3 Don’t Be Polite. That’s Annoying!..................................................................................... 171

4 Playing with Sexuality....................................................................................................... 175

5 Ironic Laughter between the Aggressive and the Pathetic.............................................. 181

Chapter 5..................................................................................................................................... 186

User-Generated Content: Producing New Values and Exploiting Free Immaterial Labor ...... 186

1 Volunteering Subjects and the Exploitation of Free Immaterial Labor.......................... 188

2 The Drama Painter of the Wind and Audience Participation .......................................... 194

3 Making a Drama Review Book: A Collective Work of User-Generated Content........... 205

4 Willingly Exploited?........................................................................................................... 215

Conclusion .................................................................................................................................. 222

Bibliography ............................................................................................................................... 228
List of Figures

Figure 1–1 SDN Network Configuration, May 1985 (Chon 1985:567)…………………………50

Figure 1–2 Freechal Avatars (Source: Design Jungle)…………………………………………..63

Figure 1–3 An Example of Freechal’s Combination Avatar (Kim NI 2013)……………………65

Figure 1–4 Singha (Source: july1983 2007)………………………………………..……………74

Figure 2–1 Piling Up Coins by Bird Man (Source: The Boasting gallery via the Hit gallery)…..90

Figure 3–1– 1 and 3–1–2 DCinside Internet Freak Photos (Source: The Way of Nirvana gallery)………………………………………………………………………………115

Figure 3–2 DCinside Internet Freak Photos (Source: The Way of Nirvana gallery)………………………………………………………………………………………….117

Figure 3–3 “Prologue 3” from The World of the Freak (Source: The Cartoon-strip gallery via the Way of Nirvana gallery)…………………………121–123

Figure 3–4 “The Method of Drawing the Internet Freak from The World of the Freak (Source: The Cartoon-strip gallery via the Way of Nirvana gallery)…………………………126

Figure 3–5 Characters of DCinside (Source: The Way of Nirvana gallery)….……..…………130

Figure 3–6 Characters of DC Freak Contest (Source: The Cartoon-strip gallery via the Hit gallery)……………………………………………..……………….143
Figure 4–1 Excerpted Cuts from Episode “Public Enemy” of *The World of the Freak* (Source: The Cartoon-strip via the Way of Nirvana gallery)…………………………………………………………154

Figure 4–2 Still Cut from *The King and the Clown* (Source: Naver Movie)……………………………………161

Figure 4–3 Kkŭbyŏlsam and Kids: “We shut up and keep going following Kkŭbyŏlsam” (Source: DC Joon gallery Mini Homepage on Cyworld)…………………………………………………………163

Figure 4–4 Don’t Look Back. It Is Just a Nightmare, created by DC chun’gi kael madam (Source: DC Joon gallery Mini Homepage on Cyworld)…………………………………………………………176

Figure 4–5 The First Time Is Just Like This to Everyone, written by Syuppang and Photo by Chunch’am (Source: DC Joon gallery Mini Homepage on Cyworld)…………………………………………………………178

Figure 4–6 An Imagined Wedding Ceremony for Lee and the Nunhwa Orchestra (Source: DC Joon gallery Mini Homepage on Cyworld)………………………………………………………………………………183

Figure 5–1 Official Poster for *Painter of the Wind* (Source: SBS)………………………………………………………196

Figure 5–2 An Excerpt of “One Hundred Expressions,” created by Treasure Island (Source from the Painter of the Wind gallery)…………………………………………………………………………202

Figure 5–3 Artwork by Yŏnurŏni for the first Tongjegakhwa (Source from the Painter of the Wind gallery)…………………………………………………………………………………………………..204

Figure 5–4 Excerpted Pages from the Drama Review Book *Painter of the Wind* (Source from the Review Book Project Website on Daum.net)………………………………………………………………………..208
Introduction

In this research, I examine aspects of the culture of Korean Internet users who call themselves “Internet freaks” (*int’ŏnet p’yein*) in self-mocking ways.¹ As the label “Internet freak” implies, these Internet users use the Internet excessively every day and are heavily attached to the practice of being connected to the Internet. The Internet freaks that I focus on gather on a website called DCinside.com and produce/post/comment on their own products, which include texts, photos, cartoons, composed images, and audio and video clips. The posts of Internet freaks on DCinside became popular because of the style and wit they employ in delineating the poor and unpromising lives of Koreans. They have also created and promoted various images of social losers, freaks, and surplus populations in styles that they call “DCinside-like feeling” (*tissi ppil*) or “full of idiotic tastes” (*pyŏng mat*).

Internet freak culture intrigues me because of the particular social contexts of South Korea within which the Korean Internet has developed. Democratization from military dictatorship in 1987 raised people’s expectation for freedom in terms of comprehensive aspects of their everyday lives: abolition of censorship violating privacy as well as freedom of expression in popular culture; more variety of lifestyle choices based on a new consumer culture, including more access to participatory leisure activities like karaoke (*norae pang*), survival games, and trips overseas; the emergence of sexual politics and improvements in gender equality (Joo EW 2010:311–319). South Koreans experienced the expansion of more diverse cultures and social movements through the late 1980s and the early and middle of the 1990s, resulting in a social atmosphere seeking more individual freedom. Around this time a domestic networking service, which was mainly based on modem and public switched telephone network, and which was also known as “PC communications” (*p’isi t’ongsin*) in South Korea (or “conferencing system” or “online system” in the United States). This network became the predecessor to the Internet in South Korea (as it did in other locales around the world). This early network spread quickly among youth, the highly educated, and social activists in the years immediately following democratization in 1987. These cadres expected that this new space on the net would enhance individual freedom.

¹ Following the connotations of the Korean word “int’ŏnet p’yein,” Internet freak, my English translation of int’ŏnet p’yein, means Internet users who are “obsessed” with using the Internet in a self-mocking way. See the section “Translating Internet freak” below for further discussion.
The social atmosphere full of hope and expectation quickly came to a close in 1997, when the Asian financial crisis hit Korea (Hahm IH 2012:532; Joo EW 2010:310–311). While the crisis of the Fordist mode of production had been deepening in South Korea since the early 1980s (Seo DJ 2009:57–58), the Asian financial crisis became a turning point from which most Koreans began to feel neoliberalization in their everyday lives. The popularization of the Internet in South Korea that had been gathering pace since the middle of the 1990s came to coincide with the social changes Koreans experienced as of the Asian financial crisis in 1997. While the Asian financial crisis legitimated a large scale restructuring of the Korean economy by means of a fear of losing national competitiveness and of being stuck at the industrial stage of capitalism, the Internet offered one of the important discursive grounds for restructuring in terms of the “new economy” or “knowledge economy” in the so-called “new era of information society.” South Koreans came to encounter these terms through public statements on government policy, including President’s Kim Dae Jung’s inaugural address in early 1998 (Choi and Kim 2005; Kim DJ 1998), business discourse (kyŏngyŏng tamron), and media journalism circulating in their everyday lives (Seo DJ 2009:54–56).

The Internet in South Korea developed rapidly indeed. In terms of numbers of users, it jumped from 3.4 percent out of the entire population in 1997 up to a point, in 2007, where more than 90 percent of the households had high speed broadband Internet (ranking first worldwide in terms of broadband penetration) (OECD 2010) and 72 percent of the whole population had become Internet users (ranking fifth worldwide after the Netherlands (88.9 percent), Norway (81.7 percent), New Zealand (78.8 percent), and Sweden (77.0 percent) (NIDA 2008:188, 74). Korean Internet users, who have been blessed with as well as forced into conditions of rapid development of information and communication technologies (hereafter, ICTs), are not different from the people who have struggled with the rapid socio-economic changes of neoliberalization. They have learnt how to use the Internet and consumed digital devices and programs to be competitive or not to get left behind, as well as while enjoying using them. At the same time, they have experienced the amazement of new online culture mediated by the Internet. Moreover, the Internet offers people the most cost-effective (around $12 per month) means of sustaining

---

2 Neoliberalism, as defined by Jesook Song, is “an advanced liberal mode of social governing that idealizes efficiency and productivity by promoting people’s free will and self-sufficiency” (2009:x). See the section “Subjects, Technologies, and Politics: Theoretical Considerations” in this chapter for more detailed discussions on neoliberal subjectivity.
their social and cultural lives. What they have experienced on the Internet has affected and shaped who they are. The new ICTs in their hands have consisted of tools for people to deal with what they have experienced in their lives, which has included the knock-on effects of large-scale restructuring guided by the International Monetary Fund in the form of increasing competition, personal financial decline, underemployment, homelessness, depression, and increasing rates of suicide among the people around them since 1997 (Pak KI 2010b; Hahm IH 2012).

The restructuring of capitalist modes of production has always been accompanied by the restructuring of new subjects. The process of becoming Internet users in South Korea has been interwoven with that of becoming neoliberal subjects who are solely responsible for their own fate, and are therefore constantly empowering themselves. The majority of Korean Internet users, having encountered the Internet in the post-democratization period, seek freedom, autonomy, and creativity. These qualities have come to describe that which, in ideal terms, Internet users are—liberal, autonomous, and creative individuals. Such individualistic yearning endorses the norms of desirable neoliberal subjectivity, while at the same time, such yearning is simultaneously encouraged by such norms. While South Koreans have transformed into desirable Internet users such as netizen and bloggers, skillful in using advanced technologies and self-branding, while seeking more freedom, they have also transformed into desirable neoliberal subjects who are self-responsible and self-sufficient. Simultaneously, however, people have experienced a constant anxiety that they are not competitive enough, with the imagined consequences consisting, for example, of exclusion from normative life paths entering university, finding a stable job, having a family, and reaching and maintaining at least middle class status, if not upper class status (Hahm IH 2012:534–535). The awareness and reflexivity of Internet users toward their everyday life have appeared in different forms of posts that Internet users upload with the media power in their hands. DCinside and its culture, in particular, have demonstrated the ways in which Korean Internet users have questioned, contested with, and negotiated, as well as been subjugated to, neoliberalization through the style, subject matter, and self-representation of their products. Instead of existing as silent subalterns, users of DCinside have shaped themselves into very talkative “powerful” “losers.” Their stories tell us about the minute details of their endeavor to become a desirable neoliberal subject: pursuing higher education and certificates, nurturing creativity, and being responsible for their own lives. Their stories also tell us about their struggles and hostility toward conforming to the qualification of being a desirable subject. Their
self-mocking humor and satire have arisen from the irony of this ambivalence, which reveals alternative aspects of neoliberalism that we cannot detect within the discourses of the evangelists of neoliberalism. The stories enable us to interrogate neoliberalism as an undetermined and ongoing process of becoming, not as a fixed social structure. The stories enable us to see the lived experiences of people who are becoming neoliberal subjects, as well as their moments of resistance towards efforts at neoliberal transformation.

I argue through my dissertation that the process of the Internet development in South Korea has been interwoven with the process of transition of the Korean economy from a Fordist mode of production to that of post-Fordism. This process includes inventing a new subjectivity that embodies and activates neoliberal sociality. The Internet plays an important role in composing the dominant ideology for the transition of Korean capitalism to its post-Fordist mode. It also offers people new technological tools and producing powers which they can use to govern themselves according to new expectations of their changing social environments as well as to digest such changes in their own ways. The Internet freak culture characteristic of DCinside harnesses unique styles of communication which both mock and promote the virtues of being a “loser.” Internet freaks mock aspects of everyday life under neoliberalism, from the non-stop competition itself to the frequent failures taking place as part of competitive activities, including their own endeavors, which very often wind up being in vain.

I refer to the styles of their posts, which delineate their poor and unpromising lives in a self-reflexive and self-mocking way, as “loser aesthetics.” The loser aesthetics create humor and satire based on collective reflexivity through contact with others in online space, where they create a kind of “stranger sociability” (Warer 2002:212; Barker 2008:130–131). In this sense, Internet freaks are ambivalent subjects both complying with as well as resisting neoliberal norms. The politics of loser aesthetics creates a meaningful way of resistance toward neoliberalism in the sense that its humor and satire based on collective reflexivity bring about kinds of laughter that enable people to overcome the fear of the dominant social order. Recently, there have been scholarly efforts among Korean scholars to tease out the social and cultural phenomena of social losers and discourses of “being surplus” (ingyŏ) (Paek UI 2013; Paek and Uhm 2011). My research contributes to this scholarship by shaping loser aesthetics into a lens through which Internet freaks see social changes and their statuses as social losers who are not successful in adjusting themselves to such changes. Simultaneously, however, this research examines the
formation of neoliberal subjects who embrace and at the same time disclose the consequences of neoliberalization through the impromptu voices of Internet freaks on DCinside.com.

1 DCinside.com, Field Site

My research participants are a group of active users of a website called “DCinside.com,” from within which its users consider the term “Internet freak” to have been coined (see my discussions on the stories about the “origin” of the Internet freak in chapter 3 and my translating of “p’yein” into “freak,” below). “DC” is an abbreviation for “digital camera,” “digital community,” “digital contents,” and “digital commerce” according to DCinside’s company introduction (DCinside). DCinside is known as the first and most popular anonymous Internet forum in South Korea. It began as a small-scale online shopping mall specializing in digital cameras as the digital camera started to become popular at the end of the 1990s.3 Despite its small size in terms of its technological infrastructure, i.e. such as server and bandwidth capacities, DCinside became famous because of high-quality product reviews for various brands of digital cameras that Internet users could find there, reviews produced not only by experts or employees of DCinside but also by the digital camera-using public. The community of gadget geeks and early adopters thus played an important role in the early days of DCinside. The DC Flea market of used devices on DCinside became popular as well among people who were attracted to DCinside because of their interests in digital cameras, photography, and composing images using graphics tools. The ability to share images online quickly led to people uploading posts that had nothing at all to do with digital cameras. The unruliness of the multifarious posts uploaded to DCinside soon led to its reputation as an online space where “anything goes.” DCinside has been popular with its various topics and themes which the company DCinside has left open and reflected in 1,700 galleries with different interests. The culture “anything goes” is also related to the way in which DCinside users communicate with each other. As I discuss in chapter 2, DCinside users have accepted even malicious comments and commenters as a part of DCinside culture. Coercive speaking styles and irrelevant posts and comments have been fine among DCinside users. Most

---

3 This online shopping mall was run by Yusik Kim, the founder and owner of DCinside. Kim had been a well-known commentator in online communities centered on the domestic networking services, networks which preceded the Internet in South Korea. See chapter 1 for more about the history of network technology in South Korea and the figures involved in its development.
of my interviewees ranked the freedom of being able to say whatever they liked in any style on DCinside. The fact that DCinside has not been based on membership, different from most of Korean Internet portals which also offer online community services, has played an important role in creating this culture. I translate this into the culture “anything goes.”

I define DCinside as a virtual world. It has four characteristics of the virtual world, as Tom Boellstorff et al (2012) describe them: virtual worlds are “places” having a “sense of worldness”; they are “multi-user in nature” as “shared social environments”; they are “persistent” despite the absence of any one participant; and “virtual worlds allow participants to embody themselves” as “avatars” (7). DCinside meets these four criteria including the last characteristic, of embodying oneself as an avatar, in the sense that DCinside users constitute their online personas through their posts via their user-nicknames. Boellstorff et al do not consider all networked environments to be virtual worlds. Social networking services such as Facebook and Myspace or “online communities sustained via chat forums or other media” do not qualify as virtual worlds in their definition because of the lack of a sense of worldness. While DCinside has features such as a web platform offering a bulletin board system for forums that create and sustain online communities, these might not meet the qualification of virtual worlds as Boellstorff et al characterize. I still consider DCinside as a virtual world, however, since DCinside users imagine DCinside as a world, an immense territory composed of various groups and parts, where they inhabit according to who they are in terms of different types of DCinside users. DCinside users have used terms like “tribe” that are indicative of the spatial metaphors used in describing what engaging with DCinside is like. As I discuss through the cartoon series The World of the Freak (p’yein ŭi segye) in chapter 3, DCinside users imagine themselves residing in DCinside, which shows a sense of worldness that is similar to Boellstorff et al’s conceptualization. An “object-rich environment that participants can traverse,” as Boellstorff et al describe virtual worlds, can be interpreted and applied more flexibly to explain the spatial imaginations of Internet users that is evident from my ethnographic data.

I also define DCinside as a site for publics and counterpublics building on Michael Warner’s conceptualizations of these categories. Warner (2002) defines a public as a “self-organized” (67) “relation among strangers” (74) “constituted through mere attention” (76). A public exists “only in relation to texts and their circulation” (Warner 2002:66). Warner differentiates “a public” from “the public” as a “social totality” in the modern “public sphere” as well as from “concrete”
groups such as audiences and crowds that exist in “visible space” (2002:65–66). Warner’s public is modeled on the “reading public” that is partially constitutive of modern society. It is an “indefinite audience rather than a social constituency that could be numbered or named” (2002:55–56).

DCinside users, as well as Internet users more broadly, exist as indefinite audiences that cannot be numbered or named. Some of them can be numbered through their user names, especially on websites requiring membership. Others cannot, on websites where they can be anonymous and exist as lurkers, like on DCinside. They can be found in the visible space of particular websites such as DCinside, but are still indefinite because of the virtuality of such space. They are organized by discourse and exist as an “ongoing space of encounter for discourse” (Warner 2002:90). Warner briefly discusses the changes that the Internet and other new media can bring about in the public sphere based on modern reading publics. Reading publics used to “only act in the temporality of the circulation that gives it existence” (Warner 2002:90). Web discourses, according to Warner, are organized as “continuous” rather than “punctual” as discourses based on print media used to be (2002:97–98). Ten more years of our experience of the Internet since Warner’s book was published can tell us that web discourse actually has features of punctual temporality in terms of “newly updated” posts with the specific post date and time. As the “ranking play” that I discuss in chapter 3 shows, the importance of punctuality is intensified in web discourse, while its features as continuous discourse still exist as well.

What makes the publics of a virtual world further and more consistently different from publics formed from print media is external frameworks beyond discourse and a stronger sense of membership than a reading public. Warner sees a public being organized by its own discourse rather than by external frameworks (2002:74). The publics of virtual worlds are formed in a similar way, by their own discourse, but, at the same time, can set boundaries through particular web platforms that are constructed beyond discourse. The website of DCinside.com, for example, was created and is maintained for publics created and organized through discourse on DCinside.

Further, the nature of the attention of a virtual world like DCinside is somewhat different from that of reading publics in that the attention of DCinside’s public is actively directed to follow up on updates of its discourse. A stronger sense of membership arises from this point, a shift away from the characteristics of modern publics based on print media; yet this sense of membership
itself has a certain punctuality to it. Despite the pull of membership of DCinside, to active attention to updating discourse, there is a countermovement in the sense that membership does not encompass DCinside users all the time, as social classes and certain imagined communities (like nations) do. They thus require more than the notional attention that a public requires in Warner’s conceptualization (2002:87). While a public creates a sense of membership and community, DCinside has a sense of membership and community that also involves a corporeal sense of place and worldness. While I consider DCinside to be a group of publics, I consider it as an online community in the context that it expresses a sense of membership and belonging. I also consider DCinside as a counterpublic / set of counterpublics following Warner’s definition, in the sense that they are aware of their subordinate status (Warner 2002:56). I discuss the possibilities of DCinside in terms of a counterpublic through its tension with dominant social norms in chapter 3 and chapter 4.

DCinside has defined certain Internet trends in Korea, such as the phenomenon of the Internet freak. Internet freak is a term which is both self-referential and self-deprecatory. The label “Internet freak” appeared on DCinside.com in 2002 and became popular through 2002 and later, following a previous trend called “absurdities” (yŏpki) (Kim YS 2004:74–75, 84). While there had been more specific kinds of individual Internet obsessions such as chatting and online games identified before, the Internet freak phenomenon reflected the way in which the Internet completely saturated and reconfigured the everyday life of ordinary people. “DC freak” (tisi p’yein) was another term that came into circulation, short for Internet freaks who spent a lot of time on DCinside. The DC freak depicted themselves as such, in sardonic tones, as part of their posts. The self-referentiality, self-deprecation, and irony involved replicated the reputation that DCinside had managed to cultivate for itself overall.

The DC freak emerged from the user community of DCinside referred to as “galleries,” which are based on a bulletin board system, where people can post comments or pictures or videos, and where other people can post replies to these posts. These galleries have been fertile ground for the production and reproduction of DCinside culture. The DCinside galleries became more popular than the DCinside digital camera shopping mall, such that DCinside has evolved into general Internet community portal and in fact shuttered its content service for digital cameras in 2011. As DCinside and its galleries became popular, the number of galleries in DCinside also increased. Currently, there are more than 1,700 galleries about various topics and interests, from
politics to individual regions of the country, TV broadcasting, celebrities, sports, food, pets, cartoons, online games, and topics about sex and sexuality. These galleries are maintained by the company DCinside as a part of its website. While the company DCinside does not require member subscription as mandatory to use the website DCinside, user activities in galleries are important for the company to sell advertisement spots (see chapter 5 for further discussions). Various types of multimedia texts have been shared in different galleries of DCinside since users of DCinside are active producers of online posts who are skilled in using digital cameras and related digital technologies. The galleries of DCinside are ideal places to learn about the culture of DC freaks. Among roughly 1,700 galleries, I focus on the following five galleries as concrete field sites for participant observation: 1) the Way of Nirvana (tŭkhaeh ŭi kil) gallery 2) the Hit (hit) gallery, 3) the Lee Joon Gi (Yi Chun’gi) gallery, 4) the Painter of the Wind (Param ŭi Hwawŏn) gallery, and 5) the Comedy (k’omedi) gallery.

The galleries Way of Nirvana and Hit are examined to answer the question of how the DC freak community has taken shape by using and reversing conventional images of the “loser.” These two galleries are helpful to understand the overall characteristics of the DCinside community since the posts of the two galleries are composed of those from all the galleries in DCinside. The Way of Nirvana gallery is arranged by the administrator of the company to introduce the cultures of DCinside. It lists up the most popular posts, characters, cartoons, events, and trends that have been created and been circulated and commented upon on DCinside. This gallery can be taken as a self-reflexive archive of the history of DCinside edited by the staff of the company DCinside. The Hit gallery is a less actively curated database which functions as a hall of fame, generated by counting the number of hits received by particular posts across all the galleries. It is not unusual to see comments written now to posts originally created and posted in 2001 since newcomers, wanna-be DC freaks, consider visiting the old posts of these two galleries as a “pilgrimage to the Holy Land” (sŏngji sullye). In this sense, these two galleries are still under ongoing construction. I analyze the images of DC freaks in their early days, the loser-like characters created and continuously used by DCinside users, and cartoons delineating the formation of the DC freak

---

4 The policies of DCinside also foster multimedia texts, especially images, by making image attachment mandatory when users upload their posts. If a post does not have an image, DCinside staff can delete it. To avoid the inconvenience of uploading images every single time they intend to upload a new post which they want to be text only, many galleries make a representative image that fits their themes and set up automatic attachment of this representative image. This process is referred to as “Preventing Deletion” (tchalim pangji or tchalbang as an abbreviation).
from the gallery Way of Nirvana. I examine posts from the gallery Hit to show the trends of DCinside culture. These posts show the ongoing interaction that takes place among different generations of DCinside users in the form of thick layers of accumulated texts, which might be a way in which Internet users exist. Those texts also show the most updated trends of DCinside culture, which focuses on the triviality of everyday life, including great and small failures, humorous moments or products, and feelings of being a “loser” (rujŏ) or “surplus (human)” (ingyŏ).

Lee Joon Gi, who is the focus of the third gallery, gained fame as an actor through the film *The King and the Clown* (Wang ŭi namja, Kwŏn WI 2005) in which Lee starred as Konggil, a jester who is a female impersonator in a troupe of entertainers. The gallery, named after Lee Joon Gi, opened on DCinside in 2006. The distinguishing features of this DCinside gallery, not only from other fan clubs of Yi elsewhere, but also from those idolizing other good-looking celebrities dominated by female fans, are its strong sexual codes and abrupt interactions within the gallery. The users of this gallery call themselves “Nunhwa” (elder sister) playing with conventions and stereotypes surrounding age, and both the power and marginalization that comes with advancing years (for women, especially) in South Korea. A significant portion of this takes place in the field of sexuality, as they express sexual desires for Lee in unconventional and aggressive ways. The users of the Lee Joon Gi gallery shape the Nunhwa character into a form of self-representation by using the same mask that Lee’s character wears in the movie to play female characters. Behind this mask, these elder sisters indulge in sexual pleasure with Lee virtually, which sometimes takes the tone of sexual harassment or rape. As famous characters created by DCinside users I examine in chapter 3 show, the representation of DCinside users is male-dominant in the sense that the main characters representing them are male. The character Nunhwa appeared as a gender-ambiguous character and became sensational in DCinside because of its “hard-core” cultures which are neither stereotypically masculine nor feminine. I examine the implications of the character Nunhwa and the excessive expressions of sexual desire in terms of the way in which DCinside users resist and challenge femininity and gender expectations.

I chose one of the TV drama galleries to see how existing media converge through the Internet, how new media environments are formed through the time-consuming practices of users as they deal with these media in everyday life, and how these new environments and user activities contribute to capitalist accumulation through media induced consumption. Before the Internet
appeared, watching TV was usually a family activity. The TV, located in the center of the living room, affected the whole structure of the house and the arrangement of furniture. The time for watching TV was determined by TV broadcasting companies, unless the audience recorded a video of the program. The Internet and personal computers changed people’s interaction with TV. TV itself has changed from a family get-together medium to a personal entertainment medium; there is no more need to compete with other family members to watch what one wants; the place of watching TV has moved from the living room, a family space, to the rooms of individual family members; there is no more need to adjust one’s schedule to a TV broadcast since one can easily download any TV show they want to see easily from the Internet. At the same time, however, watching TV has come to mean that audiences perform new duties: converting TV programs into digital formats, uploading/downloading/sharing digital files, and taking a part in the production processes of TV programs. TV companions are not only family members but also anonymous Internet users, and the meaning of watching TV has changed into producing content or active participation. I chose the Painter of the Wind gallery among the various TV drama galleries in DCinside. This drama was not a huge success in terms of its viewer ratings. Nevertheless, this drama was well known because of the activities of its fans. I examine a review book project of this drama that was published by its fans. I analyze how a collaborative working process came to be organized and how Internet users’ voluntary leisure activities contribute to the profit-making system in the media industry.

The Comedy gallery was originally a place where people shared interests in TV comedy shows. However, the characteristics of this gallery have changed into something that cannot be defined clearly with one theme. It is not a phenomenon that can only be found in the Comedy gallery but also in other galleries of DCinside. DC freaks upload numerous posts which are not necessarily related to a theme of a given gallery, which they call “excrement” (kūl ssagi) and “meaningless posts” or, roughly, “bullshit” (ppŏlgŭl). The Comedy gallery exhibits the extremes of this culture. The DCinside users in the Comedy gallery do not talk about only TV comedy shows any more. Instead, the gallery features posts about all issues, of varying topicality and import, along with a great deal of “bullshit.” The main theme of this gallery cannot be pointed out clearly since a variety of issues, which are not necessarily related to TV comedy shows, dominate the Comedy gallery. This is in contrast to other galleries that in general keep to their main themes (even though they address only peripherally related issues too). The topics and the speech styles in the
Comedy gallery are considered inappropriate by DCinside users in terms of the way that they use slanderous verbal attacks on each other, violate one another’s personal information, are rude, and offensive in terms of what DCinside users assess to be normative public morals. DCinside users who are interested in this kind of inappropriate pleasure in particular gather in the Comedy gallery, leading it to be noted as the “darkest slum” (makchang) from among the 1,700 galleries of DCinside.

I wanted to interview users of the Comedy gallery besides those from the Lee Joon Gi gallery and the Painter of the Wind gallery, but recruiting interviewees did not go well. I contacted several users who were active in the Comedy gallery and had a “gallog” (kaellogû). I contacted active users of the Comedy gallery through a guest book of their gallogs but did not hear back from any of the users I contacted. I did not recruit interviewees from the Comedy gallery more actively because I was worried about my personal information being forcefully exposed (sinsang t’ölgí), which has been one of the malicious acts on the Internet and considered as a sort of malicious fun and play popular on DCinside, especially in the Comedy gallery. I thought my status as a researcher doing research on DCinside might be good for DCinside users to mock. It was possible that my personal information, which could include my emails, photos, SNS accounts, and even personal information of my family members, could go public, which might jeopardize my entire field research. Yet a number of my interviewees—Beef-bone-broth, Eloquence, and Guitar-man—were users of the Comedy gallery. Beef-bone-broth, in particular, was active enough in the Comedy gallery that there had been constant attempts to expose her personal information, in vain. These three interviewees told me about their experience in the Comedy gallery. The Comedy gallery led me to understand better the DCinside culture “anything goes.”

These five galleries are just a small part of the totality of DCinside and its galleries. It is not possible to represent the entire culture of DCinside since each gallery has its own characteristics. However, there have been some commonalities which unite “DC-like” cultures based on their fondness of delineating poor and unpromising lives of “losers” and those who are “surplus” with by means of posts displaying “idiotic” tastes created in a deliberately shoddy style. I call the

---

5 Gallog is a personal account page when DCinside users subscribe for the membership of DCinside. DCinside started servicing gallog in 2007 when Korean government enforced the Internet real-name policy (int’ônet silnyôngje). If one signs in DCinside and uploads posts, their posts are archived in their gallogs. One can visit other users’ gallogs by clicking their user nick names.
latter styles “loser aesthetics,” a concept that I discuss in more detail in the following sections. This research aims to examine those aspects of the DCinside culture in relation to the social changes that have taken place under neoliberalization in South Korea. The unregulated culture of DCinside and Internet freaks can be a good lens through which we can observe people’s regulated and unregulated reactions toward neoliberal social changes.

2 Translating Internet Freak

I translate the Korean term “Internet p’yein” into “Internet freak” in English. There is no existing English term that translates easily from the Korean phrase Internet p’yein. The labels “computer geek” and “computer nerd” might have somewhat similar connotations but tend to indicate people who are gifted with technological skills. Internet p’yein covers broader ranges of Internet users. Some of them are probably gifted with technological skills but others might be just the Internet obsessed. P’yein is not the only term used to describe obsessive Internet users in Korea. Another term is “chungdok” (addiction) and “chungdokcha” (addict) for instance, which bears roughly similar connotations. Internet chungdok, which can be translated easily to the English term “Internet addiction,” has also been used as self-referential term by Korean heavy Internet users, but carries too much clinical and psychological usage in English to convey the appropriate inflections. As Korean Internet p’yein created a new self-referential label, I translate Internet p’yein into Internet freak. Internet freak can be an appropriate translation for the self-referential term “Internet p’yein” because it has the advantage of being a term one can use about oneself as well as about others in a disapproving fashion. Freak is also a word that some people have appropriated to refer to their own marginality, so it is similar to the re-purposing of the word “p’yein” in that respect.

Another reason why I decided to coin a new word instead of using the existing English term “Internet addiction/addict” is that an English-language market for a discussion of Internet addiction in South Korea has been formed and has become preoccupied with the term “Internet addiction.” Korean Internet addicts are represented as, for instance, a gamer without will power who killed himself by playing online games for days (BBC News 2005), as bad parents who left their newborn baby to starve to death (Associated Press 2010; Salmon 2010; Yoon SW 2010), as
an anti-social person in need of clinical treatment (Williamson 2011), as a murderer who kills his own nagging mother (Choe SH 2010), as young Internet addicted children (Lee YK 2012), and as slackers of the real world escaping into fantasy land (McCurry 2010). Similar to the odd surprise that tinges Western reports about the rapid development of the Korean Internet (Cho HJ 2007:29–32), emphasizing extreme problems in terms of self-regulation implies that Koreans (and people from other non-western countries like China) do not have appropriate experiences, skills, or social systems to control advanced technologies.6

The word “freak” is more relevant in translating p’yein because it connotes the following: on the one hand, having a kind of an obsession (like “addict”) with something. It is sometimes, in English, used interchangeably with “fan,” usually a fan pretty far along the scale of interest regarding whatever it is they are a fan of. But it can also indicate a kind of marginality, like the term “burnout” indicating someone who has become somewhat addled from the use of too many drugs, a term with certain connotations involving addiction, but without the clinical overtones or parallels with Orientalist Western mass media fixation on Asians who cannot handle their technology.

A part of the complex nuances of translating Internet p’yein from Korean to English is the fact that p’yein in Korean itself has complex meanings. P’yein refers to a kind of malaise or stupor of body and mind that can be the result of medical illness and/or substance addiction, but also of a variety of personal difficulties, from lovesickness to certain devastating personal events. Contemporary connotations have roots in Korean modern literature of the early twentieth century in connection with tuberculosis (p’eryŏm or p’eybyŏng). Tuberculosis was used as a metaphor for youth, purity, and passion while creating lonely and sensitive modern subjects, and people became p’yein because of it in the 1910s and 1920s during the Japanese colonial period (Lee SY 2004:274–275). Famous Korean writers in the colonial period such as Yi Sang and Kim You-Jeong, both of whom died young from tuberculosis, also contributed to creating romanticized

6 Discourses of Internet addiction have also emerged and grown in North America. The term “Internet addiction” has been used to indicate the indulgence of Internet usage in English as a self-referential term in the Internet user community as well as a clinical term by psychiatrists and psychologists. In the former case, the term “addiction” is used as a first-person description to express they have a deep connection to or reliance on online game, SNSs, iPad apps, or other new technologies and are members who understand the pleasures of those technologies (Nardi 2010:125-6; Schweingruber and Hostmeier 2013:207). Internet addiction as a clinical and pathological term has been conceptualized in the realm of psychology. The very first attempt was the research of Kimberly Young, which suggested eight diagnostic categories and examined three main addiction areas such as online affairs, student Internet abuse, and employee Internet abuse (1996).
images of pathological modern intellectuals who were capable and passionate but became useless and helpless in their colonial homeland. Korean Internet users resurrected the word “p’yein” to refer to themselves in a kind of ironic fashion where they were obsessed with using the Internet, an advanced technology but, at the same time, found themselves somewhat helpless and useless in the real world.\textsuperscript{7}

The label “Internet p’yein” appeared on DCinside in 2002. The label was coined by DCinside users as first-person description to refer to themselves and their obsessive activities on the Internet. As Internet p’yein became popular, the word “p’yein” became combined with other words to indicate obsessions with different areas such as TV dramas (“Tamo p’yein”), online games (“sū’t’a p’yein” or “wau p’yein”), and even state examinations to be a government employee or a lawyer (“kosi p’yein”). The expanded usage of the word “p’yein” as a suffix shows increasing public interest in the areas in which this suffix is used. Following the rapid growth of the Internet user community, individual users’ time spent on the Internet was also increasing. Playing on the Internet is one thing. If individual users are using the Internet through digital devices such as computer and smart phone at work and study, working time is also connected to the Internet, which enables them to be connected to the Internet almost all day, every day. The change of technological devices used at work and play reshapes lifestyles of individual Internet users. They work on their computer and the Internet through email, the intranets of their companies, and office tools. They spend their leisure time on their computer and the Internet by being involved in chatting, SNSs, online-games, and so on. The change of lifestyle brings about the increasing usage of the Internet. Internet users started recognizing their obsession in using the Internet and calling themselves “Internet freak” humorously. The label has a number of different nuances. While it acknowledges they use the Internet “too much” with literally negative connotations, it simultaneously expresses their deep engagements in the Internet user community, particularly DCinside, with positive connotations. They know how things work on DCinside because they spend a lot of time on it. They know how to enjoy the culture of DCinside because they are core members, they are insiders. They humorously lament their excessive usage of the Internet, usage not related to their work and study. At the same time,

\textsuperscript{7} In chapter 2 and chapter 3, I discuss other labels such as “the pathetic” (tchijirï), “otaku” (ot’ak’u), and “surplus” (ingyŏ) which have been used broadly in DCinside as well as other Internet user communities. These labels resemble, replace, and supplement Internet p’yein. They are similar in the sense that they are terms of self-referentiality and express helplessness, but with wit and humor.
however, they also express a kind of pride with being Internet obsessed. The slighting labels “unknown” (tūt-po-chap: tūtto podo mot han chap nom) and “newbie” (nyubi) referring to people who are not known as active users or newcomers demonstrate pride in being heavy users.8

By translating Internet p’yein into Internet freak, I aim to emphasize the ways in which Internet freaks form their cultures and communities based on self-referential mockery, humor, and laughter. While the slighting nuance of the label “freak” shows that Internet freaks are influenced by the ways in which the outside world evaluates productivity and usefulness in people, this label does not simply resonate with such evaluations. Instead, it twists and makes fun of such evaluations and creates different angles through which Internet users can see themselves differently and make meaning of what they are doing on the Internet. The unique culture of Internet freaks is formed from this standpoint.

3 Subjects, Technologies, and Politics: Theoretical Considerations

My main interest is examining how the two significant changes of the Internet development and the socio-economic restructuring of neoliberalism are related to and have affected each other in South Korea. I explore the development of the Internet, the growth of online user communities and cultures, and the formation of neoliberal subjects as South Koreans have become Internet users. Particularly, this research focuses on users of DCinside who represent themselves as social losers by means of self-referential mockery. My research interest relates closely to the literature which examines neoliberal social changes and subject formation, the implications of ICTs within new modes of capitalist production, the history of the development of the Internet, and online user communities and cultures. The literature which has been inspirational in articulating the political meanings of ICTs, online space, and Internet user activities is also of interest to me. I review the literature relevant to this research in three main categories: ethnographies of the formation of neoliberal subjects; ethnographies of online user communities and cultures; and

8 I discuss the DCinside culture of harshness with new users in chapter 4 in more detail.
theories of politics of aesthetics, which brings about the fundamental changes in the sensible, mainly focusing on the work of Jacques Rancière and Mikhail Bakhtin.

3.1 Becoming Neoliberal Subjects

The rapid changes of politico-economic conditions that South Korea has gone through since the Asian financial crisis is a part of the global transition of capitalism which has been under way since the 1970s. Marxist scholars have dealt with neoliberalism by trying to examine this new political agenda and the rationale for it, while their analyses of Fordism and post-Fordism mainly focuses on the changing mode of capitalist production in the economic structure (Clarke 2004; 2005; Peck and Tickell 2002). Foucauldian scholars have also analyzed neoliberalism, by means of the concepts of governmentality and of technologies of the self, approaches which shed light on the links between individual action and structural change (Burchell 1996; Dean 1999; Foucault 1978, 1988; Gordon 1991; Hindess 2004; Lemke 2001, 2002; Rose 1999). Jesook Song, in her book *South Koreans in the Debt Crisis: The Creation of a Neoliberal Welfare Society* (2009), engaging in both Marxist and Foucauldian studies of neoliberalism, conceptualizes it as “a social ethos as much as a political-economic logic and a variant form of liberal social governing” (10). As Song illuminates, the Foucauldian study of governmentality is useful in unpacking “technologies of (neo)liberal governing” and the formation of “governable subjects”; on the other hand, the Marxist study of the capitalist state can offer better tools to explain “the consequences of (neo)liberal governing in the capitalist labor market” (2009:12).

Anthropologists have contributed to scholarly efforts to tease out the social transformation brought about by neoliberalism in terms of a “structural force that affects people’s lives and life-chances” as well as an “ideology of governance that shapes subjectivities” (for a comprehensive review on anthropological scholarship engaging in neoliberalism as well as criticism on neoliberalism as an analytical category, see Tejaswini Ganti 2014. Also, see Bonnie McElhinny 2010 for a review on linguistic anthropological work focusing on neoliberalism and affective labor). Of particular interest to me is the way in which individuals subjectify themselves in relation to labor in the flexible labor regime of post-Fordism, which is notorious for proceeding with jobless growth.
Most of my interviewees were underemployed youth. While their existence as DCinside users seemingly has nothing to do with employment and labor because they are considered as Internet users and their activities to amount to leisure, as I analyze in chapter 2, chapter 3, and chapter 5, being an Internet freak and uploading posts are deeply related to their socio-economic status of being underemployed, with an excess of surplus time. The way in which Internet freaks find a sort of self-fulfillment as creative subjects by means of their production in online space gestures to the way in which voluntary labor is mobilized through people’s yearnings for social belonging (Muehlebach 2012). It also resonates with the way in which public discourse on youth unemployment targets youth as a surplus population “who could create new commodities and new job markets—including their own jobs—to compete with global capitalism” (Song JS 2009:21). Song interrogates through homelessness and youth unemployment how the Korean new welfare system categorizes and nurtures new desirable and undesirable subjects who are divided into those who deserve and do not deserve state welfare (2009). Song analyzes how certain groups of youth were considered “promising” as “new intellectuals” or “creative contributors” while others, labeled as “good-for-nothing” (paeksu), were disparaged because they did not effectively contribute to the new flexible labor regime and knowledge economy (2009:xi-xii). My research delves deeper into those people who considered undesirable, who are separated out into the good-for-nothing, in ways similar to those of Song’s ethnography.

While the less competent and less “self-manageable/self-enterprising” underemployed youth have been excluded from the class of “desirable” subjects who deserve more privileges like neoliberal government welfare, in fact, they have contributed to the knowledge economy of late capitalism as producers of content by offering their “immaterial labor” force for free, like many DCinside users. I define immaterial labor following Maurizio Lazzarato’s conceptualization of immaterial labor as activities producing “cultural content” as well as “informational content” and skills involving cybernetics and computer control (Lazzarato 1996:133). Tizianna Terranova (2000) takes Lazzarrato’s concept of immaterial labor further by examining immaterial labor in terms of free labor appropriated by the digital economy. Internet users’ activities including those of DCinside users fit into “free labor” as Terranova defines in terms of being “unpaid” as well as being “not imposed” (Terranova 2000:48). My research, particularly chapter 5, scrutinizes this new mode of exploitation under the post-Fordist mode of production.
The concept of neoliberalism which Song addresses from both Marxist and Foucauldian perspectives is relevant in analyzing social changes in South Korea that have occurred over the last two decades. It is not because South Korea has similarly passed, as in the west, from early liberalism to current neoliberalism. Rather, as Song points out, liberal ideas can be circulated without state endorsement of liberal democracy. In addition, capital transaction penetrates different global sites including many late industrial countries with similar language that express changes to the market and labor, language based on notions of flexibility, adaptability, and self-governing, which is crucial to the circulation of neoliberal commodities and technologies (Song JS 2009:11).

Scholars of Korean studies have examined the formation of neoliberal subjects in the context of a broad range of themes, social groups, phenomena, and milieus, including consumers of self-empowerment culture (Seo DJ 2009, 2011), educational manager mothers (Park SJ 2007, 2011), IMF homeless and new intellectuals (Song JS 2009), multiculturalism (Jun ER 2012; Paik YG 2011), Christian evangelical missionaries (Han JH 2011), and sexuality (Yi HY 2010). Scholarly efforts analyzing the configuration of subjectivity under the neoliberal restructuring of South Korea mark attempts to delineate the contours of Korean society, which have changed rapidly since democratization in 1987 in terms of the deregulation of the economy, political engagement under civilian governments, and the growth of a culture of self-empowerment, in the words of Seo (2009:24–25).

My research contributes to this scholarship, focusing on Korean Internet users as subjects who embody neoliberal norms. DCinside users delineate unpromising lives and “pathetic” aspects of “losers” and “surplus (humans)” by means of self-reflexive mockery. While DCinside users constitute a counterpublic in the sense that they conflict with the dominant norms of neoliberal South Korea as well as in the fact that they are aware of their “subordinate status” (Warner 2002:56, 119), they are also neoliberal subjects who try to improve their market values by, for example, pursuing higher education and degrees while feeling responsible for themselves. While they are fond of social losers who are not good looking in a normative way, which can be interpreted as resistance to the judgment of look in relation to lack of self-care skills, some of my

---

9 “Being pathetic” is an English translation of the Korean expression “tchijil hada” or “chijil hada.” This expression became popular among Internet users to indicate a situation or a person in some sense lacking in dignity, or the shameful or embarrassed emotion arising from or within such a situation or person. The popularity of this expression reflects the social atmosphere and users’ shared feelings toward their lives.
interviewees highly concern about their look in a form of self-mocking criticism. Even if they resist ethics of self found in the judgement of look in South Korea (I discuss about it in more detail in chapter 2), the technique and responsibility of social governing fall back onto individual shoulder (Lim IS 2004; Tae HW 2012). While they resist capitalist logic of monetary value by looking for alternatives such as good feeling, reputation, attention, and fun through their online communities, DCinside users collude in the ideology of enjoyment (jouissance) which, according to Slavoj Žižek, results in conformity to the capitalist order in compensation for small transgressions. (Song JS 2014:110). Song articulates the way in which enjoyment becomes important ground for former leftist student activists to identify themselves as “liberal personhood” (Song JS 2014:65–66). Song points out that their low-paid part-time positions are not only because of the “structural discrimination against women and former student activists” but also because of their own need to enjoy both job and lifestyles although they have to pay for their choice by enduring “single households in low-quality dwellings” (Song JS 2014:66). Eunwoo Joo, in his article about freedom and consumption of South Korea in the 1990s, argues that enjoyment became forceful demand which results in frustration, anxiety, and oppression under the name of enjoyment (2010:337–338). Voluntary, reciprocal, and creative labor of DCinside users play an important role in enabling them to live with some dignity in terms of fulfilling their desire for being creative and useful. While they are working hard for enjoyment, their free labor contributes to the mode of production based on jobless growth which makes their living conditions even more insecure causing frustration and anxiety. Such contrasts shed light on ambivalent positions of DCinside users as neoliberal subjects who try to be qualified for desirable subjects but, at the same time, are aware of the possibility of being a failure, which brings about critique of neoliberal consequences.

3.2 The Medium is the Message: What is the Message of the Internet and the Internet Freak?

Marshall McLuhan’s famous argument “the medium is the message” is insightful in the sense that the format of a given medium affects, changes, and shapes our life in various ways. The railway affected and changed the previous scale of human functions and created new kinds of cities, work, and leisure. The newness the railway created started to dissolve when the airplane
appeared. The content itself, what railway and airplane carried, did not really affect what these new media created according to McLuhan. Similarly, McLuhan sees the message of the medium “electric light” as like the message of electric power in industry. The messages of those media are separate from their uses but both eliminate factors relating to time and space in human association (McLuhan 1994:8–9).

As electronic light and power did, the Internet also accelerates the previous scale of human functions and eliminates time and space factors. It offers the means to enhance the speed and efficiency of the existing mode of production. Different from the producing technologies of industrial capitalism, the Internet distributes control into the hands of individuals (Gee et al 1996:5, 29). This new telecommunication technology, which began as a U.S military project during the Cold War era, became open to public and private usage in 1991, resulting in an enormous surge of Internet use (Abbate 1999:2; Mueller 2002:1–2). The number of Internet hosts increased from 727,000 in 1991 to 14,532,000 in 1995 (Cerf 1999 in Castells 2000:376). Grassroots online communities based on an increase of Internet users grew fast, which brought about social interest in “cyberspace” as a virtual society in which different values and orders from those of the real world can be experimented with (Rheingold 1993; Turkle 2005). In addition to the rapid growth of Internet users and communities, the commercial usage of the Internet grew fast as well. The dot-com industry as a new economic area was born and grew rapidly, reaching total revenues of over $500 billion in the US by the end of 1999 (Castells 2000:150). However, a more fundamental implication of the Internet on the existing industry can be found in the application of this technology to the globalization of finance capital. Thanks to the rapid development of ICTs including the Internet, global stock markets came to be united within a singular time slot encompassing the entire world, and became much more flexible as well. While manufacturing and its labor market become more and more dispersed, production related services like accounting, finance, and management became more and more centralized in large global cities which have similar functions and roles for a “combination of spatial dispersion and global integration” (Sassen 1991:3).

However, McLuhan overlooked the fact that the same medium can also become different messages when it interacts with given cultures in different locales. The medium, which conveyed messages of militarized national security in the Cold War era along with the emergence of counter culture (Turner 2006:14, 28–32), created messages of national prosperity, the
cosmopolitics of engineers, and the emergence of (net) citizenship out of authoritarian military dictatorship in its early days of 1980s and up until the middle of 1990s. In chapter 1, I tease out the strata of accumulated messages of the Internet in South Korea during the period, beginning in 1982 when networking technologies that were the precursor to “the Internet” were set up in South Korea for the first time, to 2011, the year to which my ethnographic data stretched.

The Internet boom and its expansion since the late 1990s in South Korea can be understood in relation to neoliberalization. New ICTs including the Internet have mediated new subjectivity formation as well as political economic changes of neoliberal capitalism. Social reconstruction after the Asian financial crisis marked an attempt to react to changing environments of global capitalism. The Internet as a high-tech medium was also called for to resolve the economic crisis, in collaboration with other resolutions such as downsizing, financial mergers, and de-regularizing employment for the purposes of a more flexible labor market, but under the names “new economy” or “knowledge economy” (Kim DJ 1998; Choi and Kim 2005:28–29; Seo DJ 2009:36–37). Composing discourses on the Internet means constituting a “social imaginary” of the national future in which the nation itself becomes re-imagined and reinforced. The Internet boom in South Korea under neoliberal reconstruction after the Asian financial crisis is the process within which a new social imaginary on the economy was formed to legitimate a new political rationale related to contemporary economic changes (Seo DJ 2009:62–67).

While the Internet boom constructs new governing ideologies for the whole population, these ideologies are realized through the governing of the self. People conduct political economic restructuring by answering to the request to be new desirable subjects suitable for the new market environment: free individuals seeking self-fulfillment, creative producer-consumers, and entrepreneurs. Using the Internet becomes a practice for individuals to transform themselves into new desirable neoliberal subjects, as well as a technology of the self for the purposes of self-fulfillment. As the popular label “netizen” used among Internet users implies, the new subjects, users of new ICTs, emerged as technology-savvy, creative producers of new online culture, and autonomous citizens realizing liberal democracy.

Anthropologists have examined the new terrain that digital media open with a wide range of different inquiries into phenomena such as virtual worlds and the virtual self (Boellstorff 2008; Turkle 2005), immaterial labor and changing modes of production (Bermejo 2011; Gee et al
1996), open source software and hackers (Coleman 2013; Kelty 2008), social networking services (Miller 2011), cell phone novel (Lukács 2013), and online gaming (Nardi 2010) (For a review on anthropological literature of digital media, see E. Gabriella Coleman 2010). I engage in the themes of this scholarship to unpack the consequences of the rapid development of the Korean Internet as well as the community and culture of Internet freaks. I question what implications online space has on the restructuring of the off-line world, what work can mean in the context of a flexible labor regime, how moral frameworks of Internet users in terms of sharing information for free can be appropriated by capitalist exploitation, what stories of self-branding via social networking services can tell us about the political economic conditions of South Korea, and how activities of Internet users, in particular those of DCinside users, can create politics that react to the structural violence of neoliberalism.

My ethnography deals with the productive activities of DCinside users. Active participation of Internet users shares many commonalities with that of fans of popular culture. Fandom has played a leading role in creating the culture of participation and cultural production of audiences of popular culture while constituting themselves as media publics. ICTs have enhanced the prototype of cultural production that fandom has created on a large scale. As Henry Jenkins provocatively claims, “Fandom represents the experimental prototype, the testing ground for the way media and culture industries are going to operate in the future” (Jenkins, 2007:361). As such, as the Internet has expanded into ever-deeper expanses of social life, fandom itself has pushed into these expanses along with it. My own research seeks to tease out vernacular cultures of digital media in relation to the expansion of fandom into everyday practice. The literature of fandom studies, therefore, offers crucial theoretical insights for my research.

Fandom studies have addressed many of the implications that digital media have had on fandom (Baym 2000; Booth 2010; Gray et al. 2007; Hellekson and Busse, 2006; Hills, 2002; Jenkins 2006; Ross 2008), including those related to the effects of the Internet’s spatiotemporal transformations on fandom, in particular. Studies of TV fandom are particularly relevant for my research. TV fandom has been one of the venues in which the active participation of audiences and fans has been explored. Anthropologists also have delved deeply into the experiences of TV audiences and industry (Abu-Lughod 2005; Appadurai 1991; Ginsburg et al 2002; Lukács 2010; Mankekar 1999). My participant observation and analyses of audience/fan communities about the TV drama Painter of the Wind, which I discuss in chapter 5, engage in the existing...
scholarship on TV audiences and fandom. In addition, I join recent scholarly attempts to unveil the implications of new ICTs, especially the Internet, on existing mass media (Jenkins 2006; Hellekson and Busse 2006; Bury 2005). My ethnography focuses on the role of the Internet in shaping its users into fans and more active audiences.

While the Internet can be used on different devices especially smartphone nowadays, I mainly focuses on computer (desktop and laptop) connected to the Internet. I conducted my field research from 2008 to 2009. During this time, smartphone was not popular yet in South Korea that none of my interviewees used the Internet on their phones. Besides computer and the Internet, digital camera was one of the popular devices for my interviewees. When I discuss the Internet usage in this research, it mainly involves in computer, broadband Internet, and digital camera.

3.3 Politics of Aesthetics in Carnivalesque Online Space

Throughout this dissertation, I try to illuminate the culture of Internet freaks and to find the political meanings of technologically mediated cultural practices. I may need to admit my tendency of romanticism toward DCinside and Internet freaks, of in some ways thinking of the Internet as “good” and of neoliberalism as “bad.” Bonnie McElhinny sounds a warning to researchers against implicitly harboring such good/bad binaries (2012:253):

Like Martin, I want to say that “there is no vantage point from which I can say confidently that the developments that I have described are ‘good’ or ‘bad’” (1994, 249). The challenge as progressive scholars is not to sort the conservative concepts from the progressive ones, the tainted from the pure. Indeed, many scholars note how progressive intellectuals often reproduce structures of inequality and domination (Bauman and Briggs 2003 xi; see also Amit 2000; Inoue 2007; Song 2009; Strathern 2000). We are asked, however, to consider the range of uses of concepts that can be harnessed to many ends. We can neither celebrate as liberatory, or condemn as contaminated, CofPs [community of practice], or any of a range of other methods emerging from, as they study, changing social contexts. Instead, we need to be attentive to the romances linked with any such terms or methods—here, romances of community, flexibility, choice, consensus, local, individual, similarity, innovation—and ask whose interests are served, in given instances, by such terms.
I am aware of the romanticism in my own work. My tendency to consider the consequences of neoliberalism to be “bad” is based on my own experience and observation of how people’s livelihoods have been threatened by neoliberal restructuring and governing. Moreover, ideologies of neoliberalism such as the financialization of everything and the claims attached to this agenda which says that this is the best way to advance human well-being, flexible labor regimes and the attendant increase in insecurity of individual lives (the unacknowledged dark side to its claim of increasing freedom for self-sufficient subjects), and market fundamentalism, continue to fail to prove themselves. My discontent with the consequences of neoliberalism and its false advertising of itself leads me to keep thinking about what alternatives there might be while, at the same time, I try hard to improve my own human capital to be up to the adequate standard in case the rumor of invincible capitalism is true. I suspected that it was not only myself that was unhappy with neoliberal livelihood and found the discontent of Internet freaks to be similar to my own. I interpret the loser aesthetics of DCinside culture as meaningful resistance to neoliberal governing.

This does not mean that I see Internet freaks and DCinside culture only in a single, romanticized way. As much as I see their discontent and resistance to neoliberal social orders, I also see them as subjects yearning and trying to make themselves self-sufficient and empowered, thus embodying a neoliberal social ethos and (sometimes) succeeding in increasing their human capital. If I am weighted toward the latter aspect, the same phenomena which I interpret as discontent and resistance can be reinterpreted as implying different meanings. Internet freaks’ self-mocking practices can be discerned as a gesture toward entering the mainstream by accumulating “creative cultural capital” by means of being good at loser aesthetics, for example.

Being a neoliberal subject then means experiencing and living both of these processes. While individuals try to fulfill neoliberal norms, they experience the discrepancy between neoliberal ideologies and failures of such ideologies. The formation of neoliberal subjectivities, in this sense, is an on-going process of negotiating, contesting, and reconfiguring. I cannot help being romantic about the democratic possibilities of ICTs and online space. However, I can keep my romance in check by means of engagement and by means of effective use of explicitly non-romantic tools of engagement. These include my attempts to consider the development of the Korean Internet and Internet freak culture “in relation to the collective historical processes and
struggles” (Hennessy 2000:121) and articulate them in a “historically or socially precise” manner (McElhinny 2003:32).

To illuminate the political meanings of Internet freak culture, Jacques Rancière’s theory of “politics of aesthetics” is useful. “Configurations of experience” bring about “new modes of sense perception and novel forms of political subjectivity” according to Jacques Rancière (2004:9). For Rancière, according to Žižek (2004:69–70), political struggle is the “struggle for one’s voice to be heard and recognized as the voice of a legitimate partner” so that the excluded can speak for themselves and enable “their claims” to “have a legitimate place” in social space. The activities of Internet users change what Rancière calls “the distribution of the sensible,” defined in his conceptualization of the political, as “the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it” (2004:12). By examining the phenomenon of the Internet freak by means of Rancière’s notion of “politics of aesthetics,” I show how powerless—from conventional perspectives and evaluations—groups under neoliberalism are able to find ways to speak out and make their voices audible through the use of new ICTs and by being speakers and audiences for themselves.

While Rancière’s work offers good conceptual tools to interrogate the implications of posts produced by DCinside users, what is missing from Rancière’s work in terms of illuminating my subject-matter is why it should be such “loser-like” characters and deliberately shoddy styles that constitute these aesthetics, not something else. Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of carnival can be used to shed light upon this. Just like the Internet freak, the various characters which are produced, circulated, and are popular on DCinside are comic, absurd, and grotesque figures, which shape DCinside into a space similar to “the feast of fools” and “the feast of the ass” which Bakhtin praises in his theory of the carnival (1984:5). In the carnival, giants, dwarfs, monsters, clowns, and fools who were considered degrading in the existing official world take center stage, ruling the time of the carnival with laughter. Laughter overcomes fear which is inspired by the mystery of the world and by power. The laughing truth degrades power through curses and abusive words (Bakhtin 1984:90–3). This is what I find laughers burst in DCinside also gesture to.
4 Methodologies

The ethnographic data I analyze here are based on 17 months field research on DCinside.com in South Korea from 2008 to 2009. During my fieldwork period, I lived in Ilsan, Gyeonggi-do, a new town which is located 40 minutes away from Seoul, the capital of South Korea. Most of my online participation happened through the broadband Internet where I lived. I had meetings with my interviewees at locations in Seoul most times because most of my interviewees lived in Seoul or towns near Seoul. All the events like fan meetings, movie screening, and theatricals I attended in relation to my research were also held in Seoul. I traveled to other towns such as Icheon in Gyeonggi Province (No-rain) and Daejeon metropolitan city (Perfect-rose) for in-person interviews. I slept over at No-rain’s farmhouse while helping with the busy farming season (we wrapped peaches on the tree with paper backing to protect them from birds and worms) and spent five hours with Perfect-rose at a restaurant and café in Daejeon.

The data-collection methods of this research included archival research, participant observation, and in-depth interviews. Archival research was not meant to supplant ethnographic methods, but was crucial for research examining an Internet community and its users in the sense that the activities and interactions of the users in a given Internet community are happening and are kept in the form of texts. As discussed above, community activities of Internet freaks on DCinside happen in the galleries through various interest groups. Among around 1,700 galleries, this research focuses on the five galleries noted above as concrete field sites for participant observation. While focusing on the five galleries, I perused other parts of DCinside including other galleries, DC News, DC Interviews, and the DC Flea market of used devices to explore the broader scenery of the DCinside community. My wandering and perusing on DCinside can be called “doing DCinside” (tisijil) or more specifically being a “lurker” (nunt'ing)” since I usually only read other people’s posts rather than uploading my own posts. Participant observation of different galleries required mainly reading updates in each gallery, occasionally uploading my own posts, and commenting on other people’s posts. Participant observation conducted on the Internet shares commonality with archival research since most websites and online communities exist and express themselves in the form of texts. Reading new updates easily led me to check back with posts originally posted in the past, which I consider to be the archive of interactions among DCinside users. The archive of web texts enabled me to conduct participant observation on the presence of the past in the form of interactive texts and communications.
I met my interviewees through my participant observation. I got to know about individual DCinside users while I read their posts. I contacted active users of each gallery who led special events or who uploaded many posts which got many comments and a number of views from other gallery users. DCinside users call themselves “gallers” since most of their activities are based on galleries. For example, users of the Lee Joon Gi gallery call themselves and are called by other gallery users “Joon gallers” (chun kaellŏ). Users of the Painter of the Wind gallery are called, for example, “PaWin gallers” (pahwa kaellŏ). Users of the Comedy gallery are called “Co gallers” (k’o kaellŏ). Hereafter, I use these labels for different “gallers” depending on the contexts that I am describing in the following chapters. I contacted DCinside users I wanted to interview through their gallogs, which means I could not contact users who do not post under signed in membership. However, contacting people through gallogs did not gain good results. Either I got no replies, or rejections that were not very kind (see my discussions on the culture of being harsh on newbies on DCinside in chapter 4) as if I was a person who had “never known and heard” (tüpajo, short for tütt po do mot han chapkŏt), which was true since I had been a lurker on DCinside, consistent with how I usually conduct myself on different online communities. I built rapport by attending events held in the offline world and by volunteering for a collaborative project. Through the two galleries Lee Joon Gi and Painter of the Wind, it was possible for me to contact other users since users of each gallery have close ties with each other. Once I had a couple of interviewees in both the galleries, I could benefit from snow-balling effects since my interviewees introduced me to other gallers who became my interviewees too. I conducted interviews in both online (using instant messenger) and offline spaces (mostly cafés and restaurants). I kept the original form of texts including emoticons and acronyms such as “lol” (ㅋㅋㅋ or ㅎㅎㅎ in Korean) when I translated interviews conducted through online chatting. Conducting both online and offline interviews enabled me to understand the interplay between online and offline spaces better.

Regarding the demographic information of my interviewees, I contacted 37 people, got approval from 23 people, and interviewed all of those 23 in DCinside. Sixteen people were from the two galleries Lee Joon Gi and Painter of the Wind, but they also participated in other galleries. The other seven people defined themselves as all-around players of DCinside. In total, my respondents were composed of 20 women and three men. The higher percentage of women results from my focus on specific galleries; a gallery for a TV drama and a fan community
revolving around admiration for a good-looking actor. The composition of the interviewees could have limited my access to the masculine and macho aspects of DC freak culture. While it might have been possible for me to choose some more male dominant galleries, those male dominant galleries like the Comedy gallery tend to have less intimate ties, if they are not strongly against friendship among gallers, which means restricted contact with interviewees and lack of opportunities to build rapport.\textsuperscript{10} I tried to resolve this limitation by expanding my participant observation into other galleries even though I could not recruit interviewees there. My interviewees who I met in the galleries that I focused upon and who were also active in other galleries helped me to understand those galleries better. My interviewees are composed of two high school students, one drop-out teenager, seven college students in their twenties, three people in their twenties having temporary contract positions with an average monthly salary of US$ 1000,\textsuperscript{11} two people in their thirties having permanent full-time positions, one person in her thirties running her own small business, one freelance fashion coordinator in her twenties, and two part-time workers. These freelance and part-time workers can be considered members of the $800 Generation, earning less than US$ 1000 a month, a group which I examine in chapter 2. The remaining four people, in their mid-and late-twenties, were unemployed at that time and trying to get a job. In addition to my interviewees from DCinside, I included my interview with Kilnam Chon, a Korean engineer who set up the Internet in South Korea to illuminate the history of Korean Internet development in chapter 1.

5 Outline of the Dissertation

In chapter 1, I delineate a history of Internet technology, one going against the grain of a widely circulated, standardized history emphasizing government initiatives and technological prowess. I begin by acknowledging the role of technological advancement in key social discourses that have motivated national projects going back to South Korea’s developmental years. I then use the concept of the “figure” to help me demonstrate, first, the important role

\textsuperscript{10} One of the ways in which DCinside users differentiate DCinside from other online community services such as Daum Café and Cyworld is that users on DCinside do not promote friendship (\textit{ch’innokji\kumji}). This claim is not true considering what is actually going on in different galleries. As I discuss more in detail in chapter 1, online user communities have grown fast and large in South Korea. The claim “prohibition of promoting friendship” on DCinside is a reaction to the dominant Internet culture promoting friendship.

\textsuperscript{11} Throughout the dissertation, I use USD as a currency unit.
of engineers in pushing forward with initial stages of Internet technology in the 1980s and early 1990s, including the political visions that they articulated; then go on to delineate the multifarious figures that appeared as the Internet exploded both in a technological sense and in the sense of its cultural meanings. Through acting as online figures, including the “netizen,” “avatars,” and “malicious Internet commenters,” I show how the Internet has been a rich field within which Koreans have grappled with both the meaning of rapidly spreading ICTs, and of the advance of neoliberal agendas in the aftermath of the 1997 Asian financial crisis.

Chapter 2 elaborates the political economic conditions of Internet freak youth, the focal point of this research. Most of my interviewees who were active participants of DCinside were youth in their teens, twenties, and early thirties even though I did not limit my interview group to youth at the outset of my research. This shows the position of youth as the core group of Internet activities. I do not take it for granted why youth are most active participants and producers in online space by assuming it is natural that young generations are keener about new technologies. Instead, I analyze their active online participation in relation to their politico-economic conditions such as underemployment despite being highly-educated, the increasing insecurity of their livelihoods, and the pervasive social anxiety that their middle-class status must be defended. I articulate features which enable Internet freak culture based on how it is constituted (i.e. via loser aesthetics) by examining generation discourses, the popular buzzword “surplus,” and the individual stories of my interviewees.

In chapter 3, I delve deeper into the themes I explore in chapter 2 by closely looking into posts that DCinside users have produced and uploaded. Particularly, I examine posts which delineate features of the Internet freak themselves, as well as other absurd, “DC-like” characters including haehor, tchijiri, otaku, and surplus. Photos of Internet freaks, two cartoon series, and composite images of DCinside characters consist of the main data I analyze. By focusing on the way in which DCinside users have created their own loser-like online personas and aesthetics, I elaborate the implications of self-mocking subjecthood, which opens up a carnivalesque space where social losers and freaks take up power and belie the awkward truths of the normative world of neoliberalism.
The characters of DCinside users I introduce and analyze in chapter 3 are mostly male characters, which implies certain male-dominant features of DCinside culture. Chapter 4 elaborates the gender politics and engagement of DCinside users by analyzing the culture of the Lee Joon Gi gallery, a fan community considered to be both absurd and outrageous. The Lee Joon Gi gallery has acquired its reputation, qualifying as bearing a DC-like spirit and as amounting to loser aesthetics mainly through the character “Nunhwa,” which users of the gallery have created as their persona, in particular by means of sexually charged posts. Nunhwa, as gender ambiguous and anti-aspirational characters, contest and refigure conventional gender norms of femininity and masculinity. By re-appropriating attributes of DCinside culture which have been criticized as male-dominant and macho-like, elements like absurdity, abruptness, and aggressive sexual expression, the users of the Lee Joon Gi gallery occupy a carnivalesque space characteristic of DCinside more generally, here laughing out loud at gender ideologies.

In chapter 5, I position activities of Internet users as unpaid immaterial labor. User activities have been considered as voluntary participation and leisure, activities undertaken in the pursuit and reward of good feeling, reputation, attention, and fun. The newly emerging discourses extolling Web 2.0 and user-generated content push this view further by promoting creativity and technical skills as desirable qualification for the new knowledge economy. I focus on an undeniable fact that the so-called user-generated content based on voluntary participation requires significant amount of time and work no matter what name it is called. I interrogate discrepancies between the unpaid work of Internet users and the huge revenue that Internet platforms yield based on user activities by means of elaborating upon a collective project involving the creation of a drama review book for the Korean TV drama *Painter of the Wind*. The fulfillment participants of the drama review book project experienced and the moral framework involved in the practice of sharing information for free, both in evidence as my co-volunteers on the project proudly defended their work, illuminate how ICTs create an ideal world where the flexible labor regime can exploit free labor through the very enthusiasm of the exploited.

In the conclusion, I reaffirm that the politics of loser aesthetics at DCinside consists of a meaningful resistance toward neoliberalism, using ICTs to create collective reflexivity and reciprocal support. I complicate my own conclusion by raising an open-ended question about the possibility of diverse and contradictory implications of the politics of loser aesthetics based on
my observation of the “Ilbe” phenomena, the culture of an extreme right-wing website derived from DCinside. There have been conservative voices in DCinside as a part of its culture of “anything goes.” The gender politics that I examine through the culture of the Lee Joon Gi gallery in chapter 4 is a good example of the conflicts between different “anythings,” in particular, male versus female DCinside users and non-fan DCinside users (mostly male) versus DCinside users who are also fans of popular culture (mostly female). Through long lasting debates and struggles, Joon gellers have expressed their voices clearly and aggressively against certain tendencies of male-dominant culture of DCinside as well as gender norms of patriarchal tradition of South Korea. The voices of Ilbe used to exist as a part of “anything” but because of its strong tendency towards slandering others, especially those from minority groups, they had to find a space where they could speak out more freely, out of DCinside. Detailing the emergence and growth of Ilbe shows the importance of the actual possibility of co-existence of “anythings” through contact with others, a major feature of the politics of loser aesthetics at DCinside. While the culture of Ilbe legitimates its posts by means of slandering others, mostly disadvantaged groups, in the name of the culture of “anything goes,” using deliberately shoddy styles similar to that of loser aesthetics, it, in fact, suppresses other “anythings” by clearly categorizing people into two groups, those who are good, and those who are bad, the productive members of South Korea versus the undeserving interlopers of the country. In this sense, the culture of Ilbe shows a reactionary tendency towards loser aesthetics by using very similar forms of cultural politics but in doing so, closing off a space for “anything goes.”
Chapter 1
Networking South Korea: Internet, Nation, and New Subjects

South Korea has set records related to Internet technologies for more than a decade. It set up the first Internet system by means of its own technological prowess (i.e. without importing foreign technology) in May 1982. South Korea is one of the few countries to have developed the Internet in its earliest days (Chon et al. 2012). The number of Internet users in South Korea increased very quickly, from 3.4 percent of the entire population of 46 million in 1997 to 50.7 percent in 2001, to 72 percent in 2007, and 82.1 percent of 51 million in 2013 (KCC and KISA 2011; MSIF and KISA 2013). High speed broadband Internet was set up in 1998. Since then, the number of households using broadband Internet has increased from 40 percent in 2001 to 95.9 percent in 2010. This is also one of the highest rates in the world (OECD 2010). Mobile wireless broadband Internet also developed quickly in South Korea in its earliest stages. CDMA (Code Division Multiple Access) 2000 1x and EV-DO (Evolution Data Only), the core technologies of wireless broadband, were introduced for the first time to the world from 2000 to 2002 and were first commercialized at a national level in South Korea (Chon et al. 2013:13; Oh and Larson 2011:xx). The rate of subscription to wireless broadband services is 89.9 percent, which is also one of the highest rates in the world (OECD 2011). South Korea is also the first country that provided Mobile TV based on Digital Multimedia Broadcasting in the world. In 2005, Mobile TV viewership was up to 27 million people, 56 percent of the Korean population. South Korea ranks first for usage of ICTs and is tenth in the Networked Readiness Index among 138 countries according to the World Economic Forum (2011:12, 16).

In this chapter, I examine the rapid development of the Internet in South Korea by focusing on the interplay between technology, nation, and subject. Kilnam Chon, an engineer who succeeded in setting up the Internet in South Korea in 1982 and is one of the key figures of the South Korean Internet that I examine in this chapter, has defined the “Internet boom” in South Korea as a “perfect storm.” According to Chon, the Internet “was not planned in advance. It could not be controlled by a single actor. Many actors and circumstances have been involved in the development of the Internet, which brought about the Internet boom in South Korea in the 1990s and 2000s” (Interview of Kilnam Chon, Sunyoung Yang, May 4, 2008). The history of science and technology has shown that this type of unexpected and unplanned paradigm shift also
characterized the initial invention of the Internet in the United States (Abbate 1999; Turner 2006). While Chon’s observation of the Korean Internet boom as a “perfect storm” is useful to draw attention to the historically contingent formation of the Korean Internet, the context of this rapid development still requires further scrutinizing in order to sort out the particularities of how the Korean Internet has emerged the way that it has. In this chapter, I flesh out the components of the “perfect storm” from which the South Korean Internet emerged and explain the emergence of DCinside from within broader historical and social contexts.

To accomplish the latter, I draw a picture of Internet development which goes “against the grain,” following Walter Benjamin’s theses on the philosophy of history (1986:257). There have been efforts to write a kind of “standard history” of the development of the Korean Internet.12 Much of this history has been written based on celebrations of certain quantitative measures and historical milestones such as those listed at the outset of this chapter, ones outlining the impressive dimensions of the South Korean ICT footprint.

There have been scholarly efforts to tease out the implications of Korean Internet development that the standard history does not shed light upon. Haejoang Cho, for example, engages in its history through a lens of the particularity of Korean modernity, focusing on different social actors who have been involved in its development (2007). Cho challenges the positive evaluations about the role of government initiatives by criticizing the developmental sentiment used by the Korean government in its push for informatization, a sentiment of a similar sort to that which was used to push forward with industrialization in earlier decades. She pays more attention to the roles of ordinary Internet users. Dal Young Jin examines South Korea’s online gaming industry from a political economic perspective, which offers a detailed picture of the domestic circumstances as well as transnational contexts of online gaming and South Korea’s

---

12 The Cyber Internet History Museum serviced by the Korea Internet & Security Agency is a good example of a location of such narratives. It offers chronological tables of Internet history, statistics, and materials from important IT-related events. One display notes ten important Internet-related news stories from years past, starting in 2007 (sample headline: “The world pays attention to the Korean broadband Internet” and “The politics of social media and its expanding social influence”). It also offers introductory sessions where new Internet users can easily learn the history of the Korean Internet, methods of applications of Internet technologies, and the ins and outs of netiquette. Kilnam Chon also has led collaborative writing teams to write an Internet “history” of South Korea as well as Asia. See An et al 2014 for a Korean Internet history and Chon KN 2013 for the first volume and Chon 2015 for the second volume of a history of the Internet in Asia. Chon’s attempt to write a “standard history” simultaneously results in producing alternative histories for the global history of the Internet, which has thus far been written for the most part based on data and perspectives produced in the United States and Europe.
position in them (2010). Sang-hyŏn Kang offers an insightful criticism regarding the dominant discourse about ICTs that insists on the role of successful government initiatives by delving deep into the political economy of the IT revolution in South Korea against the backdrop of a transition from Fordism to post-Fordism (1996). I contribute to these existing scholarly writings about the Korean Internet development by treating “historical facts” about Korean Internet development not as a given or as objective but as something that has the power to constitute themselves towards what are projected as coherent narratives. The active attempts and ambition to make South Korea an Internet power have contributed to the public discourse on guiding the Internet in a certain direction. Seeing the Internet as the future of the nation supports the governmental decision to invest, which has enabled the speedy construction of technological infrastructure that in return becomes tangible evidence to the claim that South Korea is an Internet powerhouse. By engaging in the circular arguments of Korean Internet history, I articulate the ways in which the discourses about the Internet and online communities and cultures have mediated the changes of national and individual subjectivities. The newly emerging Korean Internet users are subjects who experience the freedom and autonomy that online space offers, but they are also subjects who typify the neoliberal transformations, particularly their flexible labor regimes.

In analyzing the interplay between technology, nation, and subject against the grain of “standard history,” I use a method of focusing on “figures.” Barker et al (2014) define a figure as “someone whom others recognize as standing out and who encourage reflexive contemplation about the world in which the figure lives” (2–3). What interests me most in this approach to figures is the way in which it helps to pay attention to “the lifeworld of particular individuals” while also reading out “sociohistorical backgrounds” from the lifeworld, backgrounds against which these figures stand in relief (Barker et al 2014:3–4). In this way, figures become “ethnographic sites that mediate a wide range of processes and structures” (Barker et al 2014:15). The history of the Internet in South Korea encompasses roughly 30 years. Individuals have played important roles in the formation of the early Internet universe as well as in its rapid development in a short period of time. Those individuals can be read as figures who “encapsulate a modern ethos” (Barker et al 2014:1), in this case a specific kind of ethos deeply saturated with and mediated by technological development.
The ways in which I use the idea of the “figure” are various as I articulate different aspects of the development of the Korean Internet. Firstly, I analyze figures that appear in discourses of informatization that are found in government policy rhetoric and mainstream journalism. These figures demonstrate attempts to give shape to ideological social types for the purposes of a newly emerging social environment that is mediated by the Internet. Secondly, I focus on a single individual, Kilnam Chon, as an exemplar of the figure of “the engineer,” figures that have developed Internet technologies in South Korea. This approach is close to the way in which Barker et al (2014) examine figures of modernity in Southeast Asia. Thirdly, I analyze figures that I collectively refer to as “figures of Korean online communities.” These figures are not individuals, as is the case with the engineer. Instead, they include many Internet users who are involved in different Internet services and cultures. They are figures of collective identities. Lastly, I analyze figures that appear in discourses and counter discourses about the Internet, which may be taken up consciously from time to time by people, that of the malicious Internet commenter. The figure of the malicious commenter sometimes appears as a collective identity and at other times as a powerful singular figure. In both cases, they are strong figures of discourses. In other words, methodologically, I use the concept of figure in different ways, which is still appropriate for the definition of figure Barker et al use in the sense that figures are, even when it is about one particular individual, collective identities to some degree because figures are “conceived as signs of the times” (Barker et al 2014:4–5) and “reveal subject positions” (Barker et al 2014:1). By focusing on “key figures,” I articulate the sociohistorical backgrounds of rapid Internet development by means of sketching the outlines of technological persons and personae that have drawn the attention and activities of South Koreans as they have navigated these rapidly changing landscapes.

This chapter is organized into four sections based on the four figures I will analyze. The first section traces a long lasting discourse promising national prosperity and progress through technological development. Government policy and journalism have played a role in composing this discourse, which has contributed to legitimating changing political regimes and government policies in South Korea. Particularly, the discourse about informatization and the Internet has mediated a neoliberal transformation by promoting ICTs as tools for survival in the context of intense and ongoing global competition crucial for the competitiveness of both the Korean nation and individual Koreans. I overview a long lasting government stance on the development of
science and technologies to achieve modernization and industrialization by means of analyzing a campaign of informatization led by the *Chosun Ilbo*, known in South Korea as the most popular conservative daily newspaper. I in particular pay attention to the way in which the newspaper uses stories of real people in pushing forward its narrative. The narrations of these people amount to attempts to create and mobilize a new social type that delivers an ideology of informatization in an intimate and concrete way. The national request for cultivating the capability of ICTs conveys the need for people to be flexible and self-sufficient subjects.

The second section examines the construction of the Internet infrastructure through Kilnam Chon, a figure of the Korean engineer. Joshua Barker, in his article “Engineers and Political Dreams” (2005), articulates the way in which Indonesian engineers as “human mediators of new technology” (703) turned the “fantasy” of nationalistic discourse on the Palapa Satellite as an “instrument of national unity and development” into reality (718). The fact that the Korean Internet infrastructure was built with domestic technology, especially in the early days of the Internet, has provided a solid foundation for the propaganda of nationalistic pride as an “Internet power.” These engineers gave their homeland the ability to contribute to the rest of world as an equal member of the community of nation states. They were eager to be instrumental in the “progress” of Korean society by means of technological prowess. The process of building the technological infrastructure, therefore, is not just about technology, but also about the emergence of modern subjects who have a clear set of interrelated goals: on the one hand, to construct a modern nation in their homeland, and on the other, of a cosmopolitan vision seeking to build the capacity of the nation to contribute to the world as an equal member. Kilnam Chon, who has been known as the “father of the Korean Internet” and whose lifeworld has been interwoven with the development of the Internet, is a perfect example of this vision. I narrate his own storytelling of his life and achievements to deliver a vivid picture of him. His life and career trajectory have “encapsulated a modern ethos” (Barker et al 2014:1) as a figure of modernity in terms of how his work is informed by nationalism, but accompanied by liberal and communal cosmopolitanism. Chon as a figure has influenced the formation of new subjects related to the development of ICTs. I focus in particular on engineer–entrepreneurs trained in Chon’s research lab in this section. I argue that Chon’s emphasis on start-ups brought about the group of engineer–entrepreneurs that led the Korean IT industry later on. I also argue that Chon’s cosmopolitical concerns complicate the nationalistic discourse of the Internet.
While the nationalist public discourse about informatization and the visions of engineers have played an important role in setting up the Internet infrastructure nationwide and promoting the need for such informatization, online user communities and cultures have complicated the meanings of new technologies through technologically mediated cultural engagements. In the third section, I discuss the evolution of Korean online communities and cultures through three collective online figures: those of the netizen, the online avatar from Freechal.com and Cyworld.com, and Agorian from Daum.net. Barker et al argue that “figures reveal subject positions that manifest and comment upon a particular historical moment in the complex articulation of the large-scale processes” that shape social milieus (2014:2). The subject positions that the three online figures reveal are those of newly emerging net citizens as active political subjects as well as consumers who are identified and identify themselves according to their diverse tastes. These subject positions “manifest and comment upon” the post-democratization era and accelerating consumerism of South Korea. They also resonate with a flexible labor regime of neoliberalism by nurturing values of freedom and autonomy.

The fourth section analyses the ways in which DCinside emerged, from the fertile soil of growing online communities, as an Internet freak community where its users could enjoy the freedom of anonymity, indulge in various themes, and violate the social conventions of both online and off-line Korean society. The free atmosphere of DCinside enables its signature culture of “anything goes.” I explain the emergence of this culture through discursive interactions between the shadowy figures of malicious commenters, and other DCinside users who had to figure out how to deal with these unpleasant figures and their disturbing virtual attacks. The figures of malicious commenters take up the subject position in which one reflects on what Internet users are like beyond “desirable netizen.” In short, this chapter traces an early history of Korean Internet development and positions the emergence of DCinside within broader historical and social contexts.

1 Nation and the Internet

Today, the (21st) century informatization forum of the Chosun Ilbo declares the beginning of the “Movement for Informatization.” If we do not open our eyes and do not choose (informatization), we may repeat the darkness and stagnation of the past in the coming century. One hundred years
ago, we were defeated by huge warships and bombs and were colonized. It was the result of our laziness that others hurried up with their industrialization. Although it is late, we could reach the border of globalization through speedy enlightenment, independence, industrialization, and democratic movements. However, we face a mysterious area where the common sense of yesterday becomes uncommon today, and the reality of today becomes the illusion of tomorrow. To investigate an ocean, running with the huge waves of the information revolution, is globalization. While we have just followed other countries before, we cannot move forward any further unless we find the right direction and make a road for ourselves. To cross the rough ocean of globalization, the most needed mind-set and tool is informatization. (Chosun Ilbo 1995)

National yearning to join the ranks of advanced nations has played an important role in bringing about a strong drive toward the rapid development of the Internet, much as it did in leading the agenda for the rapid economic growth of South Korea that began in the 1960s. The rapid development of the Internet in South Korea needs to be understood as a continuation of the rapid modernization initiated by national developmental projects. As of the 1990s, the development of the Internet became a new goal to achieve in order to advance national development (Jin DY 2010:20; Kang SH 1996:236–237). In this section, I give an overview of South Korean state history focusing on political economy first and then discuss the emphasis on science and technology including ICTs.

In the early 1960s when President Park Chung-Hee took control, South Korea started to rebuild itself from the ruins of the Korean War and began its rapid economic growth. Under Park’s regime, an export-oriented economy was established as a crucial strategy and foundation of the Korean economy through “light industrial development in the 1960s, and heavy and chemical industry in the 1970s” (Nelson 2000:12). The maintenance of low labor cost enabled South Korea to be internationally competitive and realize economic growth during this period (Nelson 2000:15). Another factor that made Korean economic growth possible was the world order of the Cold War. As Makoto Itoh (2001) points out, Soviet socialism has affected the modes of regulation of Fordism as well as post-Fordism (120–121). South Korea’s security position helped to draw large amounts of capital from the US. The state played a crucial role through negotiations with the US in gathering and allocating such capital.

The economic development of South Korea began to be extolled as a miracle and an example of late-industrialization through continuous economic growth in the 1980s (Lie 1998:124–126). Meantime, the military autocracy of Park Chung-Hee’s regime was replaced by another
autocracy of Chun Doo-Hwan’s regime in 1980. The growth rate in gross domestic product between 1965 and 1985 was close to 10 percent per year (Janelli 1993:55–56). The economic boom in the middle of the 1980s was thanks to the “3 Lows,” that is, the low price of oil, low interest rates and low exchange rates (Seo DJ 2005:28). Mass consumption and the delayed promise of Fordism in South Korea were realized from the early 1980s through the diffusion of consumer durables into the Korean consumer market (Hahm et al 2001:17). Although the real wage rose steadily until the 1980s and brought about mass consumption, the gap between light and heavy industry and between genders divided the labor market into different conditions and enabled only certain select groups of laborers to enjoy the fruits of Fordism in the spirit of mass consumption (Amsden 1989:208; Kim SK 1997:47-48).

The labor movement, democratization, and accelerating globalization all culminating at the end of the 1980s. It did so in a way that combined to force the Korean type of Fordism to plateau, in the sense that it was no longer possible to sustain export-oriented economic growth due to the increasing labor costs resulting from the success of labor strikes in 1987. In addition, the changed international order in the post–Cold War era made the US withdraw long-standing financial support to South Korea and forced South Korea to cope with the challenges of globalization accelerated by the post-Fordist neoliberal trend in Western countries. The Kim Young-Sam regime pushed for “globalization” (segyehwa) as a way to save the Korean economy and encourage enterprises to strategize innovating new management initiatives to counteract the crisis. In reaction to strong resistance from the labor movement, the need for a change in the mode of production was going to be a massive undertaking, requiring an overall economic restructuring, new capital investment, transferal of production lines to foreign countries, deregulation and rationalization of enterprises. Those efforts were integrated into the “new economy” (sin kyŏngje) policy of the Kim Young-Sam regime which is considered to be neoliberal policy (Seo DJ 2009:57). Flexible labor, market competitiveness, technological innovation, and finance-opening appeared as main economic issues.

Reconstruction became vital after the Asian financial crisis in 1997. Financial crisis is one of the consequences of post-Fordism, which exposes the flaws in the Fordist system’s inflexibility to manage crises and anticipate change. The Asian financial crisis was also a by-product of an unstable post-Fordist global economic structure, and not necessarily an indication of problems within any given national economy. Nevertheless, the Asian financial crisis in 1997 focused
attention on the incompetence of the Korean economy and helped to accelerate reconstruction, including financial mergers and flexibilization of labor markets. The state played an active role to optimize environments for new market in the name of deregulation, which in fact is far from the withdrawal of the state power, although it was frequently characterized as such (Peck and Tickell 2002).

South Koreans came to be affected by the flexibilization of the labor market. This flexible labor market was immediately classified into categories of high-tech labor versus unskilled labor, which widened a financial divide and increased temporary employment (Kang SH 1996:161). Concentration on high-tech and the knowledge-based industry—the results of which are represented in specific ways by means of statistical figures like many of those presented at the outset of this chapter— was the process through which South Korea reformed its economic structure to adjust to the changing mode of the global market. It is also a process of economic restructuring based on the dominant power of finance capital. The Asian financial crisis was a monumental event through which the domination of finance capital as well as globalization was rapidly adopted in South Korea. While financial mergers and corporate restructuring were under way, the boom of venture companies (small start-ups) and venture capital appeared in the aftermath of the crisis. The Kim Dae-Jung government promoted and supported small venture companies, especially those based on new ICTs to transition the Korean economy towards a knowledge-based economic structure considered more advanced than heavy industry monopolized by large conglomerates. Given that the latter characterized the existing economic structure, supporting small enterprises showed the will of Kim’s government to turn a new leaf. However, the venture companies determined their own unique presence in South Korea. Rather than being small, focused, and professional enterprises, Korean venture companies became an opportunity for speculation (Song JS 2009:96,147; Chung JA 2003:180–181). While the original goal of government support was altered, the neoliberal ethos considered economic well-being the most important development.

Patriotic attitudes toward new technologies have a long history in South Korea. The military dictatorship that began with the May 16 Coup in 1961 set forth a schedule to modernize the economy as its task, in hopes of legitimatizing its democratically illegitimate origin. From the start, the regime showed serious interest in developing new technologies. The electronic industry became the focus of government-led development projects such as the “Five-Year Economic
Development Plan” (*kyŏngje kaebal 5-kae nyŏn kyehoek*) which started in 1962, the “Five-Year Science and Technology Development Plan” (*kwahak kisul chinhŭng 5-kae nyŏn kyehoek*), which started in 1962, and the “Seven-Year Electronic Computer Development Plan” (*chŏnja kyesan'gi sayong kaebal 7-kae nyŏn kyehoek*) which got underway in 1967.\(^{13}\)

Government policy and plans for the advancement of technology compelled huge sums of money from the government budget, which played a role in creating effective demand and risk sharing allocation for companies. The National Project of Localization of Computers (*k'ŏmp'yut'ŏ kuksanhwaa kukch'aek saŏp*) is a good example of the latter. This project started in 1981 and changed the existing tendency of importing computers toward a strategy of developing them domestically. Thirteen million dollars were invested in this project. Besides these allocations, the government started supplying only domestic computers to government departments and organizations and pushed the private sector to use domestically manufactured computers (Hŏ SS 2006:191–192).

Following the success of governmental promotion of technologies for the purposes of national prosperity, the computer became considered to be a “dream machine” by ordinary Koreans (Hŏ SS 2006:65; The Kyunghyang Shinmun 1972). While a social atmosphere extolling computerization and informatization was being formed, government projects of technology education for ordinary people laid the foundation for shaping an ICT-using population. The “Plan for the Provision of Educational Computers” (*kyoyuk yong k'ŏmp'yutŏ pogŭp kyehoek*)\(^{14}\) established in 1982 became a part of the technology agenda (Kang SH 1996:231). Government enforcement educating people in information technology hit its stride in the proclamation of 1983 as the “Year of the Information Industry.”

---

\(^{13}\) The Five-Year Science and Technology Development Plan, established in 1966, was the first government policy framework for the development of science and technology. The government approached science and technological development in terms of developing new industry by including the consumer-electronic industry in the tasks of the Commerce-Industry Ministry (Yi SK 1999). The Law for the Promotion of Science and Technology was enacted in 1967. This law explicited the policies and plans which the Minister was to establish for the distribution of computers, the development of software, and for rearing agents capable of data processing (Hŏ SS 2006:72).

\(^{14}\) The educational computers were distributed to 90 vocational high schools, 10 vocational training centers, and 17 computers to the Education and Training of Public Officials. The thing was that those computers were not usable in terms of their quality without additional cost (Hŏ SS 2006:200).
When the Internet emerged, in certain key advanced capitalist countries, including the United States, as a key infrastructure for the future in the early 1990s, South Korea was more than ready to join the leading group of countries pushing the technology forward because of its engineers, who had developed the Internet domestically (see the next section for a detailed discussions on the development of the Internet in South Korea and the Korean engineers who made it happen). The Kim Young-Sam regime actively took up this kind of position, particularly as a leader in Asia. Kim proposed the construction of the Asia Pacific Information Infrastructure (APII), as a collaboration to be implemented with the Global Information Infrastructure (GII), which had been proposed by the Clinton government at the 1994 APEC Economic Leaders’ Meeting held in Bogor, Indonesia. In the following year, the first APEC Ministerial Meeting on Telecommunication & Information Industry was held in Seoul and announced the Seoul Declaration for the Asia Pacific Information Infrastructure. In 1995, the rapid development of broadband services was started through the first Master Plan for setting up a comprehensive strategy for the Korean Information Infrastructure (KII, ch’ogosok ch’ôngbo t’ongsin kiban kuch’uk chonghap ch’ujin kyehoek) which aimed to “construct an advanced nationwide information infrastructure” (Jin DY 2010:20). These events were indicators of the advanced status that South Korea had attained in the area of ICTs, resonating with the Kim Young-Sam regime’s major policy on globalization. While modernization in South Korea, with its long-standing focus on rapid economic growth, was still about catching up with the more advanced countries, being a leader in the area of ICTs would be proof of successful achievement in the national goal of modernization. The catch phrase expressing nationalistic sentiment “South Korea, an Internet Power” (int’ŏnet kangguk k’oria) became popular around this time.

It was also at this time that the Chosun Ilbo started their promotional campaign for globalization through the Internet, a campaign with the slogan “Although our industrialization was late, let’s start informatization in advance.” The paper announced this slogan and the campaign on March 5, 1995, presenting it as a movement for the commemoration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the establishment of the newspaper itself. Considering the global atmosphere emphasizing information infrastructure and the initiatives of the Korean government, the Chosun Ilbo campaign was well-timed. The catchphrase, which succinctly expressed the core sentiment of

---

15 Al Gore’s High Performance Computing Act of 1991, the National Information Infrastructure that followed, and the expanded plan of the latter drawn up in 1994, called the Global Information Infrastructure (GII), were major animators of this discourse, of the Internet as the technology of the future.
Korean modernization, but adapting and routing it toward new information technology, became highly popular nationwide. As its nationalistic, even poetic, manifesto above shows, informatization carries condensed meanings as an extension of industrialization, as a solution to grapple with globalization, and as an “inevitable” path toward the predetermined future of a high-tech information society. In such a discourse, the Internet was presented as a national matter of moment, as well as a general trend, not something that the South Korean nation or South Koreans as individuals could choose to go with or against.

At around this time the newspaper sponsored a campaign called KidNet (kidunet), which aimed to help elementary schools to open their own school home pages and to network with other schools under the slogan “Internet for Kids” (Rye HJ 2014). For this purpose, the Chosun Ilbo raised funds and networked volunteers in elementary schools that wanted to participate in the KidNet movement, as well as university students that wanted to help elementary schools gain access to the Internet and to have their own home pages. Because this movement concerned children, there were many moving stories which the Chosun Ilbo willingly featured on its pages. The vivid stories of real people which the newspaper regularly reported put flesh on the abstract ideal of “informatization for the national future.” The following are some examples of the stories that the paper ran:

“Wow! I found Michael Jordan on the web! What are you searching for?” Kids who speak a Gyeongsang-do dialect are excited and curious about what their friends are doing. It has been one month since the Internet was connected in Nambumin Elementary School (Nambumin Ch’odŭng Hakkyo). Whenever the Internet class is finished, kids beg for the class to be extended. The Internet was connected to Nambumin Elementary School with the help of an anonymous student’s parent who is working in a fish market (Chagalch’i sijang), who donated 10,000,000 won (US$ 10,000) to do so. Eighty five percent of the students at Nambumin are from poor families who do not have their own houses, personal computers, or an Internet connection. Nevertheless, Nambumin has been able to establish an educational environment thanks to parents of students who are very much interested in the education of their children. (Kwŏn MU 1996a)

Kim Samt’ae (a fourth year university student of Inje University) was busy setting up the Internet for Nambumin Elementary School. … He believes that, in the future, people who have information will rule the world. This is not only because his adviser emphasizes the unlimited powers latent within the Internet but also because he has already believed [in the power of networking technologies] through his experience with domestic networking services, which he has used from his middle school days ... Samt’ae says, “Although this has a humble quality, connecting five Pentium PCs to the Internet, it includes kids’ dreams and their future. If possible,
I would like to develop the Internet system of Nambumin, mobilizing all of my knowledge.” (Kwŏn MU 1996b)

These stories created new social types who were to be found in the information society. The newspaper combined real figures and old familiar stereotypes with stories centering around computers, such as kids from a poor neighborhood who are eager to learn and can be anything they want if appropriate support is provided (particularly ICTs, in the above story); a passionate young man who, bearing clear insights into the coming age of the information society, wants to help others to have access to the power of information; devoted parents who will do the right things for their kids (i.e. make sure they are trained in the use of ICTs) even though they are poor. These are social types that intersect with those of ordinary Korean people as well. Through its campaign, the Chosun Ilbo positioned the Internet as what the whole nation should care about and what all of its people should practice.

The Asian financial crisis, which was considered a national embarrassment, became a crucial motivation to push harder toward the rapid development of the Internet. Informatization would be the key to restoring the good name of South Korea. Government budgets for the IT industry increased: US$ 300 million to support IT-related small companies, US$ 135 million to hire the highly educated unemployed youth in informatization-related businesses, US$ 83 million to cultivate “new intellectuals” and manpower for the IT industry, and US$ 4 billion to develop next-generation Internet technologies were invested between 1998 to 2004 (Yi KB 2008). Capital, which had to find a new target for profitable investment, rushed into IT start-ups (Chung JA 2003:8–9; Song JS 2009:6).

Nationwide efforts to develop new Internet technologies brought about an educational boom as well. The Korean government launched “Cyber Korea21” in 1999 which includes informatization education for the whole nation (MSIF and NIA 2014). Computer labs became mandatory in every elementary and secondary school under government regulation (Kim and Yi 2001). Universities voluntarily participated in this flow by establishing IT infrastructure and education programs, which would increase the possibility of acquiring government support (Yun SH 2001; Woo SH 2003). White-collar workers of most age levels were required to know how to use the Internet and a computer to conduct their work in a new environment redesigned by ICT-
based communication models. Learning how to use the computer and the Internet was not exceptional for people such as housewives and the jobless, despite the fact that they had no particular need for those technologies at that point in time. To be a good mother in charge of her children’s education at home or to be well-prepared and competitive on the job market, people had to be accustomed to those new technologies (Yi ChA 1998).  

There have been government initiatives as well as technological prowess behind the rapid development of the Internet in South Korea. They make up the grains of the standard history of the Korean Internet. The grains, however, are part of something bigger than the sum of each of them. They initiated a new discourse of informatization which revived old discourses of modernization, informatization, and national prosperity. They created new governing techniques which encouraged individuals to become more liberal, autonomous, and creative subjects. This new governing technique preserved the old nationalistic sentiment but deployed itself through ICTs. The nation has continued to call on people to demonstrate their devotion to the nation by creating a discourse in which the nation and the Internet are inseparably linked. This long-standing nationalistic discourse functions as a backdrop for individual lives, whispering again and again that one’s individual well-being and competitiveness is determined by national prosperity, enabling Koreans “to cross the rough ocean of globalization.”

2 Figure of an Internet “Pioneer”

Even though the South Korean government had a long history of emphasizing and initiating the development of science and technology in terms of modernization and industrialization, the path of Korean Internet development would have been very different without the engineers who developed the Internet from scratch in the early 1980s and enabled the government to promote it. Kilnam Chon is the man who made it possible for other Korean engineers to be part of the Internet innovation, having a rare specialty in Internet technology back in the day when it was still in the middle of being invented as a US military project. This section traces the developmental footprints of the Internet infrastructure through Chon’s life history which explains

---

16 For example, I had to get an e-mail account and learn how to use the Internet in the winter of 1998–99 to get a TA position for a course which was going to use an online learning system that my university had just developed.  
17 In making the argument here, I draw on Barker’s observations on satellites in Indonesia in his (2005) essay on engineers and political dreams about the role of technologies in constructing and stabilizing official discourses.
how the Internet in South Korea has been shaped in a very specific way. I also discuss Chon’s nationalistic enthusiasm combined with cosmopolitical concerns that technology can help Third World countries like South Korea to develop but must not exclude anyone. His nationalistic as well as cosmopolitical visions feature him as a figure of modernity who believes in the progress of human history, the importance of technology, and freedom and equality. Chon as a figure has influenced the emergence of engineer–entrepreneurs who have cultivated visions and responsibility for technology in particular for the Internet.

Before I start, I need to explain how I position myself in relation to Chon, my respondent since my positionality highly is inseparable from my analysis. I met him in 1999 while I was working at a youth center called Haja Center which is run by the Seoul metropolitan government and Yonsei University. I was working on my undergraduate and master’s degree. Haejoang Cho, who was my supervisor as well as a director of the Haja Center (Seoul Youth Factory for Alternative Culture), invited Chon to the advisory committee for the center. Since I worked at a web studio, I had the opportunity to work closely with Chon. He helped our team to plan long-term forecasts and major projects and to get sponsorship from IT companies such as Thrunet for free broadband Internet service and Nexon for technological support in hosting related events such as a Digital Storytelling Festival. When I went back to school to finish my master’s degree in 2002 after working full-time at Haja Center for three years, Chon invited me and another staff member from the Haja web studio to the first Asian Pacific Next Generation Camp hosted by the Asian Pacific Networking Group, one of the inter-Asian Internet organizations Chon has founded and engaged in. After attending the first camp, I organized the second and the third APNG Camp in 2002 and 2003. I also became interested in issues of Internet governance, attending Internet Governance Forums in 2005 and 2008. Throughout this path, Chon has been like a mentor to myself, and his insights have influenced my thoughts on the Internet. I gave a personal account of my time with Chon in length because it can be a good example of the way in which Chon has influenced a group of people that work in areas related to the Internet both in and beyond South Korea. He has been an enthusiastic mentor as well as an outstanding engineer. Chon exists as a figure of modern engineering and is an Internet “pioneer” but, at the same time, has been actively involved in nurturing modern subjects in a hands-on way.

I did not conduct the interview with Chon, which is my primary data for this section, as a part of my dissertation field research, even though the interview was conducted during my fieldwork
period. Chon retired from KAIST in 2008 and was at Tsinghua University in Beijing as a visiting professor when I was in South Korea for my fieldwork. I visited Chon in Beijing in May 2008, following his advice that it would be a benefit to me to see the rapid development happening in China. I interviewed him to get to know about the details of his life history, which I had always been curious about. I did not conduct this interview for my dissertation, and there are many holes such as the exact names and years of certain events that Chon participated in. Cyrus Farivar’s book, *The Internet of Elsewhere* (2011), helps me to fill these gaps. I also use interviews with members of SALab which were conducted by the project team publishing the book, *Han’guk int’onet üi yŏksa: Toedola ponun 20 segi* [The History of the Korean Internet: Looking Back at the 20th Century] *Internet* (An et al 2014). The transcriptions of all the interviews conducted for the latter book are available with the manuscript itself on its website.

Kilnam Chon is a Japanese-Korean person whose parents migrated to Japan during the colonial period. He was born and grew up in Japan. He was a leader of the student movement against the Military Agreement between the USA and Japan while he attended high school in 1960, which enabled him to start thinking about being Japanese in terms of being Korean Japanese (Farivar 2011:26-27). Chon recalled those days,

I was actively involved in the movement as a chair of my school. One day, I was going to make a speech at a rally. I was standing on the platform but could not say a word because I did not feel like I belonged to the people in the rally. I felt clearly that I could not be Japanese because I could not say things such as “we Japanese” or “our country’s democracy.” All I was thinking about was the April 19 Student Movement which was happening in South Korea at that time. I was very impressed by the movement and felt like I should have been there. I went to South Korea for the first time right after I graduated high school. My mother and I visited my uncle, who was still living in my mother’s hometown in Gyeongsang province. The first thing I did when I arrived in South Korea was visit the April 19 National Cemetery in Seoul. I still had the newspaper which listed the names of patriotic martyrs of the movement. I checked their names one by one on the memorial stone. I could have been one of them if I had been in South Korea during the movement. I swore to myself that I would not live for myself for the rest of my life but for the country to which those patriotic martyrs devoted themselves to. That was why I chose science as my career instead of being a medical doctor or a professional swimmer, which were the areas in which I showed talent. I had to decide which Korea, South or North, I should go to. It was unlikely I could be happy in North Korea given the regime at that time. Also, my relatives still lived in the southern part of South Korea from which my parents came. It looked like going

---

18 Farivar is a freelance technology journalist as well as the host of *Spectrum*, a science and technology radio program. His book explores different paths of Internet development of four countries, South Korea, Senegal, Estonia, and Iran. Interviews with Chon and his students from SALab are primary data for the section on South Korea.

19 Available at https://sites.google.com/site/koreaInternethistory/interview
Chon went to the United States and got his master’s and doctoral degrees in computer science from the University of California Los Angeles. He worked for the Jet Propulsion Laboratory of National Aeronautics and Space Administration until he relocated to South Korea. The South Korean government established the necessary research institutes to cultivate science and technology manpower. These included the Korea Institute of Science and Technology in 1966, the Agency of Defense Development in 1970, and the Korean Advanced Institute of Science and Technology (KAIST) in 1971. The policy to invite overseas Korean scientists home brought manpower to these research institutes. Chon was one of the first generation of overseas Korean scientists invited to South Korea by the Korean government. The task given to him was to produce computers domestically. Chon decided to go beyond the given task because of the passion of the young Korean engineers he worked with. Producing computers with domestic technology would be beneficial for a country like South Korea but would only mean being the fifteenth or so country to succeed in doing so (Interview of Kilnam Chon, Sunyoung Yang, May 4, 2008; An et al 2014:23). If Chon could develop computer network—which was actually his specialty—South Korea could be the second or the third country to succeed in developing network technology. So, Chon started developing a computer network in South Korea. His first proposal for developing a research network was rejected by the Korean government because there was no one that really understood what the project was about back in those days. Chon resubmitted a similar proposal, this time as if it was a part of the project producing a computer domestically, and got approval in 1981 (Interview of Kilnam Chon, Sunyoung Yang, May 4, 2008; An et al 2014:23). This is an example of how the approach that gives too much credit to state-led development of the Korean Internet can overlook the dynamics among different actors who have been involved in the process.

---

20 The Korean government’s policy of inviting overseas scientists has a long history. Four hundred and ninety eight overseas Korean scientists moved into South Korea from 1968 to 1979, and 716 were added by 1986. Foreign scientists have been invited in addition to overseas Korean scientists since 2000 (MK Business News 1969; Electronic Times 2011).
Chon’s team set up a network called the System Software Development Network (SDN) using a TCP/IP protocol between a computer at Seoul National University, and another at Gumi, in Gyeongsang North province, in 1982. This was the first Internet setup in South Korea and Asia, and one of the very first Internet setups in the world (Chon KN 2011:11; Chon et al 2012). Chon and his team extended SDN to be a nationwide research network based on TCP/IP as a backbone network. In 1983, they added KAIST to SDN, and moved the network operation and management center to KAIST. The SDN was also connected to EUNET in Europe and to the UUCP Net in the USA (Chon KN 2011:12–13), and then to a newly developed American network called CSNET in 1984 (Chon KN 2011:13). This network was used as a window for technology exchange with North America until it was officially connected to the network that had become known as “the Internet” in the USA in 1990 (Chon KN 2011:13). By 1985, the SDN had around 20 universities, national laboratories, and company research laboratories as members. This functioned as what came to be known as “the Korean Research Network” (Chon et al 2013:11).

Figure 1–1. SDN Network Configuration, May 1985 (Chon 1985:567)
Chon and his research laboratory at KAIST, called SALab (Software Architecture Laboratory), developed new Internet technologies and in doing so played active and leading roles in South Korea as well as worldwide. The group held the Pacific Computer Communications Symposium focusing on computer networks in Seoul in 1985. It was one of the world’s first conferences on the Internet. Approximately 300 Internet experts from Asia, Europe, and North America attended this conference. Chon and his students who organized the conference evaluated this symposium as an “epoch-making event” considering that the next global conference on the Internet was not held till the early 1990s (Chon et al 2013:12). His research laboratory increased the number of core members of engineers and entrepreneurs who played important roles in establishing IT start-ups in South Korean. It was the priority of SALab and Chon to encourage students to establish IT start-ups, which would give South Korea something that had not existed before (Chon and Song 2012). Chon trained his students strictly while encouraging them to have a sense of duty for the country that had offered them higher education paid for with state resources (An JB 2012). One student, Hyunje Park recalled Chon’s emphasis on start-ups as the best way to contribute to the nation:

Professor Chon particularly emphasized a sense of duty. We all thought back in the day that we would be the basis of national R & D (research and development) when we graduated. There were not many people who stayed in academia to be a professor in our lab. Professor Chon always said, “You don’t want to stay in academia after studying with national money. Graduates from Seoul National University can be professors. You should contribute more to the nation because you studied with its money. The ordinary job of becoming a professor is not what you have to do.” Professor Chon didn’t say anything particular that we should do but broadly suggested something like contributing to the technological development of the nation and opening start-ups. He wanted us to explore what we could do for ourselves. (An JB 2012)

Hyunje Park led the consortium for building the HANAnet as a part of the Pacific Communications Networking Project (An JB 2012) and developed high-speed Internet based on the cable infrastructure at Thrunet, one of the three companies (with Hanaro and Korea Telecom) which led the fast distribution of the high-speed broadband Internet through severe competition for market share. Another, Chul Jung, established a start-up company named Human Computer and became a vice president of Trigem Computer Inc. Another, Jinho Hur, in 1994 founded INET, the first Internet service provider (ISP) based on a business-to-business model (Ko et al
Chon’s students from SALab established online game start-ups that have led the industry worldwide.\footnote{Chon himself has evaluated online games as consisting of one of the two breakthroughs (he considered the World Wide Web as the other breakthrough) made in the area of Internet technologies in the 1990s (Chon and Song 2012). See Dal Young Jin’s book Korea’s Online Gaming Empire (2010) for the history and culture of Korean online gaming industry.} The online game, which is the embodiment of art, hardware, and software programming, attracted early power users who were majoring in computer science and engineering. Jiho Kim and his friends, undergraduate students at KAIST, were Multi-User Dungeon/Dimension (MUD) users. They developed and serviced one of the first two commercialized MUD games, titled “Land of Dangun” (Tan’gun ūi ttang) through PC networks such as Hitel, Chollian, and Nownuri in 1994 (An and Jo 2012b). Another MUD game, “Jurassic Park” (Churagi kongwŏn) was developed by Jake Song, a PhD student of SALab at KAIST and was also served through PC networks. Jake Song, who was not satisfied with text-based MUDs, opened an online game start-up called “Nexon” with his colleague Jungju Kim, who was also a PhD student at SALab. In 1996 Nexon published its first title, “Nexus: The Kingdom of the Winds” (Param ūi nara), the first Korean Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG). Jake Song, who left Nexon in the middle of developing Nexus, opened NCsoft and published the MMORPG “Lineage” (Liniji) (An and Jo 2012a). Since then, Nexon and NCsoft have been two of the leading online game companies worldwide.

Barker (2005) traces the genealogy of the dominant satellite discourse of Indonesia, which shares significant commonalities with the discourse of science and technology in South Korea in terms of “technology, tradition, development, and national unity” which Barker suggests is “a set of keywords” that determine the discursive position of the satellite (708). Barker articulates the way in which the dominant satellite discourse was “black-boxed” by powerful political mediators of the Suharto regime, engineers, who were also powerful mediators, as well as entrepreneurs, who turned the fantasy of satellite discourse into reality (2005:715, 718). Barker goes on to depict the emergence of a new bourgeoisie who was responsible for establishing the satellite discourse as well as a “New Order political culture” in Indonesia (2005:705).
engineers, including Chon, also mark the advent of a new bourgeoisie who are elite professionals with cosmopolitan visions. While Chon got his education abroad, his students were educated in South Korea, but through Chon’s influence they developed cosmopolitan visions emulating him as well as being exposed to transnational encounters. Hur who played an important role in hosting the Pacific Computer Communications Symposium in 1985, recalled how they did it without even knowing what an international symposium was like. Hur recalled, “I was in charge of tutorials for the symposium. Professor Chon sent me to participate in the USENIX conference hosted by the Advanced Computing Systems Association. I learnt what they did in that conference and came back home and shared what I learnt with my colleagues. That is how we prepared the symposium. It was very rare to go abroad to learn such things back in those days.” (Ko et al 2012).

It was through encounters with transnational events that the engineers first became aware of their country’s status as a Third World country and were inspired to build up their homeland. For example, at the end of the 1980s, Hyunj Park was in charge of setting up HANAnet, the leased line between South Korea and the United States. Park recalled that Torben Nielson from the University of Hawaii, contact person for the United States, refused to pay half of the cost of using the line. Different institutes and companies in South Korea had to share the whole cost (An JB 2012). Park experienced something similar while he was developing the broadband Internet at Thrunet. Park recalled,

We went to visit the company ‘@Home’ in the States, seeking technical cooperation to develop the high-speed broadband Internet, but the company was not interested in us at all. It seemed that the company was thinking that South Korea was just a country beside Japan. Neither Nielson nor @Home seemed to take our technical skills seriously even though we set up the Internet before Japan and helped Japan to set up the Internet there. I keenly felt that the computer network is a human network. What we had back in the day were engineers like Rick Adams working at MCVAX or Seismo that willingly connected with us. (An JB 2012)

Korean engineers like Park built up the human network as well as the computer network in the process of developing the Internet in Asia in its early days of 1980s and 1990s (Chon KN 2015).

Chon’s life history challenges the dominant discourse of state-led authoritarian nationalism through his cosmopolitan approaches toward the development of a nation as well as technology.
Gustavo Lins Ribeiro (2005) defines cosmopolitanism as “a western notion that epitomizes the need social agents have to conceive of a political and cultural entity, larger than their own homeland, that would encompass all human beings on a global scale” (1). Ribeiro also points out that “cosmopolitanism presupposes a positive attitude towards difference, a desire to construct broad allegiances and equal and peaceful global communities of citizens who should be able to communicate across cultural and social boundaries forming a universalist solidarity” (2005:1). Chon’s life history, as well as that of SALab, gives life to cosmopolitanism and the “cosmopolitical” in the way Ribeiro conceptualizes.

It is still challenging, however, to balance the nationalistic stance of those Korean engineers from state-led authoritarian nationalism with their “good” cosmopolitanism. Pheng Cheah, in the introduction of edited volume *Cosmopolitics* (1998a), starts his discussion by bringing up the main theme of the book: “to explore the feasibility of cosmopolitanism as an alternative to nationalism in our contemporary era” (21). As Cheah points out, the concept of cosmopolitanism has been criticized as “moralistically condemning” as well as “uncommitted bourgeois detachment” (Cheah 1998a:31), but it has emerged as the “obvious choice as an intellectual ethic and political project” against the backdrop of globalization and transnationalism (Cheah 1998a:20–21). Cheah elaborates, building on Homi K. Bhabha’s and James Clifford’s conceptualizations, the way in which hybridity brings about differences in cosmopolitanism when cosmopolitan cultures meet native cultures, “subverting imperialism’s cosmo-political-cultural project” (1998b:293). Cheah furthers his discussions on the hybridity theory by critiquing how culturalism overlooks the “complex givenness of material reality” and narrows focus on metropolitan migrancy (1998b:302) and emphasizes responsibility to the given of a local (1998b:316). Chon’s life story shows his dedication and belief in the responsibility to the given.

Kilnam Chon is a modern figure who embodies nationalistic enthusiasm as well as cosmopolitan visions. Chon’s devotion to South Korea transcended the national boundary from the very beginning. He has focused on developing his country not just for national prosperity but for enabling South Korea to contribute to the rest of the world as an equal member. Chon’s stance on nationalism is similar to that of Sun Yat-sen, the father of modern China. Cheah portrays Sun Yat-sen as an example of “decolonizing nationalism.” Sun Yat-sen, according to Cheah, considered nationalism as the “necessary base of genuine cosmopolitanism” (Cheah 1998a:29–
Chon’s nationalistic enthusiasm needs to be understood in a similar way as a necessary step toward “genuine cosmopolitanism” in attempting to overcome past rooted in colonization. Chon’s cosmopolitan concerns also resonate with the endeavors to reconfigure cosmopolitanism as an intellectual ethic and political project.

In *Cosmopolitics*, Amanda Anderson discusses the elitism found in universalism and cosmopolitanism while she traces the genealogy of the term “cosmopolitanism” (1998). Anderson defines the political possibility of cosmopolitanism, despite the tension between elitism and egalitarianism, in terms of the “position and role of the intellectual and the intellectual enterprise” as well as its “geopolitical configurations” (Anderson 1998:268). The trajectory of Chon’s life history shows its basis in elitism. However, his elitism centers on the role of the intellectual as well as geopolitical configurations.

The April 19 Student Movement was a momentous event in Chon’s life. To Chon’s way of thinking the movement was about democracy, which transcends national boundaries in terms of a universal concern for equality. His background—being born and raised in Japan but choosing to work for South Korea, being educated in the United States, working as a professor as well as an engineer in South Korea for more than 30 years, despite not being Korean in terms of birth place—might possibly make him identify himself as a world citizen rather than Korean, in such a way that the resolution he made as a young person devoted to democracy has not been limited by national boundaries. Likewise, the “recursive public” of IT engineers all over the world with whom Chon has collaborated to develop the Internet might reinforce his cosmopolitan stance like the recursive public of geeks that Christopher Kelty examines (2008). The technological progress of the Korean Internet, therefore, has been shared with other countries, particularly in Asia through various networking groups that Chon has been involved in. The nationalistic discourse of the Korean Internet has emphasized the initiatives of government and the technological prowess of engineers. This discourse of the Internet has been constructed through selective compositions of narratives including the stories of engineers like Chon’s. The focus on national prosperity and power made the history of the Korean Internet narrow itself within its homeland.

---

22 In its early days of the Internet, instead of downloading data directly from the network, many countries used post-mail delivered magnetic record to access to the data on the net because of the comparatively low speed of the Internet and high cost of the phone bill of the dial-up connection. Once Chon and SALab got the magnetic records delivered, they passed them around to other countries in Asia with whom they were collaborating to develop the network technologies for themselves instead of importing the technologies from the West (Interview of Kilnam Chon, Sunyoung Yang, May 4, 2008). Also, see Chon 2015 for inter-Asian efforts and collaborations.
The story of Kilnam Chon, the father of the Internet and a “pioneer” in South Korea as well as Asia, challenges the nationalistic bias of the state-led authoritarian nationalistic discourse of the Korean Internet and sheds light on the cosmopolitics of Korean engineers and the technologies they have developed not only for Koreans but also for the universal humanity.

3 Evolving Online Communities and Living Figures: From Netizen to Agorian

The strong tendency toward the creation of communities is one of the features of Korean Internet cultures. Such community-centeredness is not only characteristic of online spaces explicitly dedicated to creating communities such as the Daum Café, but also those of online journalism, personal media, online gaming, online debates, and even online bullying and privacy infringement—in other words, it is shared by the broad range of Korean online cultures. As Jin examines through online game culture, Korean gamers have developed “mass play culture” while gamers of MMPORG in the United States prefer playing as single players (Jin DY 2010:30). Instead of staying as individual users of Internet services or websites, Korean Internet users are inclined to create communities of “deep, horizontal comradeship” based on strong “fraternity” as Anderson defines the nation when he considers it as an imagined “community” (2006:7). Individual users seek to become active members of different online communities. They join clubs based on their interests and build close relationships with other members of the same groups. They prefer playing online games as a community group, both in terms of interactions they engage in online, but also in the way they conduct themselves off-line, collecting at South Korea’s ubiquitous Internet cafés (p’isi pang). They debate social issues, participate in demonstrations such as the Candlelight rallies in off-line space, participating in such demonstrations under the flags of their online communities. They form ad hoc groups that pry into the personal life of given targets, like “dog-poop girl” (a young woman who was caught on video leaving her dog’s excrement on a subway and who was subsequently humiliated when the video was circulated and became popular online). While Anderson’s nation is imagined by its members in the sense that they never actually meet or interact with most of the other members of what they nonetheless consider to be citizens of their own “community” (2006:6), the members of online communities directly interact with each other through multimedia texts they themselves
create, by means of real-time communication such as online chatting and commenting. They sometimes even meet in person. The range these online communities have easily includes people at every geographical point of South Korea and often goes beyond the peninsula itself. The intensified comradeship and fraternity that Internet users have developed through their online communities result in a strong community orientation of Korean Internet culture.

Cho analyzes the popularity of online communities in South Korea in terms of “compressed modernity,” “cyber democracy,” “temporary autonomous zones,” and as an “alternative public sphere” (Cho HJ 2007:17). Cho argues that online communities offer Koreans spaces where they can experiment: (1) with new forms of democracy such as “anti-candidate campaigns (naksŏn undong),” new Internet media such as that resulting from the citizen journalism of Ohmynews, collective production of information such as that offered by the Naver Intellectual service, and “street festivals” like the 2002 FIFA World Cup; (2) with the creation of temporary autonomous zones, especially created by youth and women whose voices have not been audible enough. Youth’ and women’s experiments include creating cyber families,23 “me-centered” social networking on Cyworld, and online fan activities; (3) with creating habitats for unemployed youth (Cho HJ 2007:35–52).

Building on Cho’s work, which makes inroads in explaining the particularity of Korean Internet culture, I delve deeper into the community-centered tendency by using the notion of “sociability.” According to Simmel, sociability means “a feeling for, by a satisfaction in, the very fact that one is associated with others and that the solitariness of the individual is resolved into togetherness, a union with others” and “a feeling of the worth of association as such, a drive which presses toward this form of existence and often only later calls forth that objective content which carries the particular association along” (1949:255). In his article on interkom culture in Indonesia, drawing upon Simmel’s notion of sociability, Barker articulates the ways in which interkom users form publics which are not “self-consciously political subjects” like those of Anderson’s “imagined communities” or Warner’s “reading publics” (Warner 2002) but are “just for fun” (Barker 2008:142). The interkom publics, however, have their own “politics that plays with privileg ing a form of free and equal association while holding it in a space of suspension from

23 It is called “cyber fam (ssaiibo p’em)” using the abbreviation of English words “cyber family.” Internet users form a family of choice composed of parents, grandparents, and kids by post ads such as “I’m looking for a cyber family” and “I’m looking for a dad” in online communities (Chŏng HJ 2003:344; Cho HJ 2007:42).
‘reality’” (Barker 2008:130–131). Like interkom publics in Indonesia, for Koreans, sociability created from network connectivity brings about politics “at a formal level” (Barker 2008:131) before other kinds of politics which are related to the content of communication. The newly emerging online space enables Koreans to develop new sociabilities which are not bound to strong regionalism, school relations, and kinship, all of which have heavily affected off-line sociabilities in South Korea. As my interviewees demonstrate through their different backgrounds (they are from different provinces, schools, ages, and professions), how relationships developed in online space show the “unboundedness” from the existing culture of the off-line world. The extraordinary popularity and rapid growth of online communities in South Korea can be reckoned as showing the limit of existing off-line communities and some of the discontents of ordinary Koreans.

In this section, I articulate the new sociability that Korean online communities create through different online figures. In particular, I examine the netizen, the online avatar of Freechal and Cyworld, and Agorian. These are figures of collective identities. As “young female factory workers” appeared as “iconic figures of modernity” (Barker et al 2014:9; Ong 1987; Kim SK 1997) or as the Korean soap opera junkie has recently been found in many countries in Asia (Cho HJ 2005; Fu Su Yin and Kiew 2005; Lin and Tong 2008; Creighton 2009), online figures of Korean Internet users have appeared as signs of the times in which the Internet was developed and as new subjects entwined with Internet use emerged in South Korea as well as worldwide. While scholars mainly focus on actual individuals to depict figures (Barker et al 2014), I attempt to depict the three Korean online figures based on the collective footprints of Internet users who compose those figures individually and collectively. Their words and actions have been archived on the Internet, which, in this way, offers rich ethnographic sites for exploration. Examining these figures can be similar to piecing together a jigsaw puzzle of the formation of new subjects as mediated by network technologies.
3.1 The Netizen

The most popular definition of “netizen” in Urban Dictionary, a US-based crowd-sourced dictionary of slang terms, is that “Nobody uses this word except Korean” (sic).24 This is not entirely true; the term has circulated in limited circles in the anglosphere, including in early scholarly research on the Internet. A 1992 volume by Michael Hauben based on research about Usenet, for example, notes that “netizen” is a portmanteau term of “(Inter)net” and “citizen,” one denoting the “value of collective work and the communal aspects of public communications” indicating “people who discuss and debate topics in a constructive manner” (Hauben and Hauben 1997:ix-x).

In South Korea, by contrast, the term is incredibly widespread, its use extending deeply into official discourses relating to the Internet. In 2000, the Korea Internet Safety Commission (chŏngbo t’ongsin yulli wiwŏnhoe), a private organization the existence of which is mandatory by law, and which thus can be considered to be a quasi-government body, declared “the Netizen Ethics Code (net’ijūn yulli kangryŏng),” as follows: (1) We respect and protect other people’s human right and privacy; (2) We provide and use appropriately healthy information; (3) We reject and do not circulate unwholesome information; (4) We thoroughly protect other people’s as well as our own personal information; (5) We refrain from using slang and swearwords, using proper language instead; (6) We use our real names and are responsible for our behaviors under our online ID; (7) We do not commit to illegal actions such as spreading viruses and hacking; (8) We respect and protect other people’s intellectual property; (9) We actively participate in autonomous surveillance and critiques of cyber space; (10) We foster healthy netizen culture by practicing the Netizen Ethics code. This ethics code outlines a prototype of the desirable netizen who are self-regulating, voluntarily participating in social surveillance, and project and respect market regulations such as intellectual property. Online space, here, functioned not only as a tool to transcend the limits of off-line space but also as an ideal laboratory where neoliberal governing techniques working through self-regulating individuals can be experimented with.

The popularity of the label “netizen” in South Korea long predates the implementation of neoliberalism in the country, however. It started being used with the emergence of domestic networking services. There was even a popular music song titled “Netizen” released in 1994.

The label has had two general usages, one referring to a politically active, Internet-empowered agent, and the second, to net users in general. While it does pertain to the former meaning of net citizen, one who has rights and responsibilities for a given society and online community, netizen became dominant as a term denoting Internet users in general, representing the entirety of Internet users as “autonomous” and “technology-mediated” subjects in South Korea. This broad meaning began to take hold as the Internet started to spread nationwide in the late 1990s.

The popularity of the label “netizen” in South Korea is closely related to the ways in which “civil society” and “citizen” have been discussed in South Korea. Scholarly discussions in South Korea define civil society and citizen building mainly on two theoretical frameworks: (1) Liberalist perspectives, mainly from theorists of the social contract like John Locke; (2) Marxist perspectives such as Antonio Gramsci’s theory of hegemony and Jurgen Habermas’ theory of the public sphere (Yu P’M 2004: 31-34; Cho HY 1998:235–239). Citizen is defined as a concept which has been articulated with the emergence and growth of the modern bourgeoisie, who wanted to protect themselves from the absolute power of the monarch and feudal aristocrats by declaring that all humans are equal and have natural rights which cannot be infringed upon (Yu P’M 2004: 50–51).

Even though natural rights and democracy were guaranteed by the Constitution when the South Korean government was set up in 1948, after Japanese colonization ended in 1945, Koreans had very limited space for civil society till the end of the 1980s because of colonization, the Korean War, the division of Korea into north and south, the US Military Government, and then 30 years’ military dictatorship (Yu P’M 2004:63; Choi JJ 2009:72–73, 203). Even though modern citizens started emerging at the end of the Choson Dynasty and throughout the colonial period (Yu P’M 2004:80–82), discussions about civil society and citizenship gained renewed popularity with the democratization movements of the 1980s. Citizens’ movements emerged as an “alternative” to earlier democratization movements which were also known as “people movements.” While people movements focused on lower working-class people and farmers, new social movements, which came to be centered on the post-1987 (democratization) period, focused on diverse political subjects who were interested in various issues such as gender, ethnicity, and environment (Yu P’M 2004:116–119; Cho HY 1998:221–222).
While it was not easy to change existing public spheres where government power had been dominant over civil society, online space emerged as an alternative which was not determined by the existing rules of “off-line” Korean society but were open to any possibility. The membership for the newly emerging online space was not given en bloc as it was for the nationality of the Republic of Korea. Those who had been referred to only as the people of the Korean nation for a long time came to be able to exist as individuals. Some of those individuals chose to be members of online space which, itself, they could and would compose. Ŭnyŏng Song, a literature scholar, vividly depicts the excitement of these individuals as they encountered the domestic networking services for the first time:

The people who felt an unidentifiable thirst in the 1990s had a special friend. They were the people who knew that there was a new world in a 386 or 486 computer—which was considered no more than a word processor—in the days stranger than fiction when resistance toward the machine named computer existed. They waited patiently for their slow computer to boot, to hear the sound ch’i i i ik... following the sound tti tti tti tti, the sound connecting the modem. When the tiny blue window which could not even fill the whole screen of the heavy built monitor started loading white letters, a new space filled with new information, new people, and new pleasure unfolded before their eyes. (2009:315)

My own experience in domestic networking services resonates with Song’s. I started using domestic networking services in 1993 when I was 18 years old, in my last year of high school. I met several more teenagers who had started using domestic networking services as early as elementary school. It was a space where elementary school kids could be in the same clubs where university students, social activists, artists, and jobless intellectuals debated over social movements, computer and network technologies, and many other things. As early as their early teens, these kids became politically keen as well as technologically savvy. It was a space where a high school girl could meet older feminists who were in their twenties and thirties, have her first ever feminism seminar, and declare that her political stance would be as a radical feminist from now on. Various cinema and music clubs appeared through this space as well. As Ŭn-yŏng Song analyzes, the online communities and cultures brought about by the domestic networking services show not only the explosion of subcultures which had been suppressed over the military dictatorship period, but also the emergence of “mania groups” who brought about new grassroots mechanisms of creating and circulating cultures and information through their own productive activities (2009:323–324).
The users of the domestic networking services in the early 90s—mostly well-educated people, students, children, and youth keen to learn new technologies—also actively engaged in social and political issues through debates on the net and started to develop their own ways of resisting: spreading news about demonstrations through the Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) and using simple images such as black ribbons as a mark of respect to the dead at street demonstrations. They experienced a different life in this new space. They were free individuals who were all equal and had the right to express their opinions in the public sphere. They were citizens on the net even though they might not be able to be as free in the off-line world as in the online world. The label “netizen” properly represented this group of people and became more and more popular even after the domestic networking services withered and the Internet started to flourish. Although the Internet as we know it now has expanded beyond and encompasses so much more than domestic networking services ever did, the tradition of social activism, autonomous cultural production, and community-centered engagement is still practiced by the early users of the domestic networking services (Song ŬY 2009:316, 321).

As the Internet spread rapidly nationwide, the attributes of the netizen came to diversify. The label “netizen” came to indicate Internet users in general rather than Internet users as politically active agents. While they are still autonomous and technologically mediated individuals, they can go from well-meaning, well-behaving netizens to those engaging in less well-received behaviors, with autonomy and technologies in their hands, posting malicious and inflammatory comments, for instance, infringing on other users’ privacy, and cyber bullying. “Kae-(ne)tizen” (lit. dog + netizen, meaning netizen behaving badly; the label “troll” is used to indicate similar people among Internet users in English) is a newly coined label referring to netizens bearing such changing attributes.25

### 3.2 Freechal avatar and Cyworld Mini Me

The Internet expanded the online space of the domestic networking services. Daum Café, the online community service launched by Daum Communications in 1999, can be said to have been the very first form of Social Networking Service (SNS) on the Internet in South Korea. It has

---

25 It is hard to track down exactly when this term was coined. This term started appearing in major journalism publications in 2005 (Hankooki.com News Team 2005).
offered its users a space where they could create a café based on certain interests and activities, attracting other users who share the same interests. Daum Café was an immediate success, one which played an important role in building the strong foundation of the Korean online community space.

While Daum Café offered Korean Internet users space for group interests and collective activities, Freechal and Cyworld were keener to the increasing the desire and need of Koreans for a more individualizing medium to express themselves. The online avatar based on various visual characters appeared, complementing the existing ways of self-expression, which had mainly been based on plain text. Figures of Internet users who were eager to express themselves with online avatars emerged. As avatars mean to represent or replace off-line identities and offer online personae, they function as figures of Internet users who transcend the limits of the off-line world, particularly in terms of consumerism, and construct self-consciously branded subjects based on cautiously chosen types of consumption conducted in order to express oneself (Kimjong 2007:86–88).

Figure 1–2. Freechal Avatars (Source: Design Jungle)
The first company worldwide to service avatars was called Neowiz, and did so as a pay service at first through its online chatting services, called “Sayclub.” Services and programs on the Internet have a long history in terms of their being considered free and shared common goods. Freemium services have been offered as an option through which users can make the default service better and the service providers can make profits (via advertising) while not violating the tacit rule that information and services on the Internet should be free. Sayclub was the first successful case to invent a revenue model of selling the virtual items, which has been one of the most important sources of revenue for numerous online services and gaming sites since 2000 (Chon et al 2013:14).

The avatar services were popularity enough to get users to open their wallets due to users’ desires to create and express online personae. The Freechal avatar successfully met user demands, particularly through their combination avatar (chohap hyŏng abat’a), one where users could create their avatars by combining different body parts: for example, 38 different face shapes, 41 different styles of bangs, 17 different hair styles, 44 different eyes, 21 different noses, 24 different lips, 45 different bodies, and various items such as glasses, all of which could possibly make 37 billion different avatars. The catch phrase for the service was: “Me, the only one in the world! You can make it on Freechal (i sesang e tan hana ppunin na! p’ŭrich ’ael esŏ mandŭlŏ poseyo)” (Erwik’usŭ 2009).

---

26 As I discuss in chapter 5, I do not see such “free” services as being free as in terms of compensations, users have to offer personal information for the purposes of being targets of advertisements.

Freechal, which grew quickly based on its combination avatar service, started declining just as fast because of their attempt to charge fees for their services, particularly community space which had long been considered basic and free. Cyworld benefited from Freechal’s decline. Cyworld “Mini-home-pi” (mini homp’i) offered its users tools and accounts for easily set up personal home pages. Users could decorate the main page of their Mini-home-pi as they would their own living place, their Mini-home-pi consisting of a digital small-size bachelor apartment with wallpaper, carpet, furniture, and decor. Users could also decorate their avatars, called a “Mini-me (mini mi),” with different hairstyles, clothes, accessories, and even pets. Setting up their favorite songs to play while a user was visiting their Mini-home-pi was a good way to express their characteristic tastes.28 Besides Mini-me, the “self-camera” (selk’a) was one of the popular features of the Cyworld Mini-home-pi. Self-camera means a photo of oneself taken by oneself.29 To maximize one’s beauty, enhanced camera skills, face angles, light, and background

---

28 While the default form of Mini-home-pi and Mini-me are free, users have to pay for additional items to decorate their Mini-home-pi and Mini-me, including the streaming services by which to play their favorite songs when someone accesses their Mini-home-pi.

29 Analogous to the “selfie,” but notable in that it was popular much earlier than the selfie photo genre, which became popular in the West became after the advent of the smartphone.
images have been developed. The self-camera images accompanying Mini-me living in a Mini-home-pi contributed to creating online personae.

Cyworld Mini-home-pi would not have been successful if it had not invented a method of networking people, referred to as “il ch’on.” In Korean “ch’on” means the degree of kinship. Il ch’on means the closet degree of kinship, for example, between parents and their children. The Cyworld il ch’on plays a role in networking people much as Facebook networks people through the device of the “Friend.” The reason why personal home pages could not be as successful in Cyworld, although easy-to-use tools to design home pages were available, was the absence of such a networking function. It was not easy for individual personal home pages to get a high number of regular visitors. Cyworld Mini-home-pi offered readers and audiences to its users, who were eager to express themselves as the characters portrayed. The nationwide boom of Mini-home-pi’s opened the era of personal media on the Internet in South Korea. The Mini-home-pi started its service in 2001, and the number of its subscribed members increased from 3 million in 2002 to 10 million in 2004 to 27 million in 2012, at that point consisting of 58 percent of the entire South Korean population (Kang HCh 2002; Myŏng SŬ 2004; Cyworld 2012). The huge boom of Cyworld was a phenomenon referred to in shorthand as “The whole nation is doing Cyworld (chŏn kungmin i ssaijil chung)” (Yi KU 2004). The Mini-home-pi can be said to be a forerunner to Myspace and Facebook, which both developed similar services to the ones offered by Cyworld that had been a hit several years earlier. We can observe the emergence of figures of Internet users who position and express themselves through the social network they have and continue to develop, as well as images made out of their avatars, virtual rooms, and staged self-photographs.

Korean scholars have analyzed the phenomena surrounding the popularity of the online avatar and Mini-home-pi in terms of personal media, community of choice, self-branding, real-time intimacy (Kimjŏng 2007), experiment of identities (Hwang SM 2007), and as a complement to active participation to that in the off-line world (Pak SH 2006). While the existing literature sheds light on the implications of the avatar and of personal media on identity formation, it rarely examines the political economic conditions which brought about the popularity of such phenomena. As the popularity of the label “netizen” particularly in South Korea shows the conditions of Korean constructions of civil society and of the public sphere, the extraordinary
popularity of avatar and its related freemium services are related to the political economic changes affecting the way in which individuals form their identities.

South Korea has experienced rapid growth of consumer capitalism since the early of 1990s along with a transition from a Fordist to a post-Fordist mode of production. People’s desires to become free individuals after the long-lasting military dictatorship found its way to self-fulfillment as part of a fast-growing consumer culture. “Branding oneself” in online space became as important as doing it in the off-line world as the influence of online space became more powerful. While online self-branding complements that of the off-line world, the former sometimes becomes the only option if one does not have solvency to brand oneself through actual consumption in the off-line world. As I discuss in chapter 2, South Koreans came to experience increasing economic difficulty after the Asian financial crisis. While one’s capacity to brand oneself can be limited in the off-line world, it can be more flexible in the online space where one can brand oneself with good taste with a comparatively small amount of money for freemium services such as avatar and background music. While one was struggling to manage to have one’s own place in the off-line world, the Cyworld Mini-room might offer a good sanctuary to retreat to from rough reality (Kimjong 2007:84–85). Much as online space offers Koreans more openness for civil society, it also does so for consumer culture.

3.3 Agorian

As I discussed above, one of the explicit features of Korean Internet culture is the strong sense of community. Political debates or social critiques are also formed more explicitly through community space. Daum Communications opened another community space called “Agora” in 2005. While Daum Café offers space for mutual friendship among subscribed members sharing similar interests (to become a member of a given café, users need to subscribe to the café on top of subscribing to Daum), as its name implies, Daum Agora offers more discussion-focused space over various social issues (users just need a Daum membership to do so). “Internet commentator” (int’ŏnet non’gaek) became another popular label to indicate Internet users who are passionate and have a talent for debating in the open space on the Internet. Agorian is a label referring to Internet commentators who are active particularly in Daum Agora.
Online debate forums became more and more powerful as the Internet continued to spread. Agorians did not stay merely on the net. Instead, they started to bring different social issues into focus and led online debates into street demonstrations, ones which became known as the “Candlelight Rallies” (ch’otpul chiphoe). Street demonstrations have a long history in terms of being a part of the labor movement for democratization in the 1970s and the 1980s. The tradition of street demonstration waned after democratization in 1987, however. The new generation of street demonstration began in 2002 after Koreans experienced huge street gatherings which spread nationwide during the 2002 FIFA World Cup. The experience of occupying streets and opening up public space during the World Cup enabled Koreans to later bring forth social issues to the same street. The candlelight demonstrations have been organized autonomously through the Internet, without official organizing bodies. Its official title is “Candlelight Cultural Festival” (ch’otpul munhwaje), which aims to bypass government regulations that prohibits any demonstration after the sun sets. These demonstrations or festivals have dealt with issues such as the death of two Korean middle school girls run over by a US Military armored car in 2002, the battle against the impeachment of President Roh Moo Hyun in 2003, fights against the government’s decision to allow US beef to be imported in 2008, the death of President Roh Moo Hyun and the death of displaced people in Yongsan in 2009, university tuition fees in 2011, and interventions in the presidential election by the National Intelligence Service in 2013. The number of participants has varied from 1,000 to 700,000 in the case of demonstrations held in Seoul (Yonhap News 2008). Demonstrations have been held in different cities all over the nation.

Agora and Agorians became famous particularly with the candlelight rallies regarding imports of US beef in 2008. US beef had been banned since 2003 after the prion known to cause mad cow disease was found in US cattle. In 2008, the Lee Myung-bak government decided to reopen US beef imports as a part of the Korea-US Free Trade Agreement, which was signed in 2007. The government decision brought about huge antigovernment sentiment, particularly due to the perception that the government was willing to risk people’s health for the purposes of economic interests. The broad range of ordinary Koreans, from teenagers to parental generations, university students, various fan clubs and online communities, participated in the rallies. Social activists and politicians were not leading the groups of the rallies. Rather, politicians were surprised by the passion and the organizational power of the rally participants, who were without
de facto power and busy with figuring out a new wave of social movements. Agora became one of the online communities where the discussions were most active and from which discussions and information were forwarded to other communities. As a result, Agora and Agorians were called the de facto power of the rallies. Agorians are very proud of themselves, since they find themselves actively engaging in changing society as responsible citizens. The following excerpts from a post written by an Agorian demonstrate how they recognize themselves and their online discussion communities.

My name is Agora. I am the new civic democracy for the 21st century. I am a melting pot. I am the blade of cold reason which is, at the same time, full of aspiration and wrath. I am a combination of a generation dancing between teenage girls, with great fuss and innocent sensitivity, and the aged, with a chronic cough. I am chaos. I am a war zone between people who cannot reconcile with one another. I am raw freshness in which nicely wrapped secrets cannot exist. No, no, I am the arrogant flow of a river. I am the flow of holy water. I am the river of which depth and width cannot be measured and which only aims to reach the sea of resurrection (Na MS 2008:94). … … Everything is disclosed piece by piece when it is captured by the net of Agora. Agorians are not afraid of the power even though it is almighty. Even the pushiest man is totally disclosed by the inspection of Agora…. (Na MS 2008:97)

Did you guys meet each other in person by any chance? Maybe nobody did but everyone did. At work, at school, on the street, in a bus and subway, and Gwanghwamun Gate.

Did you guys know each other’s background by any chance? Maybe nobody did but everyone did. Gyengsang province, Jeolla province, Seoul, Pusan, Chungcheong, Gyenggi……

One only having an elementary education, a middle school education, a high school education, or a university education

Farming, fishing, salaried worker, professor, owner of small pub…

What is your affiliation?

Haha… You are indeed the Republic of Korea.

In the 100-year darkness
Merely blossoming 10-year democracy
Was trampled only in three months,
I shed tears.

Haha… But I am going to stop crying.
You.
Thank you.
I’m shedding further tears.
(Kkoma wa changgun 2008:17)

Agorians are confident of themselves as core agents of civic democracy. They are also confident of their power based on the Internet which enables them to compose a collective intellect and collective actions. Internet users are depicted as responsible citizens on the net who are politically progressive and active under the label “Agorian,” like the label “netizen” in its early days.

4 Malicious Commenters and the Emergence of DCinside

This section examines the emergence of the DCinside culture of “anything goes” by focusing on the interactions between malicious commenters and other DCinside users. Malicious commenters emerged as figures that violated social conventions. They liked inhabiting DCinside in particular because of its policy of keeping users anonymous, creating a more liberal atmosphere tolerant of behavior many would consider undesirable. Ironically, because it was the main target of malicious commenters, DCinside came to develop its culture “anything goes,” as well as its abrupt style of loser aesthetics. Malicious commenters and later DCinside users who are fond of self-referential mockery such as the Internet freak and being surplus cast a suspicious eye on the pretentious and specious claims of prudish “netizens” and the neoliberal moralizing that they espouse.

It is not correct to say that each label indicating certain Internet users clearly indicates a different group of Internet users. Rather, different groups overlap. Internet users could be Agorians, owners of a Mini-home-pi, and Internet freaks at the same time. Some Internet users in a certain group set themselves up against others in other groups; other Internet users freely cross over between different groups. In this sense, Internet freaks indicate certain tendencies or
characteristics rather than an exclusive demographic group of Internet users. The actions of Internet freaks are different from what proper citizens on the net might be supposed to do. They are engrossed in finding the absurd in the scenery of everyday life, rushing into new posts, creating composite photos, as well as high quality artworks including serial cartoons and music videos, rapidly post piles of trivial content on BBSs, harassing each other with rude and unruly comments, and making fun of themselves. DC Internet freaks aggressively pursue unregulated fun, challenging proper norms set out for Internet users such as those of the Netizen Ethics Code.

The policy of DCinside, keeping its users anonymous and letting them solve problems happening in the gallery for themselves, contributed to the creation of a unique culture of DCinside which is tolerant of any kind of improper behavior, including abruptness, Internet bullying, sexual nuances, violation of personal information, and saying silly things. Most Korean websites request their users to subscribe to their websites first to use their services. Rates of subscribed membership are pivotal for Internet companies since they can attract advertisements based on the number of members a site has and the personal information collected through the sign-up and the activities users undertake as members. Personal information is needed for Internet users to subscribe to most websites in South Korea. Information requested will typically include not only an e-mail address, but also a telephone number and mailing address, as well as the person’s national registration number, which is based on fingerprint records collected by the government.

A national registration number is issued to all Korean citizens when they turn 17 years old; people submit their applications for the ID card, the civic service office takes and records fingerprints from the applicant. This procedure is mandatory for every Korean, a practice started in 1968 under the Park Chung-Hee’s regime for the purpose of tracking down North Korean spies and to better arm South Koreans against anticommunism (Hong SB 2006:268). Privacy and anonymity might be values in name only in such a society, one that considers the whole population to be potential criminals or threats to national security and does not hesitate to take this kind of biometric information. Moreover, this biometric information can be easily accessed by any government body, such as the civic service office and the police, in electronic form through the network thanks to the successful accomplishment of e-government projects on the part of the Korean government. Constant and effective social surveillance is not helpful for building a public sphere where people can speak out freely. The Internet offered Koreans a public sphere which barely existed in the off-line world under the long military dictatorship.
While most Korean websites ask people to subscribe with personal information, with the effect that people need to be wary of what they say as they can easily be identified, DCinside has kept its website available to nonmembers while offering membership services as an option. The freedom to be anonymous means a lot and DCinside users are at liberty to talk about anything they desire, even if it could violate social conventions, or is frowned upon politically by powerful agents, including the state. However, DCinside had to give up its anonymity between 2007 and 2012, during which time the Internet Real-name Policy (인터넷 실명정책) was legislated and implemented. This made it mandatory by law for Internet users to submit their real identification based on the national registration number if they posted something online or commented on other people’s posts. This policy restricted the DCinside “anything goes” culture for a period of time.

The emergence of malicious commenters (악플) also played an important role in shaping the tolerance for impropriety of the DCinside culture. There is a kind of urban legend about the top three malicious commentators in Korea’s Internet history: Fucking Pope (ssibol kyo hwang), Singha, and The General Trend Is Tactic (태세 민출략) (July 1983 - 2007). The stories of the top three malicious commentators I refer to here were written and posted on DCinside by a user with the nickname “july1983.” The original posts on DCinside are missing, which is not uncommon, but have been reposted on other websites. Like the stories written by july1983, the legends of malicious commenters as well as those of DCinside are composed as a discourse through retelling, rewriting, reediting, and repost by DCinside users.

Fucking Pope appeared around 1999 through other popular Internet websites such as the Thrunet online community and Ddanzi Ilbo, a famous parodic political webzine. Fucking Pope wrote posts full of foul language numbering over 1,500 pages on the Ddanzi Ilbo BBS, while also hacking the webzine system with deletions and changes to articles. Ddanzi Ilbo had to close its website for three days to block out Fucking Pope. The owner of Ddanzi Ilbo sued Fucking Pope but suddenly withdrew the lawsuit, which spread the rumor that Fucking Pope might be a really rich man with a lot of power. This astonishing phenomenon and rumors related to it increased the number of Fucking Pope’s followers, who even paid for the expense of his followers’ off-line gatherings as if he had been proved to actually exist. Fucking Pope moved his sphere of activity to DCinside after “laying Ddanzi Ilbo in the ashes.”
While other websites offering social networking services tried to expel malicious commenters like Fucking Pope, DCinside let its users deal with them. The culture of DC Internet freaks came to be formed as an unexpected effect of this process. DCinside was not considered to be so decadent till the legendary malicious commenter Fucking Pope appeared. Until then, DCinside was known as a fun but proper website among Internet users. DC Internet freaks started to talk down to and curse this malicious commenter, which the company DCinside allowed to continue because Fucking Pope had overloaded its servers with malicious posts. The liberal but harsh style of DCinside was created through battles between Fucking Pope and DC Internet freaks. DC Internet freaks finally learned how to deal with Fucking Pope over several years. They came to develop a tough skin and started considering the tenacious spirit (kŭnsŏng) of Fucking Pope and his malicious posts as kind of cute and funny, as nothing to be taken too seriously. DC Internet freaks came to acquire a tolerance for these malicious commenters since their insanely malicious posts and behaviors were fun in some ways. In addition, they became as good as Fucking Pope regarding cursing and malicious free talk. Many malicious commenters such as London Childe, Soul Slave, and Daniel appeared in the wake of Fucking Pope. DC Internet freaks were unfazed of these malicious commenters, armed, as they were now, with a tenacious spirit.

Singha, representing a second generation of malicious commenter, succeeded in becoming another legend on DCinside. Singha used a so-called “humiliating snapshot” (kulyok tchal)30 of the famous Chinese actor, Bruce Lee, as his trademark for all of his posts. This funny image became an essential ingredient for composing images on DCinside.31 Singha was just an ordinary user of the Fashion gallery until he became furious at the ridiculing and obnoxious comments by other DC Internet freaks toward his own posts. Singha started “papering” (tobae) the BBS with extraneous posts (chap kŭl; ppŏl kŭl) and malicious comments. The following is one of his extraneous posts and composite images.

It’s me, your older brother (hyŏng). I feel fucking bad because I heard the rumor that I was dead. You, fucking sons of bitches, assholes, listen to me. You’d better stop spreading such rumors. Otherwise I will kill you by punching you with a single fist. I already beat up the fucker who spread the rumor. It’s gonna be your turn, you fucking assholes just playing games at home even on the weekend. I will find and beat you up one by one till you’re dead. (july1983 2007)

---

30 Snapshots and photos capturing awkward moments acquired this label and became popular.
31 One of important galleries at DCinside is that of “Composition-Essential Ingredients.” Once an image becomes an essential ingredient for composition, it becomes widely used by DCinside users.
Singha became popular in the DC galleries and even other websites outside of DCinside such as Humoruniversity (*Utkkin taehak*), DCinside’s competition and sometimes jokingly called “the enemy.” DC Internet freaks started following Singha’s mischievous posts. Singha eventually paid the penalty for fame through false impersonations and attempts to track him down in the off-line world by other DCinside users. Singha left DCinside, posting his official last words as follows:

It’s me, your older brother (hyŏng). I will skip cursing today because I’m gonna leave here. I will leave the Starcraft gallery and live a normal life. I’m fucking blinded with tears because I have to leave you here, you fucking child-like assholes of the Starcraft gallery. I have cursed you because I loved you. You should know that I shed tears after I beat you up, every day. You can choose your next leader after I leave. I’m leaving. If you see me in other galleries, please give me a nod. I really loved you. Goodbye now… I will badly miss beating you up. (Source from july1983 2007)
The legendary malicious commenters viciously criticized other Internet users mainly by making ad hominem attacks. They shut down BBSs and websites by uploading hundreds and thousands of posts at once. They abandoned modest behavior, according to the mores of polite Korean society, and showed off their wealth and power, which they possessed in tremendous quantities, according to themselves. They straightforwardly said that they had every right to torment others simply because they were the strong. While neoliberal sermons recommended that individuals should become entrepreneurs and be self-sufficient and responsible, the malicious commenters spoke out without reservation about the consequences of the rule of “winner takes all” and the hidden implications that losers are solely responsible for their own failures. Their statements are brutal but truthful, which enables other Internet users to feel the pleasure of enlightenment rather than the displeasure of sugarcoated neoliberal norms. The tolerance for all kinds of impropriety grew as the very core of the DC Internet freak culture with the advent of malicious commenters. Even though Internet users encountered malicious commenters only via texts appearing on the Internet, they have taken on an almost mystical corporeal presence in people’s minds. The way in which malicious commenters created a presence enabled them to become powerful figures in the galleries of DCinside. The figure of malicious commenters challenged the dominant representation of Internet users as netizens. Laughing at the virtuous, technologically empowered “active citizens on the net,” malicious commenters challenged the agent of the new neoliberal status quo. In this sense, the figures of malicious commenters play the role of a negative doppelganger of the netizen, suspicious of upstanding citizens preaching doctrines of neoliberalism as well as promises for the rosy future of an information society.

Trained by the figures of the malicious commenters, DCinside users have developed tough skins and now they do not hesitate to curse each other, clog up bulletin boards with repetitious and redundant posts (tobae), make fun of the dead (koindũrip), and meet and beat other users in person (hyŏnp’i). DCinside users are tolerant to whatever comes to them, but it is not a proper or polite type of tolerance. They are tolerant because they can also react to others in the ways they like themselves, with no limit. This is the way that diverse DCinside users can coexist in DCinside: accepting other people’s bullshit in order to have the freedom to defecate all over the place themselves.32 The guaranteed freedom of expression on DCinside enables its users to speak out without limits, which results in various forms of self-representation without limits of self-

32 The word writing is often replaced with the word excreting (ssa da) on DCinside.
censorship. Moreover, it enables DCinside users to reveal the consequences of neoliberalization by means of their jaundiced eyes. I continue to discuss the different forms of self-referential mockery of DCinside users in chapter 3. Before I explore self-mocking representation further in chapter 2, I position DCinside users within the politico-economic and socio-cultural contexts of Korean society and youth culture.
Chapter 2
Being Surplus: Youth in between Economic Decline and Internet Development

“Mantis Kindergarten” (Samagwi yuch’iwón) is a feature of Gag Concert, a popular Korean TV comedy show.33 This kindergarten is not, in fact, attended by young children, but by youth of around eighteen years of age who are still receiving an education and are thinking about a future career. The goal of Mantis Kindergarten is to educate students about their future in Korean society. Career education is one of three classes that make up the curriculum for this kindergarten. Today, Mr. Mantis34 and two students, “Nineteen-year-old Soyŏng” (sipku se Soyŏng i) and “Nineteen-year-old Nayŏng” (sipku se Nayŏng i) are talking about their dream jobs. Nayŏng wants to work for a major company. Mr. Moneylender, who is in charge of vocational education, is helpfully advising Soyŏng and Nayŏng how to realize their dreams of being hired by a major company.

Adult-Kids35, it is not that difficult to get into a major company. All you need to do is to succeed in entering one of the three top universities, the names of which everyone knows. It won’t be that hard to get into one of them since there are three of them, not just one. You see? No problem!36 Once you enter university, your tuition fees will cost you from at least US$ 50,000 to at most US$ 200,000 in total. But don’t worry. You can borrow money from your parents first. Do you feel bad for your parents? Well, then you can get a part-time job at a 24-hour convenience store.

33 The nationwide broadcasting rate of Gag Concert was between 13.6 percent to 27.9 percent, ranking between fifteenth and second among all programs on the Korean public TV network in the weekly rating from the beginning of the run of Mantis Kindergarten in September 2011 through to the year 2011. The nationwide broadcasting rate on October 16, 2011, was 20.5 percent, placing it third in the weekly ratings measurements (AGB Nielsen 2011).
34 Mantis Kindergarten has four teachers, with Mr. Mantis as the director. The other three teachers are, first, Ilsukkun, which can be translated roughly as “Mr. Moneylender,” Ssangk’al, roughly “Two-sword man” (a typical nickname for Korean gangsters), and a teacher who teaches a course in civics, but whose name is constantly changing. “Mantis” refers to the director’s facial features. He proudly calls himself “Mantis,” riffing on the name of a famous Korean comedian whose nickname is “Grasshopper” (a name also related to his facial features). Gag Concert is well-known in Korea for its piquant satire. The producer of the series has said that he wanted to present the ugly side of the adult world to youth as they approached adulthood (Park SS 2011).
35 Instead of calling students “ŏrini” (kid), teachers of Mantis Kindergarten call them by the pun neologism “ŏrni-i (Adult-Kid).”
36 The total entrance quota of Korea’s postsecondary system of two-year colleges and four-year universities is 568,182, these new students gaining entrance to a total of 377 schools. The entrance quota of the three top universities to which Mantis Kindergarten refers, Korea University, Seoul National University, and Yonsei University, is 10,063 (Ministry of Education 2012). This includes only the quota to the main campuses of these three universities, those located in Seoul, because the branch campuses of these schools are not considered to be as prestigious as the main campuses. Refer to Uhm Ki-ho to see the defeated feelings of youth in the branch campuses of the top universities as well as those in the country’s second- and third-tier universities (2010). The percentage of all entrants entering into the three top universities is 1.78 percent of the total entrance quota. There is still no guarantee of a good career for these entrants, even as those who have won the gruelling race of the university entrance examinations.
You’re going to be paid four dollars per hour. You can gather enough money for one year’s tuition in a year if you work for ten hours per day/seven days per week/365 days per year. You can graduate from the university within eight years if you follow this cycle of working for one year and then studying for one year. Once you graduate from the university, you can get into a major company if you obtain a good score in the English test, let’s say more than 900 points (out of 990) for the Test of English for International Communication. Hmm, you are not good at English, you mean? Then you can go to Canada for English training. You don’t have money to do that, you mean? Then, you can go back to the convenience store. Again, if you’re paid US$ 4 per hour and don’t do anything but breathe and scan bar codes for a year, you can make enough money for a six-month language training abroad. Once you come back from studying English abroad, you just need to get some plastic surgery to give a good first impression at the job interviews. Hmm, you don’t have money for the plastic surgery, you mean? Then, you can go back to the convenience store. Again, if you’re paid US$ 4 per hour and do nothing but breathe and scan bar codes for a year, you can make enough money for the surgery. Once you get into a major company, you can probably pay off the money you have spent so far in ten years if you don’t do anything but breathe and gather all the money from regular pay, overtime pay, and bonuses. If you work this hard without any serious mistakes or bad accidents, don’t be surprised, you can be the head of a department in 30 years, when you’re in your fifties! Then, a 30-year-old son of your company’s owner will become your boss. You can avoid the heavy blow of early retirement if you try hard to kiss up to your young boss. Adult-Kids, what do you think? Isn’t it so easy to get into a major company? Why don’t you get into a major company to be globally talented and a leader of the Korean economy?

Soyŏng and Nayŏng nod in agreement, as if acknowledging that they have received a good lesson. Mr. Mantis wraps up the class by saying “Adult-Kids, did you listen carefully? Let’s try to be reborn as a son of a major company’s owner to get into a major company in our next life!” (Sŏ SM 2011).

The episode “Getting into a Major Company” received an explosive response from audiences and the press not because it dealt with an unrealistic and shocking story, but because the context of this shocking story was quite near to the reality of most Korean youth.37 Young adults on the cusp of their adult lives desire positions with major Korean companies such as Samsung, Hyundai, and LG because they hold the most promise in terms of career-building. Getting into these companies is very competitive, and based on the annual turnover in 2011 the top 50

---

37 “Mantis Kindergarten” ranked in the list of top ten searched terms overall and was among those with the sharpest increase in searches at the time of this broadcast. It also ranked as the the third and fourth most searched feature program and entertainment program, respectively, for the week after the episode aired (Naver 2011). Newspapers, TV news, and Internet journalism reported this episode of Mantis Kindergarten as a sharp criticism of the bottleneck into the country’s elite postsecondary institutions (Kim ChH 2011; Lee DH 2011; Yi SG 2011; Han OCh 2011; Yi Ch’H 2011; Im HY 2011). Popular public figures including politicians, economists, and social activists also referred to this episode (Kim YK 2012; Pak MCh 2011).
companies reported an application rate of around 61:1; that is, 61 applications received for every one position that opened (Incruit 2011). Even for graduates from the top universities, attaining a position with a desirable affiliate of one of the top major companies is no easy feat. As Mantis Kindergarten advises, graduates from good universities still need high scores in TOEFL or TOEIC English-language skill exams, as well as having good looks. Plastic surgery became a trend to increase individual competitiveness in concert with widely circulating discourses that can be summed up by the popular aphorism “Looks are also competitiveness” (Oemo to kyŏngjaengryŏk ida). Such discourses have circulated in prior eras, but were somewhat frowned upon; now they have become openly acceptable, especially in regards to women. Of high school graduates, 40.3 percent wanted plastic surgery as a present for graduation (Kim DH 2007). Of college students, 98 percent affirmed the idea that “Looks are also competitiveness” and 93 percent of them answered that they were fixated on their looks (Media Trend Team of Korea IT News 2011). Mantis Kindergarten goes further, demonstrating the ironic futility of all this effort and expense. To put it in the colloquial terms of Gag TV, life working for a major company actually kind of sucks. Hard work is mandatory just to retain a position. The salary does not seem rewarding enough given the time and money invested to land the job; a job that winds up counting for less than 20 years of employment time, which is plagued by continues threats of being laid off for most employees followed by forced early retirement and job insecurity. Even if a person successfully avoids these threats, he has to endure unfair promotion through nepotism and other opaque procedures at higher levels of the organization. Mr. Mantis jovially concludes to his students, “Let’s try to be reborn as a son of a major company’s owner to get into a major company in our next life!” which implies that the current social economic structure is

38 English is one of the important qualifications for most jobs no matter whether the job itself actually involves speaking, reading, or writing in English or not. Around 51.8 percent of college students answered that they took or were taking private English lessons for the purposes of getting a job after graduation (Incruit 2011). The average expenditure for these private lessons was around US$ 2,500 (2.79 million KRW) per year. Of students taking private lessons overall, 98.1 percent were taking or had taken English lessons (JobKorea 2011). Students who went abroad to study English spent around US$ 15,000 during the seven-month period (Campus & Society Watch of the Seoul YMCA 2009).

39 A survey conducted by Saramin HR, an Internet Job search portal, found the starting salary of major companies was around US$ 40,000 in 2014 (Yonhap News 2014). The average salary of a major company is found to be around US$ 75,000 in the same year. Men’s average salary is found to be US$ 30,000 higher than women’s. The highest salary for an individual employee is found to be US$ 115,000 for a man and US$ 79,000 for a woman (Asia Economy Online Issue Team 2015).

40 I deliberately use a masculine pronoun here to indicate the male dominance of major Korean companies. The rate of female employees in the top 100 Korean companies is 22.9 percent. The rate of female managers is 7.1 percent and that of female executives is 1.1 percent (Kang HS 2010). Ironically, both of the students in Mantis Kindergarten are young women, their male teachers teaching them how to enter major companies, where women are very much marginalized.
untouchable and that the best any individual can do is pray to be reborn into a rich family. As uninspiring as this sounds, even this kind of life is not available to everyone. It is an option available only to graduates of the elite universities.

Although the particularities of their social positions varied, all of my interviewees shared the anxieties as evidenced in this television episode: of being caught in a never-ending torrent of competition, of being mired in an alienating system of education and examination, of being engaged in a Sisyphean task of working to build a foundation on which to construct a solid middle-class life even as forces outside their control erode the ground beneath them. Much of the posts on sites like DCinside comments on the absurdity of living this kind of life in ironic tones similar to the episode of Mantis Kindergarten I discussed above. One of my interviewees, whose online moniker was Eloquence, did her best to reject this system of striving for empty promises, choosing instead a low-paying career (of around $11,000 per annum) as a social worker in order to maintain job security and guaranteed retirement benefits (she qualified that these are not entirely guaranteed—they are available as long as the organization does not shut down, which rarely happens). She justified her decision by means of a critique of South Korean social life that was uncannily similar to that depicted by Mr. Mantis:

My friends who studied better than me in high school majored in economics, accounting, and so on, which are considered better than my major, social welfare studies. They are still working very hard to enter a good company like Samsung. Some of them will succeed, but others won’t. There is no guarantee even though they are working very hard. And then what? Even if they succeed in entering Samsung, they have to live an even more competitive life to be successful in their company. And then, they would start to be forced to retire in their forties. What a life! I would rather live a long and mundane life rather than a short and sharp one (tchalkko kukkke salgi poda kilgo kanülge salgo sipta).

This chapter aims to position Internet freak youth, like Eloquence, as the focal point of this research. The definition of the term “youth” is flexible in the sense that different cultures and regions have assorted terms that square with varying equivalence with the idea of youth; in English, these might include child, teenager, youngster, and adolescent. The term “youth” can be translated into “chŏlmŭni,” “ch’ŏngsonyŏn,” or “ch’ŏnggyŏn” in Korean. The term “chŏlmŭni” means young people in general and is more informal than ch’ŏngsonyŏn and ch’ŏnggyŏn. The term “ch’ŏngsonyŏn” in Korean is a person who is between 9 to 24 years of age, according to the
Korean Framework Act on Juveniles. This term is usually applied to underage teenagers in everyday life, even though it frequently covers people in their early twenties, as well. Ch’ŏngyŏn, which is used in the compound word “youth unemployment (ch’ŏngyŏn silŏp),” categorizes people between 15 to 29 years of age, as defined by the Korean National Statistical Office. Although ch’ŏngyŏn silŏp uses the defining age range of ch’ŏngyŏn, it also covers late teens who are already in the job market and those who are in their early thirties who are still financially dependent on their parents as they search for a job.

Most of my interviewees are underemployed youth in their twenties. I did not limit my interviews to this youth group at the outset of my research, but it just happened to turn out to be the average age of people I encountered while seeking out users of DCinside who actively uploaded posts. This was not surprising given that the youth of South Korea are the core group participating in various Internet activities, especially those related to social networking services and the production of online content. However, instead of taking it for granted, this chapter examines the political economic conditions that enable youth to be the most active participants and producers of Internet posts. To do so, this chapter analyzes public discourses about how the youth are determining not only how they are identified by others but also how they identify and understand themselves through normative expectations of success, opportunity, and failure in South Korean contexts. The implications that new media technologies have on the experience of being young are touched upon in this chapter and continue to be discussed throughout the rest of the chapters of this dissertation.

The first section of this chapter addresses generation discourses in South Korea which started emerging in the 1990s and getting popular through the decade of 2000–2010. The discourse has been composed of marketing strategies such as “Generation X” (eksū sedae) which is based on popular culture and subculture combined with new genres of popular music and new consumer culture, and academic discourse trying to grasp rapid changes of Korean modernity. Sarah Lamb (2015) defines generation according to two primary meanings based on the way in which the term has been used by anthropologies: 1) “a group of people who are living through a time period together and participate in some kind of shared identity, practices, and beliefs” and 2) relationship in a “system of kinship descent” (853). The way in which the term “generation” has been used in South Korea is more closely related to the former definition as a cohort, while including the latter meaning as well depending on a given context. Korean scholarship that has
used generation as an analytical tool has found the usefulness of generation in terms of particularities of South Korean modernity in which people have experienced rapid and far-reaching social changes at a dizzying rate. While they are aware of the possibility that generation can be used to conceal class issues by focusing on conflicts between generations, as well as to fulfill the marketing need to pin down target customers based on different age groups and peer cultures, scholars argue generation can still be a good lens through which we can understand the way in which Koreans have experienced rapid social changes. While elaborating on scholarly efforts to understand Korean modernity with the concepts of “compressed modernity” and “generation” as analytical tools, I also pay attention to normative understandings that discourses about generations have contributed to an overall comprehension. These normative understandings have influenced the way in which Koreans understand the world as well as themselves as collective subjects. Critiques on the $800 Generation have influenced the way in which those in their twenties during 2000–2010, including my interviewees, understand the world and themselves.

The second section examines the fear of “being surplus” among Korean youth through a close reading of posts that include the term “surplus” as a central feature. The term “surplus” became popular among South Korean youth around 2008.41 Surplus means something or someone that is not needed or highly valued. The fear of being surplus is a direct result of being new entrants to a fiercely competitive labor market and as shaky aspirants to the South Korean middle classes. This section analyzes discussions of being surplus in relation to the social pressure of defending middle-class status and the ever-increasing rate of participation in higher education. While defending middle-class status determines social success and failure, having an advanced education functions as a key strategy in the attempt to defend middle-class status in terms of acquiring qualifications and opportunities. Being surplus is a fear produced by the normative understandings of social success, opportunity, and failure, and is common among youth regardless of the degree to which they have been successful or unsuccessful in their education and career building, or what kind of social status and class background they have. The possibility of dropping through the social ranks is as powerful a fear as the actuality. Precarity—of employment, of social status—operates as a meta-condition of life, and middle-class consciousness aggravates the fear of being surplus.

41 The term surplus ranked as one of the most popular terms used on the Internet in 2008 (Ham YH 2012).
The third section tells stories of my interviewees in order to situate them within the broader category of Korean youth. Their stories illuminate the precarious lives that most Korean youth endure and their strategies and despair at living out such lives. Using the Internet becomes an intimate everyday practice through which they manage the important threads of their lives, from school and work to intimate relationships to leisure time activities. DCinside helps its users to make their lives livable by offering a space where youth can shout out their stressful lives and become someone that they cannot be in the real world. The final section offers a brief analysis of my interviewees’ stories in relation to my discussions on broader contexts of political economic and socio-cultural conditions of Korean society.

1 Compressed Modernity, Neoliberalization, and the Emergence of the $800 Generation

The economic development of South Korea since the Korean War demonstrates the influence of particular characteristics of modernity on South Korea. The per capita national income of South Korea was US$ 67 in 1953, as measured in the immediate aftermath of the Korean War. It increased to US$ 254 in 1970, US$ 1,645 in 1980, US$ 6,147 in 1990, US$ 10,000 in 1995, and US$ 20,000 in 2007 (Sim et al 2010:20–21). This represents a rate of increase of almost 300 times over the course of 45 years. South Korea has transformed from the world’s poorest agricultural country to a wealthy postindustrial country in a very short period of time. Korean scholars have addressed the implications of this rapid economic development with the concept of “compressed growth” (апх’ук сŏндж’а) (Sim KH 2010:15), “compressed rush-to development” (Cho HJ 2000:55), and “compressed modernity” (Chang KS 2010:1). Kyung-Sup Chang’s conceptualization of compressed modernity encompasses the broad range of social changes that Koreans have lived through, a process that has included economic change, political struggle, and new popular and consumer cultures (2010:3). Chang in particular emphasizes the importance of family in this process. Chang argues that family became the only resource Koreans could mobilize for their survival “when the colonial economic exploitation and political abuse of the grassroots were rampant, when a colossal civil war denied any certainties in social relations and economic activities, and when political regimes were unstable and authoritarian in managing civic life” (2010:4). Chang finds answers from the unprecedented compressed modernity to the
questions related to major social issues Koreans have experienced such as formal education, unstable labor market, conflicts between traditional and modern elements, the strategy of the developmental state concentrating material resources toward a small number of conglomerates, and “defamiliation” such as family violence, increasing divorce rate, and decreasing birth rate as a consequence of a “functional overload” of family-centered compressed modernity (2010:9–13). Cho points out that the way in which modernization has proceeded in an extremely compressed time period in South Korea prevents Koreans from having time for self-reflection (2000:53). According to Cho, as industrial capitalism has developed rapidly, consumer capitalism has also rapidly arrived, rushing Koreans to a new consumer culture while discouraging social movements such as feminist movements (2000:54). Cho and Chang in common characterize strong familism and educational zeal as main features of compressed modernity in South Korea (Cho HJ 2000:62–63).

While sharing the common features of compressed growth and modernity with Chang and Cho’s discussions, Sim et al (2010) argue for the necessity and adequacy of generation as a conceptual tool to explain particularities of South Korean modernity. According to Sim el al, under the circumstances of compressed modernity, people in a similar age group have experienced huge social events and changes together (Sim 2010:23–24). This has tended to result in a strong peer culture which clearly distinguishes them as a certain generation from other generations who have also experienced distinguishing historical moments such as Japanese colonization, the Korean War, different military regimes, democratization in 1987, post-1987 era, the Asian financial crisis that started in 1997, and the post-crisis era (Sim 2010:20–21). Sim et al point to generational differences in explaining social aspects that existing criteria, such as class differences, cannot explain well. Sim et al define generation difference as the different ways in which class and regional differences and conflicts are reflected on by and distributed to different subjects. For Sim et al, analyzing the relation between class difference and generational difference is necessary in better understanding class struggle as well as political economic changes (2010:32–33).

Crystallization of current social debates on the current generation of youth in South Korea was the book titled *8800 Generation (88 man wŏn sedae)* published in 2007 by Kwŏnil Pak and
Sŏkhun Woo. The notion of the $800 Generation became part of more widespread cultural discourses, becoming something with which certain groups of youth identified. These generational discourses had precedents in the events of the early 1990s when the tradition of university student movements waned in the wake of democratization in 1987 and the election of the first civilian president, Kim Young-Sam, in 1992. It was also a period which saw a boom in consumer and popular culture. The youth generation of the era appeared as a leading group of this new culture, one which criticized older generations and their conservative cultures. Seo Tai-ji & Boys, a popular boy band (one of the parody images I analyze in chapter 4 plays with the name of this boy band), became a watershed dividing the old and the new by offering new role models and visions for the constitution of a youth generation. “Youth culture,” which used to be dominated by university student movements, came to include teenagers and the cultural changes closely related to the new consumer culture taking place in the country (Sim and Editorial Group 2010:51). This youth generation was referred to as the “New Generation,” and was set in explicit contrast with older generations in terms of their acceptance of consumer culture, lifestyle as a legitimate area of concern, fresh attitudes toward politics and values in life. The label “New Generation” was an astonished reaction of Korean society to the youth generation. While New Generation became used as a magic word for marketing in advertisement, it also demonstrated a different type of politics. The attempt to criticize existing politics appeared by supporting the emergence of a New Generation who could mark a change from older generations (Mimesis 1993). University student movements, with labor and class issues at their center, started to decline with the collapse of the East-European bloc at the turn of

---

42 The book title in Korean is in won, Korean currency unit. I used dollars in the translation to give readers an idea of how much money that is in USD.
43 Seo Tai-ji & Boys (Hyeon-seok Yang and Ju-no Lee) made their debut in 1992 and retired in 1996. They were not desirable role models for young people from the perspective of older generations. The education of their membership was lacklustre; Ju-no Lee only graduated from high school, Hyeon-seok Yang from technical high school, and Tai-ji Seo in fact had dropped out of technical high school. Seo Tai-ji & Boys experimented with new genres of music such as midi technology, hip-hop, heavy metal, (alternative) rock, and Korean traditional music remixed with mainstream popular music. Their lyrics carried strong political messages about topics such as Korea’s distorted education system and the reunification of Korea. Tae-ji Seo was extolled as “the President of Culture” by fans who were mostly teenagers and youth in their twenties and became a model of a new type of cultural subject (Lee DY 1999:248–250).
44 “Generation X” was another label which was used for the New Generation. This label came from a commercial for men’s skin care product, “Twin X.” Twin X targeted men in their late teens and early twenties. The “X Generation” label was used to bind the diversities of the youth generation into one collective identity for the market. It was the first time that a men’s skin care product especially targeted youth as a trendy consumer product. The images of two famous male actors featured in the commercial depicted a new type of man who was fashionable as well as good-looking, who showed a new sensitivity, was self-assertive, and was involved in new types of social activities such as doing volunteer work in Africa (Im HCh’ 1995; Dongbang Khoek 1993, 1994).
the 1990s. The politics of sexuality filled the void in terms of a fulfilling orientation for university student movements, which included a new generation of feminist, queer, and environmental movements (Ch’oe UK 1995; Kang NK 1995). Criticism of the authoritarian and monolithic cultures of previous student movements came together with new attempts at new cultural movements on campus. Sexuality politics emerged with the popularity of cultural studies, offering existing leftist activists compelling alternatives to older projects that now seemed less relevant. Independent musicians appeared and new live music stages and clubs in the underground music scene grew as fertile grounds for new popular cultures. It seemed that new cultures, in the aftermath of democratization in 1987, were blossoming.

The generation previous to that of New Generation acquired the name “386 Generation” (386 sedae) in retrospect as a contrast to New Generation. This generation was named after a 32-bit microprocessor called “386” (the shortened name of the Intel 80386) which was the popular model of personal computer from the middle of 1980s to the early of 1990s. While this name made sense in terms of both the generation and the microprocessor that emerged and flourished during the same time period, the 386 Generation also acquired meanings that indexed certain events and conditions of that time period in South Korea. “386” indicated people in their thirties, of classes which graduated in the 1980s, who were born in the 1960s. They started their twenties in the 1980s, at the time of President Chon Du-Hwan’s regime. The 1980 Gwangju Democratization Movement and the Chon-led military dictatorship that followed heavily affected the political stances and student movements of this generation of people (Pak PY 2007:87).45 They entered the job market when the Korean economy was still booming and achieved economic and political success quickly (Pak and Woo 2007:178–179). As New Generation was changing the university student culture that the 386 Generation developed, the 386 Generation was simultaneously evaluated as challenging the culture established by still older generations, from party politics and entrepreneur to lifestyle and childhood education (Ŏm P’T 1999; Ch’ae KO 1999).

45 President Park Chung-Hee was assassinated by Jae-Gyu Kim, who was the director of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency, as well as Park’s close friend, on October 26, 1979, after 17 years of Park-led dictatorship. Chon Du-Hwan and his allies in the army staged a coup to seize power on December 12, 1979. Koreans who expected liberation from Park Chung-Hee’s dictatorship put up resistance when it became clear that Chon offered no such thing. As Chon declared martial law on May 17, 1980, in the city of Gwangju in the southwest province of Jeolla, a resistance movement began which came to be called the Gwangju Democratization Movement. The civilian protest was put down by force, with 195 people including 168 civilians killed and 4,782 people injured, according to the government official announcement of the final total in 2001. (The May 18 Memorial Foundation). These figures are highly disputed.
The liberal atmosphere that took off in the 1990s after democratization did not carry on long. The new hope and energy toward the creation of a new society was shattered when the Asian financial crisis hit in 1997. This crisis came to be called “the second national shame after Japanese colonization” (che i e kukch’i) and played a role in freezing the atmosphere of the whole society. The social shock and fear caused by the Asian financial crisis was filled with patriotic voices calling for a savior of the nation from the crisis. Yet there were also public discussions that promoted the idea that “a crisis is a chance” (wigi ka kot kihoe ta). The patriotic voices were accompanied by national patriotic movements which sought voluntary movements led by civil groups, such as the “gold-collection campaign” (kŭm mǒûgi undong). This campaign encouraged the whole nation to give away the gold they had to pay off the foreign currency debt of South Korea (Song JS 2009:8; Cho ChS 1998). The notion of the crisis as a chance, on the other hand, was fueled by the national emphasis on IT start-ups and the cultural industry. President Kim Dae-jung explicated from the outset of his government, in his inaugural speech in fact, that by emphasizing IT and cultural industries as well as start-ups, South Korea would be able to turn misfortune to advantage (Kim DJ 1998).

The youth who are in their twenties at the end of 2010 did not have any name for themselves until the label “$800 Generation” was coined. This label was chosen while Pak and Woo, the authors of the book “$800 Generation,” were considering other labels such as “generation ‘winner takes all’” (sŭngja toksik sedae) or “battle royal generation” (baet ‘ül royal sedae). The label “$800 Generation” came to them after they ran into an ad for a temporary job at the national parliament. The position requested “advanced statistical skills and insight for policy” of possible candidates, who should qualify with the education level of a PhD candidate. This position would pay around US$ 800 per month for a nine to five, Monday to Friday work schedule, which might also include unpaid overtime work. The book and its title brought about renewed debate about the status of different generations of people in South Korea. According to Pak and Woo, the $800 Generation is the group who spent their teenage years under the social economic restructuring that took place in the wake of the Asian financial crisis. According to the authors, this is the first generation who accepted the neoliberal rules of endless competition and

---

46 The phenomenon characteristic of the $800 Generation of low pay and precarious work conditions even for the highly educated is not a problem for South Korea only. Similar criticism has appeared in Europe along with the label “Generation 1000 Euro,” which is also a title of a popular novel written by a member of this young generation (Incorvaia and Rimassa 2006).
winner-take-all as the only available option for survival without complaint. This is a generation who has competed with one another through elementary, middle, and high school to enter a better university, and then continue to compete to get a better job, both during and after university (Pak and Woo 2007:193). Haejoang Cho categorizes the same generation as “spec generation” by using the buzzword *spec*, “an acronym derived from the word ‘specification’ in computer language” (Cho HJ in press). This label specifically pertains to college students who devote themselves to “resume-building activities” (Cho HJ in press).

As the notion of compressed modernity shows scholarly efforts to grasp particularities of Korean modernity, the use of generation as an analytical tool also involves similar attempts. Kwŏnil Pak, a columnist writing for the progressive-left media, and Sŏkhun Woo, an economist involved in environmental movements, explain why they strategically chose to use generation as an analytical tool, rather than class. The authors decided that generation might be a better tool to unite a youth generation thereby encompassing different classes and backgrounds as new political subjects capable of collective action (Pak KI 2009). The authors’ expectations, however, did not come to pass, and they themselves concluded that their book did not fulfill their original objective. Pak (2009) evaluated that the notion of $800 Generation came to be popular in a way that was appropriated by both conservative and progressive media, which resulted in the generation discourse replacing other social issues such as class and gender and giving the impression that such social issues were all brought about by competition among different generations.

Discourses on generations contribute to normative understandings and resonate with changes that neoliberalization has brought about, such as an emphasis on competition, on flexible labor regimes, and an increasing unemployment rate, but they do not appear out of thin air. Existing social structures are reappropriated to construct new worldviews. The importance of middle-class status and advanced education as a key to advancement are the main features of an existing social structure that is closely interwoven with new normative understandings that discourses about generations are involved in. Discourses on surplus, the discussion of which follows this section, explore the way in which defending middle-class status through a strategy of obtaining higher education sharpens the normative understandings of one’s place in a neoliberal world of severe competition, a place of “being surplus” in many cases.
2 Being Surplus

While generation discourses offer youth concepts to understand the world and their place in it, the new technologies which this generation uses enable them to create, distribute, and share their own experiences through their posts online. Now ubiquitous, portable ICTs have shaped users into people who depict and record every aspect of their lives, covering what they eat, what they wear, where they go, whom they meet, what happens to them in everyday scenarios, what happens to others, what they see, what they think, and how they feel at every moment. Youth are located at the center of these phenomena and depict their lives, often as a series of competitions, failures, and fear.

“Surplus” or “surplus human” is not a new term. This term had been well-known in South Korea through the popular novels of Russian writer Ivan Sergeyevich Turgenev (1954) and Korean writer Ch’angsŏp Son (1958). Much as “surplus human” means in these older novels, the general meaning of surplus as used in DCinside indicates someone or something surplus. More specifically, it means people who are not very successful in their real life, especially regarding their work and study, and spend a lot of time on the Internet while playing online games, web surfing, digging into the information of their idols, and debating with others as keyboard warriors (Han SH 2010).

There have been scholarly efforts among Koreanists to tease out the phenomena of surplus as this term has become more and more popular (Paek UI 2013; Paek and Uhm 2011). In an edited volume called Snob and Surplus (Sokmul kwa Ingyŏ), Korean scholars analyze the phenomena of surplus as consequences of a post-democratization era that has been accompanied by neoliberalism and informatization (Paek UI 2013; Kim SM 2013; Han YH 2013; Kim SH 2013). Those who are surplus are losers who have lost the race in regards to the economic and social competition and failed to become a snob (Paek UI 2013:4, 15). They are citizens who are not included as part of “normal economic activity,” in other words are unemployed and have become a part of what the majority of people call the “working poor” (Kim SM 2013:76, 88–89). They

---

47 The phenomena of recording every aspect and moment of everyday life was brought about by the spread of digital cameras. Carrying a digital camera everywhere evolved into carrying a mobile phone with a digital camera, which enabled the digital camera as a recording device to spread to more of the population. Now, people take pictures of or videotape their everyday lives with their phones and upload them immediately on to web.
are the proletariat of the information society (Kim SM 2013:92). In the past, at a time when the emphasis was on school prestige, it was an inadequate education that created social losers in South Korea, but the current phenomena of surplus includes the highly educated who nevertheless have difficulty in becoming winners (Han YH 2013:126–127). My observation of the phenomena of surplus supports the analyses of these scholars but takes it one step further by delving deeper into the socio-economic conditions of surplus, particularly that of advanced education and middle-class status, as well as my ethnographic data of DCinside.

Most surplus activities consume vast amounts of time and energy, but are not considered productive. It is in this sense that Internet freaks call themselves “surplus” (ingyŏ), their activities “acts of surplus” (ingyŏ chit), and the energy that goes into these activities “surplus power” (ingyŏ ryŏk).

Figure 2–1 is an example which demonstrates surplus, act of surplus, and surplus power. Bird Man was a senior high school student preparing for the university entrance exam when he created coin statutes and then posted photos of this act of surplus to the Boasting gallery on DCinside. Bird Man wrote in the post, “I’m spending time in a really crazy way with coins. I feel that my life is pitiful while I myself am looking at what I’m doing” (2009). Bird Man piled up coins in a simple, straightforward way at the beginning, but started questioning why he should do so when he could come up with more creative, elegant ways of stacking the coins. It took five hours and fifteen minutes for Bird Man to complete piling coins in the second picture in the sequence of Figure 2–1. Bird Man did the third stack shown in the third image of figure 2–1 because his parents took some of his coins away. To fill in for the lack of coins, Bird Man added
some other objects with which he completed the third masterpiece. It took nine hours for Bird Man to be done with this. Bird Man cursed himself for being an idiot in a self-mocking tone for his obsession with piling coins. As Bird Man’s endeavors show, the terms *surplus*, *act of surplus*, and *surplus power* have, in some sense, negative connotations such as “useless” and “idiotic,” but also have positive nuances involving a sense of humor because the results of these acts of surplus often bring about a “burst of surprise” (*kkam nollada*) or a “burst of laughter” (*ppang t’ŏjida*). Many comments on Bird Man’s post extolled Bird Man’s surplus power. Starting from the fourth comment “lol lol lol lol lol lol lol recognition for a real surplus of the Hit gallery lol lol lol lol lol,” continued with the seventeenth comment “lol fuck, proving surplus lol lol lol lol lol lol lol,” the twenty-third comment “By the way you are a real surplus for real lol lol lol lol lol lol,” the twenty-seventh comment “So cool lol lol lol lol lol lol so surpruisious! (*inglyŏrop kuna*, made-up adjective for surplus),” the thirty-first comment “Surplus surplus surplus surplus king lol lol,” the thirty-seventh comment “Recognition for coin surplus,” and the forty-ninth comment “This doesn’t show spirit but surplus,” DCinside users interpret Bird Man’s post in relation to the notion of surplus. Surplus in DCinside is a complicated term, much like “Internet freak,” involving self-representation, self-criticism, self-consciousness, self-mockery, but also self-esteem.

The terms “surplus,” “act of surplus,” and “surplus power” became popular buzzwords used among the youth in everyday life both online and off, because these terms fit well in relation to how the youth feel about themselves. The social status of being surplus or an undesirable subject leads to feelings of fear and inadequacy. As I discussed above, the Korean youth have competed in the school and college entrance-exam system their entire lives. The fever of education now in fact starts with prenatal education care: some Korean mothers stick specifically designed earphones from their MP3 players on their bellies so that their fetuses can listen to classical music directly and be well equipped to be sensitive and artistic; some mothers start learning English so that their children can begin their English-language training in the womb; some buy high-level math workbooks and solve math questions out loud so that their fetuses can develop mathematical thinking skills as early as they can (Kang HS 2012). As their babies are born and grow up, education fever becomes increasingly critical because competition is everywhere, and Korean parents compete for a space in better kindergartens, in better private institutes, better schools including special-purpose middle and high schools, prestigious universities, better
English skills, and better jobs. If their kids do not have long enough tongues to pronounce English fluently, parents may consider getting their children tongue surgery (Mun Ch’Ch 2002). Parents need to become competent educational managers and strict trainers who gather the best information for their kids and push them hard to keep up with a murderous study schedule because the competition is ultra-severe (Yi SY 2013; Park and Abelmann 2004). Under so much pressure the children develop the fear of being surplus in the Korean educational system, one which directs a spotlight only at the top students. The terrible fear of failure comes into full swing when entering university and human values are assigned based on the rank of their schools.

The devastating effect this competitive school environment has on people, as they look forward to entry into the workforce, is illustrated by increasing suicide rates. Actual youth suicides went up 46.9 percent between 2000 and 2010 (WHO 2010). Youth answered that they had suicidal thoughts at a rate of 8.8 percent in 2010, with 38.6 percent stating that among the issues troubling them was the issue of grades and entering university, with 22.9 percent stating that the source of the problem was occupational issues (Statistics Korea and MGEF 2012:8–11).

Education fever and endeavors to defend middle-class status are not limited to Korea, but are also found in Japan. We can thus discern commonalities in the East Asian region against a backdrop of growing, similar tendencies globally. Japan has shown a similar pattern of growing a large middle class, which appeared a couple of decades earlier than that in Korea. The Korean term “ch’ungsan ch’ŭng” does not exactly have the same meaning as the term “middle class” in English. Kwang Yeong Shin defines it as a term coined under the military dictatorship in which people could not use the concepts of social sciences such as class freely (2004:246). Doo Seung Hong divides the concept of “intermediate” classes or strata into two parts: the “middle class” as a class group and middle stratum, and ch’ungsan ch’ŭng as a status group. While the former approach based on middle class shows how class affects the formation of ch’ungsan ch’ŭng, the latter explains why people from the lower class consider themselves ch’ungsan ch’ŭng. The middle class as an intermediate class is also found in Japan. William Kelly William uses the term “mainstream” (chūryū) and “mainstream consciousness” (chūryū ishiki) to explain Japan as a “90 percent middle-class society” which, however, has been used to “declass and massify the debates

---

48 Forty-two percent of the people surveyed said they considered themselves middle-class in Japan in 1955. This number increased to 77 percent in 1975. In Korea, from 34.4 to 55 percent of those surveyed, depending on the region within which they lived, said they were middle class in the late 1970s. The rate of self-defining as middle class has increased over 40 years and has been maintained at around 80 percent since the 1990s, except for a short period of time in the immediate aftermath of the Asian financial crisis (Hong DS 2005:111)
about social stratification” (Kelly 2002:235). Entering mainstream and maintaining an average level of life became very important for Koreans and Japanese to be able to see themselves as successful modern subjects. Buying consumer goods such as a TV, washer, refrigerator, car, and apartment, as tokens of middle-class lifestyle, has played an important role in subject formation.

Public education, in both Korea and Japan, has played a role in upward mobility especially for people with not much in terms of other resources. Public education became the ticket to middle-class membership if one was successful at it. However, this ticket ceased to be valid as higher education became a requirement and accessible to everyone. When higher education such as high school and university becomes available to the masses, it stops being a clear-cut advantage. Instead, high school and university diplomas define a floor, not a privileged middle point of entry (Gordon 2002:121). The education system as a means of improving “human capital” has failed to produce better jobs (Standing 2011:67). Nevertheless, investing in a higher educational qualification will continue unless a new alternative system appears. Without alternatives, the only option becomes buying more education until it is just “enough to secure a job that would make the total investment worthwhile” (Standing 2011:70).

The Asian financial crisis has also played a role in aggravating the fear of being surplus through vivid stories and images of Koreans coming upon hard times and tumbling out of the middle classes (or worse). Two and a half million people, around 10 percent of the economically active population, newly joined the group of economically inactive men from the end of 1997 to February of 1999 (Shin KY 2004:221). One out of ten people experienced the loss of employment. The average income decreased by around 60 percent, which led to an increased prevalence of poverty in Korea (Shin KY 2011:23). Moreover, white-collar workers and managerial staff who had not experienced unemployment seriously before the Asian financial crisis were forced to face the devastating collapse of their middle-class lives (Hahm 2012). Most Koreans came to experience these threatening changes in their everyday life: one’s father suddenly lost his job and disappeared from home; another person’s uncle, who ran a successful business for years, went bankrupt; the money the uncle borrowed from someone in the family put that person in debt; another person could not find a job after graduating from university; another’s mother, who had lived as a full-time homemaker for her entire life, had to start working as a kitchen helper, being paid around US$ 4 per hour (An et al 2010). Neoliberalism came into full swing through the Asian financial crisis, which was experienced by Koreans as a
series of events that threatened the bedrock of their everyday lives. While witnessing the aftermath of the Asian financial crisis, young Koreans have shown a tendency of being conservative and docile in the service of better managing their precarious lives by sticking to the seemingly safest career options such as teacher and civil servant. The extremely high competition rate for civil servant exams\(^49\) can be interpreted as the effort not to give up security, which, according to Emily Martin, workers have to give up to gain flexibility (1994:145–147). Ironically, the choices that were meant to reduce the uncertainty of their precarious lives have come to increase the chances for them to be losers because most youth make similar choices, and only a small group of them can be winners in a now-intensifying competition for these once “safe” careers.

The popularity of the term “surplus” on the Internet, including DCinside, led me to interpret phenomena of the Internet freak and feeling surplus as the self-awareness of being a relative surplus population. If the boom of the Internet freak in the early 2000s depicted the poor and unpromising life situations that were brought about by economic reconstruction after the Asian financial crisis, the term “surplus” shows the self-awareness of Internet users about their status as surplus, expressed with a deftly cynical touch. Not all DCinside users are jobless. Nevertheless, they do not hesitate to call themselves freaks, losers, and surplus, which harkens back to Karl Marx’s concept of the relative surplus population.

The relative surplus population or the reserve army of labor is necessary for capitalist accumulation to guarantee labor supply at a low cost (Marx 1982:798–799). Marx categorizes the relative surplus population into three forms, the floating, the latent, and the stagnant in addition to the lowest sediment, that of pauperism.\(^50\) Despite the time span between Marx’s writings in the 19\(^{th}\) century and the situation in Korea in the 21\(^{st}\) century, the concept of the relative surplus population is still valid in explaining current class configurations. The result of a highly educated general population aiming for at least a “desk-job” results in an oversupply of labor, which becomes floating and stagnant, as people go from job to job or in and out of

\(^{49}\) Despite the announcement of a reduction in the amount of the pension rate for public officials, the rate of competition for the civil servant exam offered in October 2014 was 127:1 (Herald News 2014).

\(^{50}\) The floating emerges as a result of increasing number of the employed while constantly decreasing proportionately to the scale of production. The latent is people that are not fully integrated into capitalist production but can flow into the production relation any time. The stagnant are active labour force with extremely irregular employment which enables an inexhaustible reservoir of disposable labour power to capital (1982:794–797).
employment. Housewives, students, and job those seeking work exist as latent as well as stagnant pools of labor. It is hard to determine to what class the people who call themselves “surplus” really belong, as determining class itself has never been clear-cut. Ursula Huws discusses how complicated and contradictory it can be to define one’s class through demonstrating six different ways of defining it: the functional relationship of one’s work to capital; one’s occupation; one’s social relation to production; one’s place in the social division of labor; one’s comparative income; and one’s social “status” (Huws 2001:8). Rather than examining the precise political economic conditions of Internet freaks as surplus, I approach the pervasiveness of the concept of “surplus” in terms of the uncertainty of the current status of their lives, in other words, with regards to the precarity of their lives. This is closely related to the definition of class as one’s social status in terms of pursuing and defending middle-class status. The long-lasting normative expectations of being (at least) middle class and obtaining higher education explicate what successful life is like and what social failure is. The youth suffer more from the pressure of expectations than older generations in the sense that the social status of the youth today is being established from the scratch, from the time they are in the womb to the name value of the university they enter. While trying to fit into normative expectations, they come to constantly check their place in the world. One can easily fall into a place of surplus based on one’s accomplishments or failures, for example, in terms of university degree, English exam scores, engagement in permanent versus temporary jobs, salaries, and many other standards of success. Surplus becomes the way in which youth can be identified in terms of social expectations but, at the same time, the way in which they identify themselves. They try hard to make their lives better, but there is no guarantee that they will secure a future for themselves. In the meantime, the surplus time of underemployed youth becomes a key source for prosperous Internet cultures, including the Internet freak culture of DCinside.\textsuperscript{51} Their individual struggles and frustrations, however, are depicted and shared thanks to new ICTs. They do not hesitate to mock themselves by calling themselves “surplus” as they engage with their digital

\textsuperscript{51} Youth are the population who use the Internet the most. The Internet-using population among teenagers has exceeded 90 percent since 2001. Those in their twenties exceeded 90 percent as of 2003 and those in their thirties the same rate in 2005. 98 percent of the whole population in their teens, twenties, and thirties use the Internet as of 2010, while the rest of the older population has yet to reach this saturation point (KCC and KISA 2011:4). Youth are also the leading group regarding the usage of social networking services. In 2011, of all teenagers, 78.9 percent used social networking services such as Facebook, Myspace, blogs, mini home pages and online cafés, as did 89.7 percent of people in their twenties, and 70.8 percent of those in their thirties. These numbers compare to 50.8 percent of people in their forties using such services, 40.8 percent of those in their fifties, and 24.6 percent of those sixty and over (KCC and KISA 2011:12).
producing power. They are “surplus” (ingyŏ) “doing surplus” (ingyŏjil) with their “surplus power” (ingyŏryŏk) in their “surplus time” (ingyŏ sigan). They become surplus-being in Korean society and are well aware of it. The following stories of my interviewees reveal the anxiety, frustration, and anger that the lives of Korean youth are fraught with. The social conditions that produce the anxiety, frustration, and anger are revealed through my interviewees’ narratives.

3 Stories of My Interviewees

In this section, I introduce eight interviewees that I met in DCinside one by one. In doing so, I seek to depict their personalities, along with their particular living conditions and troubles. I interviewed 23 people in total from DCinside. I chose to introduce the stories of these eight interviewees because they willingly shared their life stories beyond DCinside with me, as well as freely telling me more detailed stories about their activities and thoughts about DCinside than other interviewees. While each interviewee tells a unique story, they share the commonalty of living a precarious life and finding DCinside to be an outlet from the off-line world. The stories of my interviewees resonate with my discussions regarding the conditions of Korean society and the situations of youth in particular.

3.1 “I don’t wanna be stressed out by being so ambitious” – Eloquence

We have already met Eloquence, in the introduction to this chapter. I met Eloquence through the drama review book project “Painter of the Wind” and got to like her because of her sense of humor. She was hilarious and never very serious even when she was under the heavy workload of the review book project (which is the focal point of chapter 5). I interviewed her through instant messenger online besides the regular meetings that we participated in for the drama review book, which were held in online chat rooms. Eloquence got to know DCinside through funny images she found while web surfing. She had participated in several other drama galleries and the Comedy gallery. She said she liked DCinside because of its liberal and “glamorous” (yuktŏkchin) culture, which was hard to find anywhere else. She was 22 years old and in her last year of university majoring in social welfare when we started the review book project. She is an
only child and at that time lived with her mother in Ulsan, which is a big industrial city located in the southeast of South Korea. Eloquence had been preparing for the exam to be a civil servant, but felt that due to the competitiveness surrounding the job that she would be better off pursuing another path. Instead she applied for a job with the welfare organization and was hired. In this low-paying position Eloquence earned US$ 11,000 per year with the option of performance-related pay. Eloquence worked in a department dealing with elders’ continuing education and outplacement. Despite being put in stressful situations with both the elders and her bosses, she was satisfied with her post. Eloquence chose to reject pursuing a hyper-aspirational life, and she considered herself fortunate to have had a mother who was supportive of her outlook on life. When she started to get headaches in the lead-up to school exams, her mother told her to stop studying since it was not worth getting sick over. “I thought my mom was so cool,” she told me, “my mom’s attitude liberated me.”

3.2 “I wish my future would be better than this at least” – No-rain

When I interviewed her, No-rain was 25 years old, an active member of the Lee Joon Gi gallery, and a part-time instructor of fine art at a private institute for children. I interviewed her both online (through instant messenger) and in person (usually in cafés). I also met her, Madeleine, and other Joon gallers to go to Lee Joon Gi Lee related events such as seeing a play. No-rain lived with her family near the border between Gyeonggi-do province and Chungcheongbuk-do province, about a two hour drive from Seoul’s metropolitan core, among the furthest stretches of the city’s conurbation. Her family had run a peach orchard for more than fifty years. Her grandparents and father had passed away, and her mother was mainly in charge of the farming at the time of my field research. No-rain was the eldest child in her family. Her younger sister was studying in China and her youngest brother was serving in the army. It was just she and her mother living together when I interviewed her.

No-rain’s attraction to the Joon gallery was no different than the other members’. She was an undergraduate student when she became a user of DCinside and its Lee Joon Gi gallery. She lived an unhappy life at that time in the suburbs of Seoul, where her university was located. Her hometown was also in the suburbs of Seoul and she had wanted to enter a university that was located in Seoul-city proper so that she could experience the so-called “Seoul life” (city life).
Sadly her dream did not come true. She didn’t score as high on her university entrance exam as she’d hoped and had to choose a university that she did not want to attend. She hated her university life, which was in another part of the Seoul suburbs, and suffered from depression until she became aware of DCinside and the Lee Joon Gi gallery.

DCinside set No-rain free from her unsatisfactory university life and self-loathing caused by failing to enter a university in Seoul. She liked the loser-like DCinside culture, which fit in well with her sense of humor and tough personality. She was connected to the Joon gallery nearly 24 hours a day. Her computer was always turned on, even when she had to leave it to go to school. She programmed a long list of songs to play on a personal radio broadcasting station even when she went to bed. There was a joke in Joon gallery that No-rain might not be a real person but an agent program because of her ceaseless online presence. She gained a good reputation in the Joon gallery and enjoyed it by sharing fun content and developing relationships with new people there. Being a DC freak or Lee Joon Gi obsessed (chun ppa) meant a lot to her since it made her life livable again.

After graduating from university, she tried to “raise her market value” (sijang kach’i rūl nophi ta) by enrolling in a Computer-Aided Design certificate program while she lived with one of her college friends in Seoul for several months, but had to quit soon because of deteriorating health. She was developing unexplained health issues in various parts of her body. She diagnosed herself as suffering from psychological symptoms since she got easily stressed out by other people. She rapidly gained weight, got tired easily, and suffered from headaches, back pains, and swelling all around her body. No-rain had to come back to her suburban home and live with her mother after failing to find a job and for the sake of her health. She was able to find a part-time job as a teacher at a private fine art institute for kids near her family home, having majored in stage art in college. She worked for five hours per day from Monday to Friday, earning around US$ 700 per month, which she either spent as pocket money or saved for future studies. The rest of her living expenses relied on her mother’s continued running of the peach orchard.

Even though she failed to find a job and live in Seoul, No-rain was by and large satisfied with her life, and DCinside and the Joon gallery were a contributing factor to her happiness. She said, “Frankly speaking, I like my situation better than those of my friends who have full-time jobs and are busy all the time. I met my alumnae from college a couple of weeks ago. They kept
complaining of their busy lives. And then, they started talking about their vacations abroad, clothes, and cosmetics. I’m not interested in such a life. I don’t want to be one of them. That’s why I like people in Joon gallery. They are not very materialistic but funny and considerate. They are my only assets from the whole undergraduate period.”

When I talked to her in April, 2010, after I came back to Toronto from fieldwork, No-rain had quit her part-time job because of her health problems. Instead, she was now enrolled at the Korea National Open University, where students can get a degree through distance learning. No-rain majored in education in fine art. In addition, she was also planning to gain a certificate in art therapy. She was worried about her future and felt more insecure than when I was doing my fieldwork because her family peach orchard had been damaged by cold weather during the previous winter. She said to me, “Peach trees were all frozen to death. People said it will be hard to harvest for the next three years at least. What should I do to make a living for myself? Lol I have no idea! Lol.” I had no idea either. Her anxiety about her precarious future made her obsessed with higher academic degrees and more certificates for the purposes of gaining a better job, better income, and a more stable life. Several months later, No-rain got another part-time job in a private institute for fine art education for kids. While she taught kids during the day, she was also attending the certificate program for art therapy and the Open University to get a child-care certificate. No-rain’s mother also quit running the peach orchard after the peach harvest was bad two years in a row. Instead, she began working as a part-time worker at a small food-processing factory. Her mother’s monthly income was around US$ 900, while No-rain’s was US$ 1000. No-rain now had to contribute to living expenses since the family income had shrunk while at the same time trying to save money for multiple tuitions. No-rain said, “I graduated from a four-year university while other teachers there only did from two-year colleges. Nevertheless they are paid more than me because they have child-care certificates. I feel so bad when I feel that they think they are better than me. I’m going to get the certificate and will show I’m better than them. Life is so stressful. I wish my future would be better than this at least.”
3.3 “My stressful family pushes me to be an Internet freak” – Beef-bone-broth

Beef-bone-broth was 22 years old when I interviewed her. I interviewed her both online (instant messenger) and in person (in a café). Her first encounter with DCinside was through a gallery dedicated to an actor (the So Ji-sub gallery) when she was in her first year of high school. She posted her only comment to So’s gallery but did not participate further. She came back to DCinside, enticed by the funny images she came across in Joon gallery while surfing another famous Internet portal site, Daum.net. She said she felt a strong affection and sympathy for the pathetic but comical characters with unique personalities. Once she became an active Joon galler, she also developed into an all-round player in DCinside, visiting various galleries and participating actively in more than 30 of them. Among those many galleries, besides the Joon gallery, she particularly liked the Comedy gallery, becoming popular enough to be chased by other users of the Comedy gallery who tried hard to intrude upon her private information.

She was an undergraduate student majoring in childhood education. She entered her university after twice taking a university entrance exam. In other words, she was a repeater of the university entrance exam (chaesusaeng). She had a stressful year while she was preparing for her second attempt at the exam, as most repeaters of the university entrance exam do. The result was not satisfactory, despite this extra-stressful year, and she was denied entry to the university of her choice. Instead, she picked a major that would ensure a safe path for her future career; she would be able to be a kindergarten teacher after graduating. It was not a well-paid job, but at least she could be free from being stressed out about finding a job after graduation. She said, “At least I don’t dislike kids. I can find some fun outside my work if I can have a job. I really need a job to move out from my family home and live on my own. I need money for that.” I asked her what she really wanted to be if she did not need to worry about money. She answered, “Well, I don’t know. Maybe working as a writer for a broadcasting company? Working at a big entertainment agency so that I can hang out with idols I like? I don’t know, man. I don’t think I’m that talented. But yes, I wish. It would be awesome if I could have such a job.”

She lived with her family—father, mother, and younger sister—in Incheon, one of Seoul’s largest satellite cities. Her parents ran a small manufacturing factory. Her parents were continually fighting with each other. Although family discord isn’t unusual, the arguments her
parents had were somewhat intense: speaking harshly to one another, cursing, and damaging household goods. Her parents had foul mouths, which also affected their children. Cursing each other became a part of the family culture and environment of everyday life. Beef-bone-broth said, “Well, I could have learned from my parents. But their foul mouths did not look good to me. So, I intentionally try not to be rough in my speech style.” As she said, Beef-bone-broth possessed wit but did not curse a lot, even though this behavior was totally acceptable on DCinside. Her choice to speak without vulgarity combined with the hilarious and DC-like content that she produced brought a unique color to her posts.

For obvious reasons she didn’t like hanging out with her family, and she usually spent time in her room with the door closed while other family members were around. She didn’t like complete silence, and therefore she usually left the TV or radio on when she was at home despite the fact that she wasn’t actually paying attention to them. Media became her refuge, and her time using the Internet increased exponentially due to the negative atmosphere of her family life. Beef-bone-broth said, “Once, all of my family members went on vacation, with only me left at home alone. I rarely used the Internet but enjoyed the whole house, especially the living room. I don’t think I can help being an Internet freak. My family situation makes me be one. I can’t wait to get a job and move out from my parents’ home. It will be awesome to have my own space.”

In addition to the family situation, the lack of other pastimes left her with few options other than being online. “I don’t have anything to do especially during the vacation. I don’t go to school. It costs me a lot to go out to see my friends. What I usually do when I meet my friends is to eat out, which makes me spend money and gain weight. It is not helpful at all since I’m already fat enough. So, not going out but staying at home is the most convenient and wise. Then, I have to stay in my room because of my family. Then, I have nothing to do but use the Internet. DCinside is my favorite among sites on the Internet because it is pyŏng mat (full of idiotic tastes). Once I start kaeljil (using DCinside), I go crazy. It is not just about DCinside. I think I always need something to go crazy for and to be obsessed with. Those things could be Lee Joon Gi, TVXQ (tongbangsin’gi),52 DCinside, or learning Japanese.” Beef-bone-broth was a “re-al” (real)53 DC

---

52 TVXQ, also known as DBSK, is a famous idol singer group with five nice-looking male singers. This group has been popular not only in Korea but also in Japan, China, and other Asian countries promoting the Korean Wave.
freak. She persisted at keeping up with DCinside and didn’t tire easily, which DC Internet users call “spirit” (くんそう). She was an all-round player of DCinside, especially having been active in the Lee Joon Gi gallery and the Comedy gallery.

3.4 “You know what? I wanna kill all those troublesome kids on rainy days” – Madeleine

Madeleine was a close friend of No-rain in the Lee Joon Gi gallery. She was 24 years old and lived in Dongducheon, an hour away from Seoul. She majored in library studies at university. I interviewed her both online (instant messenger) and in person (in cafés) together with No-rain most of the time. She started “p’aenjil” (doing fan activities as an active fan) of Shinhwa, a boy band, when she was 14 years old and attending middle school. She stayed up all night to line up for a concert, followed her idols everywhere, and was an active member of the online fan club of the group. Madeleine said that she was a very experienced fan. She showed an amazing ability to organize several events in the Joon gallery such as a Lee Joon Gi’s movie screening, a group purchase of Lee Joon Gi concert tickets, and the preparation of a birthday gift for Lee from the Lee Joon Gi gallery. She referred to herself as No-rain’s “appendix,” joining and taking care of events when No-rain made an impulsive decision to be in charge of them. Madeleine said in a cool attitude, “Well, she got to do what she got to do.”

Right after Madeleine graduated university, her grandmother was diagnosed with cancer. Madeleine was applying for jobs as she prepared to graduate from university and was on the final list for a job interview, but gave up on it because she had to take care of her grandmother on behalf of her parents, who were both working. Madeleine took care of her grandmother for roughly six months, until she passed away. At one point during this period, she worked as a teacher at a private educational institute for kids for three months while her grandmother’s condition was going comparatively well. One of her friends was working as a teacher at the institute for kids (posūp hagwŏn) to earn money so she could study abroad. This friend got Madeleine a job as a teacher in the same institute. Madeleine told the director she could work

53 The term “re-al” is one of the popular newly coined words on the Internet, along with “surplus,” both of which appeared in 2010. This word originates from the English world “real.” Internet users use this term to emphasize a given situation: re-al great, re-al loser-like, and re-al appealing.
there for three months. Madeleine said, “I knew from the very beginning that teaching at a private educational institute would not be my lifelong career. So I told the director I would work only for three months, which would be a fixed term. While I was working there, I clearly realized that teaching kids is not my thing. I hated it. Kids are terrible. I hated them. Lol. I even completed the curriculum for the teaching profession while attending university. It was fun when I had a four-week teaching practicum at school. I thought that teaching would be one of the good options for my future career, but it wasn’t. By the time I was done with working at the institute for three months, my grandmother’s condition got worse. I had to take care of her full-time both in hospital and at home.” When she reentered the job market a year after her graduation, it was more difficult to find a job because the market had deteriorated from the previous year. “One day, my father informed me that the city government is hiring youth interns, which one of his friends was in charge of. After all, I was able to get an internship on my father’s coattails.”

Madeleine was working at a children’s public library as a temporary contract position offered by the government as a part of a program to solve the youth unemployment problem while I was in contact with her during my fieldwork. She was cynical about her job. She worked from 8:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., six days per week and was paid around US$ 1000 per month. Madeleine said, “I work as much as the full-time librarians there. However, I’m paid much less and do not have any guarantee for the future. Our awesome President Lee Myung-Bak got me this job, well, if I can call this internship a job, I don’t think so. Should I thank the government for this exploitative, insecure job? For God’s sake…” Madeleine lived with her family, which reduced her living expenses and enabled her to save some money. She craved the opportunity to travel abroad, while her best friend, No-rain, was cynical about traveling, even though it had become a hot trend among youth. “I know I can’t quit this job unless they fire me since there isn’t any better position. I will work here as long as I can even though I hate being exploited and being paid less. This is what the people in their twenties have to deal with. Shitty but unavoidable.”

It was a rainy day in the early summer, 2009. Madeleine signed in on instant messenger while No-rain and I were chatting. She was totally exhausted after a long day’s work. On rainy days, the children’s library became total chaos, according to Madeleine. Water from children in their

---

54 Refer to Song JS’s work (2009) to see how the government support program for underemployed youth appeared at the end of the 1990s in the process of constituting desirable and undesirable subjects in the new neoliberal welfare society in Korea.
raincoats and umbrellas made a mess of the library, and wet-weather days especially during the summer monsoon season were the most difficult time for Madeleine. She groaned, “You know what? I wanna kill all those troublesome kids on rainy days. I think I can. Really!”

3.5 “Should I grow my hair so that I look like a proper girl and succeed in getting a job?” – Husky

Husky was an active user of the Painter of the Wind gallery on DCinside.com. She had been fond of watching TV, more particularly TV dramas, but had not taken any active role as a fan until she watched the drama Painter of the Wind and thus was attracted to the gallery. Husky was a 22-year-old university student when I met her in the Painter of the Wind gallery in February, 2009. I interviewed her through instant messenger online, but met in person several times at different events such as a fan meeting for Geun-young Moon and the review book after party. At that time she was working a part-time job at a convenience store to earn some money for her major hobby, gaming, besides getting a monthly allowance from her parents that covered transportation and meals at school.

The drama Painter of the Wind interested her, and many other fans, because the actors were talented and the visual aesthetics were beautiful and artistic. While she was Internet surfing, Husky ran into some interesting posts about the drama Painter of the Wind, traced their sources, and reached the Painter of the Wind gallery on DCinside.com. Husky came to be in charge of the “Geun-yeong Tour,” which traced the footsteps of the actor through the elementary, middle, and high schools she attended to her current whereabouts, and she also headed up the “Drama Review Book Painter of the Wind.” Husky was one of several core members who led the review book project to success, and despite the heavy workload, Husky loved playing an important part in the meaningful review book project.

When I talked to her in 2010, after my fieldwork period had ended, Husky was apprehensive about her future. She was in her third year of university and feeling a lot of pressure about finding a job after graduation. One of the options she was considering at the time was going to graduate school. Husky said, “My GPA is so low, lower than an average of 3.0 (out of 4.5). You cannot get any opportunity for a job interview with such a low GPA because you won’t be able
to pass through the document examination. As you know, my major, forest engineering, has very limited options if I want to have a job related to my major. I can apply to either paper manufacturing companies or furniture manufacturing companies. For that, I need to get a forest engineer’s license. It is not easy, especially since I’m not very interested in my major. If I go to graduate school, I can have one more option, to become a researcher. For that, I have to increase my GPA and apply to graduate school. But the thing is I don’t like being a researcher. Holy cow…no matter what, I need a good English score so I often conclude that I should study English and get a good score on the Test of English for International Communication. But English is so difficult. Any suggestions? My manager at the convenience store told me to grow my hair to give a good impression to hiring committees in future. He thinks I don’t look like a girl at all, and it won’t help me to get a job. What do you think? Should I grow my hair so that I look like a proper girl and succeed in getting a job?”

3.6 “Sometimes, I’m unbearably poor. No money is left after buying cat food” – Perfect-rose

Perfect-rose was a third year undergraduate student majoring in Japanese literature. I interviewed her both online (instant messenger) and in person (at a restaurant in her neighborhood). She had also been involved in the Lee Joon Gi gallery since 2006, and I got to know her through a group viewing of Lee’s first movie, The King and the Clown. I got to know her better as we participated in the project “Nunhwa Album,” which she led in the Joon gallery. She was involved in different events as a core member of Joon gallery and showed a perfectionism which she herself thought was excessive. She was knowledgeable about Japanese cultures as well as Korean and Japan idol fandom. She wrote fan-fic (fiction written by fans) for her friends who were fans of idol groups.

I went to visit Perfect-rose in Daejeon where she was living while attending university. She was a cute girl with good fashion sense. She said that she felt really ugly, which was not false modesty but was what she really thought. She was treated as an outcast when she was in elementary school, and after that she started to hate herself, but most especially her appearance. She was convinced people disliked her because she was ugly. She said that she felt scared when she met new people but more so men. She limited her activities and relationships as much as
possible in the off-line world, except for some inescapable duties such as school and family matters. She liked doing things online because it could not hurt her as severely as the relations and events in the off-line world. In addition, it was very cheap compared to other leisure-time activities. In fact, I was a bit surprised when it came out that she could not even afford to pay her bus fare to meet me in Daejeon. She said that she took care of six cats with her roommates and that her pocket money was all spent on cat food and sand for the litter box.

Perfect-rose suffered from her personal history and had difficulty socializing with other people. She took care of the six cats even though she was broke because of them. She did her job perfectly when she was in charge of a collaborative project in DCinside and ran her own blog while she tried to avoid being involved with people and events in the off-line world. The case of Perfect-rose shows why online space can be better for people who have trouble coping with the off-line world. People can leave a stressful life, riddled with problems from money to university and work and be somewhat relaxed on the Internet. They can even start their lives over on the Internet since it gives them a clean slate.

However, her struggle in the off-line world was ongoing. Perfect-rose graduated university without getting a proper job. She moved back to her family house in Cheongju and found a temporary job as a secretary in a private institute for English education near her house. She said she was planning to go to Japan to continue with her major. However, she was not sure whether when she could really make it given the limitations of her low-paid job.

3.7  “I feel guilty when I indulge in running in a gallery too much”
– Treasure Island

Treasure Island was 22 years old when I interviewed her by instant messenger in 2009. She was active in the Painter of the Wind gallery and had been a lurker of Joon gallery. She would only agree to be interviewed online, but I did meet her several times in person when I attended Geun-young Moon’s fan meeting as well as the after party of the review book. She lived with her parents and younger sister in Hwajŏng, a new town made up of a condominium (ap’at’ū) cluster near Seoul. Since she lived near my house I suggested having an in-person interview, but she
turned me down saying, “I’m a mumbler and have a husky voice. I’m not good for a voice recording. You don’t want to experience an awkward atmosphere meeting me in person! Lol”

When I asked what she was did for living, she hesitated to answer, worrying that I would laugh at her. She geared herself up for my ridicule for several seconds before she told me she was working as a kindergarten teacher. I jokingly pretended to be surprised (“Huh! You are beyond my imagination!”), and she jokingly overreacted as well (“My secrets are all exposed…”). These exaggerated jokes stemmed from the fact that people had mistakenly thought that Treasure Island was a male galler in the Painter of the Wind gallery. A kindergarten teacher is seen stereotypically as a kind and feminine young woman in South Korea and that mismatch between the stereotype and the way in which she was mistakenly known as a male galler as well as how she saw herself (mumbler with husky voice) brought about good laughter between Treasure Island and me.

After seeing some of her artwork, I told her I thought she might find a job in the fine art–related industry or would do well as a student majoring in fine art. She said, “I’m flattered. I have never had formal education in fine art. I just liked drawing. Though, I didn’t major in it because I lack creativity (ssingk’übik i ttallyösō, this sentence is based on Internet slang meaning lack of creativity or intellectual capability). I just enjoyed art classes in my school curriculums. I enjoyed compliments from friends, teachers, and parents. I also drew several cartoon series too, but as I said, I lack creativity. Besides, I easily fall into a mood and I can’t be bothered doing anything… (kedaga... kwich'anijūm..., kwich'anijūm in Korean is Internet slang means idleness-ism). I easily get excited, easily lose interest, and quit in the middle.”

Her tendency of idleness-ism seemed to find a cure when she started running in the Painter of the Wind gallery and getting responses from other gallers. At the same time, however, she came to have difficulty controlling her ability to limit indulgence in running a gallery, which came to affect her off-line life, including her work. I discuss Treasure Island’s story in more detail in chapter 5.
3.8 “We are all lonely and anxious. That’s why people come to DCinside” – Guitar-man

I met Guitar-man through the drama review book project. He was the leader of our team, which was in charge of collecting and writing the review texts for the review book. He was always very confident (in fact, he sometimes came off as overly confident), liked to talk about himself, and did not hesitate to be harsh with team members whom he thought were not working hard enough. I became interested in him because of his strong character, even though it somewhat annoyed me. I thought he might be a typical macho-type who liked showing off.

There were a number of themes running through Guitar-man’s life. The first was his work preparing for the bar exam. While we were starting our review book project, he was preparing for the first round of the bar exam. He worked hard even when there was only a month left until the exam date. He kept talking about his bar exam while he worked for our project, collecting and editing other people’s reviews, and writing some reviews himself. It was burdensome to see him dedicating so much time to the review book project despite the fact that his exam date was approaching. I could not understand why he decided to participate in the first place while he was preparing for the bar exam.

As he expected, he failed the first round of the exam, which meant he had to wait another year to take it again. However, he told us that he’d decided not to write the bar exam again, instead he would prepare for the employment exams for the TV broadcasting companies. He said that being a TV show producer would fit his interests and talent better. Being a lawyer had not really been his dream.

The second theme of Guitar-man’s life was a preoccupation with his ex-girlfriend, who had badly betrayed and left him. He met his girlfriend while he was attending a national university in Chungcheong-do. She had wanted to enter law school in Seoul, and he studied together with her to encourage her. The following year they entered the same law school in Seoul, which was not very easy. Meantime, Guitar-man took care of her family, which was poor. His girlfriend passed the bar exam before he did and then entered the Judicial Research and Training Institute, which is run by the government and is a crucial stepping-stone to becoming a lawyer. She broke up with him soon after entering the institute. He declared that he did not care about whether he

---

55 Law school is an undergraduate qualification in Korea.
became a lawyer or not since it hadn’t ever been his dream but his ex-girlfriend’s. That Guitar-man would dedicate so much time and energy into something that was never his true passion struck me as pitiable.

Guitar-man’s third theme was his ceaseless creative power. He often said that he composed songs, wrote novels, and so on. He also gave us a notification that he had to miss one of our regular meetings because he won an award for an essay he had written and had to attend the ceremony. I was less interested in the fact that his essay won a prize than in his motive behind telling us about it in detail. He was obviously showing off, but he was not lying when he said that he’d composed songs and written novels and essays. He composed and presented a song to Geun-young Moon, the female protagonist of the drama *Painter of the Wind*. She called him to the stage and hugged him at her fan meeting where most of our review book team members were present. He came to be more respected by other team members because of this recognition.

When I asked him whether he would allow me to interview him, he willingly approved my request. This didn’t surprise me since he liked talking about himself so much. Why would he miss such a good opportunity? He refused to do an online interview, only an in-person interview while drinking, so we met at a sushi bar and started our interview with a couple of glasses of Korean liquor, *soju*. Guitar-man in person was not a sham, but authentic, and it was not because of the liquor. He was sincere about what he thought and said, which could make him seem almost too forward, even a little arrogant when in the online setting. “I know how I seem. I might seem too much sometimes because I act differently from the ways in which most people do online. I don’t mind what people think. I have nothing to hide. Why should I be a different person online? I let people know my real name, phone number, and so on. All my information is real. I’m not afraid. Nice people will in any case feel my real heart.”

He was talented enough to design computer programs in middle school. His family had gone bankrupt when the Asian financial crisis hit South Korea. His father had closed his restaurant, and the whole family had had to get through this hard time. Guitar-man gave up the hope of going to the elite high school for science geniuses that he had originally wished to go to, and went to ordinary high school instead. He lost interest in studying but indulged himself in computer games, web surfing, and music instead. He learned how to play guitar by himself and started to compose his own songs.
Guitar-man had been a DC Internet freak since DCinside began in 1999. He had been a huge fan of Ddanzi Ilbo, the first web-based parody journalism site, which is considered to be a predecessor of DCinside. While Ddanzi Ilbo was insufficiently flexible and fail to keep up with the changes taking place in Korean society, DCinside succeeded. It was a liberating experience for Guitar-man to be fully anonymous and to talk about anything, even in the form of cursing. Guitar-man theorized that the DCinside macho culture was caused by the loneliness of DC Internet freaks in addition to men’s seemingly natural tendency to show off. He said, “We are all lonely. We are all anxious. That’s why people come to DCinside.” Guitar-man was in his early thirties but still exploring various possibilities for his future career. He lived with the support of his father and the inheritance from his mother, who had passed away several years previously. He was not anxious about his future, but about his loneliness. This was what made him come back to DCinside over and over again.

4 Living with Precarity, Maybe with Some Dignity

Most of my interviewees, whether they were students or part-time and full-time workers, were dealing with the precarity of their jobs and future careers. As No-rain and Madeleine’s stories showed, a university degree does not guarantee a future career. They could find part-time jobs in relation to what they had majored in, but those part-time positions were low-paid and insecure. Eloquence’s case was somewhat better than No-rain and Madeleine’s in terms of satisfaction about their job, but not much different in terms of low pay and precarity. She majored in social welfare and got a job based on her specialty. The job security that Eloquence liked most about her job despite the low salary, however, was not guaranteed in her contract but only tacitly within the organization.

Low-paying jobs result in a generation that feels vulnerable and marginalized, leaving some many young people dependent on family members or friends for financial assistance. Most of my interviewees were living with their parents. It is not unusual for premarital adult children to live with their parents in Korean contexts. This tradition, however, seems to become the only available option for most Koreans because of increasing underemployment. It is not only the premarital underemployed children who need support, in some case it is the parents who have experienced economic difficulties, like No-rain’s mother, and need to depend on their children to
sustain a living. A family is able to sustain their financial stability by pooling the income from its family members. The family still plays a role in offering a social security net to most Korean households, as it has done for a long time in Korean society, which has hindered the development of a viable alternative to the familial social security net. As it stands, grown children may never attain financial independence, and their parents may never be free of the obligation to help their children. Beef-bone-broth’s most important dream might not come true anytime soon.

Precarious jobs pushed my interviewees to pursue further degrees and certificates. No-rain enrolled in different degree and certificate programs not just because she wished for a future career in a field such as art therapy but also for a child-care certificate that might enable her to get a pay increase and better recognition at her current workplace. Perfect-rose wanted to go to Japan for future study in Japanese literature, her university major. While working as a receptionist at a small private education institute in her hometown, she was unsure whether she could save enough money for her study in Japan. Husky was also considering going to graduate school, not because she wanted to study more for her major but because she thought she would not be able to find a job. In fact, she disliked her major immensely, and although she should aim for a research job if she went to graduate school, she was already sure that she had no interest for research. Another option for Husky was taking a certificate exam to become a forest resource engineer, which was not easy either. In addition, her GPA was too low to apply for most company jobs. Both graduate school and applying for a company job require a good score in the Test of English for International Communication. Husky decided to study for the English test first, no matter what, but this was not easy either. While she was devastated and upset because she had no idea how she was going to make a living after graduating university, Husky was investing in more education. To fortify themselves against job insecurity, the employed or the want-to-be-employed need to build their qualification further, but without any guarantee as to whether their further investments will work out or not. Continuing with education and adding degrees and certificates can worsen precarity in the sense that it delays obtaining employment and being independent, and it increases the amount of money invested, which can burden individuals and their families as well. Further investment, in the end, can make it more difficult to adequately collect on that expenditure. This absurd cycle of investment in education for a
future that is in no way guaranteed is what the episode of Mantis Kindergarten outlined above demonstrates so well.

In this context, the online community indeed becomes an alternative space where people can realize a self-fulfillment that they cannot accomplish through their jobs. Most of my interviewees started acquiring skills to deal with ICTs and digital media when they were in elementary school. They grew up into power users surrounded by a technological environment and were used to participating in an online community and producing online content. Besides being producers of media content, the Korean youth has a high rate of participation in higher education, which also shapes their expectations with a strong and widespread desire to work as white-collar laborers, especially in the cultural industry. While expecting to get a job related to her major in child care, Beef-bone-broth wished she could be a writer for a broadcasting company or work in an entertainment industry. She knew her wish would probably not be realized. At least by means of the Internet, Beef-bone-broth would be able to keep doing surplus things with her surplus power in her surplus time. Husky might not be able to get a job in which she is in charge of a big project similar to the position she had in the review book Painter of the Wind. If she is itching for creative work or to have a significant role, she might be able to volunteer for some other projects in online communities. Despite his creative talents, it might not be easy for Guitar-man to get a job as a producer in a broadcasting company, which is as competitive as being a lawyer. Gabriella Lukács, in her article “Dreamwork: Cell Phone Novelists, Labor, and Politics in Contemporary Japan” (2013), elaborates the way in which the digital media economy exploits the affective labor of young cell phone novelists. While these young novelists are willingly exploited like the members of the review book project, Lukács argues that “they also open new channels of communication and generate new experiences of intimacy and new forms of belonging” (47). While it is extremely hard for my interviewees to realize self-fulfillment related to their interests and talents through their jobs, the online community does not require a high qualification nor does it give chances selectively only to a small number of winners. The online community enables my interviewees to live with some dignity by letting them fulfill their desire to be creative and participatory while generating surplus value through their surplus power without getting a share of the revenue their surplus value generates.
Chapter 3
Internet Freaks: Representing Internet Users as “Powerful” “Losers”

In this chapter, I analyze the self-referential characters of DCinside users through posts that users have uploaded. DCinside users have created representations of themselves and promoted various images of social “losers” (rujŏ), “freaks,” and “surplus (humans)” (ingyŏ). The meaning-making process involved in creating, circulating, and talking about characters shows how certain groups of Internet users reflect on their everyday lives and portray themselves as the subjects in self-mocking portraits. Feeling like a loser or being fearful of becoming one is a condition that many Koreans grapple with every day. The self-mocking and self-reflexive images DC freaks have created tell stories about being a loser, in other words, of being failures in the context of post-crisis South Korea’s cycle of endless competition.

The posts of DCinside users I analyze in this chapter include a series of photos through which the label of Internet freak emerged, two cartoon series, titled *The World of the Freak* (P’yein ŭi segye)\(^{56}\) and *DC Freak Contest*, (Tissi p’yein taehoe)\(^{57}\) and several images of other characters created and circulated on DCinside. These posts were produced in the early 2000s (the decade 2000–2010). I first came across them while Internet surfing when they were first posted and was aware of them as they became popular. I encountered them again while I was perusing the five galleries that my research came to focus upon during my fieldwork period of 2008–2009. I found this data to be particularly relevant for the issues that I discuss in this chapter, the ways in which certain groups of Internet users categorize themselves as “losers.” Analyzing the different characters of DCinside enables me to delve deep into the self-mocking nature of the subjects that I am interested in.

I articulate the implications of self-mocking subjecthood through the term “loser aesthetics,” which can be defined by a set of shared styles and sentiments that can be found in the posts of DCinside. As DCinside users are fond of losers and freaks, they prefer posts inflected with

---

\(^{56}\) All the episodes of this cartoon series I refer to were available at [http://dica.dcinside.com/study_listN.php?id=583&code1=50&code2=60&s_mode=&s_que=&page=6&](http://dica.dcinside.com/study_listN.php?id=583&code1=50&code2=60&s_mode=&s_que=&page=6&), accessed January 6, 2013. As of October 31, 2014, the page had come down.

\(^{57}\) All the episodes of this cartoon series I refer to are from the Cartoon-strip gallery and available via the Hit gallery. [http://gall.dcinside.com/board/lists/?id=hit&s_type=search_name&s_keyword=%EC%9A%B8](http://gall.dcinside.com/board/lists/?id=hit&s_type=search_name&s_keyword=%EC%9A%B8), accessed on July 10, 2015.
deliberately shoddy styles. By focusing on what are presented as the “pathetic” aspects of everyday life and shedding light on figures who are not winners in the prevailing social system, loser aesthetics expands the horizon to voices who wish to speak, voices that otherwise might not be heard. It refers to the ways in which DCinside users configure their experiences. I elaborate loser aesthetics by building upon Jacques Rancière’s theory of the politics of aesthetics. I also find Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of carnival helpful in thinking through the “loser-like” characters and deliberately shoddy styles of Internet freak culture. I argue that by creating their own aesthetics and making their own characters, DCinside users open up a space where social losers and freaks take up power and infuse their world with loser aesthetics extolling a pathetic, humorous, and playful spirit. Characters living on DCinside twist, make fun of, and belie the awkward truths of the normative world, all while including themselves in being laughed at through self-mockery. Publics formed on DCinside express characteristics of counterpublics in terms of “their tension with a larger public” (Warner 2002:56) and “awareness” of their “subordinate status” (Warner 2002:119).

1 Emergence of the Internet Freak

This section analyzes a series of photos (seen in Figure 3–1) to which DCinside users have attached the origin of the label “Internet freak” (int’ŏnet p’yein). I suggest possible meanings implied by this series of photos by contrasting them with a series of TV advertisements which Internet freaks originally parodied. The advertisements and the series of photos parodying them tell us different stories about what advanced ICTs can bring into our lives. I see a discrepancy between the idealized pictures of a high-tech lifestyle and parodied counter discourse which delineates mundane scenes of ICT usage.

I first came across this series of photos in 2001, at a time when the photos and the label “Internet freak” itself were becoming popular. A post in the Way of Nirvana gallery uploaded around that time introducing the photo series discusses the genealogy of the terms: “While ‘Freak’ (p’yein)
had been used, for example, in ‘StarCraft freak’ (st’a p’yein) or ‘chat freak’ (ch’aet’ing p’yein), we know that DC freak is the first full-scale usage.”58

Figure 3–1–1 and 3–1–2 DCinside Internet Freak Photos (Source: The Way of Nirvana gallery)

Figure 3–1–3 and 3–1–4 DCinside Internet Freak Photos (Source: The Way of Nirvana gallery)

Figure 3–1–1 shows an anonymous user who has uploaded a photo of himself using the Internet. The small portable coffee table holding a bowl of cooked rice and several humble side dishes such as fermented vegetables (kimch’i), roasted seaweed (kim), and pickled vegetables

58 As noted in the introduction, The Way of Nirvana gallery was similar to a “hall of fame” of some of the most popular posts in the history of DCinside. DCinside staff curated posts recirculated in the context of this gallery. The Way of Nirvana gallery has disappeared from the list of galleries on DCinside, and the old links to the posts of this gallery are not working at the moment (not accessible June 3, 2015).
(changatchi)\(^\text{59}\) is located in front of his desk. He is holding a mouse in his left hand and his spoon in his right hand. He is reading something from a DCinside.com bulletin board. The caption of this photo says “You, who cannot leave the Internet for one minute, you are a freak (p’yein).”

The caption parodies an advertisement for the services of a major South Korean telecommunication company, KTF. This advertisement shows Woo-sung Jung, a Korean actor who is famous for being good-looking, tall, fit, and fashionable, dressed in a formal shirt and necktie. He talks on his mobile phone while dancing in a fancy, crowded club. A narrator speaks over the scene, saying, “You, who cannot leave your mobile phone for one minute because of your career, because of your love of every single minute, you, you’re Number 1.”\(^\text{60}\) This advertisement, targeting men between the ages of 25 to 35 years old (Wel k’omyunik’eisyŏnjū 2002), actually uses an English-derived term, “the main”\(^\text{61}\) to describe Jung, which I have above translated as “number 1.” The phrase is dense with meaning, including the more obvious, self-oriented “You are the protagonist of your life”; although it also has implications in terms of this normative male’s place in Korean society: “You are the foundation of Korea,” it implies, and “You are the center (core member) of this society.” The advertisement delivers an image of living a cool and successful life by combining several images such as a trendy and crowded club scene, a successful young businessman in a formal suit, and the latest model of mobile phone.

While the original text of the advertisement focuses on showing the busy, passionate, and successful life of one man who is at the center and is the driving force of both his life and of society, the parodied photo at DCinside shows the bleak scenery of everyday living as mediated by new ICTs.

This parody photo was a big hit, with other users in DCinside uploading their own versions of the photos, mimicking and further parodying the original. Parodies that show people so engrossed with their ICT that they are unable to leave it for “even one minute” while conducting

\(^{59}\) A couple of photos in Figure 3–1 show food items which may not be considered humble such as seasoned fried chicken (yangnyŏm t’ongdak) and a bottle of wine. For example, in Figure 3–1–4, the scene of combination of chicken dish and the other dishes of cooked rice, fermented cabbage, and roasted seaweed all together in one humble bowl implies that the person in this picture may make do with take-out food instead of socializing with others including family members. The setting of this picture, despite rather special food of seasoned fried chicken, looks remarkably different from those of the KTF advertisements Jung features.

\(^{60}\) Refer to the following link to see the original advertisement. http://www.adic.co.kr/gate/video/show.hjsp?id=I91523, accessed January 17, 2014.

\(^{61}\) This is also the name of a service plan offered by KTF.
much more banal activities in the context of much less glamorous settings than those in the advertisements. Some photos, like the first in the series at Figure 3–1–1 for example, show a person eating while using the Internet, surrounded by a computer desk and a dining table, rather than a nightclub. Figure 3–2 shows a person who is sleeping, face oriented to the still-on computer monitor that accompanies him in his bed, his hand still cupping his mouse. If we look at the photos of Figures 3–1 carefully, especially the monitors, we can see that people appearing in the parodied photos are all connected. Each person in those photos is looking at one of those in the previous photos. The people in these photos do not look fancy and cool, but are presented as austere in terms of what they are wearing, sitting in their unembellished rooms, eating cheap, fast food consumed always on their own, and most of all, emphasizing ceaseless attention to their computer screens.

The scenes shown in Figures 3–1 and 3–2 make other users seeing these posts, including myself, laugh. This is probably so because the scenes are similar to what they (we) do in their everyday lives as well as because some scenes have a touch of humor in calling attention to such familiar everyday scenery. When one person disclosed his personal experience of being obsessed with the Internet as a parody of the KTF advertisement, many people showed an enthusiastic response by post their own parodies in similar situations. The collective actions fueled by the new ICTs changed the bleak scene of everyday life into collective fun-making based on a common ground. When the Internet users started to call themselves “Internet freaks,” they began to enjoy making fun of themselves as well as each other and “being pathetic” became fun. The more pathetic,
outrageous or exaggerated they could depict their situations, the more applause they received in
the form of comments and replies. Self-mockery combined with a critique of the idealized
images of ICTs became a methodology to convert the bleak aspects of life into noteworthy ones.

The series of photos of Internet freaks belie the promises of the capitalist market and of new
technologies by making fun of Internet freaks themselves, who are far from qualifying as
desirable subjects like Woo-sung Jung from the KTF advertisement. The new ICTs are promoted
in the KTF ad (amid many other locations) as a crucial qualification for competitiveness in the
future. Most Koreans have rushed to acquire the most up-to-date versions of these devices,
despite the fact they in no way guarantee success for their users, at least in terms of material
prosperity. The original advertisement and its cool and successful protagonist (Jung, Mr.
“Number 1”) become suspicious when they are reflected in the mirror of the Internet freak
(p’yein).

2 From the Door of His Tent: Discovering a New Tribe, the Internet Freak

The series of photos by Internet freaks in contrast with the KTF advertisement show us different
insights about what ICTs were bringing into our lives in the early 2000s. While the KTF
advertisement addresses increasing capability, efficiency, competitiveness, and freedom enabled
by ICTs, the parodied photos question the idealized images of ICTs that the KTF advertisements
draw in a humorous way. Both cases depict certain figures who are defined by their ICTs: Mr.
Number 1 and freaks. The type of humor we can find in the series of photos of Internet freaks is
based on self-reflexive and self-mocking insights on the austere scenes of everyday life that was
undergoing further and continual transformation due to ICTs. The humorous figure of the
Internet freak (DC freak) emerged from this scenery. In this section, I continue to analyze the
way in which DCinside users represent themselves as DC freaks through self-reflexive and self-
mocking humor via two famous cartoon series that were produced and circulated on DCinside.

*The World of the Freak* is a popular cartoon series appearing on DCinside delineating what
Internet freaks are like, a series which is full of satire and humor. Poong Kim, the cartoonist of
*The World of the Freak*, was an early prominent DC user, post serialized cartoons of his own
creation at the DC gallery Cartoon-strip (k’at’un yŏnjae kaellŏri). Poong Kim was a majoring in animation at university when he drew *The World of the Freak*. He became a big name both inside and outside DC because his cartoons depicted the piquant flavor of the new cultures of the Internet freaks based on his own experience of being one of them. Here, I will provide an analysis of certain episodes of *The World of the Freak*, including examination of what it means that the feature character, Dr. Kim, “discovers” the tribe of the DC freak using a discourse that centers on an imaginary anthropologist and a popular understanding of what it is that anthropologists do.

The first episode of *The World of the Freak* begins with the narration of an “anthropologist” who wears a safari jacket, shorts, hat—a stereotypical costume of an anthropological fieldworker exploring a remote part of the world. Dr. Kim observes the customs of Internet freaks from the perspective of an outsider. Through Dr. Kim’s eyes, the unknown world of the Internet freak is disclosed to the strip’s readers. He narrates:

My name is Dr. Kim. I am a professor in the department of biological anthropology at H University. I came to the remote wild to do field research for my new thesis titled “Compiler Functions of the Internet Freak and Measures to Vitalize Luciferase” (p’yein ŭi kŏmp’aillŏ hamsu wa rusip’oraaje ŭi hwalsŏng pang’an). Internet freaks are divided into various tribes, and each tribe lives according to their own language and customs. Let’s look at DC freaks, the largest and most powerful among the tribes. The most obvious feature is that each DC freak has a digital camera. After taking pictures of various things, they upload them to a gallery called “Hunting the absurd” (yŏpki kaellŏri) in the town hall. Villagers run into the town hall in a crazy rush when a new photograph is uploaded. There is no reason for them to rush into the town hall. They just want to be the first. That is it, nothing more or less than that. They also comment on the new photograph. The comment from the sixth freak, “I will save this picture of the girl. I won’t be lonely during the night anymore with this picture,” is quite modest [in terms of it not being irrelevant to the subject of the photo—it is modest in terms of its irrelevancy]. They do not accept it if it does not suit their needs, as expressed in the opinion of the twenty-first freak to comment, saying that “It is invalid since there is not toilet paper [to clean up the semen after masturbation]” and that of the twenty-fifth which is “It is not valid since this girl doesn’t fulfill military duties.” As the comments accumulate, the more irrelevant the comments become: the

---

62 The title of this research project is nearly untranslatable, as a great deal of it is made up of academic-sounding gibberish. This is a translation of a title which is at least partially nonsensical, made up of a scientific pseudo-vocabulary.

63 The additional explanations offered in parenthesis are my interpretation.

64 This refers to military service, which is mandatory for men of Korean nationality. In this context, this is simply evidence of the comments spinning out of control in terms of having less and less to do with the content of the original post.
fifty-sixth comment “B is stupid! Hahaha…” It can’t get any worse once a comment like the fifty-seventh appears: “It is difficult selling baked yams.”

Internet freaks and their culture were foreign to most Koreans when they first appeared in the early 2000s, as if they were a new tribe living in a remote part of the world. The new ICTs such as the digital camera and the Internet were still very new, as were online communities and cultures. The early online communities and cultures took shape focusing on the possibilities of building a new public sphere where net citizens could experiment and constitute a new universe. DCinside and Internet freak culture appeared strange to many Internet users because it did not follow the norms of existing online communities in terms of, for example, keeping up “netiquette” or offering useful information to others. Instead, Internet freaks spoke an incomprehensible language and conducted strange deeds that seemed to have little purpose. *The World of the Freak* expresses metaphorically the unfamiliarity of the Internet freak culture through the setting of an anthropologist exploring a new tribe.

Dr. Kim, the narrator of *The World of the Freak*, continues to describe the customs and cultures of Internet freaks from the perspective of an outsider as the cartoon series proceeds. The ways in which Internet freaks live are described not just as something new and strange, but also as involving sacred forms of ritual that provide Internet freaks fulfillment. Such rituals did not make much sense to outsiders, including Dr. Kim. Dr. Kim in fact actually figures out the reason why Internet freaks are hard for outsiders to understand, which is because the freaks have reached nirvana. It is natural that the deeds of enlightened Internet freaks look odd in the eyes of ordinary people. The following episode of the cartoon describes the customs and ways of living that are also the rituals of Internet freaks, showing how they seek fulfillment through everyday practices.

---

65 The saying “It is difficult selling baked yams (as a street vendor, which is a way of making living). Spare any change?” became popular on DCinside. Baked yams used to be a popular food at street stalls, especially during the winter, and were considered a poor person’s method of self-employment. At the point where this statement is made in this series of comments, a state of total irrelevance in terms of the original post has been achieved. DC freaks used this same expression repeatedly in their posts and comments no matter the content of the posts to which the expression “referred.” As a result, the galleries of DCinside came to look like a street full of beggars panhandling for quarters here and there. This phrase became one element in a popular repertoire for comments to posts.
1) Much as there are Buddhist apprentices in a Buddhist temple, there are Haehors\(^6\) in the DC village.

2) Haehors train themselves to reach nirvana every day.

3) There are three methods of meditation to reach nirvana: Eating instant noodles, sleeping during the day and being awake at night, speaking ahaehhaeh.

4) Sleeping during the day and being awake at night: “It’s dawn. It’s time to go to bed and have nightmares…”

---

\(^6\) My translation of the Korean neologism “Haehch’a,” which refers to the sound that the characters in the cartoon make to communicate.
5) Eating only instant noodles: “I can’t stand it anymore.”

6) Speaking only ahaehhaeh to communicate with others and forgetting the language of the rest of the world.

7) The three meditation methods imply that one renounces the material world and enters the priesthood. Following them can provoke a lot of abuse from the world. / “Fucking lunatics, get out of here!!!”

8) After mastering the three meditation methods, one can finally reach nirvana: “I’m me, Ahaehhaeh no matter what people say.”

---

67 The bear and the tiger in the cartoon are caricatures of the main characters of the Korean nation-building myth. While the bear succeeded in transforming into a human being following God’s instructions to eat only garlic and crown daisies and to stay inside a dark cave without being exposed to sunshine for 100 days, the tiger gave up in the middle of this quest. The bear became a woman, got married to a son of God, and gave birth to the first ancestor of the Koreans, according to this myth.
The customs and the ways of living of Internet freaks are based on their devotion to the Internet. Their enthusiasm for the Internet is compared to that of apprentices at a Buddhist temple in this cartoon episode. This comparison makes sense considering the fact that their unending Internet usage might well reorganize their entire lives, including the activities they undertake during most of their time day-to-day, who they encounter on any given day, and how they organize their social relations. The most important features, common among many Internet freaks, are introduced as the three methods of meditation to reach nirvana: Eating only instant noodles, sleeping during the day and being awake at night, and communicating only via repetitions and variations of the sound “ahaehhaeh.”

I further unpack the meaning-making of Internet freak customs and cultures in the following sections. Before moving on, I want to discuss the metaphor of the anthropologist as a narrator, embodied in the figure of Dr. Kim. Anthropologist Dr. Kim plays the role of narrator and field investigator. While a new tribe of Internet freaks is discovered by Dr. Kim through the eyes of an outsider in a way that mocks Internet freaks, the gaze of an outsider is mocked as well through the comical depiction of Dr. Kim. Dr. Kim’s big round thick glasses replacing his eyes in the cartoon seems to satirize puritanism and knowledge of modern (social) science. Starting off by observing incomprehensible behaviors of Internet freaks, Dr. Kim came to be enlightened that the incomprehensible behaviors of Internet freaks were incomprehensible to secular eyes because they were methods of reaching nirvana. The shift from incomprehensible and even seemingly “lunatic” behaviors into “ascetic” practice seems to mock certain conventions of anthropological research mining profound meanings from mundane events while questioning the validity of meanings about Internet freaks produced by outside interpretations. Internet freaks appreciate the outsider’s gaze on them by reappropriating the gaze toward themselves, which brings laughter to the insiders, the new tribe of Internet freaks. But then, is Dr. Kim really an outsider?

---

68 This word does not exist in regular Korean vocabulary. It was coined by the Internet freak community on DCinside.com reacting to a bizarre image and since then has been used to express various feelings from happiness to embarrassment about various situations. People can use this word in any situation for any purpose and even compose entire sentences using only this word, since it can take the place of any part of speech. For example, one can say “I feel so ahaehhaeh since that ahaehor behaves so ahaehhaeh-ly. Life is so ahaehhaeh…” How to interpret this sentence is up to readers.
Dr. Kim has some attributes from his creator, Poong Kim, who himself is an Internet freak. Dr. Kim’s ethnography is not targeting a class of readers who are outsiders wanting to know about Internet freaks. Instead, Dr. Kim’s human subjects, the Internet freaks themselves, are the targeted readers of this ethnographic cartoon, considering that the cartoon series was originally uploaded on a popular DCinside gallery. The authority of truth-making about Internet freaks, therefore, does not belong to outsiders but to the Internet freaks themselves, including the individual who drew the cartoons himself (Poong Kim) and the readers (DCinside users).

I interpret these cartoons as what Anthony Giddens refers to as the “reflexive awareness” of agents that takes place against the backdrop of “reflexivity,” itself an “intrinsic component of modernity” (1991:35). According to Giddens, “self-identity” is “reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography” rather than a distinctive or “collective traits possessed by the individual” (1991:53). The way in which Internet freaks construct their selves is parallel to the reflexive awareness of modern agents. The creation of the character “Internet freak” was possible through the reflexive awareness of agents, as pointedly illustrated by the Internet freaks looking at other freaks in the series of monitors shown in Figure 3–1. These are Internet users observing themselves slipping from normative images of users of advanced technologies, like Jung, Mr. Number 1. The self-reflexive urge continues to provide the impulse to create, consider and articulate what Internet freaks are like through their own collective biographies, like those in evidence in the episodes of The World of the Freak.

My dissertation is related to this self-reflexive biographic storytelling in some ways, especially similar to the way in which Dr. Kim and Poong Kim engage in Internet freaks. I have been a DCinside user even though I have been a lurker most of time. I have some serious intention to decipher the profound meanings of Internet freaks and DCinside. My serious intention can be funny to other DCinside users and be easily mocked. Nevertheless, my dissertation will contribute to creating and imposing certain agency on DCinside users. In the following sections, I continue to further what kinds of stories the collective biographies tell us about Internet freaks in a way of still being written as my dissertation is.
3 The Feast of Fools Constituting a Carnivalesque in Online Space

The customs and cultures of the Internet freak so diligently excavated by Dr. Kim reflect in many ways the poor living conditions and unpromising social statuses of Internet freaks. The visual aspect of the cartoon characters alludes to living conditions and social statuses. We can get a better sense of the aesthetic boundaries of the Internet freak by taking a look at another cartoon by Poong Kim, a step-by-step guide on how to draw an Internet freak (see Figure 3–4). The different characters of *The World of the Freak* are based on the same rough sketch, which proceeds as follows: 1. Draw a circle, 2. Add a dot on both the left and right of the circle diameter, 3. Draw a mouth a little bit below the center of the circle, 4. Decide on hair styles. If the freak is male, a beard is necessary; if female, hair accessories should be added, 5. Make sure to draw a fat belly for the upper part of body, 6. Draw the lower part of the body as you want, 7. Differentiate the color of the uniform according to its specific tribe, of freaks inhabiting particular websites, 8. Add armpit or leg hair but, for a female freak, no hair would be more appropriate. Accessories such as glasses can be added depending on one’s taste.
The characters of the Internet freak are far from being neat and proper. They wear short underwear or track suits, garb that is not appropriate for activities outside the home. Their unshaved armpits and legs hint that they do not care much for grooming, perhaps because they
do not have any formal business to deal with or any people to meet outside of their homes. Their fat bellies also imply that they might not be into working out to stay in shape, not meeting the pervasive social preaching promoting the idea that “Looks are also competitiveness.” They may not really be wanted by others and society considering the fact that they fail to meet the qualifications set out by such instructions.

The cartoon sets out three meditation methods to reach nirvana that also allude to similar living conditions and social status to those implied by the visual aspects of the cartoon characters. The first step on the path to nirvana is represented by instant noodles. These economic meals have been invaluable to Koreans, especially those who are poor, too busy to cook, or seeking convenience. Instant noodles are representative of the fact that this cheap food might be the only available option for these poor and incompetent Internet freaks. The instant noodle has been devalued as an unhealthy and fatty food since healthy eating and while the Internet freaks largely consume these noodles they remain outside the popular trend toward organic foods. Step two on the path requires one to sleep during the day and be awake at night, which is possible when one does not have a regular job or work as a freelancer. The final step to attain nirvana necessitates only speaking ahaehhaeh, which also makes it impossible to live a normal life, preventing communication with others in an ordinary social setting. As the cartoon depicts, speaking only ahaehhaeh causes Internet freaks to be beaten up and stigmatized as lunatics because of its abnormality.

The customs and ascetic exercises that make up these three methods are not consistent with living a normal life. Imagine young adults who have just graduated from high school, two-year technical colleges, or four-year universities. They have not found a permanent job and continue to prepare and apply for jobs. They might live with their parents, or alone, on a tight budget. Eating poorly, living a nocturnal lifestyle, and being antisocial can be consequences of their precarious social status and financial difficulties. Many Korean youth find themselves in this kind of situation when they finish school and as they are looking for a job in order to be independent and grown-up, as I discussed in chapter 2.

The label “Internet freak” is a collective identity. DCinside users have constructed this collective identity of Internet freak through different posts delineating, mocking, and sometimes

---

69 See my discussions on lookism in South Korea in Introduction and chapter 2.
exaggerating the way in which they use the Internet and DCinside. The Internet freak, as constructed by the collective posts of DCinside users, exemplifies the impoverished lives filled with hours and days of activities mediated by ICTs. The self-reflexive and self-mocking identity of the Internet freak in return offers references for Internet users to interpret what they are doing online. As Figures 3–1 and 3–2 above, show, people that have eaten or fallen asleep by themselves in front of their computer monitor might be able to figure out the meaning of their behaviors in using new ICTs through posts about Internet freaks. They did these things because they were Internet freaks and they were Internet freaks because they were doing such things. The construction of the label of Internet freak is one of the ways in which Korean Internet users identify themselves; netizens, avatars, Agorian, and malicious commenters, the figures elaborated upon in chapter 1, also function in a similar way. The features of being an Internet freak, which themselves have been accumulated and created by different user posts, shape the individual experiences of using the Internet into a collective experience and culture on which individual Internet freaks can rely.

Along with their self-mocking identities as Internet freaks, the characters that DC freaks create play an important role in constituting DCinside as a new universe where losers, freaks, and surplus can take up power. The strokes of their mouse enliven comic, absurd, and sometimes grotesque characters. Figure 3–5 shows some of these characters (posted on various galleries at DCinside): Sŭngŏp Chang, a drunken master of fine art, Kaebyŏki, a dog whose head is stuck in a wall, Kaejuki, a dog hanging over a bamboo tree, Ch’onangang, a kitschy Japanese singer, Asian Prince, an Asian singer in tight pants that reveals his erection, a masturbating frog, a funny screen-capture of Chinese actor Bruce Lee which brought about a trend called “humiliating capture” (kulyok tchal), and Simyŏng, a devastated and impotent middle-aged man.

Sŭngŏp Chang is the male protagonist of a Korean movie Chihwaseon (ch’ihwasŏn, Im 2002). The movie tells the tale of a lifetime of artistry lived by a master of fine art during the late Choson Dynasty. Chang is known to love drinks and women and to have various eccentric behaviors, which were hard for his contemporaries to understand. The Chang film includes a great deal of humor, generated by the main character’s facial expressions, eccentric behaviors, and satiric paintings, all of which became good sources for DCinside users and their parody posts. The episode “Prologue 3” of The World of the Freak that I discussed above in Figure 3–3 shows the influence of Chang in the sense that it shares the theme of reaching nirvana with the movie,
in which Chang’s various eccentric behaviors were ultimately in the pursuit of the nirvana of true artistry, which he succeeds in doing in the end. The last cut of “Prologue 3” of *The World of the Freak* (Figure 3–3–8) is a parody of the movie poster where Chang says “I’m me, Sŭngŏp Chang no matter what people say,” in the caption of the poster. Like Chang, the characters DC freaks create or re-create bring about laughter through absurd situations (Kaebyŏki and Kaejuki), absurd moments (Bruce Lee), satires of bodily fixations and lookism (the Internet freak’s body as shown in Figure 3–4), male virility (Asian Prince and the masturbating frog), male impotence (Simyŏng), and splendid kitschy style (Ch’onangang). What do all these absurd and comic characters mean?
Internet freaks characterize DCinside as a space which resembles the medieval “carnivals,” inflected by “the folk culture of humor” that Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) elaborates. Bakhtin (1984) attempts to restore the “thousand-year-old development of the folk culture of humor,” which he saw as having withered with the rise of modern society, through his in-depth study of Rabelais’s *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (3–4). According to Bakhtin, the Rabelais novel functions as a “key
to the immense treasury of folk humor” (1984:4), the sphere of which is boundless and is manifested in various forms (1984:58). Bakhtin defines the manifestations of the folk culture in three distinctive forms:

1. **Ritual spectacles**: carnival pageants, comic shows of the market place.
2. **Comic verbal compositions**: parodies both oral and written, in Latin and in the vernacular.
3. **Various genres of billingsgate**: courses, oaths, popular blazons.

(1984:5, Italicized in the original text)

In these three closely related forms, Bakhtin emphasizes characteristics of carnival and carnival laughter. Carnival characters such as clowns and fools and medieval spectacles as the nucleus of the carnival are neither purely artistic nor spectacle but belong to the “borderline between art and life” or a “peculiar midzone” (Bakhtin 1984:7–8). Carnival laughter is different from an “individual reaction to some isolated ‘comic’ event,” firstly, because it is the “laughter of all the people,” secondly, because “it is universal in scope,” and thirdly, because it is “ambivalent” (Bakhtin 1984:11). Bakhtin also points out the second most important trait of carnival laughter is the fact that the carnival laugh is directed at people who laugh, in other words the “wholeness of the world’s comic aspect” to which both people who are laughed at as well as laughing belong (Bakhtin 1984:12). The carnival spirit and laughter enables the political as well as symbolic “conflict between official versus unofficial forces” (Holoquist 1984:xxi). Bakhtin differentiates the carnival laughter from “cold humor, irony, sarcasm” which arose in the process of transformation of the folk culture of humor into Romanticism in the modern era (Bakhtin 1984:36–38).

Certainly there are huge gaps between Rabelais’s world and that of DCinside including gaps between Rabelais’s time of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance and the present time, between Western Europe and South Korea, and between the differing contexts of “off-line carnivals” and “online communities.” The possibility of the close link between these two different worlds can be found in the very intention of Bakhtin to write a book about the medieval folk culture of humor. By fully unpacking Rabelais’s *Gargantua and Pantagruel* and interpreting it vis-à-vis the officialdom of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, Bakhtin creates an unofficial side of the
folk culture of humor which is a severe critique of the officialdom of Stalinism. Despite the gap of four hundred years’ time as well as the spatial gap between France and Russia, the “indissoluble and essential relation to freedom” of carnival laughter enables both Rabelais and Bakhtin to create a “special kind of open text that they explored as means for inscribing themselves into their times” (Holoquist 1984:xv, xxii).

DCinside and its world beyond temporal and spatial gaps share important common features with those of Rabelais and Bakhtin. The European medieval carnivals as a second world and a second life (Bakhtin 1984:5–6) in particular provide a lens through which we can think about the common features that arise from the gaps between Rabelais’s world and that of DCinside. In the carnivalesque space of DCinside, the hegemonic social order is navigated, contested, and played with. It also offers DC freaks unregulated space where they feel like anything—including satire, self-deprecation, absurdity, irreverence, and profanity—goes. It is a space where comic, absurd, and sometimes grotesque characters take up power. Its language is composed of “abuses, curses, profanities, and improprieties” refusing “to conform to conventions, to etiquette, civility, respectability” (Bakhtin 1984:187). Most of all, it is a space for laughter, not for fear, which I discussed in the previous chapter as one of the key current living conditions of Koreans. Bakhtin points out that “the principle of laughter and the carnival spirit on which grotesque is based destroys this limited seriousness and all pretense of an extratemporal meaning and unconditional value of necessity” (Bakhtin 1984:49). So laughter can crack the pervasive social fear eating up individuals. But such laughter becomes possible only when these individuals “contact with other bodies” and are “aware of being a member of a continually growing and renewed people” because laughter is “the social consciousness of all the people” (Bakhtin 1984:92). The self-reflexive and self-mocking humor of DCinside is the way in which DCinside users construct the social consciousness of all the people including the laughed at and the laughing. This is why the collective action of establishing DCinside in a carnivalesque space, a new universe where their comic, absurd, and grotesque personas live, is important.

The carnivalesque space of DCinside did not emerge out of thin air. South Korea has a long history of folk culture of humor (p’ungja wa haehak) which still heavily influences popular culture in the present. Scholars have argued that humor found in the context of Korean folk culture is paired with the popular national sentiment of han (sorrow) and has functioned as a way by which Koreans overcome life’s ordeals (Cho TI 2008; Jang HCh 2005). Humorous
manifestations are generally found in traditional Korean folk culture through various genres such as folk songs (minyo), dramatic songs (p’ansori), mask dances (t’alch’um), exorcism rituals (kut), fables (sŏlhwa), folktales (mindam), as well as folk objects, such as earthenware (t’ogi), clay dolls (t’ou), roof tiles (kiwa), wooden totem poles (mokchangṣŭng), furniture ornaments, folk paintings (minhwa), and genre paintings (p’ungsokhwai) (Jang HCh 2005:146). The tradition of humor never disappeared but lasted even during repressive periods of feudal society, the colonial period, and the military dictatorship. T’ae-il Yun briefly overviews the characteristic of traditional Korean folk humor focusing on “situational ironies” (sanghwang chŏk airŏni) in which one brings about laughter to others despite whatever sadness might characterize their own situations. Yun calls it “situational ironies wiping tears with laughter” and finds its manifestations in a broad range of Korean folk culture, from the hyang-ga (native songs) written in the 800s to the pansori (dramatic songs) and t’al-ch’um (mask dances) of the Choson Dynasty, modern novels of the 1930s under Japanese colonization, and contemporary novels (Yun T’I 2008:282–283). In traditional Korean folk culture of humor, comic characters of fools and the warm gaze and laughter toward those fools are also important features (Yi ChS 2008:397; Yun T’I 2008:283–285). The tradition of the folk culture of humor has also influenced current popular culture such as TV dramas (Yun SJ 2010; Sim UCh 2008), sitcoms (Kim M 2010), advertisements (Yun T’I 2008), and comedies (Choi JR 2012). In chapter 2, I analyzed an episode of “Mantis Kindergarten” from the TV show, Gag Concert. The satire and humor brought about from situational ironies colored by self-reflexivity and self-mockery in the episode of Mantis Kindergarten demonstrates, in relation to the social conditions of educational panic and competitive job markets, that Korean humorists and their audiences have inherited the long-lasting folk culture of humor.

The features of folk culture of humor had appeared from the initial creation of online space in the context of domestic Korean networking services. The “humor room” (yumŏ pang) of domestic networking services is a good example (Sin TH 1998). What attracted my interviewees to DCinside is related to the carnivalesque characteristics of DCinside. Guitar-man said, “DCinside totally deviated from the conventions not only of the off-line world but also of the existing online world. There was a lot of effing and blinding going on. Different from other online communities, DCinside offered real anonymity. People could post without a membership subscription. I think it enabled people to talk more freely and honestly as well as to bring up issues that are not
mainstream. I had read Chosun Ilbo for five years before I started using DCinside. It was quite the cultural shock in a good way.” What attracted Guitar-man to DCinside is related to the carnivalesque language of curses and the carnival spirit of challenging orthodoxy. Baby-chick defined DCinside as a “hangout of the pathetic (tchijiri), idiots (pyŏngjin), and surplus (ingyŏ).” She said, “They all look normal in the off-line worlds. They are all stressed out at work, about their studies, relationships, and even about themselves. They need a space where they can relax and get rid of stress. They gather on DCinside and indulge in ‘playing idiots’ (pyŏngjin nori), which they can’t do in the off-line world.” Beef-bone-broth also defined DCinside in ways similar to that of Baby-chick. “DCinside is a space where people gather and express their idiotic spirit together. The charm of DCinside lies in its surplus power. People do stupid things which become a refreshment from mundane life. I am pleased whenever I find people who are bigger idiots than me. Lol.”

The comic characters of fools being created and flourishing on DCinside mock “social losers” and “surplus (humans)” in particular, which creates an unofficial milieu and offers a critique of officialdom of the post-crisis era accompanied by neoliberal social restructuring. While the seriousness of the officialdom of neoliberalization creates a fear of failure and of being surplus, the carnivalesque universe of losers, fools, and surplus people brings about laughter and helps people to cope with the fear. The purpose of Bakhtin’s study of Rabelais is not limited to the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Rather, Bakhtin argues that Rabelais’s work enables us to explore the folk culture of humor of other ages, which is not different from understanding the drama of world history more fully since “all the acts of the drama of world history were performed before a chorus of the laughing people” (1984:474). Bakhtin’s attempt, then, as Michael Holoquist succinctly points out, “carnivalizes the present because it is a hope for the future” (1984:xxii).

While traditional carnivals were temporary and separate from official social orders, online spaces like DCinside provide consistency, in that its users can access its subversive space anytime they

---

70 Beef-bone-broth told me about several such “refreshing” episodes involving “idiots worse than her.” One of these was an unplanned get-together among the users of the Chicken gallery, one of DCinside galleries in which Beef-bone-broth were active. One user put up a post about how to gain free fried chicken. This person ordered two deliveries of fried chicken to two random addresses in his neighborhood. While the delivery person was delivering one order to one address, this user stole the other order of chicken from the delivery bike. Other users started doing the same and post the result. A group of six teenagers were arrested copying the trick. This event was reported in the media and became referred to on DCinside as the “forced get-together of the Chicken gallery users at a police station” (chʾikʾi ni kaellŏri kyŏngchʾalsŏ kangje chŏngmo).
want. The carnival, which in Bakhtin’s conception was a temporary space, can exist timelessly
on the Internet, available for reflection on the ins and outs of the official world via carnivalesque
humor. This means that the anarchy and revolutionary possibilities of the carnivalesque are
continually available within the online space, which can be an even more serious threat to the
proselytizing dictates of neoliberal norms.

Simultaneously, however, it can also function even more effectively as a “safety valve” for
passions and resistances of the common people (Anatoly Kunacharsky in Holoquist 1984:xviii;
Morris 2003:22), which is one of the biggest criticisms of Bakhtin’s endorsements of people, the
folk culture of humor, and the carnival spirit. The conflictual possibilities of the carnivalesque
need to be understood, rather than as limits, as the conditions of politics which contests,
negotiates with, and reconfigures a dominant social order from within. In the following section, I
further my discussions on the meaning-making of DCinside users and its political possibilities
through the notion of loser aesthetics.

4 Abundant Time: Deconstructing Conventional
Meaning-Making

The grotesque figures of the characters, the deliberately shoddy styles of the posts, and the
humorous sentiment that delineate the “pathetic” aspects of ordinary life together compose loser
aesthetics. I define loser aesthetics as “a set of shared styles and sentiments” found in the posts of
DCinside. By aesthetics, I follow Rancière’s definition, referring to the collapse and rupture of
an existing representative regime from which “new forms of life” can be invented (2004:25).

Aesthetics, according to Rancière, is involved in the “distribution of sensible” which is a system
determining what can be visible, what can be included and should be excluded, and what can be
experienced in common within a given community at a given time (Rancière 2004:12). This is
how aesthetics is related to politics (Rancière 2004:18), which Rancière defines as the process of
emancipation which is, in other words, the process of equality composed of practices to suppose
succinctly articulates, in Rancière, political emancipation comes through the active involvement
of the excluded when they transform the existing way of the distribution of the sensible through
new aesthetics that challenge the established order of politics (15–16). This is what we can call the “politics of aesthetics” in Rancière’s conceptualizations.

A key issue in using Rancière’s notions as conceptual tools to analyze Internet freaks’ culture rises from the question of whether Internet freaks’ activities and products can be appropriate arenas for aesthetics according to Rancière’s definition. Birgit Meyer’s article “Aesthetics of Persuasion: Global Christianity and Pentecostalism’s Sensational Forms” (2010) is inspiring in terms of the relevance of Rancière’s notions in expanded usages. Meyer’s article explores Pentecostalism in Ghana, focusing on the relation between the spiritual and the physical through her idea of “sensational forms” (2010:751). Meyer understands religion as a “practice of mediation between the levels of humans and God” the distance between which should be “bridged by sensational forms” (2010:750–751). Meyer builds on Rancière’s concepts of the “politics of aesthetics” and the “distribution of the sensible” to open up a new space where aesthetics and the senses are re-connnected to “religious sensational forms” while determining religious experience through the inclusion and exclusion of certain sensations (2010:754–755).

To apply Rancière’s concepts to religion, Meyer pays attention to the way in which aesthetics is involved in “lived religion” and defines, in her case, the “aesthetics of persuasion” (2010:756). The architecture of the denomination building, the stage used for pastors and singers, and the audiovisual equipment are effectively used in a service to enable believers to feel the “presence of the Holy Spirit” and create sensational forms inducing an “aesthetics of persuasion that affirms the Pentecostal view” (Meyer 2010:757–758).

Following the way in which Meyer expands the application of aesthetics and of the distribution of the sensible at “the level of everyday experience” (Meyer 2010:756), I articulate the “aesthetics” of loser discourses on DCinside. Internet users develop cultural products that represent their ordinary lives and are referred as “posts” (kesimul). This term denotes the ambiguous status of the Internet users’ products, which are considered to be neither art nor professional work. I designate the Internet users’ products as “aesthetic acts” which, by Rancière’s definition, are “configurations of experience that create new modes of sense perception and induce novel forms of political subjectivity” (Rancière 2004:9). The “aesthetic revolution” happens when the focus of art moves from “great names and events” to “the minute details of ordinary life” (Rancière 2004:33). ICTs contribute to an aesthetic revolution in the sense that they redistribute information and change the ways in which people communicate with
each other. The beauty of Internet freak culture can be found in the fact that they speak out, even though they are losers according to their self-reflexive and self-mocking identification, through the minute details of their ordinary lives. Internet freaks are a counterpublic when they see themselves as social losers. Discussion within DCinside contravenes the dominant social rules by “making different assumptions about what can be said or what goes without saying” as a counterpublic would do in Warner’s conceptualization (2002:56) and by the same token struggling to have their voice heard as an outcast would in the case of Rancière (Rancière 1992:61; Žižek 2008:70). As it is these minute details that mediate this new aesthetics of the ordinary, it is important to investigate the details that online posts deliver.

One of the features of Internet freaks that Dr. Kim discovers is that they carry digital cameras. Digital cameras started being popular as a novel digital device at the end of 1990s, a couple of years before the Internet freak phenomenon itself became popular. The new tribe of Internet freaks, particularly those living at DCinside, which was originally started as a small online shopping mall for digital cameras, are depicted as people taking and uploading pictures and retouching images all the time. These pictures and retouched works matter on DCinside because they are the principal content that DC freaks produce and enjoy. What interests Dr. Kim, however, is not the content, because Internet freaks look as if they care about something other than the content itself. Dr. Kim observes the freaks rushing into galleries displaying not particularly compelling content for no discernible reason at all. They do not seem to pay enough attention to the newly updated pictures to justify their rush to see the newly updated pictures as soon as possible. Instead, “rushing” itself becomes the main purpose, if it can be said that there is any purpose at all. As a result, a new game called “ranking play (tōngsu nori)” is derived from the act of “rushing.” What determines a winner is not the quality of a comment, but instead, being the first one to comment on a new post is important. Relevance in terms of the connection between an original post and a subsequent comment does not matter, as the first episode of The World of the Freak shows, above. The content of a post becomes a minor issue compared to the act of “rushing and commenting as soon as possible.” Internet freaks create new fun and culture from minor issues, which makes what they are doing seem odd from conventional points of view. In fact, conventional rules of meaning-making collapse in the interplay between the original post and the irrelevant comments made “about” it.
Although the irrelevance of meaning-making increases the importance of ranking play as the reason why Internet freaks rush to add comments, the ways in which the ranking play proceeds interrupts Dr. Kim as he seeks clear answers in terms of explaining the behavior of the freaks, as well. As the rules of meaning-making between the original post and its comments collapse, so do the rules of determining winners in ranking play. Although being the first commenter is important in such play, there are still other ways to join in and enjoy the game. If one fails to be the first commenter, then the person can try to be the second, third, tenth, thirtieth, fiftieth, one hundredth, five hundredth, or one thousandth, a process which can take place over a long period of time, over years, in fact. Being the first is a good thing, if not, one can still leave a footprint on a series of comments and insist that being five hundredth is something significant, because it shows a relentless spirit. The ranking play looks similar to the blind competition characteristic of post-crisis South Korea in the sense that players are forced to run to win a competition without knowing what the competition is about or what rewards are in store for them. What matters is not the content of a competition, but above all the result: that of winning. While ranking play resembles the blindness of competition, it incapacitates simultaneously the supreme task of competition, that of being a winner, by expanding the ways in which people can win this game; in other words, it incapacitates the privilege of being a winner, which is particularly significant in a society where winner-takes-all.

Thomas W. Dunk (1991), in his ethnography on the male white working class in Thunder Bay, northwestern Ontario, offers insightful analyses about the multilateral meanings of the local lob-ball tournament as leisure activities, to which I can define the meaning behind ranking play. Dunk addresses features of resistance of working-class men whom he calls the “Boys” in the way in which they play lob ball. Lob ball as a physical activity, first of all, enables the Boys to differentiate themselves from other classes of intellectual high culture (Dunk 1991:91). While the competitive element of sport resembles the competitive features of a capitalist mode of production, the lob-ball game of the Boys is ruled by the significance of fun which the Boys think should be the point of work, but which is denied in the labor process such that the Boys must secure it in the realm of leisure (Dunk 1991:92–93). Along with de-emphasizing competitiveness, the Boys challenge the dominant values of the workplace by replacing a “moralistic and puritanical streak” with celebration of “fun,” market individualism with “group activities,” “economic forces and authoritarian structure” with “human interpersonal relations,”
and “market exchange rule” with “reciprocity” (1991:94). In this sense, lob ball as a culture of
the male white working class is an arena of resistance toward the dominant discourse and
economic structures. This arena of resistance, however, has clear limitations. Dunk notes, for
instance, that the lob-ball games are thoroughly mediated by consumerism, one way by which
the system the Boys’ resistance is directed to is not undermined by their activities (Dunk
1991:95). Moreover, the Boys’ culture to resist economic and ideological structures reinforces
other kinds of social injustice and their ideological structures such as racism and gender
discrimination in the process of their constructing the male white working-class consciousness.

Much in the way demonstrated by Dunk in the case of the lob ball of the northwest Ontario Boys,
the aesthetic acts of DCinside users demonstrate both the potential and limits of their critique and
the sphere of resistance that is created in their virtual world. As the experience of work shapes
leisure time and its activities for the Boys (Dunk 1991:66), the experience of the off-line world,
in particular work and study for the purposes of work in the future, contributes to shaping what
the online world, including DCinside, should mean. While in both the case of the Boys and the
DC freaks, there is an emphasis on fun, as I delineated in chapter 2, many of my interviewees
were concerned about their careers, future jobs, and economic security, which stress them out in
many cases. The serious conditions of “officialdom” of the off-line world lead the DCinside
users to pursue fun and the annulment of regulations, which results in the atmosphere of
“anything goes.” While activities like ranking play offer critiques of competitiveness of capitalist
society, the aesthetic acts of DCinside users are mediated by consumerism in many ways, much
like in the case of the Boys. From the outset of DCinside, its communities and publics started
being formed through the consumption of a new commodity, the digital camera. Also, as the
following chapter 4 and chapter 5 will show, the practices of DCinside users are deeply related to
the consumption of popular culture and celebrities, by way of fandom. The aesthetic acts of
DCinside users, despite the possibility of the resistance they newly create, also actively
contribute to consumerism.

There are, however, features which we can consider having potential or at least the change ICTs
have brought about in the interplay of resistance and subordination or collusion with capitalist
economic and ideological structures. While the Boys in Dunk’s ethnography construct class
consciousness through face-to-face relations, it is impossible to categorize DCinside as a single
class despite its affection for social losers and freaks who are also ambiguous in terms of class
background. Rather, it is a space where class divisions dissolve. It has potential to create a new language beyond different class backgrounds drawing on loser aesthetics. The changing aspects engaging in consumerism deserve attention. Even though DCinside used to be a shopping mall of digital cameras, digital cameras are not the only commodity to be consumed. As the evolution of DCinside shows, it can be said that the most important commodity on DCinside has been information and immaterial goods. Even if one cannot afford expensive digital devices such as digital camera, one can still participate in activities on DCinside because information (in the form of posts) circulate for free. One can even be a “kick-ass” reviewer of a digital camera without actually having one. One can even post a series of cartoons and become popular without knowing how to draw, as demonstrated in the cartoon series DC Freak Contest that I discuss in the next section. While the information as free goods offers a fantastic new means of valorization for the capitalist mode of production, as I discuss in chapter 5, it also enables DCinside users to consume popular culture without spending money (consuming for reproduction).

Dunk also addresses the carnivalesque spirit explicit in the Boys’ lob-ball tournament. What Bakhtin calls the “the material bodily lower stratum” offers a firm ground for the Boys’ humor, composed of “Penises, arses, excretion, vomiting, and farting” (Dunk 1991:93). Excessive release based on excessive consumption of the Boys “symbolically invert dominant ideas about self-control, discipline, and fun” (Dunk 1991:93). The carnivalesque spirit of DCinside also shows the characteristic of “the material bodily lower stratum” as well as the language of the marketplace, composed of curses, oaths, and popular blazons. It seems that the most important excessive release on DCinside is in participating in excessive post, referred to as an “excretion of posts” (kūl ssagi). On the part of the Boys’ excessive release is led by excessive consumption; what leads to excessive posts is excessively abundant time available to post them and even more to read through them. Beef-bone-broth defined “running in a gallery” (doing activities in a gallery, meaning enjoying a gallery) as a “technique discriminating gems from a hundred million pebbles” (il ŏk kae ŭi ppŏl kūl chung e oksŏk ŭl karyŏ naenŭn kisul). As I discussed above, ranking play does not require acting in a timely manner or being relevant in terms of content. The diverse ways of winning as well as rushing into every single post for the purposes of ranking play are possible only due to the excessive amount of time dedicated by the participants. The accumulation of texts (posts) reflects the collective time devoted by individual DCinside users, which is in such quantity that it is rarely used efficiently. The newly created cultures of Internet
freaks depict and satirize the people whose time is not valuable enough to save, but can be just wasted in the most immoderately trivial ways possible. Simultaneously, abundant time enables these people whose time can be wasted to create aesthetic acts reconfiguring the distribution of the sensible.

5 Growing Sarcasm: From Internet Freak, through Tchijiri and Tǒkhu, to Surplus

If The World of the Freak subtly implies the profusion of unvalued time available to the Internet freaks, the cartoon DC Freak Contest drawn by Ul, a DCinside user, takes the issue of time further. This cartoon starts with the announcement of a contest which will award a prize to the “best” Internet freak. Jobless Kim (kim paeksu), the male protagonist of this cartoon, finds the announcement when he is bored contending for precedence in ranking play, replying to other people’s posts as fast as possible, and searching for something fun. The announcement says:

Name: Yusik Kim
Download #1 hit20061130.jpg (278.8kb), Download: 2
Title: Official Announcement (Must be read)

We are going to hold the 1st DC Freak Contest. You can apply for this contest through email, and final candidates will be chosen by lot. The winner will be awarded a laptop of top quality, a DSLR (digital camera), and a trophy made of pure gold. We welcome your participation. Please refer below for more information.

Application Dates: Dec. 1 to 10, 2006
Contest Starts: Dec. 20, 2006
Contest Venue: OO Motel
Contest Rules: 1. Each participant will be assigned a room where he will stay during the contest, 2. Participants will receive unlimited meals, 3. There will be only one desktop which is connected to the Internet; there will be no other electronic devices in the room, 4. The desktop
will be set up to enable the participant to connect only to DCinside.com. If the participant tries to hack the locked system to connect to other Internet services, he will be disqualified from the contest, 5. Monitoring staff will observe participants through Closed-Circuit Television for 24 hours. If the participant is away from the desktop for more than 30 minutes or falls asleep, he will be disqualified from the contest, 6. The contest will end when only one participant survives.

Jobless Kim smirks and says to himself, “Well, it’s absolutely a contest for me. Hehehe… The laptop and the digital camera are mine!” Jobless Kim is confident about winning since what he is expected to do to win the contest is exactly what he usually does anyway: use the Internet, more specifically DCinside.com, as much as possible. No difficult skills are required. What is needed is endurance and time, of which Jobless Kim has plenty. Endurance and time are the principles that make the best Internet freak. While the people who are “Number 1” (main) are always busy, the people who are “freaks” (p’yein) are always trying to kill their abundantly unvalued time. *DC Freak Contest* exaggerates the latter with the fun of self-mockery.

The cartoon *DC Freak Contest* depicts different types of Internet freaks through the setting of the contest. Five participants qualify for the preliminary contest and enter into the final session, which means that they are the most “DCinside-like” candidates. The five participants and their varying characteristics reflect different kinds of DCinside users as well as different aspects of the Korean Internet culture more broadly. Participant No.2, who looks, with a book in his hands, like a young and stylish philosophical thinker, is considered by the owner as an “ideal DC freak.” No.2 understands most of the galleries on DCinside in depth and uploads high-quality posts covering various topics of DC galleries.
Figure 3–6. Characters of *DC Freak Contest*. From the top, Yuski Kim on the first line, No.5 on the right of the second line, No.4 on the left of the second line, No.3 on the right of the third line, No.2 on the left of the third line, and No.1 on the bottom line. (Source: The Cartoon-strip gallery via the Hit gallery)
While the owner of DCinside is impressed by No.2’s capabilities, the staff of DCinside is suspicious about whether he is really a DC Internet freak since most DC Internet freaks are usually not as capable as No.2. In other words, No.2 is too good and ideal to be a model DC Internet freak. No.2 carefully strategizes and prepares to win the contest. However, he comes to face his limitations through three galleries, “Toy” (toi), “Animation” (animeisyŏn), and “Babe Love Simulation” (Misonyo yŏnae simulleisyŏn), which are known as galleries for otaku. These three galleries are mostly about Japanese popular culture, including cartoons, animation, and computer simulation games based on sexual fantasies involving the pretty young girls of popular animation programs, books, films, etc. The DC Internet freaks active in these galleries are similar to Japanese otaku, those obsessed with the subculture. In the end, No.2 recognizes he cannot be the best DC Internet freak, even though he is the most capable among the participants, because he tends to understand things based on reason. Being a real Internet freak and achieving spiritual enlightenment should be accomplished through having a truthful mind, not good brains.

Participant No.2 is a good representative of mainstream “netizens” and Internet commentators who try to rely on reason and knowledge in their life and in their activities on the Internet and are serious and hardworking, with a clear goal in life. He realizes his approach is wrong, however, and that he can achieve enlightenment by observing what Jobless Kim accomplishes through the contest.

The cartoon continues with participants No.5 and No.4. Participant No.5 is an otaku nut, and is rejected for being vaguely perverted. Participant No.4 is rejected for being too immature. Participant No.3 turned out as an alien with more advanced intelligence than human being at the end of the cartoon. The strip then turns to Jobless Kim, participant No.1. Kim has the stereotypical look of a jobless Korean male, looking somewhat similar to the Internet freak characters of The World of the Freak above. He wears tracksuit pants and a T-shirt, which implies that he stays at home without socializing much in the off-line world. He is presented as being lazy and naïve compared to No. 2. He attends this contest just in order to win the prize. After 130 hours have passed spending time on DCinside, Jobless Kim starts to see images of him in the past as if he was watching a movie. He starts to ruminate about himself and his life. “Hmm…this shows how I was doing recently… Finding a job was not going well… Part-time

---

71 Otaku is a popular phenomenon that originated in Japan, one related to “those who indulge in forms of subculture strongly linked to anime, video games, computers, science fiction, special-effects films, anime figurines, and so on,” following Hiroki Azuma’s definition (2009:3).
work was troublesome… Being lazy relying on my parents was easy… Isn’t it so that I can’t help it, because my name itself is Jobless? When I woke up, it was always the middle of the day, since nights flew by while I enjoyed myself on DCinside. I always went to bed while watching the sun rise. I didn’t want to waste any minute that I had, even to eat in front of my desktop. Huh? What did I do that for? Actually I didn’t do anything significant. Well…it’s strange… My friend said, ‘You’d better stop wandering around without doing anything.’ My mom said, ‘Jobless, why don’t you go out and get some fresh air rather than using the computer all day? You should stop. It’s already several years that have passed. Sigh…’ But I thought, ‘It’s much better than wasting money outside…’ Yes, it is too much, I know. I don’t know why I started at DCinside in the first place and have spent so much time there. Why? I know indulging in something in this way is not good. I should be moderate in using the Internet… I know… But I can’t help…” Jobless Kim becomes regretful while he ruminates about himself. In the middle of being regretful, he achieves enlightenment, “I’m an Internet freak because I can’t be moderate in using the Internet!” And then, Jobless Kim does not feel anything, but keeps surfing on DCinside as if he was in a state of complete absence of ego.

While watching the progress of the contest, Yusik Kim, the owner of DCinside.com, discloses why he held this contest: “A long time ago, before DCinside appeared, I was also just a jobless youth. I failed in my small business, and was just connected to a domestic networking service day and night. I thought, ‘Damn… Whatever…’ One day, I stayed up all night. And then, the next day and the day after that, I didn’t sleep at all, but used the domestic network for several days on end. At the end, I couldn’t even feel myself typing on the keyboard. I was in the state of complete absence of ego. I felt like the computer, the modem line, and me were melting together. I felt like all the information all over the world was flowing through me, and all the answers to all the various questions were just spread out in front of me. I was totally overwhelmed… That was the real world of ascetic Internet freaks.” Yusik Kim wants to experience this special moment again vicariously, through other people reaching the same state of mind. His wish is fulfilled through Jobless Kim. After the contest, Yusik Kim offers Jobless Kim, the winner of the contest, his own position as CEO of DCinside and a huge amount of prize money, in addition to the new laptop, digital camera and golden trophy. However, Jobless Kim, who has reached the state of complete absence of ego, refuses to accept the prizes, as he has no use for any of them. He is off at home to do what he really wants to do at the moment: in bed sleeping.
As Jobless Kim shows, a “true” DC freak does not look so different from many of the other DC freaks. He is depicted as jobless and helpless, relying on his parents. However, Jobless Kim obtained enlightenment in the end through the contest, which pushed him to increase the already excessive amount of time spent on DCinside to an even higher level. Even though the cartoon ends without showing any actual changes Jobless Kim experiences after attending the contest, it implies that he is a new man by depicting him as aloof from secular desires such as cash and notebooks, or the contest prizes that were originally his purpose in attending the contest. The contest also changed other participants, who were able to reflect on their past and be reborn as true DC freaks. The contest enabled the participants to find their DC freak culture meaningful and reach new insights of their own.

As the Internet users are getting more diverse, so are the labels that describe them. The label “Internet freak” appeared in 2000, tchijiri and otaku became popular around 2006 when DC Freak Contest was posted, and surplus (ingyŏ) received the baton around 2008. The new labels diversify and compose the universe of DCinside. The changing trend of these labels seems to confirm a growing sarcasm and bitterness, with the nuance of cynicism, about being a loser, instead of extolling loser aesthetics, which was the more obvious trend in the early days of DCinside. I interpret the growing sarcasm found in the representation of loser aesthetics as an awakening to the minute details of the ordinary lives in which people feel like they are losers, rather than cynicism declaring the invalidity of loser aesthetics. While the label “Internet freak” freely reflects on features of a poor and unpromising life without formality or constraints, the labels that appeared years after that of Internet freak more intensely and aggressively capture the minute details of such a life. Rancière argues that the revolution starts by changing the existing ways of the distribution of the sensible (2004:9–12). Regarding the effects of ICTs and new Internet culture such as social networking services, Rancière considers technologies as important tools for constituting new forms of solidarity and public communication through which the proletariat can realize that they are the majority, as particularly can be seen in the Arab Spring and the Korean Candlelight rallies. Yet he is also attentive to the romances of technocentered optimism that sees technology itself as having intrinsic power to change a given society even though conditions of the given society and the role of human agents bring about different consequences even as they engage with the same technologies (Yi and Yi 2012). To someone like me who tends to incline to Marshall McLuhan’s argument that “the medium is the message”
ICTs seems to go beyond the status of important tools. They are, rather, actively involved in forming new subjects through whom the potential of technologies will be deployed. The potential of the producing and distributing power of ICTs has formed their users into subjects who produce what they experience into content and share it with anonymous others. With this potential to meet people who have so much spare time because they are not considered competent and competitive, the distribution of the sensible has more of a chance to be changed through the practices that emerges from within the conditions nurtured by those with an abundance of time. This is what enables loser aesthetics and its politics.

However, the self-mocking subjects of DCinside who are affected by neoliberal subjectification embody attributes of neoliberal norms. I discussed above the ways in which Internet freaks sublimate their everyday practices of poor and unpromising lives into asceticism and enlightenment. The ultimate purpose of Internet freaks is depicted as reaching nirvana in both the cartoons *The World of the Freak* and *DC Freak Contest*. Seemingly incomprehensive customs and cultures of Internet freaks acquire meanings because of this ultimate purpose. In his article “The Will to Self-managing, the Will to Freedom,” Dongjin Seo examines the emergence of the self-managing and self-empowering practices of individuals against the backdrop of “the ascendancy of management discourses” (2011:85). Seo argues, building on Michel Foucault’s notion of technology of the self that “Society is not an entity external to the self but a reality inscribed within the self through multiple norms, ideals, and schemes….As a result, it becomes possible to link the individual’s goal of achieving self-advancement with society’s goal of eliminating undesirable traditions, customs, procedures, and institutions” (2011:84–85). The Internet freaks who endeavor to achieve spiritual enlightenment seem to share commonality with self-managing and self-empowering individuals who pursue “the ideals of liberty, happiness, and well-being, as well as realizing material and economic goals” (Seo DJ 2011:86). The explicit difference between them appears to be the pursuit of material and economic goals which the Internet freaks try to transcend, while the unconscious and disciplined bodies of the capitalist society compel them to rush into new posts.

The loser aesthetics of Internet freaks embrace diversity and encourage people to voice their opinions and challenge the notion of neoliberal market fundamentalism. Moreover, they speak loudly, through the publication (excretion in their terms) of numerous posts. It is questionable, however, whether their voices can be heard within the dominant social order, which relates to
distribution of sensible. For example, claiming oneself as a loser turns into a way in which even a loser can accumulate social capital by being an “extraordinary” loser who sheds light on unexplored aspects of loser life and deliberately masters “shoddy styles.” I do not mean that DCinside users have such ambitions as a clear goal, but in some ways, they seek recognition from mainstream media such as TV and newspapers, in addition to popularity within DCinside. Also, like cartoonist Poong Kim, many DCinside users who post their cartoon series to the Cartoon-strip galleries look for recognition and popularity through which they can become a professional cartoonist making a living from practices which may be unpaid voluntary work at the moment. These types of extraordinary losers fulfill the neoliberal ideals of creativity and entrepreneurship in a way similar to which underemployed young adults imagine as well as position themselves as “deserving and productive citizens” having “creative cultural capital” (Song 2009:109–110).

Alican A. Koc, in his ethnography on the predominantly white elite institution of Trinity College at the University of Toronto, positions the self-mockery of ethnic minority groups as a crucial attempt to cultivate “whiteness” through “self-othering” rather than as temporal liberation brought about by a humorous reclamation of negative ethnic stereotypes (2014:34). Similarly, the self-referential mockery of Internet freaks can function as means of entering the mainstream or acquiring normality through their creativity in producing online content. While neoliberalism stereotypes undesirable others by means of names such as “homeless” and “delinquent debtor,” it still encourages these people to empower themselves into self-managing and self-sufficient subjects so that they can play a role of “surplus labor or reserve army to be exploited” and “commodifiable labor power” (Song 2009:21, 96, 98–99,109).

As Alican A. Koc shows through the ways in which “whiteness” reproduces its power through the self-othering of nonwhite students, a perpetuated social fear of being a loser can be a way in which neoliberal norms reinforce themselves through the bodies of undesirable and unsuccessful subjects who might still endeavor to gain the status of being a winner in the future. The dominant power of subjectification, however, cannot fully invalidate the carnivalesque community space of DCinside because this space is constituted not just by inscribing norms within the self but also by coming into contact with other people. The unplanned contact among people brings about unexpected moments of collective work, bursts of laughter, and sudden humorous “enlightenment” (maybe we can see humor itself as enlightenment) as Internet freaks and their
culture emerged in the first place. Can we define the people in constant contact with other “losers” by the same neoliberal norms? Maybe we can, but the long-term consequences will be different between when one has to be responsible for one’s failure and being a loser who is completely alone, isolated from others, and when one can see one’s position self-reflexively and collectively with others who are in similar positions.

6 Absence of Female Characters for Their Own Sake

It is not easy to find female characters among DCinside characters. Female DC freaks are made out of the character prototype of male freaks in *The World of the Freak*. Not one of the five final participants is a woman, but a part-time staff member called “Alba” of DCinside who monitored the contest with Yusik Kim is in *DC Freak Contest*. However, while Yusik Kim is depicted as a character that had experienced enlightenment and nirvana as an Internet freak, the female staff member of DCinside is depicted as acting as an observer rather than being one of the DC freaks herself.

Besides the female Internet freak in Figure 3–4 and the part-time staff member shown in the *DC Freak Contest*, there are other popular female characters on DCinside, such as Sop’it’ia, Ttallyŏ (an abbreviation of the combined word “ttalgi nyŏ” [strawberry girl] in Korean), and Hallyŏ (an abbreviation of the combined word “halnun nyŏ” [licking girl] in Korean). These figures are mostly mocked and made fun of by other DCinside users rather than exist as one of them. Sop’it’ia has been a recurring female character in DCinside since its early days. The original character of Sop’it’ia is a beautiful woman from a Japanese 3D action game titled “Soulcalibur.” A female fan, widely thought to be Japanese, engaged in costume play, mimicking the character, and at one point a picture of her wearing the character’s costume became popular on DCinside. Her picture created a sensation because of her look, which does not necessarily conform to current ideals of beauty (with her prominent teeth and mottled complexion), unlike the original game character, who featured exaggerated characteristics of stereotypical female beauty. DCinside users found that the picture of Sop’it’ia could be very addictive in spite of or perhaps

---

72 I do not present the images of these characters even though they have been popular and widely circulated on DCinside as I cannot be certain that the real people these characters are derived from are aware of and agree with the circulation of their images.
because of its somewhat grotesque aura. Sop’it’ia became an image that was used routinely in different posts, particularly composite images of DCinside.

Ttalryŏ and Hlennyyŏ are similar to Sop’it’ia in terms of the somewhat bizarre sexuality they present. Ttalryŏ puts on a comically exaggerated erotic pose while fully clothed in a farmer’s field, tilting her head, closing her eyes, and opening her mouth as if she is moaning sexually. She holds a strawberry in each hand near her breast as though they are her nipples. Hlennyyŏ’s photo image shows her with a big smile, her eyes half closed, mouth halfway open, and her tongue stuck out while posing as if she was holding a penis-shaped rock jutting out from a mountain in the background. Both of them are depicted as humorous sexual figures. Their pictures were captured by DCinside users somewhere on the Internet and started being used in many posts as an essential component for the composition of images. These posts make fun of these funny, sexualized female figures.

Ttalryŏ and Hlennyyŏ can bring about laughter, but we should ask who laughs, who are laughed at, and who are healed by the laughter, as Wayne C. Booth asks with regards to Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and His Carnivalesque World* (Booth 1982:63). Bakhtin defends Rabelais and his world from the accusation of sexism by claiming that the image of women is portrayed at the level of ambivalent laughter, because she debases and destroys but, at the same time, is the principle who gives birth from the death and destruction of the carnival (1984:240–241). It does not mean, however, that DCinside is a boys’ club. Rather, there have been female DCinside users since the very beginning. Then, how do female DCinside users find meaning in the context of a male-dominated culture like that of DCinside? Does this culture make female users laugh, too? What kind of laugh is it? The next chapter addresses these questions through the laughter evoked by a character of ambiguous gender, Nunhwa, from the Lee Joon Gi gallery.
Chapter 4
“Feel Free to Hit on Lee Joon Gi as Much as You Want”: Playing with Gender Norms among Korean Fans in Online Space

This chapter keys into the Lee Joon Gi gallery (hereafter, “Joon gallery,” a shortened form of the gallery name given by its users, who are often called “Joon gallers”) on DCinside, a gallery considered to be particularly outrageous by its users as they, via self-generated, gender ambiguous characters called “Nunhwa,” engage in a range of playful, coercive, and even violent sexual encounters with Lee’s online effigies. The Joon gallery, an interest group or fan community oriented towards Lee, was created on DCinside based on a huge volume of requests from DCinside users who became fans of Lee in early 2006, about a month after the premiere of the film *The King and the Clown*. The posts that resulted, particularly the parodic images (paerŏdi tchal) produced in the Joon gallery, became popular on DCinside as well as the Korean Internet at large because of the characteristic wit and humor for which DCinside had become famous (Yang MK 2006).

I encountered a range of Lee-related posts, particularly those with Nunhwa images from the Joon gallery, while I was “doing surplus” (ingyŏjil) on the Internet in late 2006. I traced the images to their origin in order to see more examples, eventually becoming Joon gallery lurker. As distinguishing features of Joon gallery fandom, I examine two things in the course of this chapter: first, the character “Nunhwa,” created by Joon gallers to represent themselves; and second, the aggressive sexual expressions of the posts featuring Lee and the Nunhwa character together. I interpret the Nunhwa character as a collective identity that Joon gallers create by means of which to express self-referential mockery. This character represents the Joon gallery-based fans of Lee as a figure that is anti-aspirational, particularly in terms of femininity and physical charms. The fandom of the Joon gallery, while infused with sexuality, like other examples of fandom and current popular culture in South Korea, is unlike those examples in that Joon gallers do not appear as sexy and beautiful figures. Rather, they depict themselves as grotesque, unpleasant, and “pathetic.” An analysis of the Nunhwa character shows the discontent and transgression of fans against gender ideologies that push them to be attractive sexual subjects. Joon gallers question and challenge gender ideologies through their transgression of different gender norms based on hegemonic conventions of masculinity and femininity. I articulate the practices of Lee
Joon Gi fans in the Joon gallery in relation to my discussions about DCinside as a carnivalesque space and its loser aesthetics, as elaborated in chapter 3.

The first section of this chapter examines how fans of popular culture have been represented, gendered, and looked down upon both in the context of DCinside and in South Korea more generally, and positions the Joon gallery against this atmosphere. Throughout its history, contempt for fandom and fans has been related to biased representations and the relatively low positions of women as represented in popular culture, which can be situated in a broader context of the gendered modernity of South Korea. While male fandom has grown since the emergence of girl idol groups in the end of 1990s, contempt for fans still mainly targets mindless female fans. Joon gallers challenge existing view on fans by creating a character called “Nunhwa,” their online effigy that transgresses the stereotype of female fans. I pay attention, however, to the way in which fandom continues to be problematic, including how certain pejorative views on fandom recursively affect fans, like the Joon gallers, who apply the critiques of fandom to other fans by differentiating themselves from others.

The second section analyzes the character “Nunhwa” by focusing on the ways in which Joon gallers make use of the self-mocking styles of DCinside to create their own “DCinside-like” character. By analyzing the style and attitudes of the Nunhwa character, I examine the way in which Joon gallers resist and challenge femininity and gender expectations. The creation of a collective identity enables individual Joon gallers to reflect on and reimagine conventional gender norms more actively. The third section explores the sexual expressions of Joon gallers toward Lee. Sexuality has become important for Koreans in fulfilling their self-realization since democratization in 1987 and the expansion of popular culture in South Korea that took place in its aftermath. Sexuality expressed in the posts of the Joon gallery resonates with this broader social context but, at the same time, transgresses gender ideology and the expected norms for women as sexual subjects by aggressively pursuing their sexual desires even to the level of violence. Joon gallers distort and deconstruct male-dominant power in sexual relations by reverting and confusing gender norms. In short, I unpack the complexity of the play with sexuality that takes place within the context of Joon gallery fandom and reaffirm DCinside as a carnivalesque space that offers its users possibilities in terms of testing and reconfiguring hegemonic conventions, including—as the particular focus of this chapter—gender norms.
1 Contempt for Fandom and the Emergence of the Joon gallery

To examine the culture of the Joon gallery, it is important to situate the gallery within the broader contexts of Korean fandom in popular culture. Korean fandom of popular culture has been dominated by women and looked down upon throughout its history, which includes the last several decades. Expressions of this kind of contempt for fans also interpenetrate DCinside. I begin this section with another episode of the cartoon *The World of the Freak*, a series which I introduced in the previous chapter. This cartoon episode clearly depicts the way in which fans are looked down upon by non-fan DCinside users. My discussions about the cartoon episode are followed by a historicization of the formation of Korean fandom in relation to the gendered modernity of South Korea and the emergence of sexuality as a recent mode of subjectification.

The cartoon series *The World of the Freak* features a few episodes relating to fans of popular culture. The episode “Public Enemy” (Konggong ŭi chŏk) starts with a scene in which cartoon characters representing DC freaks are standing face to face with an anti-DC freak group. Both sides include only male participants, much like most of the characters introduced in chapter 3, who are also mainly males. A group of girls in school uniforms approach the anti-DC freak group and asks whether they can join the anti-movement. The group of girls and the male anti-DC freak group share their anger towards the DC freaks. The girls say, “You cannot even imagine how badly oppa (lit. “big brother,” can also mean any close male relation of a female; here the meaning is similar to “idol,” connoting that the girls hold someone in high regard to the extent of worshipping him) has been hurt by DC freaks.” The male anti-DC freaks feel that something is wrong and ask the girls, “Wait a second… What big brother?” The girls say, “Don’t you know our brother? He is amazing. He is better than the Beatles at rapping. He is better than Led Zeppelin at dancing.” The atmosphere suddenly becomes awkward and cold. Both sides, the DC freaks and the anti-group, discover that these girls are idol fans. The male anti-group becomes angry and starts to beat up the girl fans. The DC freaks try to stop the angry anti-group men, even though they are sympathetic to their anger, saying “Hey, cool down! Even we are

73 The previous episode of this cartoon series introduces why anti-DC freak groups formed, explaining this as due to the exclusiveness of DC freaks, their unkindness to new users of DCinside, and the typical maliciousness of their posts and comments.
staying calm.” The solidarity between the DC freaks and anti-DC freaks emerges while the girl fans are crying and running away. DC freaks and anti-DC freaks seem to form a strong bond in their mutual disgust at the fans.

Figure 4–1. Excerpted Cuts from Episode “Public Enemy” of The World of the Freak (Source: The Cartoon-strip gallery via the Way of Nirvana gallery)

As the cartoon episode shows, girl fans are ganged up on and assaulted not just because they are seen as being slavishly devoted to their idol “big brother,” but because their devotion is based on ignorance as they fail to display even basic knowledge of popular music. They are understood to be contemptible because they are mindlessly devoted to a pop culture phenomenon while being, in fact, unknowledgeable and unrehearsed about popular culture.

Fandom scholars have argued that fans actively participate in popular culture, rather than simply consuming cultural products, and that fans actively select from “the repertoire of mass-produced and mass-distributed entertainment certain performers, narratives or genres” (Fiske 1992:30). In turn, the process of fan selection itself takes “particular forms of cultural production, aesthetic traditions and practices” (Jenkins 1992:285). By challenging the authority of the media industry and asserting themselves as cultural producers, fans have the potential to empower themselves to disrupt and reinterpret dominant gender norms and hierarchies. Female fans in particular have thrived in cultivating their own gender-segregated communities set apart from the cultures of sexism and misogyny commonly found in male-dominated fan forums. South Korean cultures of fandom have distinctively and historically been female-dominated, beginning from the fans of silent film narrators and women’s classical opera (yŏsŏng kukkŭk) to pop singers, basketball

74 Made clear by their misidentification of the Beatles as rappers and of Led Zeppelin as good dancers.
players, and dance-oriented singing groups known as “idol groups” (Kim HP’ 2012:165–166, 168–170, 179–182).

Despite their loyalty and commitment, female fans have also been widely denigrated and assigned such contemptuous nicknames as “troops for a big brother” (oppa pudaε) or more recently, “girl following a big brother” (ppasuni)⁷⁶ (Kimi and Pak 2001; Kim HP’ 2012; Yi MH 2013). They are the terms which describe the activities of these fans, that is, heartily cheering for their idols, but which are also critical, jeering fans as blind followers of popular culture and even as social deviants.⁷⁷ Female fans have been affected but not intimidated by the harsh criticism of public discourse.⁷⁸ Instead, they have carried on with their fervent appreciation for their idols, while in the meantime also reappropriating the condescending labels that are frequently used to criticize them in asserting their fan identities (Song YO 1995). In other words, discourses of female fandom carry dual and contradictory connotations: actively devoted to a cause and passive in blind pursuit, simultaneously productive and unproductive.

I address the phenomena of female-dominated fandom within the context of a broader literature on gendered space and the gendered modernity of South Korea. Feminist scholars have examined the different ways Korean women and men have been “doing” modernity in post-War South Korea (Kendall 2002:2). Women have played particular roles and narrated their lived experience under conditions of compressed modernity using certain rhetorics such as melodramatic conventions (Abelmann 2003:23, 281–282). Korean women have stayed primarily in the domestic/private domain over the course of several generations, while on the other hand, Korean men have been the primary occupants of the public domain. Haejoang Cho argues that this gendered space has produced different types of women subjects generation-by-generation: motherly women, who were generally born in the 1920s and who were primarily devoted to their children; the aggressive modern wives born in the 1920s and who were primarily devoted to their families. Other fans try to change such biased criticism by engaging in social activism. See Minhŭi Yi (2013:96-100, 103-105); Sŭng-yŏn Kimi and Chŏng-ae Pak (2001:161-167).

⁷⁵ Professional baseball, which appeared in the early of 1980s, can be considered an exception to the female-dominated nature of fandom. Male-fandom of popular culture has recently grown very quickly, particularly with the popularity of girl idol groups such as Girls’ Generation (Sonyŏ Sidae). The phenomena of “uncle fans” show the changing and expanding geography of Korean fandom. Uncle fans are males in their thirties and forties who are active fans of girl idol groups. See Youn-gon Kang (2011:23-24) for a case study on uncle fans.

⁷⁶ Ppasuni originally meant “bar girl,” in other words, a prostitute working at places of adult entertainment. This label started to indicate girl fans as of the middle of the 1990s based on the similar pronunciations of the two words “o-ppa” and “ppa-suni” (Kimi and Pak 2001:159).

⁷⁷ See Hwanp’yo Kim 2012, 2013a, 2013b, and 2013c for data on how Korean journalism has depicted female fans in a degrading manner in the past.

⁷⁸ Fans have had to deal with harsh criticism regarding their fervent fandom. Some fans try not to reveal their fan identities in those parts of their lives not related to their fan activities, such as in the workplace and at school, or to their families. Other fans try to change such biased criticism by engaging in social activism. See Minhŭi Yi (2013:96-100, 103-105); Sŭng-yŏn Kimi and Chŏng-ae Pak (2001:161-167).
during South Korea’s period of rapid industrialization and economic growth; and finally, the
“daughter’s generation” who embody consumer culture and explore sexuality as a means of self-
realization (2002:168–169). Nelson confirms that women in recent years have been primary
agents of consumption, and that they have also often become targets of social criticism relating

Female-dominated fandom can be situated in the context of historical formations of gendered
space and gendered modernity of South Korea in the sense that Korean female fans have created
a new domain which is located in-between the private domain (personal hobby) and the public
domain (popular music scene). Despite attempts to denigrate and regulate women subjects who
appear as fans, fandom enables them to create their communities, cultural production, aesthetic
values and practices. Conventional gender norms are tested, played with, and redefined in this
process. Existing scholarly work on gendered space and gendered modernity hints at the
historical contingency of femininity, revealing a shifting matrix within which fans of Lee, my
research object, can be situated.

More specifically, these fans seem to be gesturing towards the emergence of the sexy girl, a
relatively recent gendered subjectivity brought about by rising consumer culture. As Cho points
out, in the early 1990s, sexuality appeared as a way in which women could achieve self-
realization and obtain power (2002:182–186). The practice of sexuality, of becoming sexy and
attractive women, reinforces gender ideology through the process of body making (Lee YJ
2000:28–30). While pervasive patriarchal ideology emphasizing women’s beauty is repressive,
this ideology is successfully realized through embodiment in the sense that women themselves
yearn to be sexy and attractive individuals and find self-realization in the process of becoming so.
Fandom, in relation to this broader social context, also becomes an arena where gender ideology
and women’s sexual desires are contested and negotiated. The formation of women’s fandom
during the World Cup 2002 shows how women fans engaged in the male dominant culture of
football games by participating in expressions of patriotism. Expressing sexual desire for male
football players was not criticized because female fans represented themselves as patriotic
In terms of fandom and sexuality, fanfic (short for fanfiction) has also consisted of women-centered fan activities and has fulfilled the sexual fantasies of female fans. Fanfic generally means “fiction written about characters or set in a world previously created by somebody else” (Hodges and Richmond 2011). Korean fanfic culture has been shaped through interactions with broader fan cultural phenomena outside Korea. In western countries, fanfic has different subgenres; among them, “relationship-centred fiction” is, in particular, written and read by women. The relationships of fanfic are based on different pairings of different genders, such as “male/female pairings of characters (het),” and “male/male or female/female pairings” (slash) (Bury 2005:2–3). Male/male slash is the most popular sub-genre in terms of relationship-centered fanfic. A similar subculture has developed under a different name in Asia. Yaoi, also known as BL (Boys Love), emerged around 1979 and is an acronym for three Japanese words, theme-less (yamanashi), topic-less (ochinashi), and meaningless (iminashi). It was a contemptuous label indicating male or female homosexual stories which were seen as lacking in quality as art or literature. Yaoi became a popular genre, with a loyal readership (Yi MH 2013:67–68). Other versions of slash in Asia stemmed from Yaoi. While Yaoi usually refers to original works involving same-sex relationships, (slash) fanfic is written based on existing characters and settings.

In Korea, fanfic dealing with boys’ love of boy idol groups is the most prominent kind. Female fans writing and reading male/male slash fanfic, which depicts imaginary romantic relationships between two male idols, can feel free to play with conventional gender roles and ideologies in the context of fanfic, since female characters who might disrupt female fans’ fantasies with their typical gender roles do not appear in such fanfic. In addition, man on man relations enable female fans to enjoy sexual fantasies that are prohibited to women, especially young women, without needing to feel guilty (Kim HS and Kim MJ 2004:350–351). Lee’s fandom on DCinside shares common ground with these experiences with fanfic in that they constitute experiments with sexuality via the practices and possibilities immanent within the fantasies of fandom.

The Joon gallery appeared against the backdrop of an expanding constellation of Korean popular culture and fandom, which took place in parallel with a boom of boy/girl idol groups that began in the middle of the 1990s. The latter eventually grew into a world-wide phenomenon, and an associated rapid development of the Korean media industry, including the production and wide circulation of movies and TV dramas. Lee’s own fandom exploded after the box-office record-
breaking success of the film *The King and the Clown*, in which Lee starred as Konggil, a jester who is a female impersonator in a troupe of entertainers.⁷⁹ Lee attained his reputation as an actor through his performance in this film, his androgynous appeal lending him the nickname “kkonminam,” making him a leading figure of the kkonminam trend in South Korea. The term “kkonminam” means “good-looking man displaying feminine qualities in his appearance” (Shin JY2013:98). The popularity of kkonminam shows a changing vision of male beauty from a tough body and look to a softer masculinity concerned with style and fashion (Shin JY2013:98). As Jeeyoung Shin points out, Lee’s feminine masculinity appealed a great deal to women, a similar phenomenon of which I confirmed through my field research. Certain women “who counter traditional values by being active, aggressive, and independent” find kkonmina appealing as objects of desire (2013:99). Lee’s fandom is thus an arena in which we can observe the dynamics of new modes of man/womanhood and sexuality.

What made the Joon gallery different from many of the other Lee fan clubs that emerged along with his fame is the DCinside culture from which the Joon gallery sprang, and upon which Joon gallers draw much of the significations that are created and circulated in the gallery. The DCinside culture has a strong influence on the styles of the Joon gallery, creating an atmosphere that signifies that it is a DCinside gallery. The sexual nuances and deliberately shoddy styles of the posts demonstrate the uniqueness of the Joon gallery. Joon gallers, those Lee fans who interact in the Joon gallery, while they strongly assert themselves as sexual subjects, are anti-aspirational in terms of wanting and trying to become sexy and beautiful women. Rather, they make their bodies according to their own unique aesthetics, critiquing and mocking the norms of feminine beauty that are preached by consumer culture. The resistance against the pressures of feminine beauty through the activities of Lee’s fans demonstrates the ways by which new gender norms are constituted via contestation and negotiation.

Joon gallers are well aware and proud of the uniqueness of the culture of the Joon gallery, but their awareness and pride result in differentiating themselves from other fans of Lee, with a tendency of applying critiques of fandom to other fans. Most of my interviewees from the Joon gallery admitted that they were “fanatical” fans of Lee (they called themselves “Joon ppa” a short form of ppasuni of Lee Joon Gi). They also called themselves “tŏkhu,” which is a

---

⁷⁹ The movie is an adaptation of the play *Yi* (Kim, T’U 2000), which was based on a real character, Yeonsangun, the tenth king of the Choson Dynasty, who reigned from 1494 to 1506.
Koreanization of the Japanese term “otaku,” meaning serious fans of different genres of popular culture. In calling themselves Joon ppa and tŏkhu, in claiming these terms for themselves, they fought against widely held pejorative views relating to fandom. The kind of fans that they were, however, was different from other kinds of fans. Most of my interviewees from the Joon gallery talked about how uncomfortable they felt in other fan clubs of Lee because of their feminine and polite culture. They had a lot of fun when they found the Joon gallery. Baby-chick, for instance, said, “The Joon gallery is not a fan club which is blind with love for Joon Gi. They only worship Joon Gi. Even though the Joon gallery is a group of Joon ppa who are tchijiri and idiots, still we are different from them. It is hard to explain, but we have our own rules.” In my interviewees’ explanations, other fans of Lee gathering in places other than the Joon gallery, are depicted as blind worshippers of Lee; Joon gallers, on the other hand, are aware enough to be able to create their own unique culture. To identify themselves as different kind of fans who are still fans but not ignorant or mindless, Joon gallers are in danger of recursively applying the same pejorative view of fans to other fans, which can reinforce such views, views which can eventually come back to them as well.

2 Nunhwa and Her Mask: Characterizing Joon Gallers, Characterizing Gender

On DCinside, creating certain characters who embody the DCinside ethos is important. The characters are not all the same; they can connote different sorts of DCinside users, such as the Internet freak (p’yein), haehor, otŭkhu, and ingyŏ, characters I touched on in chapter 3. What is at stake is which one expresses a DC-like spirit the best because it shows who the really seasoned DCinside users are and who has really mastered loser aesthetics. One of the likely reasons why the Lee Joon Gi gallery was an immediate and rapid success was that Joon gallers succeeded in creating their own unique character, Nunhwa, a character which came to stand in for the Joon gallers. What I accomplish in this section is to delineate the key characteristics of Nunhwa, beginning to draw, here, on Bakhtin’s notion of “the grotesque.” In piecing together a character of thorough gender ambiguity, particularly by means of reappropriating the mask used by Lee in the popular film, The King and the Clown, Jun gallery users create a grotesque figure
that itself makes fun of and calls into question the ontological status of frequently articulated, normative gender binaries.

In the beginning, the label “Nunhwa” did not exist in referring to Joon gallers. As other DCinside users did in other galleries, Joon gallers called each other “hyong.” Hyong is most often translated into English as “older brother,” but is used not only in the strict sense of older male sibling, but is used by younger men with reference to men older than they more generally. The frequently used variation, hyong a, is used in an ironic way by users, in that it adds an element of informality to a term which is conventionally meant to express respect to a superior. Joon gallers gradually developed their own character, Nunhwa. The label “Nunhwa” means “older sister” and is intended as a modification of the original Korean word “nuna,” which makes the sound comical. Different from traditional devaluations of femininity based on a woman’s age, by using the label “Nunhwa,” Joon gallers benefit from “being older” to guarantee their authority to express anything they want, including sexual desire.

The Nunhwa character was created based on the mask that Lee wore in The King and the Clown. The mask plays an important role in creating a collective persona for Joon gallers by offering a concrete visual of the Nunhwa character. This mask is familiar to Korean audiences as a popular traditional Korean mask used in a dance called t’alch’um (mask dance). Most traditional Korean mask dance-dramas share common elements and themes, including blessings for the audience and dance performances, satires of apostate monks (making fun of their sexual temptations), insults regarding the incompetent and corrupt ruling classes (principally yangban) from pre-modern historical periods, and love triangles, typically among an old man, his wife, and a concubine. The mask dance-dramas are played at Korean traditional festivals such as Dano, a festival in which prayers are conducted for a good harvest after the transplanting of rice seedlings, which traditionally takes place on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month. The mask Lee wore in the movie is called a “Pune t’al,” a mask that represents the character of a young mistress of a yangban. Different from masks of other characters of the mask dance-drama, the Pune t’al barely has nostrils through which to breathe and has only a very small hole for a mouth. The result is that Pune can only say two words, “po-ok” (yes) and “pok” (no), sounds she makes principally when a yangban makes sexual advances towards her. It reflects a social order in which women could not speak or even breathe freely (Hahoe ta’l Kongbang; Chun kael tanŏjang).
Despite wearing the same mask as Pune, Konggil, the character which Lee played in The King and the Clown, was not depicted as a silent character. Instead, he satirized gender hierarchies and the pretentiousness of yangban explicitly and loudly. Konggil’s reappropriation of the traditional mask-dance is reappropriated again by Joon gallers themselves, but in their case, not to satirize men’s corruptive sexual desires but to assert gender ambiguous characters as active, aggressive, and independent sexual subjects, not as objects of desire. The mask, which was traditionally used to satirize gender discrimination, is reappropriated by The King and the Clown, and then again by Joon gallers, who play with gender norms and counter traditional values.

This mask plays the role of giving a particular face to Joon gallers since they always use the same one in their posts. In other words, the mask is how Nunhwa look, it is their face. They are not just anonymous fans without a face, like those from other fan clubs, but fans with a particular face indicating that they are Lee’s fans from the Joon gallery on DCinside.com. Having a particular face helps them to create their collective identity as Nunhwa. This identity, however, constitutes a parody from the very beginning. The mask is borrowed from traditional Korean mask dances, which are works full of humor and satire against a social order which forced women to follow conventional gender norms and accept lower status’ as part of existing gender hierarchies. The mask revealed the contradictions and ironies that women experienced hundreds of years ago, and is revived to play a similar role in the present.

Figure 4–2. Still cut from The King and the Clown:
Joon Gi Lee (right) acts as a female character in a play which is performed in a movie. The mask on his head is a mask from a *t’alch’um* dance. (Source: Naver Movie)

Following the original functions of this mask, the character that Nunhwa in the Joon gallery creates through the use of the mask is satirical in a way that points to the grotesque nature of the mask. Much as other characters representing DCinside users such as Internet freak, haehor, otaku, and ingyŏ borrow and make use of images of social losers, the character Nunhwa also uses the same strategy in adopting this image of a character who was consistently degraded by the powerful in the context of the *t’alchum* plays. What the Nunhwa character furthers, rather than just a revealing of a subject position degraded by power, is a reappropriation of the very position as its mask, its particular face of collectivity. As Bakhtin aptly points out, the mask is related to “the joy of change and reincarnation, with gay relativity and with the merry negation of uniformity and similarity” (1984:39). The mask thus enables the violation of existing boundaries, making a mockery of these boundaries. The Nunhwa mask plays a double role: on the one hand, it enjoys the joy of change of the kind that Bakhtin points out; on the other, it demonstrates a critique of women’s position, one degraded by power, which was the case two centuries ago and still is in the present.

Figure 4–3 is an example of some of the images posted at the Joon gallery. The characters with name tags in this image are well-known Joon gallers. This image makes fun of the popularity and charisma of one of them, Kkūbyōlsam, as well as her fanatic followers, identified in the image as Monik’a, Killyang, and Chio, who are all wearing the Nunhwa mask, and Chunya and Nell, who here are wearing horse faces. Four Nunhwa appear as if they are famous rock stars, with a group of fans wearing horse faces behind them. These Nunhwa-rock-stars wear working boots, jumpers or cardigans, and flower-print pants named “*momppe,*” articles of clothing from different social contexts put together to clash with one another. The mismatch gives the outfit of the Nunhwa-rock-star a deliberately kitschy look. This marks one of the ways that Joon gallers distinguish themselves from other fans, despite positioning themselves as fans themselves: by demonstrating an ease with culture and pop culture, a domain so familiar to them that they are able to “play” with it in the manner of these kitschy looks. This contrasts with the superficial understanding of (pop) culture by “mainstream” fans, as represented, for example, in the *World of the Freak* strip above, at Figure 4–1.
Joon gallers were also much more adept at understanding the ethics and practices, or more basically, the ins-and-outs of how to behave on DCinside than mainstream fans. This made the latter the subject of pranks on the part of the Joon gallers. No-rain, in keeping with her nickname “capillary,” as Madeleine calls her, indicating her social reach into a great many extremities of the Internet community, hung out with the gallers who appear in Figure 4–3. No-rain recalled about them, in explaining the picture at Figure 4–3, that:

Kkūbyŏlsam was one of the active Joon gallers. She is a tough gal and was not even concerned about whether her real name was revealed. You know, Joon Gi had his Cyworld Mini-hompi. Cyworld is not as popular now as it was back in the day. It was a really big deal when Joon Gi opened his Mini-hompi at that time. You could tell whether Joon Gi was online by new updates. So, many of his fans, especially from his official fan club, were hanging out on Cyworld all the time. The Joon gallers were kinda pissed off by some of the fans from the official fan club because they reposted posts from the Joon gallery without saying that they were from the Joon gallery. Some Joon gallers decided to occupy Joon Gi’s Cyworld in a DCinside style. They resided there, “papering” (tobae) the bulletin boards so that posts written by other fans were pushed back onto past pages as soon as they posted, even though they were new posts. No chance that Joon Gi would see them. Lol. In contrast to DCinside, Cyworld has been based on membership so that your real names are revealed when you post. There were many Joon gallers who did not want their off-line identifications to be revealed. But Kkūbyŏlsam was not so concerned. So, she totally occupied Joon Gi’s Mini-hompi, which impressed the other Joon gallers. Kkūbyŏlsam was quite the galler. She attacked other DC galleries such as the StarCraft gallery and the “Darkest Slum” gallery (Makchang kellŏri), which often attacked the Joon
gallery. Some other gallers joined kūbyŏlsam [in “attacking” other galleries], and it became a regular hangout activity. Then, other gallers started calling them “Kkūbyŏlsam and Kids,” like a parody of “Seo Taiji and Boys.” Many funny images about Kkūbyŏlsam and Kids were posted. The Momppe and horse masks were used for those images because Kkūbyŏlsam and Kids were often joking that they should gather together off-line, and that they should wear momppe and horse masks when they met. Why momppe and horse masks? I don’t know, man. Lol.

It is not unusual that Joon gallers do or create something funny without clear or explicit intentions. Layers of accumulated connotations and contexts are what make those funny things funny. The horse mask, even though No-rain couldn’t think of a clear reason why it was funny, was probably chosen in accordance with the growing world popularity of horse masks as an Internet meme (Dewey 2014). According to Dewey’s brief history of the horse mask, the mask became popular through different genres of popular culture such as Japanese anime and North American Halloween customs. The horse mask has been considered “uncanny,” which became a source of fun. The fun that arises from the unpleasant feeling of being “uncanny” can be related to an aesthetic act which engages in a configuration of experience that is involved in determining what is appropriate to be seen in the public.

The momkke pants are a symbol of unsophisticated clothes that are known for their loud prints and outdated designs. They are multipurpose pants that Korean women wear in the countryside, who use them for everything from home wear to working clothes and even sleep wear. They are very comfortable but not usually compatible with being fashionable because of their gaudy designs, prints, and colors. The main wearers of momppe are “ajumma,” a term literally meaning “a married woman.” The label “ajumma” has certain negative connotations connected to married women, who are mostly mothers, and therefore not considered feminine, young, or attractive any more (Kim ŬCh 1998:306–309). The negative connotations of ajumma might be considered rather cruel, considering that the reason why Korean ajumma appear as they do is because they have been expected to continually sacrifice themselves in their roles as mothers and wives. Most ajumma do not have enough time and money to spend on themselves due to overwhelming housework and childcare responsibilities, as well as strained living circumstances. The momkke pants also have similar connotations in relation to their principle wearers.

Despite such negative connotations, ajumma can do many things that they want to do without attracting the attention of other people, since they cannot be looked down upon more than they
already are. While they have to swallow insults, ajumma can say what they want to say, eat as much as they want without watching their weight, bargain aggressively at markets, and rush into empty seats in public transportation such as busses and subways to make themselves comfortable on a trip. Being an undesirable subject in the way of ajumma can mean being stigmatized, but can simultaneously function as an emancipation from the troublesome gender expectations and customs of cultured people. Ajumma transgress sexualized power in the sense that they do not fit conventional notions of femininity at all.

Attempts to reinterpret and empower ajumma have been made in South Korea since the late 1990s. The contempt regarding ajumma is based on a social value system that considers women as the other of male subjects, and evaluates attractive young women as more valuable in terms of being sexually desirable. No longer young and attractive, ajumma are not viewed as valuable in comparison to young, unmarried, attractive women in this social value system. This affects women’s lives stereotypically, ideologically, and in practice. Feminist activists have challenged dominant discourses that look down on ajumma, and have tried to empower ajumma by reinterpreting their characteristics as positive, as they are. Women are desexualized as they become older. Feminist scholars have reinterpreted women’s aging, such as when one becomes ajumma, in terms of resistance against the patriarchal order in terms of the way women desexualize power in the process (Kim ŬS 2003:188, 191–192). Activism regarding ajumma has carried on in various forms such as published books, web journals for solidarity among ajumma, workshops, and festivals (Chumm net; Yi SK: 2001). This politics of ajumma has empowered women called ajumma by using the very name which has, in the past, been so often used in a derogatory way.

Nunhwa who appear wearing momppe self-consciously elicit all of the above connections in this image, which resonate further with the mask that the momppe are worn with. The Nunhwa’s ajumma-like outfits in a sense set the Nunhwa free such that they can do whatever they want, free from social conventions, from being silly to cursing and being blunt and even being offensive to other people. Nunhwa in momppe deploy a similar politics to ajumma in order to challenge social conventions. They are confident in their attitude and could care less about contemptuous social stigmatization. They make use of the stigmatized style of ajumma to create a space where they can be free from what other people think. The contrast between their outfits and confident postures are what make the character Nunhwa rebellious. While the mask became
known as the “Nunhwa mask” by Joon gallers, as well as DCinside users out of the Joon gallery, the character Nunhwa came to acquire a notorious reputation, referred to by means of terms such as “hardcore” or as “scary sisters,” since many of the posts of Joon gallery included harshness, unfriendliness, bluntness, and sexually nuanced expressions, as well as androgeneity.

Even though many Joon gallers know each other in person in the offline world, it is still correct to assume that they do not know exactly who are sitting behind the computers unless the person takes off their online masquerade. Joon gallers compose of a public which is based on stranger sociability and different levels of attention: these include the unknown lurker skipping through posts (mere attention) to someone like Beef-bone-broth using her surplus power to discriminate gems of digital material from the hundred million pebbles that make up the Internet at large (combination of mere and intensive attention). The strangers composing Joon gallers as a public are not addressed just as being anybody. They are “socially marked by their participation in this kind of discourse” (the “kind of discourse” here being the loser aesthetics of DCinside and the hardcore style of the Joon gallery) as Warner describes in considering what constitutes counterpublic discourse (2002:120). Joon gallers are willing to speak in a way that violates gender norms, and enter into such practices at their own risk. They mark themselves off against a dominant public of normative gender ideology and bring about conflicts “not just to ideas or policy questions but to the speech genres and modes of address that constitute the public or to the hierarchy among media” (119). Joon gallers’ multimedia posts, including the creation of the Nunhwa mask, can be read as a series of attempts to “supply different ways of imagining stranger sociability and its reflexivity” (Warner 2002:122) while constituting themselves into a queer counterpublic.

Joon gallers also constitute a queer public in the sense that Nunhwa are mysterious in terms of gender. They can possibly be understood as taking up the position of a queer subjectivity. In the position of queer, the Nunhwa become defiant characters that trouble gender norms, performing contested aspects of different genders. The lines between femininity and masculinity blur because Nunhwa deploy and play with different aspects of femininity and masculinity. That is why they are “scary” but, at the same time liberating for Joon gallers. Parodies of Nunhwa on the Joon gallery have similar effects to those of Judith Butler’s concept of gender parody. Butler argues that there is a subversive laughter that can be brought about by the pastiche-effect of parodic practices, which can “have the effect of proliferating gender configurations, destabilizing
substantive identity, and depriving the naturalizing narratives of compulsory heterosexuality of their central protagonist: ‘man’ and ‘woman’” (Butler 1990:146).

Feminist scholars point out that Butler’s notion of performative identity may result in promoting bourgeois humanist individuality (Hennessy 2000; McElhinny 2003). Rosemary Hennessy argues that in Butler’s arguments, the “postmodern subject is severed from the collective historical processes and struggles through which identities are produced and circulate” (2000:121–121). Bonnie McElhinny also problematizes Butler’s concepts, as they remain “abstract rather than historically or socially precise” (2003:32). McElhinny continues, questioning the “limited range of activities, including play activities, movies, masquerades” in which gender can be so malleable. She argues that focusing only on this kind of situation “diverts focus from continuing patterns of exclusion, subordination, normalization, and discrimination” (2003:31).

By historicizing the emergence of the Lee Joon Gi gallery and its fandom and focusing on the collectivity found in practices of Joon gallers, I still find the concept of gender performativity to be effective in terms of assessing the political engagement in gender ideology as well as individuality of Joon gallery discourse and practice. While the subversive bodily acts of Joon gallers do not explicitly reveal material inequities, they imply discontent about gender ideologies, which Hennessy also points out offers individuals an imaginary relationship to the material inequities they live (2000:19). Performative identities play a role in refracting such imaginary relationships and preventing individuals from accepting them as natural and seamless, which eventually contributes to clarification of historical processes. The increasing influence of online space, particularly the increasing tendency that the off-line world (the real and physical world) is mediated by and connected to the online world more closely, also expands the influence of this limited range of activities. As I discussed in chapter 3, it is worth thinking about the impact of online space, which is not a temporary space (like the carnival) but exists consistently and is always accessible. The gender performativity that the Nunhwa conduct may enable Joon gallers to consistently reflect on gender norms, including those that subjectify people into “men” and “women.”

When the gender performativity of Nunhwa is conducted through the lens of loser aesthetics, it also resonates with Bakhtin’s concept of the “grotesque body.” Grotesque body images are
important for Bakhtin in interpreting the carnival and its politics because its “negation and degradation” play a role in challenging modern canons and presenting a contradictory and “double-faced fullness of life” (1984:26, 62). The Nunhwa character recasts Bakhtin’s concept of the “grotesque body” in terms of self-degradation as a means of challenging repressive gender ideologies and revealing a fullness of life beyond that ideology. Nunhwa’s grotesque body becomes that of a protagonist who constructs DCinside into a carnivalesque space, one where gender ambiguous characters mock and challenge norms, patriarchal norms in particular.

How this consistent carnivalesque space of Joon gallery engages in issues relating to the off-line world is, however, still questionable. While they effectively construct the collective identity of the Nunhwa by giving the character a particular face, Joon gallers use the Nunhwa mask as an effective tool to masquerade their offline identities. This can be usefully considered as a phenomenon similar to that of “il-k’o.” Il-k’o is short for the expression “ilbanin k’osp’üre.” The term “k’osp’üre” (cosplay) is short for the Japanese compound word “k’ostyum p’üllei” (costume play), which is costume role play related to subcultures such as manga, animation, and comic books. Ilbanin means ordinary people. Il-k’o is thus a kind of reversed practice of costume play indicating that participants perform their normative identities in the real world while they consider other identities like Joon gallers or Nunhwa in online space as their more authentic personhood. Il-k’o started to be used in fan communities and became a popular term used among online users who masquerade their online personas in the off-line world. As the phenomenon of il-ko shows, Joon gallers seem to hesitate to more actively challenge social expectations of gender norms in their offline lives. The result may be that their powerful online persona based on collective identity and community activities enhance “individualized notions of self” in the off-line world much in the way that McElhinny questions the implications of community on “more individualized notions of self in neoliberal economics” through the frequently circulated concept of “community of practice” (2012:249). The question that should be furthered is what implications the continuous coexistence of two worlds, off-line and online, have had and will continue to have in poetic and collective “world making” (Warner 2002:57) and the “aesthetic revolution” (Rancière 2004:27) of the counterpublics of gender, class, youth, and much more that are mediated by the Internet. This is one of the questions that this dissertation tries to address, but not offer a complete answer to, because answering these questions would probably be too ambitious. I will come back to this question in the conclusion.
Most of my interviewees from the Joon gallery became active and loyal Joon gallers because of its unique culture. They said, in accordance with one another, that they came to the Joon gallery, as well as to DCinside itself, because of the characteristics of the posts of the Joon gallery, especially those featuring the Nunhwa mask. One of my interviewees, Madeleine, said that, “When I saw a series of posts with the Nunhwa mask, I thought ‘what the heck are these?’ But soon I found myself addicted to this content and eventually came to be ‘running in the Joon gall’ day and night. While I was running there, I found that the Joon gallery was the perfect place for me to inhabit. Before I found the Joon gallery, I mainly inhabited websites where I had to be polite and nice. It was fascinating that I could say anything, even a curse, in the Joon gallery.” Another interviewee, No-rain, agreed with Madeleine. “Fuck… What we are doing in the Joon gallery is just so hilarious. You know what I mean. You can’t find this kind of atmosphere full of humor and irreverence anywhere else.” Beef-bone-broth particularly liked its anonymity. She rarely participated in off-line Joon gallery events (see an example of a Lee fan meeting in my continued analysis, below), to the point where other Joon gallers who were close to her had never seen her in person. “I like being active only online. I don’t wanna scare people with my Orc-like ugly looks. Lol.” For my interviewees from the Joon gallery, the character Nunhwa is a key source of fun and freedom with which they can play and through which they can become involved with their favorite star, Lee.

In April of 2009, I went to a large event for Lee’s fans, which included Joon gallers as well. Lee himself hosted the event, which was a second fan meeting that followed up a first event that took place in 2006. The notification of the event suddenly appeared on Lee’s official fan club on Daum.net. Booking a concert ticket in advance was almost similar to joining a battle. The official fan club offered 1000 pieces of R-seat tickets for fan club members a week before the official ticket box began to sell the tickets. It was expected that buying a pre-released ticket on the

---

80 DCinside users use the expression “running in…” a certain gallery to articulate the phenomenon whereby a person becomes ‘addicted to’ and spends most of their time in that gallery.

81 Considering that Beef-bone-broth often hung out with her friends (off-line) and did not mind meeting with me in person, her “Orc-like ugly looks” seems like a self-mocking joke. Beef-bone-broth said, “I like to keep online relationships online and off-line ones off-line. I like not mixing them up. I just like it that way.” This is the case for Beef-bone-broth only. While online relations often expand to face-to-face relations in off-line space, as No-rain and Madeleine’s did, others like separating online and off-line worlds, like Beef-bone-broth. It is called a “tendency of mysticism” (sinbijju k’ŏnsep) among DCinside users including my interviewees, especially Beef-bone-broth and Eloquence.

82 These events were called Joon Gi Episode I (2006) and II (2009). They were basically large scale fan meetings in a concert format. Episode II was held at the Olympic Fencing Gymnasium, where around 4,000 fans gathered there to see the event. Yi released an album entitled “J Style” at Episode II.
official fan club’s online café on Daum.net would be very competitive, based on the experience of Episode I, such that many people would not even be able to access the official fan club’s online café because there would be too many users trying to access it at the same time. I was waiting for an opening to book a ticket while I was running in the Joon gallery. Jay, a Joon galler whom I had met at another Joon gallery-related off-line event (a group watching of Lee’s movie *The King and the Clown*) talked to me through instant messenger while I was waiting. She asked me whether I was going to buy a ticket from the official fan club. She told me that she had already given up since there was no way she would be successful due to the intense competition for tickets. So, I offered to buy her a ticket along with mine, if I was able to get through (one person could buy a maximum of two tickets), an offer which Jay accepted and thanked me for. Jay got back to me and said that some gallery members were considering watching the event together. So, I held off on buying a ticket from the official fan club that night.

A week later, a post of notification regarding a group viewing of Episode II appeared for several hours on the Joon gallery. A limited supply of 100 tickets was available for this viewing, which all sold out in a couple of hours. As I was out of town for a funeral, Jay bought a ticket for me as well as one for her. The way in which this group viewing was organized reflected DCinside culture, especially that articulating that “running in a gallery is timing.” One cannot be ready for something good in advance. Even though it was difficult to buy a ticket from the official fan club, one could prepare for the chance and at least could do one’s best by dedicating oneself for long periods of time to the official fan club website. The group viewing organized for Joon galler, on the other hand, was opened and ended in a way that was ad hoc. One should have good connections with other Joon galler as I did or be running in the Joon gallery all the time to catch this kind of “timing.”

On the day of the event, different fan clubs were sitting together in their assigned sections. Foreign fans that came to South Korea to attend the event were seated nearest the stage. This was a gesture of consideration for fans that had traveled all the way to South Korea from other countries to attend the event. The section for the official Lee fan club was located behind the section of foreign fans. The section for the Joon gallery was behind the official fan club, since the ticket price was cheaper than those that the official fan club offered. The volunteers from the Joon gallery that had been organized for the group viewing distributed a thick paper poster which had an image of the Nunhwa mask on the one side and had the phrase “nae namja” (my man) on
the other side, to everyone sitting in the section assigned the Joon gallery. The whole section putting up their Nunhwa masks enabled Lee and other fans to recognize a big group of Nunhwa from the Joon gallery for the duration of the event.83

3 Don’t Be Polite. That’s Annoying!

In addition to the parodic and humorous posts such as images featuring the Nunhwa mask, what attracts Lee’s fans to the Joon gallery is its unruly, harsh, and decadent atmosphere, characteristic of the DCinside culture of “anything goes.” In the context of this culture, Lee’s fans can feel free to behave in a harsh and impolite manner. As Madeleine indicated (above), the atmosphere of the Joon gallery is not one that is particularly friendly; Joon gallers persecute newcomers, reply bluntly to each other’s posts (the closer friends they are to one another, the blunter they are) and make fun of their idol, Lee. All these customs of the Joon gallery are against conventional expectations of fandom and online communities. The Joon gallery offers Lee’s fans a new space where they can establish a different kind of fan culture involving the derisive, irreverent culture of DCinside itself. The atmosphere of Joon gallery as well as the ways in which Joon gallers communicate with each other became unique cultural products of Joon gallery, which users can enjoy and become fertile material for further active participation and production online.

The direct and coarse speaking styles of Joon gallers are clearly demonstrated in an online document consisting of tongue-in-cheek guidelines for newcomers of the Joon gallery. The post, entitled “The Ten Commandments of the Joon gall” (chun’gael sipkyemyŏng), requires Joon gallers to abide by the following code of conduct:

1. Shut up and support unconditionally the one and only Lee Joon Gi.
2. Call out Lee Joon Gi’s name with full affection.
3. Live your blessed life by playing at the Joon gallery every day.

83 The event was composed of Lee’s giving various performances, from singing and dancing to talk show. It was a rare occasion for Lee’s fans, including the Joon gallers, to see Lee in person. After the event was over, I went to an after party (twitp’uri) that was held at a bar with Jay and two more gallers. We stayed up and drank all night while talking about Lee and and the Joon gallery.
4. Shut up and support Lee Joon Gi unconditionally and as dutifully as you do your own parents.

5. You are allowed to kill any anti-fan of Lee Joon Gi.

6. You are allowed to hit on Lee Joon Gi as much as you want.

7. Steal Lee Joon Gi’s heart.

8. Do not run amuck and lie through your teeth.

9. Do not covet the private life of Lee Joon Gi.

10. Do not grumble over Lee Joon Gi’s view of life.

And then, the Commandments make three additional important points at the end:

1. The Lee Joon Gi gallery is not a ChisikiN service of Naver.com.⁸⁴ Think first whether you would like the kind of questions you want to ask now if you were Lee Joon Gi before you shit out your posts.

2. The Lee Joon Gi gallery is not a peer to peer file-sharing service. Read past posts over and over and self-inspect your own posts.

3. You will be better off if you read the Commandments damn thoroughly. If you have any inquiries, go ask Chisikin at Naver.com, not here. (Source: DC Joon gallery Vocabulary List)

Another set of guidelines, this one entitled “Syuppang’s Damn Generous Guidelines for Re-post posts from the Joon gall” is similarly brusque:

---

⁸⁴ Naver.com is the most popular Internet search engine as well as one of the most popular Internet portals in South Korea. Naver started in 2002 by offering a service called “Chisik-iN” (knowledge-iN). With ChisikiN, users could ask questions and answer those questions for themselves, instead of having members of the company staff or experts respond to the questions being posted. This service became so popular that Naver came to rank as the top in search engine in South Korea; and meanwhile, “asking people on ChisikiN” (chisikin e murô pwa) became a widely-circulated popular expression. Naver added a feature for experts of different areas to answer questions related to their specialty areas in 2009 to improve the quality of answers. ChisikiN is one of the first Internet services which intended to realize the ideal of Web 2.0 by emphasizing the role of Internet users rather than that of web service providers regarding the production of web content.
4. The DC Joon gallery is not a place where people just post funny images and make dirty jokes together. If you expect such things, don’t even dream of joining us.

5. Those who dare say “If you guys won’t allow people to repost content freely, then make this place a closed community” should shut up and just read, don’t write anything, for three months to learn what DCinside is like.

Hey, fucking idiots who backstab the Nunhwa and re-post and enjoy the posts on Joon gallery, okay, all right, but just do not fucking represent yourselves falsely to be Nunhwa but fucking explain where the posts came from. (Source: DC Joon gallery Vocabulary List)

The speaking styles of these two posts for newcomers are authoritarian and coercive. While the Ten Commandments of the Joon gallery tries to explicate basic rules of the Joon gallery without being overly harsh, Syuppang’s guidelines for re-post posts from the Joon gallery are uninhibitedly direct and coarse, starting with its ironic title that begins with a completely extraneous curse, “Damn Generous Guidelines.” While clearly not generous in tone, the guide is nonetheless intended as a kind of help to newcomers regarding what they can do and should not do without first second-guessing themselves. Repost other people’s posts without being clear about the original source is considered to be one of the most serious violations of the rules on the Internet. Joon gallers share this sentiment, but are quite abrupt in expressing it.

This direct and coarse speaking style is considered “DC-like” (tisi chŏkin) as well as “Joon gallery-like” (chunkael chŏkin) among DCinside users. Most of my interviewees from the Joon gallery talked about their experiences of being beat up as a newbie. Madeleine said,

I started running in the Joon gallery because I loved the atmosphere and posts. But when I posted something for the first time, I was beat up hard by other gallers about my thoughtlessness and the inappropriateness of my post. So I lurked around Joon gallery posts harder to get to know its culture better.

Baby-chick also said,

Are there any gallers who did not experience being beat up by other gallers when they were newbie? Absolutely not. The only difference is that back in the days, we accepted the harshness of the Joon gallery and lurked harder to learn, but newbies nowadays complain
about harshness. Why??? What I want to tell them is ‘Why do you wanna hang out in the Joon gall? Just go to the official fan club if you want to be welcomed and treated nicely. Do you think it makes sense for you come to my house and insist on soy paste stew for dinner even though my family is already preparing kimchi stew? Absolutely not.’

The long-term Joon gallers do not hesitate to show how sick they are of ignorant newcomers who do not even understand the difference in cultures between the Joon gallery and large portal websites such as Naver.com where people are expected to adhere to n(et)-etiquette and politely ask and answer each other’s questions. While voluntary work for other users and free sharing have been considered to be unchallengeable axioms of the Internet, Joon gallers do not take it for granted. Instead, they aggressively question why they have to be nice to people all the time. They share things when they feel like doing so. They may or may not be kind, depending on their moods. They do not try hard to become socially desirable, “nice” people. They do not patiently explain to newcomers about what DCinside is like. Instead, they threaten newcomers, telling them to keep quiet and learn how DCinside works on their own by observing what is going on in the gallery instead of bothering other people with their obtuse posts.

The Ten Commandments are multifaceted, such that newcomers can easily become confused. They allow Joon gallers to “kill” anti-fans of Lee, to hit on Lee, and to steal Lee’s heart, while at the same time they prohibit gallers from coveting Lee’s private life and grumbling about his views on life. Asking other Joon gallers to share materials related to Lee is not allowed, yet there is nonetheless a general practice of free (i.e. without compensation) sharing in this gallery, but only at their own initiative, and usually only for a limited period of time. Shared audio or video files within the gallery open up only temporary, for perhaps one to five minutes. This is also related to the culture “running in a gallery is timing,” much as buying a ticket for group viewing of Episode II was. It is all up to the people uploading shared materials to decide how long they will keep the files that they share online—in the Joon gallery, it is rarely for very long. If someone shares something with others, then the others just thank the person for it and feel lucky because they have been online at the right time to experience the share. Being demanding—asking people to share with them—is considered absolutely thoughtless. It is not easy for
newcomers to know exactly what to do in the Joon gallery. Getting used to the customs and cultures of the gallery is a newcomers’ job, unlike those who have partaken in the gallery for some time. The fun that Joon gallers have is related to escaping from conventional custom, expectations regarding female gender norms, and civic politeness in general. While the unconventional bluntness of the Joon gallery can seem harsh to newcomers, it simultaneously shows newcomers that it is okay not to be nice and polite.

While the culture of being harsh to newcomers can be seen as a territorial imperative or as a consisting of a process of breaking them in, this culture can also be considered as the persistence of Joon gallers as a counterpublic to continue their poetic and collective world making against the dominant gender ideology, since being kind and polite is expected as a qualification of normative womanhood. Their direct and coarse speaking style composes the counterdiscourse against polite speaking styles while mocking and questioning the naturalness of being polite and nice. The speaking style of Joon gallers can be read as an aesthetic act in the sense that it denaturalizes the naturalness of politeness as a social norm. Bakhtin emphasizes the importance of abusive language in coming to grips with the literature of the grotesque. Abusive practice and language form and are formed by each other with great influence, which is “closely related to all other forms of ‘degradation’ and ‘down to earth’ in grotesque” (Bakhtin 1984:27). Similarly, the speaking style of Joon gallers functions as a basis of their world making as well as gesturing to loser aesthetics.

4 Playing with Sexuality

Behind the mask, Nunhwa indulge in irreverent pleasures such as impolite talk to the point of trading harsh insults with one another. Another such practice is indulging in sexual pleasure with Lee via images posted to the gallery. Nunhwa, confident of their sexual desires, are not intimidated by potential condemnation of their desires. Expressing sexual desire is not a problem at all for Nunhwa. Nunhwa are allowed to trifle sexually with Lee Joon Gi as much as they want as well as to steal Lee’s heart (in other words, to make him fall in love) in the Joon gallery, according to its Ten Commandments The unconditional allowance for sexual desire makes the posts of the gallery sexually charged, as is the actual back and forth communication between users in the gallery.
Nunhwa’s sexual desires and expressions sometimes take the form of molestation or rape. The situation depicted in Figure 4–4 delineates the sexual harassment of Lee by a group of Nunhwa. One Nunhwa pushes Lee by his back against a wall, whispering “Joon Gi, it’s me, your Nunhwa… I won’t hurt you. Let’s go to a tunnel…” The other three Nunhwa watch this situation, with clear expectations, saying “Next it’s our turn…” Lee, who looks younger than his actual age, like a teenaged boy, is crying, saying to himself “Don’t look back. It is just a nightmare. Sob, sob…” It seems obvious that Joon Gi is scared by this situation, while the other four Nunhwa are very excited. This image hints that these Nunhwa are soon going to gang-rape Lee, suggesting to him that they go to a tunnel and lining up in order to wait for their turn to have their way with him there.

Figure 4–4 Don’t Look Back. It Is Just a Nightmare, created by DC chun’gi kael madam

Individual Nunhwa: Joon Gi, it’s me, your Nunhwa… I won’t hurt you. Let’s go to a tunnel…
Group of Nunhwa: Next it’s our turn…
Lee: Don’t look back. It is just a nightmare. Sob, sob…
(Source: DC Joon gallery Mini Homepage on Cyworld)

Lee looks vulnerable and helpless to the possible violence from the Nunhwa, especially since he is depicted as much younger and smaller than he actually is. Lee as a victim and Nunhwa as
perpetrator of the violence confuse traditional gender roles in the domains of molestation and rape. While it is not straightforward to identify the gender of the mask-wearing, the representations of Lee are effeminate such that it is hard to tell whether they are intended to represent men. Lee and Nunhwa are identified as ambiguously male and female, respectively. It is highly possible that Lee became the target of this kind of fandom, which aggressively and openly expresses its sexual desire, because of his pretty and feminine charms, especially in relation to the movie, *The King and the Clown*. Characters whose genders are not clear and the violent situations which are comically exaggerated enable the serious situations of rape to be read as a critique and as a mockery of conventional gender ideology.

Even the serious violence presented in the Joon gallery, however, brings about laughter for some Joon gallers. The expressions of Nunhwa’s sexual desire and Lee’s fear are humorous because the situations and the characters of the posts are exaggerated as well as because gender images are ambiguous and confusing. A (somewhat) male victim of a (sort of) female aggressor reverses the usual roles of the cliché. The original clichéd stories are threatening, certainly to the women being raped within the narrative of the stories. For women in the real world in general it is threatening as well, because certainly similar narratives play out in their actual lives all the time. In this sense, the Nunhwa image is dark. The element of threat persists in Figure 4–4 and 4–5, because if it did not, the images would not function as satire, which by definition is a critical form of humour. If it was not dark, if there was no threat, if the violence was not familiar enough to be palpable, it would not function as well as a social critique. Figure 4–4 and 4–5 can be effective pieces of comedy because they remind people of the violence of their everyday lives, but with the gender roles recast through and through, they denaturalize the violence, with some risk of recirculating it, in a way that seeks to call into question both the banal, everyday instances of violence experienced by women, and the uneven social relations that allow for this routine violence to take place.

Figure 4–5 also shows a similarly violent situation. In this image, Lee is crying, and Nunhwa is smoking a cigarette in a bed located in a dark tunnel. The image implies that Nunhwa has just taken Lee to a tunnel and taken his virginity. Smoking, Nunhwa says to Lee, “The first time is like this for everyone. You trust me as your Nunhwa, don’t you?” Lee just weeps bitterly.
Figure 4–5 The First Time Is Just Like This to Everyone, written by Syuppang and Photo by Chunch’am

Nunhwa: The first time is just like this to everyone, somewhat sad, somewhat painful. You trust me as your Nunhwa, don’t you?

Lee: Sob, sob, sob, sob….

Additional note on the right side of the top: I looked over and over. Such a terrible stylist (pal k’odi) / Tearing tearing grasp grasp / Help Help / Joon Gi, you did great / Sob sob sob sob.85

(Source: DC Joon gallery Mini Homepage on Cyworld)

85 This kind of complaint about Lee’s stylist(s) were popular. Joon gallers often said that Lee’s stylist(s) made Joon Gi look terrible rather than good. This is a common complaint found in other fan communities as well. Fans have called those terrible (in their eyes) stylists “pal k’odi” (lit. foot stylist, meaning clumsy as if the stylist was using their feet instead of hands) or “k’odi ka ant’i” (lit. the stylist is anti-fan, meaning a stylist must hate a given celebrity such that she deliberately makes him look terrible).
This image is based on an old Korean cliché about what happens when a girl loses her virginity before getting married. The man who takes her virginity pretends to be experienced, manly, calm, and cool by smoking a cigarette and telling the girl that the first time is somewhat difficult and sad to everyone and that she can trust him since he will be responsible for her lost virginity. The girl is supposed to cry for her loss of virginity since she is not pure any more. Crying and being a vulnerable victim plays a role in making it clear that the event of having sex is not what she wanted but what was forced on her. As such, she can be a decent and feminine woman who should be protected by men, even though she has lost her virginity.

This cliché of pre-marriage virginity has been repeated over and over through media products such as TV dramas, movies, and cartoons in Korea, through to the present day. The film, *Virgin Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors* (2006), for instance, deals with this cliché quite seriously in terms of the gender and class gaps which explain why the female protagonist, coming from a lower middle class background, tries to keep her virginity; that is, in order to get married to a man from a rich family by impressing him with how innocent and decent she is (Hong SS). The TV drama, *The Flame of Desire* shows (2011) how various women from different generations are affected by their loss of virginity before getting married (Paek HM). One female character in this drama lost her virginity while being raped married the individual who raped her. Even though they came to be in love with each other in the course of their marriage, their initial sexual encounter was clearly a situation of rape. Her hesitance towards being in a relationship with him was unequivocally resolved by the fact that she lost her virginity because of this man; she had to marry him, she had no choice. Another female character lost her virginity to one man, but nonetheless got married to another man. In this case, her past, of not being innocent before getting married, became a crucial secret for her to hide at all costs in order for her to carry on as a decent mother and daughter-in-law in the rich family of her husband. While these two female characters are in their mid-forties and can be understood to have relatively conservative values, another female character that is in her twenties, is still strongly affected by her sexually disorderly past. She suffers from self-loathing and is threatened with revealing her past to the man she is in love with. She finally gives up her true love because of her impurity.

The loss of pre-marriage virginity, elsewhere, is dealt with in a comical fashion through the use of cartoons. Youngman Huh, one of the most popular master cartoonists in Korea since the 1980s, has based many of his jokes on the theme of losing one’s virginity. In his various cartoons,
he draws couples who imply that they have sex outside marriage by pretending that they are serious, saying “you are going to be responsible, aren’t you?” (female side) and “Don’t worry, I will be responsible.” (male side), or by showing the big belly of a pregnant woman. The stories of these couple characters are not even the main storyline, but appear as trivial background scenes when main characters are doing something in public places such as restaurants, parks, and bars.

The cliché of the experienced, dominant older man raping the virginal, helpless young girl has had a long lasting, and still living, history, as demonstrated through its repetition in cultural products like the films and cartoons, above. Emphasis on virginity shows the way in which Korean society has reckoned modern intimacy through the lens of traditional values. Virginity plays a role in accomplishing romantic love in traditionally acceptable ways (Lim JY 2011:220, 227; Cho HJ 1991:36–41) in the sense that romantic love which was not allowed in the context of traditional Confucian values, can be acceptable as long as a woman keeps her virginity or gets married to the man to whom she lost her virginity. Even though sexual ethics has been rapidly changing in practice, the cliché itself has been sustained, including by means of various media products. Even when women are depicted as active sexual subjects, their sexual desires are harnessed to heterosexual marriage in many cases (Yi HY 2010), which may enable the cliché of pre-marriage virginity to sustain life in the phantasm of popular culture.

Ji Hye Kim (2014), in her article “A Study of the Revised Romance Script and Representations of Gender/Sexuality in The First Coffee Prince (2007) and Wild Romance (2012),” discusses the heterosexual love of masculine women that has appeared in TV shows in South Korea. Building on Susan Striker’s conceptualization defining genderqueer as variants of gender that include feminine men, masculine women, neutral gender, and transgender, Kim examines the ways in which masculine women reveal the performative nature of gender and how their heterosexual loves “undermine and transform the typical romance narrative” (2014:10, 40). Lee and Nunhwa, seen in Figure 4–4 and 4–5, can be read as “genderqueer.” While they reveal the performative nature of gender like the masculine women in Kim’s article, they rewrite the dominant narrative of gender violence such as rape and gender ideology as it relates to virginity.

The position Nunhwa takes up is not necessarily one vested with overwhelming power and authority. Through self-mockery, Nunhwa position themselves together with those that are
laughed at, much as those participating in Bakhtin’s carnival of fools do. Conventional, sexualized power relations blur. The mockery that Joon gellers express does not simply imitate molestation and clichéd male storytelling about conquests of helpless virgins that often describe very real sexual assault. The confused representation of sexual violence in the posts of Joon gallery shows awareness of the violence that exists as part of conventional sexual relations. By twisting and exaggerating who uses violence and who becomes victim, Joon gellers shed new light on sexual violence and gender inequality and laugh them out. What can it mean to laugh out such serious issues? While there is a risk of reinforcing conventional sentiment of violent pleasure by deploying masculine violence, just in reverse, the change of who are speaking of and reenacting violence offers space to read seemingly similar violence in different terms. Laughing all the seriousness out brings about the effect of the kind of laughter that overcomes fear and offers some remedy for those that have to go back to and live as part of male dominant cultures in the real world.

5 Ironic Laughter between the Aggressive and the Pathetic

The enthusiasm of Baby-chick shows how important the style of the Joon gallery is for Joon gellers. I interviewed Baby-chick several times from February through July 2009. At the time, Baby-chick was a 21-year-old college student studying journalism in the Philippines. She was quite opinionated on many issues, including the Joon gallery, probably thanks to her major and previous experiences as an active fan of an idol group. Baby-chick said,

I love Joon gallery because the ways in which Nunhwa has affection for Joon Gi are similar to mine. The cultures of the Joon gallery and DCinside are unique. I mean their unique “pathetic” [at the same time, comical and playful] spirit (tchijilham) is so intriguing. While other fan clubs crave cool and impressive pictures of Joon Gi, we are doing so with crappy but funny shots. You know, DCinside is located in the underground culture, which we call a “panjiha munhwa (semi-basement culture).” Since it is an underground culture, it has its own creativity and zest which other websites can’t imitate. Joon gallery is an example of a unique kind of Joon Gi fandom, formed in the atmosphere of DCinside. I really love its pathetic and humorous spirit. Nunhwa beg Joon Gi, “Joon Gi, are you looking at us now? If you are, would you please post something? Even one post of one pixel will do for us. We are not asking for a lot. Just one pixel, that’s it. Please…” [this means, “we don’t expect too much. We don’t want you to post something long
and serious. All we want is one pixel posted by you. That’s enough for us. So, please…”) Isn’t it so pathetic and humorous? There are tons of similar examples of this pathetic and humorous spirit. Ideas from the Joon gallery are creative. Beef-bone-broth, one of my favorite Joon gallers, replied to one post which asked whether she could just get Joon Gi’s signature on the official paper prepared for signature events or whether she can get the signature on other things such as a CD or DVD. Beef-bone-broth said, “Well, then I will bring the marriage registration form and get his signature on it.” When I read her post, I laughed until I almost died. Ideas from the Joon gallery are creative. That is why I love the Joon gallery.

As Baby-chick points out, what decides the unique culture of Joon gallery is its pathetic and humorous spirit. This spirit is reflected in the grotesque and comical character of Nunhwa and the ways in which Nunhwa chases Lee. This spirit is pervasive in most of the posts of the Joon gallery, and plays a role in making a common ground for the sense of humor and laughter characteristic of this gallery. Even though they produce a great deal of posts, being boorish and abrupt and expressing their aggressive sexual desire and affections toward Lee, what they actually expect from him is excessively small, which makes them look even more pathetic and comical. The ironic contradictions among these aggressive expressions, of not being nice, outstanding fan activities, shy attitudes, and humble expectations bring about the laughter and affection for the Nunhwa character and the Joon gallery community.

Figure 4–6 is about one of the popular legendary happenings in the Joon gallery called the “recorder happening,” which demonstrates the shy and humble attitudes of Joon gallers. The Figure 4–6 depicts a wedding hall. There are two orchestras, one in which the members all play recorders and the other in which the members play a Korean traditional bamboo flute. There are no guests, grooms or brides yet. However, troupes of Nunhwa are already on standby status. This content was made after a virtual question was posed: “How should we celebrate if Joon Gi got married?” One of the Nunhwa asks, “There is nothing I can do for Joon Gi. Is it okay if I play the recorder in the corner of the wedding hall?” Other Nunhwa liked this shy expression of pure love and began to produce many parodies using the object of the recorder, which became another often-repeated joke within Joon gallery. Nunhwa would not get upset and harm Lee, even if he decided to get married, a marriage which would be a total disaster for his fans. Instead of being upset and harming Lee, they want to celebrate and contribute to it. Their contribution, however, is based on their spirit of the pathetic. It is not a fancy real orchestra but one made up of people

86 This additional explanation offered in parenthesis is my interpretation, not Baby-chick’s.
playing recorders, maybe because it is only the instrument the Nunhwa, as pathetic and absurd characters of the Joon gallery, can play.

Figure 4–6. An Imagined Wedding Ceremony for Lee and the *Nunhwa* Orchestra “The DC Joon gallery will be responsible for a wedding song for Joon Gi” / Left: recorder troupe, right: troupe of traditional Korean bamboo flute in standby status, waiting for the wedding to begin (Source: DC Joon gallery Mini Homepage on Cyworld)

This “shy” and “humble” attitude is quite a contrast to the brusque, blunt and mean way that Joon gallers usually behave and represent themselves as such. I interpret this contrast, sometimes direct, mean and blunt, and sometimes shy, humble and considerate attitudes, as an expression of ambivalence toward being a loser. Not only Joon gallers but also DCinside users in general, display this sort of ambivalence. They are brusque, blunt and mean and act as if they say to everything, even to being a loser, “So what?” They are not docile but bold subjects that challenge social conventions in a carnivalesque online space where anything goes. Simultaneously, however, they clearly know that they are losers, that they are shy and humble. For Joon gallers, many of them play il-ko in their off-line lives and pretend to be “normal” women performing politeness and kindness. This shy and humble attitude is cultivated in the process of becoming a docile neoliberal subject accepting the neoliberal logic that one is responsible for one’s success and well-being and that a winner takes all while a loser gets not much. For Joon gallers, it is also cultivated in the process of living as a woman in the off-line world. They cannot ask for
something great because losers do not deserve such great things. This docile attitude, however, becomes common ground to understand and feel sympathy with one another, which can prepare for the possibility of solidarity and collective action when the time is ripe.87

“I won’t hurt you…,” a phrase articulated in Figure 4–4 is one of the popular expressions among Joon gallers. The seemingly aggressive and scary Nunhwa always tell Lee that they would not hurt him even though they cannot control their horny desires. Similarly, there is another popular expression on the part of Joon gallers saying that, “If Joon Gi laughs, it is not molestation” (chun’gi ka usůmyŏn hirong i anijyansso), a parody of a similar line from the movie The King and the Clown, “If the King laughs it is not ridicule” (wang i usůmyŏn hirong i anijyansso). This has been Joon gallers’ answer to criticism of their sexually charged and violent posts. Lee has endorsed his affection of Joon gallers through thank you statements and notes as well as on his Cyworld Mini-hompi in which he made a separate folder to archive parody images made in the Joon gallery.88 It means he enjoys being fooled in the Joon gallers posts, different from his online effigies who are scared and weeping in the parody images of Nunhwa. Joon gallers construct a space where both their idol Lee and they themselves are made fools of and mocked. They create laughter, which stands against normative gender ideology. Their character Nunhwa is a gender ambiguous grotesque body and, at the same time, is a clown residing in a carnivalesque space of the Joon gallery who makes Lee, other Joon gallers, as well as Nunhwa herself, laugh. In their article “Taking a Bite out of Buffy: Carnivalesque Play and Resistance in Fan Fiction,” Amanda L. Hodge and Laurel P. Richmond examine fandom in relation to gender and sexuality with the conceptual tools of Bakhtin’s carnival, Foucault’s power relations, and Butler’s performativity (2011). More particularly, they analyze the bad girl character, Faith, from the American TV show, Buffy the Vampire Slayer (Whedon 1997–2003). They analyze how fanfic opens up a carnivalesque space where they navigate societal notions of gender in their own constructions of subjectivity by selectively revealing gender, class, and social roles as fluid, online. Hodge and Richmond elaborate the way in which fans gain and wield power online, how they “use and manipulate words, images, and technology to create bodies and selves through writing.”

87 The candlelight rallies I discussed in Chapter 1 can be good examples of such moments.
88 This folder might be one of the greatest sources of pride for Joon gallers. My interviewees from the Joon gallery said that Lee’s high interest in parody images from the gallery brought about unwanted consequences, with Lee’s fans elsewhere, that were not a good fit for the culture of Joon gallery, rushing into the gallery and pretending to be Nunhwa. The folder in question does not exist on Lee’s Cyworld Mini-hompi anymore. Lee does not use his Cyworld Mini-hompi much at all anymore, corresponding with a decline in the popularity of Cyworld in recent years.
fan cultures from different regions and cultural backgrounds share commonalities, as Buffy fandom based on fan fiction community and Lee Joon Gi fandom on DCinside show. As Hodges and Richmond point out, “to engage in carnival is not to set up any sort of binary but to interrogate and blur those that already exist. This ability to play, the desire to seek out or create tiny spaces for questioning and resistance, keeps discourses—and people—vital and fluid, always already in motion” (2011).

Transgressant images such as Nunhwa work to demystify norms of femininity and masculinity. The Nunhwa, with their mask, their costumes and their fraught relationship with Lee, function as the “preliminary acting out of the dilemmas of femininity” in the “hyperbolic” mode that the “masquerade and carnival do in Rabelais and his world,” (Russo 1986:224–225). Mary Russo asks “why are these old hags laughing?” (1986:227) from a feminist point of view, about figurines of senile pregnant old hags depicted in Kerch terracotta, to which Bakhtin referred in explaining the coexistence of death and birth/new life (Bakhtin 1984:25). In hopes of the possibility of a female grotesque in the context of feminist critiques and movements, Russo asks:

For now, right now, as I acknowledge the work of feminists in reconstituting knowledge, I imagine us going forward, growing old (I hope), or being grotesque in other ways. I see us viewed by ourselves and others, in our bodies and in our work, in ways that are continuously shifting the terms of viewing, so that looking at us, there will be a new question, the question that never occurred to Bakhtin in front of the Kerch terracotta figurines—Why are these old hags laughing? (1986:226–227)

Nunhwa laugh under their funny mask while they are enjoy transvestism and transgressions that are not allowed in the official/off-line world. They are laughing not because they conquer male-dominant culture of DCinside entirely but because they find themselves being able to not surrender to and be afraid of it by laughing it out as a group. The old hags might be laughing because they also have found the ways in which they can overrule (or overcome) the fear of misogyny and sexism, feeling the power in their laugh.
Chapter 5
User-Generated Content: Producing New Values and Exploiting Free Immaterial Labor

The breadth of user-generated content that crops up on the Internet every second never ceases to amaze me. Innumerable videos ranging from frivolous topics like beauty, babies, and pets to staid academic lectures about the anthropology of media are posted on YouTube every day. My Facebook friends “Feed” me with “News” ranging from how the weather is, what they eat for dinner, and what amazing things their precious kids, dogs, or cats have done that day to what concerns they have for their job applications, how things are going with their union strike, and when they have been scheduled to have a C-section for their expected baby girl. Wikipedia and Naver are a click of the mouse away to answer any questions I might have. Web message boards provide answers to my questions that many others have also been interested enough to ask, and others have answered in detail. Yelp tells me where to go for good restaurants, hair salons, or for massage therapy. If I feel like digging into a certain topic for more detailed information, many blogs under various themes are out there with outstanding information. Of course, DCinside’s body of content continues to grow in real time and is ready to distract me from my writing. Every day I am surprised by the fact that so many people voluntarily put in their time and effort to produce a huge variety of user-generated content. Just reading their posts can be a time-consuming activity for someone like me, someone who is a lurker.

In this chapter, I address the issue of the labor that is put in in order to produce user-generated content. The transition from the Fordist to the post-Fordist mode of production is aimed at regulating the contradictions in capitalism and guaranteeing cohesion in the long-run. Instead of economies of scale which are composed of the mass production of homogeneous goods for the purposes of mass consumption, small-batch production, individualized consumption, and spatial integration of labor, flexibility, and deregulation are the new rules of business (Harvey 1989:126,147). Post-Fordism, as a new mode of production, puts emphasis on science and technologies rather than the labor of individuals. In this mode of production, science, information, knowledge, and cooperation become the core of production (Harvey 1989:159; Virno 2003:101). Labels such as “new economy” and “knowledge economy” mean to emphasize the important roles of those core components. Producing commodities, which still exist as an important part of the capitalist mode of production, becomes a residue of the knowledge which
Communication functions as the interface that negotiates relationships between production and consumption, producer and consumer, and work and life, all of which were considered to be antagonistic in the older capitalist framework. Social relations including labor relations have to be reestablished in this new kind of borderless area (Lazzarato 1996:143).

My research questions for this chapter focus on labor relations, particularly that of unpaid immaterial labor in online communities. How does voluntary user participation produce new values? How do people come to feel that their time and labor is rewarded enough through good feeling, reputation, attention, and fun? How does capitalism develop a new sociality, used as a means to exploit this free voluntary labor and goodwill? To answer these questions, I examine my experiences of making a drama review book for a Korean TV drama called Painter of the Wind. My ethnography of this chapter, first of all, introduces the plot and the process through which the TV drama Painter of the Wind was first established as a gallery on DCinside. Encouraging booming online communities of audiences has been an important part of the promotion of TV dramas since Internet activity started to be coordinated with TV broadcasting. The gallery Painter of the Wind became a matrix of subsequent audience activities by DCinside users who watched the drama, and thus became the venue in which the drama review book project for the drama Painter of the Wind began. I also show how individual users of this gallery developed themselves into content producers through the story of my interviewee “Treasure Island,” who was active in both the gallery Painter of the Wind and the review book project for the series. The processes involved in how the gallery and its users grew into content producers make a good example of how voluntary user participation produces economic values, and how people feel that their time and labor is rewarded well enough by the production of good feeling, reputation, attention, and fun. The latter part of the ethnography narrates how the project of making the drama review book proceeded. This section examines further how user participation and voluntary work in Internet communities is organized into “collective work.” The collective work goes beyond the level of individual hobbies and spontaneous happenings to much more complex activities, including the organizing of a project team, the scheduling and budgeting for the publication of the review book, the marketing and pre-selling of the books, obeying copyright laws, and regulating a flea market for used review books. I examine what motivates review book...
producers to willingly sacrifice their time and labor through the story of Husky, another of my interviewees.

I argue, through examining the drama review book project, that making the drama review book offers its participants a good opportunity for self-fulfillment as creative subjects. While Korean youth are educated with full on emphasis and encouragement toward being competitive and creative subjects, the actual job market offers such opportunities only to the limited number of winners that emerge from processes of severe competition. Most Korean youth cannot seek self-fulfillment through their actual professions as a creative subject the way they dreamed and were even educated to be. Instead, the Internet offers such opportunities without discriminating against people based on their qualification. All they would need to do is to volunteer for a certain task and work hard. It is indeed a realization of equal opportunity for everyone. The goodwill of users, voluntary user participation, and user-generated content, however, make fertile ground for the exploitation of free immaterial labor. The moral of working voluntarily without seeking financial reward in online communities enables information to be shared for free. At the same time, however, it also enables web platform companies and TV broadcasting companies to make use of this free information and the time and labor expended in the production. New ICTs have contributed to building an idealized world in which people produce and share information for free just as much as they have in the service of advancing techniques for the exploitation of free labor by levying the moral concerns and desire for self-fulfillment of Internet users.

1 Volunteering Subjects and the Exploitation of Free Immaterial Labor

User-generated content is multimedia content produced and distributed by Internet users, which I have called “posts” in my previous chapters. This term started to be used broadly along with the term “Web 2.0,” becoming popular in tandem with the growth of personal media and social networking services (SNSs). Web 2.0 indicates changes in the World Wide Web from expert-centered software production to user-centered content production (O’Reilly 2005: 2006; Kostakis 2009:457). While websites considered to belong to Web 1.0, such as Netscape and Encyclopædia Britannica Online, focus on the production and distribution of software and content to their users, Web 2.0 relies on what users produce: Google, for example, is based on linking activity
produced by users as part of its algorithm for its search engine; Facebook is made up of hundreds of millions of profile pages created by its users; and Wikipedia is based on anonymous users constantly creating, building and editing Wiki pages. While some people like Tim Berners-Lee, the inventor of the World Wide Web, are not overly impressed at the hype of Web 2.0 because the attributes of the Internet technology have always been user-centered in his eyes (Lawson 2005; Laningham 2006), the phenomena considered to be related to Web 2.0 have been hailed as proof of the increasing participation of ordinary Internet users, which is seen as reconfirming the open and democratic characteristics of the Internet. At the same time, they have also been hailed as promising new sources of market revenues.

In South Korea, the term “user-created content,” more popularly used as its abbreviation “UCC” (yu ssi ssi), has been promoted and become popular since 2005. The cultural products or artwork of Internet users have been referred to by the name “posts” (kesimul). This term denotes the ambiguous status ascribed to products created by Internet users, which are considered to be neither art nor professional work. The terms “user-generated content” and “UCC” attempt to assign a new status to these products. As Web 2.0 and user-generated content become popular, we need to ask whose interests are served by the ubiquitous penetration of the “UCC” phrase in Korean popular discourse. The term was coined and promoted by major Korean web portals such as Daum and Naver as well as more targeted Internet platforms focusing on video content. The major interests served here are closely connected to market revenues for Internet platforms by means of the voluntary participation and productive activities of Internet users.

User-generated content requires substantial amounts of time and labor expended in the production of content. This time-consuming and labor-intensive process is usually considered to be “leisure,” “fun,” “rest,” or as a “worthwhile” activity by users who produce that content. Financial rewards are rarely given except to the producers of Internet platforms such as Google and Facebook, who have become billionaires. This unfair relationship is considered to be fair based on the principle of give-and-take between users and the companies that own the platforms: Internet users produce and share user-generated content while companies service platforms to Internet users for free. The deal looks pretty fair and has actually worked well as the popularity of different platforms based on Web 2.0 and their success in the market have shown (Zittrain 2008:123–125). The new platforms on the Internet enable people to produce and distribute new economic values as well as new Internet ethics. The contrast between the wide distribution of
user-generated content and online participation versus the huge revenues which only a small
group of platform producers and stockholders enjoy became the main motivation for me in
writing this chapter. I deliberately use the term “user-generated content” instead of “posts” in
this chapter to emphasize the products of Internet users as unpaid immaterial labor in the flexible
labor regime of a knowledge-based economy.

My experiences making a drama review book for Painter of the Wind enabled me to interrogate
the issues of free immaterial labor and exploitation in online space. TV shows function as media
content on their own as well as raw materials for the secondary production of user-generated
content. People using TV shows as raw material for Internet-based pastiche are an example of
the popularization of new groups of people into an ethos of “recursive publics” (Kelty 2008),
where here, they are aware of television as a condition of their own association, and being so
aware, they use the Internet to engage at least in a performance in the sense of a kind of shadow
play thereby gaining direct control over those conditions. These shared contexts as a common
ground increase the possibility of interaction among people. User-generated content based on TV
shows, therefore, can be a good lens to see how existing media converges through the Internet,
how new media content is produced by audiences and users, how new media environments are
formed through time-consuming practices in everyday life, and how these new environments and
user activities contribute to capitalist accumulation.

A drama review book is a publication devoted to a given TV drama. It is written, edited, and
published by volunteers who are audience members and fans of the given TV drama. A drama
review book includes reviews of each episode, profiles and explorations of each character, and
explorations of specific themes from the drama (love relationship, politics, art, and so on). It also
includes interviews of the production staff such as producers, writers, actors, and popular
producers of user-generated content that is related to the given drama. It offers new information
such as explanations to the production process of special props, as well as tips on filming
locations that fans can use to take themselves on tours. It also contains valuable items such as
rare pictures, which have not been opened to the public yet, and new, high-quality user-generated
content. All the content is produced by audiences or fans of the given TV drama. Drama review
books are sold directly by their producers to anyone that wants to buy them. No profit is
generated from the price of a book; the price per volume is determined by dividing the total
expense of publishing all the volumes with the total number of potential book buyers (1/n). To be
clear, what is taken to be the total expense of publication does not include expenses accrued by the production team, such as transportation for different occasions such as team meetings that take place in person or going out to cover stories.

Defining the participatory activities of the TV audience and Internet users as “labor” and claiming that they are exploited for capitalist accumulation through their “unpaid labor” might be disputable since people voluntarily contribute their time and enjoy doing these activities their leisure time. However, is the willingness of the audiences and Internet users to volunteer for these activities enough to claim that their time-consuming work is not labor, but leisure, even though the activities are key sources of work appropriated by capitalist companies that benefit from the massive profits generated by this free labor? There have been scholarly efforts to answer this question through different concepts such as the transition from Fordism to post-Fordism, fast capitalism, the new economy, the digital economy, immaterial labor, free labor, consumer labor, audience labor, and the gift economy of online communities. The different conceptual labels overlap each other and on a few scores at least, point in similar directions: analyzing the transition of the capitalist mode of production, related changes in labor relations, and the blurring border between work and the rest of life.89

As industry becomes reorganized in the transition from Fordism to post-Fordism, the subjectivities of workers are also restructured. Knowledge, a newly important core aspect of the economy, is “not explicit or objective, but rather relational” (Morini and Fumagalli 2010:236). To use knowledge, mobilizing subjects is necessary because tacit knowledge inheres in subjects. Subjectivity itself or the “‘potentiality’ of the subject” replaces abstract labor (Morini and Fumagalli 2010:236). Workers who used to be forced to sell their labor and experience alienation in the process of working are expected to bear greater responsibilities and roles, from top-level managers to frontline workers. They are expected to work critically and creatively and engage in more meaningful work (Gee et al 1996:29). In other words, workers are asked more and more to be “active subjects” (Lazzarato 1996:135). The changing characteristics of work and workers are

89 Feminist theorizations of women’s domestic work as unpaid labor as exploited by capitalist accumulation offers a useful ground to define Internet users’ activities as work. The feminist formula of including unpaid domestic labor as exploited work does not see the wage as the only connection to exploitation. What matters is not wage but work itself (Glazer 1984:65). Unpaid domestic labor contributes to capitalist accumulation by bearing the expenses of the reproduction of labor. Women can be more exploited than male waged workers since they are not even remunerated for their work. For more discussions on women’s unpaid domestic labor, see Hennessy and Ingraham (1997). Similarly, a serious amount of work is done by Internet users on different web platforms every day. It is voluntary work which has nothing to do with employment or wage.
not just limited to work spaces but are related to the formation of new subjectivities. A more liberal, volunteer-oriented, entrepreneurial type is promoted not only as the model desirable employee, but also as desirable citizens, students, and leaders. People are not only expected to become but also want to be this kind of desirable subjects. Commitment is not just limited to work space but expanded to their entire lives because it is not just about what kind of employees they are but who they are as people, as subjects.

The development of ICTs has played an important role in restructuring both the mode of production and the subjectivities of workers. While ICTs enable more responsibilities and roles to be distributed to frontline workers, they also train individuals to be knowledgeable workers who can operate digital devices and programs as well as process information. Workers are encouraged to be fully committed to their work not only by means of discourses relating to the “new economy” but also by the ever more ubiquitous environment of ICTs. They are supposed to turn into more active and motivated workers through the practices of using the ICTs, controlling more information, making more decisions, thinking more creatively, and communicating with coworkers and their companies while feeling less alienated at work. The labor which is invested in this process produces immaterial goods, which Maurizio Lazzarato calls “immaterial labor.” Lazzarato defines immaterial labor as activities producing “cultural content” such as fashions, tastes, consumer norms, and public opinions, as well as “informational content” and skills involving cybernetics and computer control (Lazzarato 1996:133). Immaterial labor has been paralleled by the development of ICTs and has reorganized and restructured capitalism in its current form by offering “communication” as a new key interface that negotiates relationships such as production and consumption, producer and consumer, and work and life. In this sense, immaterial labor is involved in the production of “social relations” including “capital relations” which have to be reestablished in this new kind of borderless area (Lazzarato 1996:143).

Building on Lazzarato’s concept of immaterial labor, Tizianna Terranova examines how immaterial labor turns into free labor appropriated by the digital economy. Terranova refers to Don Tapscott’s definition of the digital economy as a “new economy based on the networking of human intelligence” (2000:37). Terranova sees the digital economy as consisting of “specific forms of production” such as web design and multimedia production which we do not recognize necessarily as forms of labor (Terranova 2000:38). Immaterial labor does not occur only as paid labor under official auspices of employment, but also as unpaid labor undertaken by users of
technologies. Terranova points out that knowledge is inherently collective and not just about those who work in the knowledge industry, which “implies a rejection of the equivalence between labor and employment” (2000:46). An important portion of immaterial labor is “free” labor in two ways: it is free in terms of it being “unpaid” as well as being free in terms of being “not imposed” (Terranova 2000:48).

We can find examples of free immaterial labor in present discussions regarding “consumer labor” and “audience labor.” The range of consumer labor is broad, from replacing unskilled labor which used to be done by employed workers but is now conducted by customers for free—for example, serving drinks and cleaning tables at McDonalds and using the self-checkout counter at Home Depot—to creating brand value as loyal consumers and inventing a niche market as an affinity group of a certain subculture. It can be controversial to see activities involved in consumption as labor because those activities seem to not be imposed but are willingly and voluntarily conducted by consumers. Yet while it may be true that there is no clear coercive apparatus forcing people into these activities, it would be overly simplistic to describe it as simply being a matter of people choosing to labor for free. It has to do with a desire to produce oneself as a desirable subject in the labor market, but also to present oneself as acceptable in broader social milieus. Consumption is an important part of identifying oneself because the incentive to consume is not just to “satisfy needs,” but also involves showing that one belongs or ought to belong according to certain protocols of “common sense” (Morini and Fumagalli. 2010:241). Individuals are marketing, valorizing, and branding themselves through consumption, which makes it hard to see consuming activities as labor. But again, even though the activities are not waged as employment and are not imposed in a strict sense of the term, company brands are also valorized and able to extract surplus value through a premium price or higher share price brought from “the surplus community that consumers produce” (Arvidsson 2005:250). This is why we can and need to examine consumption in terms of labor which produces surplus value.

In similar ways, activities of media audiences can be interpreted as labor. Audience labor can be appropriated and commodified through the “exploitation of participation” as well as being a “source of demographic information” (Andrejevic 2008:37). Fandom, created by more active consumers and audiences than those who are just regular viewers, elucidates consumer and audience labor more clearly. Fan labor contributes to the valorization of objects of fandom and
making objects meaningful and valuable not only within fan or affinity communities but also in the market more generally. This type of labor, whatever term refers to it (consumer, audience, fan, digital, or immaterial labor), does not “feel, look, or smell like labor at all” (Scholz 2013:2). It has been categorized as “pure leisure” and even tended to be “anti-commercial,” especially considering the perception fans have of their own activities (Kosnik 2013:108). My respondents are clearly acting, in a sense, in an “anti-commercial” way, yes; but not, explicitly or implicitly, in an “anti-capitalist” way. Moreover, the fact that the amount of revenue resulting from fans’ efforts cannot be measured clearly makes it more difficult to consider consumer, audience, and fan activities as labor (Kosnik 2013:109). However, this difficulty is not an adequate reason for why we do not call these activities labor. Rather, what is required is a further examination of the changing relations of labor against the backdrop of eroding distinction between work and play.

2 The Drama Painter of the Wind and Audience Participation

TV fandom has been one of the venues in which the active participation of audiences and fans has been explored. The Internet plays an important role in shaping TV audiences into active participants and fans. The majority of them might not have recast and reorganized themselves as active participants and fans of certain cultural products had they not been Internet users. The characteristics of the Internet as a medium suits these fans: it involves accumulating knowledge, building communities in the context of common interests, and producing and circulating fan and user-generated content. While existing fans benefit from becoming Internet users in terms of better tools and networks, Internet users easily become fans of something including TV dramas because the medium they are dealing with enhances more active participation and obsession with information.

All Korean TV dramas run websites on the Internet from the very first broadcast of a new program. This has been the case since the three major national terrestrial broadcasting companies (KBS, MBC, and SBS) started digital Internet and digital broadcasting in early 2000. Broadcasting companies will build official websites for a TV drama series and open up online spaces which their audiences are expected to fill (SBS Internet News Team 2010). In addition, various unofficial and unsanctioned online spaces related to these dramas are opened by Internet
users on the Internet web portals offering social networking services such as blogs, mini-homepages, and virtual cafés. DCinside also has many subcategories devoted to TV shows, including TV drama series. The gallery for Painter of the Wind, which aired from September 24 to December 4 in 2008, was also opened under the subcategory of TV shows in DCinside, becoming the central meeting-point for its audience. The gallery produced a lot of user-generated content which became popular on the Internet, as many of DC galleries do, not only while the drama was on air, but also long after the drama was over. While it is always the case for certain TV dramas to have online space and user-generated content devoted to it, audience and fan-made review books are only for TV dramas which have such loyal fans that they would go about producing a review book, as well as other fans so loyal that they would spend money to buy them. Such books are limited to TV dramas not only because of the heavy workload involved in publishing a review book, but also because it takes a long time after the drama itself is already over to produce the book and costs a lot to publish. Whether a review book is created is not always a matter of viewer ratings. Some TV dramas which failed to achieve high ratings have seen audience and fan-made drama review books come out through the pitched efforts of their loyal fans. Painter of the Wind is an example of a TV drama with low viewer ratings, but the loyal fan base was willing to expend the effort to push forward with the production of a book. Painter of the Wind attracted audiences from the beginning due in part to its popular male and female protagonists, played by Shin-yang Park and Geun-young Moon, respectively, who were already well-known actors. It was also noted for its beautiful and artistic visual aesthetics. The drama is the story of two famous Korean painters, Hong-do Kim and Yoon-bok Shin, who lived during the late eighteenth century, during the Choson Dynasty. The two painters are famous historical figures since they are understood to be those who brought genre painting into mainstream painting circles in Korea. The drama is based on the assumption that Yoon-bok Shin disguised herself as a man in order to be a painter, a near-impossibility for a woman in the patriarchal Choson Dynasty which did not allow women to have professional careers. In the beginning of the drama, Yoon-bok begins her life as a disguised male painter in Choson Dynasty’s national academy of art because her foster father aspired to develop his family into one of distinguished artists. Hong-do is also from the same academy and comes to know Yoon-

90 The overall viewer ratings of the audiences for that time slot was 10 percent nationwide, which was the lowest among the three TV dramas on air in the same time slot that were broadcast by three major broadcasting companies.
bok as a young master and disciple. The brushworks of these two highly gifted artists are deployed as being intertwined with the politics of King Jongjo, a famous progressive ruler of the Choson Dynasty. Progressive political reforms, the great artwork of two artistic geniuses, the reversed gender of female protagonist Yoon-bok, love between Yoon-bok and Hong-do, and the secret death of Yoon-bok’s real parents in the context of political strife, are the main components of the dramatic plot.

Figure 5–1. Official Poster for *Painter of the Wind* (Source: SBS)

The drama *Painter of the Wind* claimed to be a historical (fusion) drama (*p’yujŏn sagŭk*). The historical (fusion) drama as a sort of genre can be defined as historical drama composed of both historical facts and fictional components. This genre has become more and more popular in Korea because it enables both producers and audiences to have more artistic license, since this genre does not need to be bound to either exact historical records or present customs. While audiences can enjoy the reality of this drama, which borrows from historical facts, they also
benefited from the liberal imagination which filled the void of historical records. The real paintings of Hong-do Kim and Yoon-bok Shin play an important role in making the fusion between real historical facts and fictional imaginations more plausible, especially the main fictional plot point that Yoon-bok Shin was female. This genre gives the audience more freedom to participate. While fictional creations offer audiences a greater source of material to re-imagine their own history, the historical facts offer audiences genuine sources to satisfy their curiosity for related history. After each episode of the drama keywords researched in real time changed in relation to the paintings and the historical figures that appeared in a given episode. The growing popularity of historical (fusion) drama is well accompanied by expanded user participation taking place through the Internet.

The controversial issues that Painter of the Wind was dealing with played a role in widening the space within which its audiences and users could be engaged. The genre of historical (fusion) drama provides Painter of the Wind with a more liberal framework to imagine history. It also enables its audiences to be more liberal in accepting the settings and situations of the drama. The acceptance of homosexual codes in this drama is a good example of this.91 Yoon-bok, the woman in male attire, develops a relationship with a gisaeng named Chŏnghyang, which is interpreted as both heterosexual and homosexual love since they meet as a man and a woman, but Yoon-bok is in fact a woman. Although there is a main relationship of heterosexual love between Yoon-bok and Hong-do, the interest of audiences in the relationship between Yoon-bok and Chŏnghyang were as strong as that between Yoon-bok and Hong-do, if not stronger. Audiences and fans online became divided along lines between those who cheered for the relationship between Yoon-bok and Chŏnghyang versus that of Yoon-bok and Hong-do. The debates between competing supporters of Yoon-bok and Chŏnghyang and those of Yoon-bok and Hong-do were very severe while the drama was on the air. Those opposed to the Yoon-bok and Chŏnghyang coupling accused supporters of being lesbians. The supporters of Yoon-bok and Chŏnghyang shot back at such charges of homosexuality by claiming that they supported the love between the

91 Ji Hye Kim (2011) analyzes issues of gender and sexuality seen in another historical (fusion) drama titled Sungkyunkwan Scandal (Kim and Hwang 2010) in which a female protagonist dresses up like a man to attend Sungkyunkwan, the national university of Choson Dynasty women were not allowed to attend.

92 Gisaeng were traditional Korean female entertainers who were artists in the fine arts, poetry, and music, as well as prostitutes. While gisaeng enjoyed more liberty than other women in terms of education, the possibility of having an art career, and freedom in terms of romantic relationships in the patriarchal Choson Dynasty, the social status of gisaeng was similar to that of slaves. Women whose names were placed on the gisaeng register were forced to remain as gisaeng until they died, filled their spots with foster daughters, or were paid off by rich civilians or nobles.
two female characters only because it was a situation within the drama (fiction), but also because, whatever the genders of the participants, it was a beautiful love between two truthful characters. From the perspective of the networks that were broadcasting the series, the negative responses and conflicts between the fans were as productive as the positive ones, since gossip, no matter what the tinge, is better than no publicity at all. The turbulence in the gallery discouraged some users from becoming involved in too deeply, but at the same time, kept them monitoring and occasionally responding to the posts. This activity is similar to “buzz marketing” or “viral marketing” in terms of the effects of the activity, and the drama and its actors gained exposure to the public. Even though the drama Painter of the Wind was not successful in terms of viewer ratings, it was popular on the Internet thanks to the ceaseless online debates about its storylines.

The 2008 SBS Annual Award for the Best Drama demonstrated the power of the users. The active users of the Painter of the Wind gallery put in a lot of effort to make their favorite drama and actors win prizes at the Annual Drama Award. One such prize was for best couple in dramas. The couple of Yoon-bok and Chŏnghyang was not even a candidate for this prize, originally, since they were not considered to be a couple by SBS, whereas the couple of Yoon-bok and Hong-do was nominated. The company had to add the female–female couple to the nominating list later because of the fervent demands and protest movements. The users of the gallery exulted over the result of making the company change the nomination list, and encouraged one another to vote for them in order to win the award outright. They even pushed their family members and friends to vote or to give them their personal information such as phone numbers and national registration numbers so that they could do it for them if their relations could not be bothered to do it themselves. Lots of posts were uploaded to the Painter of the Wind gallery. Those posts either encouraged other people to do the same with helpful guidelines on how to do so, or showed off how many votes they had mobilized by means of adventure stories telling how they’d made other people vote for Yoon-bok and Chŏnghyang. Thanks to the passionate efforts of the users, the couple of Yoon-bok and Chŏnghyang won the first round of audience voting, became a candidate for the final round, and eventually actually won the prize. This was the outcome that users of the Painter of the Wind gallery had wished for, but had not really expected.

The dramatic events, forged out of audience labor, are related to the profit-making processes of broadcasting companies in terms, in particular, of advertising effect. The biggest portion of revenue for the three national terrestrial broadcasting companies is advertising revenue. Of gross
profit, 75.5 percent came from advertising revenue in 2002 (Choi SK 2009:10). Advertising revenue composes 70.7 percent of the gross profit for MBC and 74.3 percent for SBS, with government-owned KBS coming in at 42.7 percent (another 41.2 percent of KBS’s revenue comes from mandatory TV license fees; Yi et al 2011:12). Besides advertising revenue and TV licensing fees, content revenue is the biggest source of income for the television broadcasters, revenue that comes from other content providers such as cable TV, satellite TV and Internet content providers including affiliated companies of the broadcasting companies themselves. The content revenue made from the websites of the three major broadcasters reached around US$ 35–40 million in 2008, representing a 20 percent growth rate from the previous year (Choi SK 2009:16). Loyal audiences are the grounds for the marketing of advertisements and content for these television companies. They are also important in terms of being a part of the target market that boosts the revenue earned by the broadcasters through video-on-demand (VOD) services, DVDs, and original sound tracks.93 Even if a given TV drama fails to get high ratings, audience activities on the Internet bring about an advertising effect for a drama, which can affect its future content revenue (Chŏng KH 2008). Audience activities in relation to the drama Painter of the Wind, including their collective activities in relation to the 2008 SBS Annual Award for the Best Drama, gave the drama itself free advertising in addition to the efforts of the broadcasting company, SBS. It also increased the market value of the actors who performed in the drama. While Shin-yang Park and Geun-yeong Mun, the male and female protagonists, were already popular before they acted in Painter of the Wind and might not be overly affected by their performances in this drama,94 other supporting roles including Ch’ae-won Moon acting as Chŏnghyang, Soobin Bae as King Jongjo, and Sŭng-ryong Ryu as the bad guy Cho-nyŏn Kim,

93 A couple of cases of extraordinary success of Korean-wave (hallyu) dramas such as Winter Sonata (Kyŏul yŏn’ga, Yun SH 2002) and A Jewel in the Palace (also known as Daejanggeum, Taejanggŭm, Yi PH 2003–2004) show the potential revenues of the TV drama industry based on audience/fan participation. Winter Sonata, production of which cost US$ 2.7 million, earned US$ 7 million from advertisements, US$ 1.3 million from its original sound track, US$ 100,000 from the Internet VOD service, and US$ 27 million from exporting the drama series. A Jewel in the Palace, with a production cost of US$ 6.4 million, earned US$23 million from advertisements, US$200,000 from copyright in the domestic market, US$ 900,000 from VOD services, US$ 40 million from the theme park based on its production set, US$11 million from exports of the drama series, US$ 3.6 million from copyright for animation, and US$ 2.7 million from copyright for the musical (Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism 2008).

94 In fact, however, this drama affected both Shin-yang Park and Geun-young Moon a great deal. While some rumors on his arrogance and greediness harmed the existing good reputation of Shin-yang Park, Geun-young Moon won the grand prize for best acting at the 2008 SBS Annual Award for Best Drama despite the low viewer ratings and her youth (only 22 years old).
helped these actors to improve their profiles, and thus their market value, as well (Kim ChY 2008).

The characteristics of Internet technologies enhance user participation. Reconstruction of the narratives has been considered to be one of the main activities of TV audiences, an observation that has been made since far before the Internet appeared (Ang 1985; 1991). Audiences who acquired more advanced multimedia tools including the Internet have reconstructed narratives not only through personal imagination and interactions with other audiences in the off-line world, but also by producing new multimedia texts both in the online and off-line worlds. The editing technologies of video and audio enable audiences to reconstruct original dramas into various kinds of new multimedia contexts. The Internet makes the user-generated content even more powerful by vesting much-enhanced distribution power into the hands of ordinary users.

Korean TV dramas from different broadcasting companies have used audience participation, which has and continues to become more and more active, thanks to the Internet. The official websites of TV dramas usually supply different bulletin board systems (BBSs) to gain audience interest. Some of these BBSs are run by staff from broadcasting companies to offer audiences additional content, such as making-of clips and “rare” pictures of actors that are not shown in official episodes. Other BBSs are mainly run by audience members, via the uploading of user-generated content. Audience participation affects the popularity of a given TV drama. Broadcasting companies can benefit from audience participation in various ways: promoting the drama by going viral, enhancing a company’s own official efforts, for example the writing and distribution of press releases; attracting more audiences through user-generated content; and paid streaming services of the drama on websites. Audience participation is deeply involved in the profit-making process of the TV broadcasting industry.95 User-generated content contributes to the revenue of the broadcasting companies mainly by promoting their shows as well as brand images through “audience loyalty” (Foundation for Broadcast Culture 2007:59, 64). Seong-Joon Limb, in his article “What Makes K-Pop So Successful?” (2013) elaborates on how fandom is actively mobilized by star agencies such as YG Entertainment and SM Entertainment and has become the ground for the global success of K-Pop (341). Their participation is encouraged by

---

95 Broadcasting companies have been eager to encourage and harness audience activities. SBS has recruited “supporters” to animate official websites of TV dramas, offering benefits such as coupons gaining 100 free downloads of VODs and invitations to production report conferences and the Annual Award ceremonies (SBS).
broadcasting companies, but is still based on volunteerism. Treasure Island, one of my interviewees, is a member of that audience. She became popular with their creative works in the Painter of the Wind gallery and, later, came to participate in the drama review book project.

I met Treasure Island for an interview on instant messenger at the end of January 2009, just before the review book project started. When she signed in, I recognized her profile picture right away. It was a baby picture of Lee Joon Gi, from when he was around one or two years old. I was familiar with the picture because it was frequently circulated in the Lee Joon Gi gallery at that time. I asked her, “Look at the picture of baby Joon Gi. Are you a fan of Joon Gi?” Treasure Island was shocked that I recognized the picture, typing “What a surprise! Are you Joon Gi’s fan too? You are the first one who recognized this picture. People don’t know this picture unless they are huge fans of Joon Gi. You smell like 토후! [You must be a huge fan of Joon Gi]” This short conversation enabled me to quickly build rapport with Treasure Island. We had fun by making jokes about Lee and the Nunhwa character of the Lee Joon Gi gallery (see chapter 4 for an extended analysis of the Lee Joon Gi gallery and Nunhwa).

I had thought that Treasure Island might be a fine art student or employed in the visual arts since she was famous for her user-generated content that highlighted her artistic skills. She had never been trained, it turned out, in fine arts, but just enjoyed drawing as a hobby. She was self-educated in graphic tools like Photoshop. She became very popular on the Internet due to one of her early artworks, called “One Hundred Expressions” (paek kaji p’yojông). “One Hundred Expressions” is a mosaic work composed of one hundred expressions of Hong-do and Yoon-bok, made out of various snapshots captured from the drama. Treasure Island’s “One Hundred Expressions” was reported in daily newspapers and on TV entertainment programs as an example of active fan participation.
Treasure Island was surprised by and enjoyed the unexpected fame she gained from her artwork. Treasure Island said, “You know what? I didn’t even invent the idea of ‘One Hundred Expressions.’ One day, I saw someone’s post of one hundred expressions of Joon Gi in the Joon gallery. I thought it was so cool. When I became a fan of *Painter of the Wind*, I thought it might be fun to make a similar image. I didn’t expect that it would become that popular at all. What happens on the Internet is pretty fun, isn’t it?” DCinside users call this kind of exposure to their work through mainstream media “receiving kye” (*kye t’ada*). Receiving kye is a slang phrase used on the Internet when user-generated content is shown, recognized, or reported through mainstream media such as daily newspapers and TV shows. Kye originally refers to Korean traditional rotating credit associations, whereby members chip in a certain amount of money and take turns receiving the money in lump sums. Even though every member eventually takes her or his turn to receive kye, the order is decided by lot. That is why receiving kye is somewhat
dependent on the luck of its participants. Receiving kye is good news for Internet users because it makes user-generated content popular, as in Treasure Island’s case. There are various forms of receiving kye (in the context of media and new media activities), in some cases TV show writers use the names of loyal fans for their characters; some actors post fan-made user-generated content on their personal websites; or user-generated content can be reported on by major TV stations, as happened with Treasure Island’s “One Hundred Expressions.” Being popular with and receiving great response to her artwork made Treasure Island indulge in the gallery more and more, a phenomenon which DCinside users call “being addicted to doing gallery” (kaeljil chungdok). Based on her positive reputation, Treasure Island also led a painting competition called “Tongjegakhwa” (Different paintings under the same topic) in the gallery.

Tongjegakhwa imitates one of the main plots of the drama Painter of the Wind. In the drama, Hong-do and Yoon-bok paint pictures according to themes suggested by King Jongjo, in the form of competition. This competition structure was parodied and imitated by users of the gallery, an activity which continued throughout my time there doing fieldwork. In this parody of the TV drama, gallery users decide on their own themes for painting together and then upload each painting to the gallery. Then other gallery users critique the paintings and post comments. The narratives which were important in the original drama are no longer meaningful in the user-generated Tongjegakhwa. Rather, singular moments as captured images from a given episode become important, visual creations that do not need to be bound to the original story or context of the drama. New meanings are created by audiences in this process. This painting competition game became as popular as the real paintings in the drama itself. TV audiences who were also Internet users enjoyed the drama by playing with multimedia tools and creating new content, as well as by following along with the original narratives.
This enjoyable play–work, however, consumes a lot of time. Treasure Island had been using DCinside before she encountered the Painter of the Wind gallery, spending most of her time in the Lee Joon Gi gallery. She rarely uploaded her own content or commented on other users’ posts; in this mode, she was what is referred to as a lurker. She did not feel as if she was a core member of DCinside before using the Painter of the Wind gallery. However, more active engagements changed her patterns of using DCinside. Treasure Island said, “I often stayed up for the whole night to spend time in the gallery. I wrote a lot and read all the posts while I was active in the gallery. It was fun, but it soon affected my everyday life, including my job. I tried to detach myself from my obsession with the gallery, but was not very successful. Look at me now. I’m even involved in this drama review book project! But how can I not be involved in this project? Look at all the staff we work with together. It is so much fun to hang out with them.”

When Treasure Island got into trouble for her excessive gallery activity at home and at work, she could not blame anybody but herself for her new obsession, because nobody pushed her to do so; she voluntarily did it, for fun. She blamed herself for having a lack of willpower and skills in
self-management. If there is a negative result brought about from this voluntary participation and creative fun, the only responsible party is the individual user, not anyone else.

As Treasure Island’s story shows, the affective responses such as “attention,” “hailing,” and “popularity” play an important role in encouraging the voluntary participation and production of users. The tradition of non-financial rewards in online communities has a long history. It originated in the open-source culture of network engineers, hackers, and early network users (Abbate 1999; Kelty 2008; Rheingold 1993; Turner 2006). Sharing software code and content for free creates good feelings and feelings of freedom for participants. It results in better solutions based on collective intelligence. It fulfills their desires to bring a positive impact on society and behave ethically. It composes the morality as well as aesthetics of hackers (Coleman 2009, 2013; Leach et al. 2009). The free sharing culture of Internet communities started from the very beginning of network history and has been taken for granted. This culture has been considered to be “progressive” and “alternative,” working against the capitalist mode of production. As audience activities of *Painter of the Wind* show, however, that capitalist accumulation finds a way to appropriate the free labor based on the free spirit of the Internet.

3 Making a Drama Review Book: A Collective Work of User-Generated Content

While most activities in the gallery are conducted by individual users who aren’t obligated to conduct or carry on with them, collective projects such as making a drama review book are more complicated in terms of the working process, labor organization, market regulations such as copyright issue, and public interests. Dealing with all these complicated issues is completed under the rubric of pleasure, leisure, fun, and being rewarding. My experience making the drama review book *Painter of the Wind* was no different. Indeed it was a fun and rewarding project and this is what I want to investigate. How does capitalism develop a new sociality that exploits free voluntary labor based on pleasure, leisure, fun, and emotional or spiritual reward?

The Painter of the Wind gallery was still active long after the drama ended, kept alive through subsequent activities related to the show such as parodied artwork and commentary DVDs in the gallery. The drama review book project was one of these follow-up activities. The first step in
producing a review book is to gather enough staff for the work. The total number of official staff members was 30, including me. The majority of the staff members were university students, the rest made up of high school students, middle school students, graduate students like me, full-time professionals, and the temporarily unemployed who were preparing for a better job.

The review book project had many obstacles to success. Audiences of the show, including those from the DC gallery, felt the ending of the drama *Painter of the Wind* unsatisfactory compared to the quality of the earlier episodes. Some gallery users as well as fans from other websites laughed at the attempt to publish a review book of the drama since the quality of the episodes was not consistently good. Others hesitated to contribute their reviews and artwork to the review book, doubting the quality of the review book. Nevertheless, the review book project started with an optimistic atmosphere among staff at the end of January 2009. The review book took around six months to be completed in terms of its publication, and then a further three months to finish mailing and coordinating its “official” online flea market for used books, which was run by the review book project team on its official website on café.daum.net.

The review book project team was composed of several sub teams who were in charge of completing tasks such as content review, design, administration, and publication. Each team had a team leader who was in charge of managing the team and fulfilling its assignments on time according to a work schedule. The tasks of all the teams were time-consuming and labor-intensive. My sub team, tasked with reviewing written content, had to first gather all kinds of qualified reviews from various websites, mini home pages, and blogs. After selecting the best candidates of those qualified reviews, my team members had to contact each author of those reviews. If those authors did not allow the review book to use their reviews, my team had to select the next best reviews and contact the authors again. If we could not get approval on a certain review, we ourselves had to write a new review on the given topic. A similar process was applied for the team that was in charge of artwork and images.

Once a review or artwork was chosen, the revision process based on comments by the team’s staff followed. After several rounds of revision, several rounds of copyediting followed. As the content for each part of the book became ready, the design team took over. While the design team was mapping the layout of each page, graphic images, and typography, other teams such as administration and content were helping the design team by doing simple and repetitive work
such as capturing appropriate snapshots from the video files of each episode which would be used in designing the book. Meantime, the administration team was dealing with various complicated issues such as budget, preorders, copyright issues, and communication with the drama production company, the agencies of the actors, and future readers and buyers of the review book on various websites, as well as the official website of the review book.

The substructure and management of the project was quite systematic. Also, the security level of the review book content was very high. The review book project team opened a separate website by using Daum Café to proceed with the collaborative work for the review book based on different levels of membership. A couple Bulletin Board Systems were made accessible to ordinary users who subscribed to the website for the purpose of promoting the review book. Different staff members of the project team had different clearance levels to the BBSs depending on their roles and contributions. The sub team of administration in the review book project team checked the attendance of each member at regular meetings. If staff members missed regular meetings too many times, their staff statuses were lowered such that they came to have limited access to the BBSs in which the review book project was proceeding. If a staff member continued to not participate enough, their staff status was taken away entirely. These kind of managing procedures showed that the review book project team did not trust people who did not devote themselves to the project enough. This was related to a strict prohibition in terms of leaking confidential information and content of the review book, except for a small amount of content created for the purposes of promoting the book in advance. The whole process of making the review book was systematic and strict, which made the review book different from the user-generated content available and given for free on the Internet.

The methodical organization and management surprised me, especially in contrast to the loose and enjoyable atmosphere of working together in actuality. The working process of the drama review book team was far from efficient regarding time spent. Joking and small talk intruded on the work process almost every minute. The work process, however, was efficient enough in terms of producing results, in the form of a fancy, hard-covered, full-colored, 290-page drama review book, which sold out the 600 printed copies long before the book was published.
What intrigued me the most about the process was the time-consuming work which the review book project members willingly and voluntarily took as their responsibility, as well as a sort of entertainment. The pleasure of collective and creative work and the tangible accomplishment in the form of a published book was what the members got out of their labor, particularly from such a huge task as a review book project. The intimate and pleasant atmosphere played an important role in keeping the work environment enjoyable.

The workload of the review book project was quite heavy and demanding since we aimed to finish as quickly as possible by concentrating on the project all together during the two-month winter vacation from school. We had meetings nearly every day, whether team meetings or general meetings, during the first two months. Most team members were quite busy with their everyday life in the off-line world though: one person was writing her master’s thesis; another was working full-time; my team leader was expecting to write his bar exam on February 18, 2009, which happened to be the busiest season for our team and those in charge of reviewing content. We were not able to finish the review book by March 2009, which was the original goal of the project. Moreover, the work speed and the participation slowed down and became less
active as time went on, since most staff members were students and became busy with their spring semester.\textsuperscript{96} We aimed for a deadline of early May, before the midterm exams of the spring semester started. At this point, the administrative team dismissed a number of staff members who had not participated in the project sincerely or eagerly enough.

However, working hard was not the only way to prove one’s sincerity and loyalty to the project. I myself did not work as much as some other core staff members did. There was not that much to do as a member of the sub team being responsible for review content after all the reviews were written, collected, and made ready. Despite my small contributions, I was always welcomed and considered as a loyal staff of the project because I rarely missed a meeting. The members of the drama review book project had many ad hoc working meetings, in addition to two regular meetings online, every Sunday and Thursday. Each meeting took an hour, minimum, but more frequently lasted up to two hours. The meetings were usually loose, and they started out by members playing tricks on one another. There were always many things for us to catch up and share with one another, including gossip related to TV dramas and celebrities and what was going on in each member’s everyday life. There were no complaints about the loose working atmosphere, or at least none voiced, since nobody wanted to ruin the pleasant and intimate atmosphere of our review book team. What I was usually doing at those meetings was amusing myself with other members rather than working hard, which thankfully did not cause any problems. Rather, my relations with other staff members became better and more intimate.

A regular meeting focusing on tasks of the design team held on March 3, 2009, was one of the meetings which show the working atmosphere of the review book team. A lot of small talk having nothing to do with the items on the meeting agenda interrupted the meeting continually. The meeting, nevertheless, carried on, with important items getting resolved.

... … [omissions of conversation of the meeting]

Husky: I’m at a PC bang (Internet café). I want to finish the meeting quickly and go back home to watch Boys Over Flowers [kkot poda namja: a popular Korean TV drama on air at the time]. Even this PC bang plays the original sound track of Boys Over Flowers.

\textsuperscript{96} The academic year in South Korea starts with the spring semester at the beginning of March every year. The spring semester ends at the end of June for college students and in the middle of July for elementary, junior, and high schools. After a couple of months of summer vacation, the fall semester starts in the end of August until a couple of months of winter vacation that takes place during January and February.
Husky: Some staff drew a red line at the end of each review. We should decide on our stamp for that purpose. Well… stamps of Shin or Kim? Logo of the drama?

Star: Stamps sound good to me.

Husky: I know. How about stamping at the end of each review?

… …

Jack: Husky, stop talking about Boys Over Flowers.

Husky: Lol. Jack is turning into an angry devil (hŭkchujak).

Star: Lol.

Jack: I’m going to get rid of Boys Over Flowers… Maybe just get rid of all the male actors only letting female actors such as Kŭmjandŭi…

Rice Tea: Well, each of us can try out these ideas, and we can make a decision at our next meeting because Husky should go watch Boys Over Flowers. Lol.

Husky: Lol.

Jack: Ugh!

Husky: I will leave as soon as we decide this item.

Jack: I’m going to kill you all if you bring up Boys Over Flowers again. It is fine to talk for a while as a joke but it is too much if we have to change our meeting time because of it! You should think. You’re all grown-ups!

Husky: So sorry. T-T

Rice Tea: I just meant to move on to the next item...

Husky: Lol.

Eloquence: Lol. We can’t help it, the drama is too fun!

Jack: Please… I will buy you the DVD of that drama later...

In this meeting, Jack, one of the three core administrators, was the only one who was focused on the items of the meeting, as usual. He looked pretty upset with the distractions of the other staff members. He scolded the other staff but still tried to spare their feelings by making jokes, too.
Husky, one of the three core administrators, was very different from Jack in terms of her laid-back working style. However, Husky was still proceeding with the items of the meeting. This meeting ended up being full of play between Jack and the tag team of Ra-ra-ra and Eloquence.

Jack: What will be best for the stamp, then?
Husky: An image of a brush?
Rice Tea: Brush.
Star: Brush sounds good.
Rice Tea: A touch of brush?
Husky: My face. It will be a great hit!
Rice Tea: Great.
Husky: People will feel like tearing out the review book. Lol.
Star: Holy… I won’t buy it…
Husky: Lol. What the heck, such negative reactions. Lol.
Jack: Look in the mirror.
Husky: … … Okay…
Eloquence: The English initial of Painter of the Wind.
Tomorrow: If we cover Husky’s face with a mosaic, it will be not bad.
Husky: Beef jerky, banana, white pickle, green onion pan cake…
Jack: Excuse me!
Husky: Soya sauce bowl.
Star: =_=  
Eloquence: King Jongjo’s six pack. Lol. ) 王 ( ← Jack’s six pack
Jack: Right.

97 They are all well-known items which Geon-young Moon likes.
Eloquence: ( . ) ← my belly
Jack: Right.
Eloquence: Lol.
Ra-ra-ra: I have been so curious whether the rumor that Jack is a gym rat is true.
Husky: That’s so right.
Jack: T-T
Kiwi: I saw a picture. Hmhahahah~
Husky: $^%^%^%*&(*)&I<<>J*GBT&*
Ra-ra-ra: Wow…
Jack: Oh, stop!
Ra-ra-ra: So unfair… You showed the pic to some staff, but not to others…
Husky: We should let people know Jack is a real man!
Eloquence: Showed to some but not to others…
Ra-ra-ra: I even volunteered to cover one of the interviews…
Eloquence: I’m not going to design pages anymore. What the fuck…
… …
Jack: All right! I will show you the same pictures I showed others. So, stop crying. They are small sized pictures though.
Eloquence: Yeeeeeccccccccccccccccccccccccccccccccccah!
Ra-ra-ra: Yes!
… …

After almost 40 minutes of pestering Jack, Eloquence and Ra-ra-ra got what they wanted.

This generous and intimate relationship in the review book project team was an important part of keeping the hardworking staff happy, since most of them liked joking with each and did not consider this play-making to be inappropriate or unproductive. Even though joking all the time
stopped the flow of work, it was still better than losing staff members who could have quit at any time, since their participation was voluntary. Fun and play established a sense of togetherness and enabled staff members to stick to the hard work put into the making of a review book. Camaraderie plays a crucial role in creating a cohesive whole out of a loose working process and fills the void of material or financial reward for hard work. People work to play and play to work in this environment of voluntary collective work in online communities.

Teasing other staff members was not the only fun the review book team could enjoy; work itself was fun and had significant meaning. Husky worked hard throughout the process of making the review book. She was quite busy with her schoolwork (as an undergraduate student) and her part-time job at a convenience store; she was involved with making the review book in addition to these pressing responsibilities. Husky loved the review book project and its participants. She paid for pizza several times out of her own pocket when some staff members had to meet off-line to work for the review book, even if she was not a part of the tasks being worked on at those specific meetings. There was no doubt that most staff members liked and relied on Husky. She was indeed a big sister in the review book project team. When I asked whether the workload was not too much for her, given that it was a leisure activity that did not yield any financial reward, she responded very modestly that, “It is a lot of work, but I feel kind of honored to do it. I’m in charge of managing a huge project. It would not be possible for me to get such an opportunity in the off-line world. Where else can I experience this kind of work? I think this is awesome. It is a lot of work, but it is fulfilling.”

Many other staff members shared Husky’s view on the reward inherent in the work. As I mentioned above, Guitar-man, my own sub-team leader, who was preparing for the bar exam at the time, was also thinking of preparing for a different exam, to be a producer for a TV broadcasting company or for the production companies of TV dramas. Jack was working as a freelancer and also preparing for exams to be a TV producer like Guitar-man. While they were struggling to achieve their dream jobs in the off-line world, online communities offered them opportunities to do creative work, which helped them with self-fulfillment. While the opportunities did not reward them financially, they fulfilled their urge for creative and meaningful work. In addition, the fact that they were participating in activities online voluntarily seemed to secure some dignity for them because they were doing something that was more than simply struggling to make a living; here they had fun and meaningful work conducted with
goodwill from which other people could possibly benefit. Guitar-man said, “Money doesn’t matter to me when I create something in online communities. I like seeing other people enjoy my work. Whoever wants my work, I really appreciate it. Money has nothing to do with it.”

As Guitar-man pointed out, money is unimportant to many Internet users who produce user-generated content. This is a common feature found in fan activities worldwide. Lukács, in her book *Scripted Affects, Branded Selves* (2010), analyzes the moral involved in fan activities to circulate Japanese drama on the Internet. Even though they violate intellectual property rights, Lukács addresses that fan ethics pursues a “non-profit mission” (188). The review book team also pursue similar fan ethics. Their activities and products should not be involved in profit-making. Money should not be an issue. Unfortunately, however, money really mattered in the process of making our review book, which was difficult because Internet users believe money should not matter. Being away from making profits and sharing information for free are important to online communities, especially in regards to the process of producing user-generated content or actual items. Internet users cooperate with each other to produce user-generated content and actual items for the sake of reducing producing costs. It is a clear rule not to count individual expenses spent in the producing process. Expenses and labor that individual users put in to Internet activities are considered voluntary. If this rule is not kept, the purpose of a given project and the people involved in it are considered suspicious and are targets of severe criticism. The review book project team was also very careful about money. Publishing a book is a project which needs a lot of money, not only for the cost of printing but also for the costs accrued in the process of producing content. Individual staff members willingly spent their pocket money on various things such as transportation for off-line meetings and interviews, meals, and accommodations when they were needed. Also, the budget and expenses were clearly open to the public from the beginning to the end of the project.

Proving the review book project was incorruptible regarding money was one of the most important things in terms of managing the project, because it in fact costs a lot to publish a review book. Again, money really mattered. Scrupulously ensuring sure no profits were made enabled the review book project to gather enough money for printing. In the early stage of book-making, the review book project team promoted the pre-purchase of the volume in the Painter of the Wind gallery as well as in other online communities dedicated to the TV series. It was impossible to print our review book if the printed copies did not reach a certain number,
otherwise the cost would be too high per volume for people to purchase it. The team needed to print at least 600 copies to reduce the price of the book to around $12 per copy. To promote pre-purchase, the review book project team offered a table of contents and several sample pages of the book to demonstrate its quality. The team also offered various special privileges such as small stationery gifts to those who ordered more than one copy. These marketing strategies succeeded and the minimum number of copies sold out in advance.

The marketing and sales project team’s work was not over even after the review book was printed and delivered. Many people who did not purchase in advance wanted to buy it after seeing the high quality of the review book. Some people who ordered more than one copy to get privileged gifts wanted to sell their extra copies. The review book project team prohibited direct bargaining between individuals to prevent them from making profits from the review book by selling it at a higher price. A legitimate official flea market was opened on the website of the review book project. The core administrative staff managed it for several months after the review book project was over.

4 Willingly Exploited?

The main characteristics of Internet users’ work including the work of the review book team are leisure and voluntary work. As a wage cannot in and of itself determine whether a certain activity amounts to labor or not, users’ intentions cannot justify exploitation of the free labor. Leisure time has been defined as a time when workers are not under the direct control of the labor process, and they are able to express themselves and pursue their own desires. Leisure, therefore, is organized around and in opposition to work (Clarke 1976:175; Dunk 1991:153). But what if the working time under the direct control of labor process is not available to people in terms of long-term employment even if they badly want to be employed and under the direct control of labor process? Is division of work and leisure time still meaningful? Moreover, what if leisure time activities can be easily and effectively appropriated for capitalist profit-making?

“Jobless growth” is one of the notorious features of the post-Fordist mode of production. As I discussed in chapter 2, Korean youth are struggling with severe competition through the education system and the labor market. While more than 80 percent of Korean youth enter
college and are educated for the purposes of intellectual labor against the backdrop of a social atmosphere emphasizing creativeness and human capital as a valuable resource, the number of jobs which can enable them to fulfill their educated selves and present themselves as answers of relevance to that which is emphasized socially are limited. Online space and its culture based on user participation and production enable Korean youth to seek self-fulfillment, which they probably want to do through their job, but which is hard to accomplish. Many talented staff members of our review book project, including Eloquence, Husky, Guitar-man, and Jack, show this unfortunate contrast between the reality of the job market and what they are capable of and what they want to be. Their willing attitude in terms of working hard voluntarily is related to the contrast between their unpromising statuses in the context of the labor market and their educated talents. Voluntary labor is mobilized through people’s yearnings for social belonging and “the emergence of an unwaged labor regime” in the post-Fordist era. While Fordist social belonging was fulfilled by “waged labor and public status,” a similar yearning for social belonging finds a solution with the unwaged voluntary work which at least enables people to feel useful to the world (Muehlebach 2011:61–62).

Lukács (2013) elaborates similar aspects of “fulfilling” work and “social belonging” in relation to neoliberal transformations through the experiences of Japanese cell phone novelists. The cell phone novel phenomenon established its popularity by ranking in literary best-seller lists in Japan in 2007 (Lukács 2013:44). The cell phone novel became popular in particular among “freeters” who emerged in the process of “mobilization of youth into a flexible labor regime” against the backdrop of the “recessionary 1990s” and are mostly “young people in their twenties and thirties who drift from one short-term job to another” (Lukács 2013:45). Lukács examines the popularity of the cell phone novel among freeters with the concept “affective labor.” Cell phone novelists see affective labor as an “alternative to the emotional labor” of the service industry in the sense that affective labor enables them to have “the possibility of self-actualization and the means of earning a living” despite the fact that only a small amount of youth is able to make a living by writing cell phone novels (Lukács 2013:58). What interests me the most in Lukács’s discussions on Japanese cell phone novelists is the contrast between the way in which cell phone novel portals generate revenue based on youth’s desire for self-fulfillment and upward mobility and the way in which youth, the cell phone novelists, realize their precarious conditions and get empowered (Lukács 2013:52–53). Lukács points out that cell
phone novel portals show new possibilities for the existing cultural industries like commercial television by cutting labor costs through the exploitation of the unpaid affective labor of amateur novelists, who seek career opportunities as professional novelists (2013:52). As I discussed throughout this chapter on user-generated content, this is a brilliant model for capitalist accumulation. While it appears to be a big triumph for the capitalist mode of production, Lukács delineates other parts composing the whole of the picture illustrating this changing mode of production, the political possibilities for young Japanese people to “understand themselves as new collectivities” and “develop critical insights about work, solidarity, and future” (2013:60).

Similarly, DCinside users’ activities including that of making the review book can be defined as unpaid labor which is exploited in the process of capitalist accumulation. The case of DCinside is somewhat different from the case of Japanese cell phone novels in the sense that DCinside users define their activities as leisure, while Japanese cell phone novelists see writing cell phone novels as hard work, not a “form of leisure” (Lukács 2013:59). Large Korean Internet portals have sections for webtoon (web cartoons), which similarly invite their users to pursue a professional career as a cartoonist. This case more accurately parallels the Japanese cell phone novel. While DCinside users tend to position their activities as anti-commerical leisure, becoming a Japanese cell phone novelist and a Korean cartoonist include monetary reward as an important factor. Despite the difference, they share commonalities in the sense that the majority of work is unpaid, and that they both seek fulfilling work and self-realization.

The term “Web 2.0” creates an illusion of user participation and autonomy of Internet user communities. The new platform of Web 2.0 is designed to encourage its users to create content and add new values which are key sources of revenue for companies that are centered around such servicing platforms: Google, Wikipedia, Facebook, YouTube, Flickr, and Twitter as well as old media enterprises like TV broadcasting companies. While the companies produce technological devices, creating and maintaining the platforms themselves, it is the users who make the platform meaningful by creating both traffic and content. While the producers of the platforms are paid, sometimes getting rich overnight,98 the producers of the content are not financially rewarded. Internet companies such as Facebook and Google do not sell their technical

98 The net wealth of Mark Zuckerberg, the cofounder as well as the current chief executive officer of Facebook was estimated to be US$ 17.5 billion in 2011 while the valuation of company is estimated to be US$ 50–70 billion (Tam and Raice, 2011). The market valuation of Google is estimated to be US$ 200 billion in 2011, which gets Larry Page, its cofounder and the current chief executive officer US$ 16.7 billion.
products; these are given to the users for free. Instead, they make profits from the value of their companies as brands. Their brand-name value enables them to make profits through advertising revenue. Facebook and Google are purely advertising agencies, if we consider the sources of their profits (Choi and Yang 2009). What enables these companies to sell advertisements is the user traffic, the eyeballs that come to and stay on their websites. What makes those eyeballs stay longer on a certain platform is the traffic that is there itself, and the content produced by the users that constitute this traffic. It is a perfect profit-making method, which exploits someone’s time and labor without employing and paying them while letting them think they do all the work voluntarily for their own pleasure and fun (Bermejo 2011; Kim SM 2013; Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010).

It is hard to say how much time exactly my interviewees spend on DCinside and how many posts they make per day because I did not ask them the exact questions to get those answers. They talked to me about how they used DCinside and the Internet in general, which can give a reasonable estimate of how much time they spent on the Internet, including DCinside. Perfect-rose, for instance, told me that she stayed at home a lot using the Internet because she had little money left over after rent and bills. When she was at home, her desktop was always on, and online. “It is possible not to use the Internet, but then what would I do?” she asked me. Beef-bone-broth also used the Internet for long hours while she was at home so as not to be bothered by her constantly fighting parents. As I wrote in chapter 2, No-rain used to be connected to the Joon gallery for 24 hours even when she was not able to be physically in front of her monitor. Madeleine’s presence at DCinside was articulated in similar terms, hinting at long hours online: “I was running in the Joon gallery day and night. If I had studied that hard during my high school, I would have easily entered Seoul National University. Lol.” Husky, as well: “I used to spend a lot of time playing online games. When I was still in elementary school, I would spend the rest of the day online as soon as I got home from school. I played less during junior high and high school because school hours were longer and I had to go to private after-school as well. But I still managed to play games for around four hours per day in between being at school and at the private institutes, except the last year of high school when I didn’t even have enough time to sleep. Once I started running in the Painter of the Wind gallery, all my time for other things such as playing games, meeting friends, and going for a walk was spent on the gallery. The six months I was making the review book, I didn’t do anything else but the review book, school, and my
part-time job at a convenience store. Although I could use the Internet while I was working at convenience store.” Treasure Island had a similar experience as Husky regarding running in the Painter of the Wind gallery.

My interviewees’ stories about their use of the Internet and DCinside emphasize the long hours of use that resulted either because there were no options other than using the Internet due to a lack of material resources, as in the case of Perfect-rose’s. The Internet usage by my interviewees compares with the average usage of 13.9 hours per week in South Korea during my field work period, which is equal to about two hours per day. Further, the number of Internet users who were online 14–21 hours numbered 24.2 percent, those on for 21–35 hours numbered 16.7 percent, and 35 hours and more were only 7.4 percent of the population. Internet users in their twenties were online for a greater amount of time, 18.6 hours per week, or around 2.7 hours per day (KCC & KISA 2009).

The hours my interviewees spent on the Internet contributes to web platform companies in terms of their advertisement revenue. DCinside sells advertisement spots based on the number of visitors and number of page views. The more time its users like my interviewees spend on DCinside, the more page views and the higher number of hits DCinside can have, which is closely related to its advertisement sales. The document titled “Advertisement Unit Price” (*kwanggo tan’gap’yo*) shows how the company DCinside sells advertisements based on user activities (DCinside 2015). The document promotes DCinside as boasting the following statistics:

Daily Average: PV (page view) 50,000,000 / UV (user visit) 1,500,000

Having a 16 Year History: Originator of an Internet Community

Leading in Internet Culture: Republic of Korea’s No.1 Community Site

The following pages of the document give more details about how DCinside promotes the value of its advertisement spots to potential buyers. The company sells on DCinside’s openness and diversity based on the access that users can gain without a membership subscription, its position as an Internet trend leader producing 300 thousand posts per day, 700 thousand to one million comments posted per day, and 30 to 40 thousand hits for more popular posts, all contained within
around 1,700 galleries. It explains that 78 percent of its users are age 18–34, noting that it is this age group who is sensitive to new trends. It emphasizes the user loyalty, which is based on time of stay per visit (110 minutes), which, the document notes, compares well to Facebook (20 minutes) and Twitter (4 minutes). DCinside advertisement spots are included on the main page but rely heavily on galleries for more targeted advertisement since galleries are based on different interests and themes. One of the advertisement spots is the body of each post, which means whenever DCinside users click a new post, a targeted advertisement is shown. The meaningless posts that DCinside users say “excrete” are in fact meaningful in terms of the company’s advertising sales. If a post has good content such as a funny parody image or a sample of collective projects like the drama review book, it will have a high number of hits, which contribute to more advertisement revenue.

Moreover, the ways in which Internet users produce user-generated content resonate with new capitalist methods organizing work and workers in a knowledge economy. McElhinny analyzes and compares the ideologies of the concept “community of practice” in the corporate and feminist literatures (2012). Community of practice, according to McElhinny, is defined in business circles as teams and work groups “assigned specified tasks” and “seen as voluntary, peer-governed, created by members themselves, and held together by a shared passion in the area of the group’s expertise” (2012:237). Community of practice and online collaborative work like the review book project are similar activities. Members of online collaborative work come to practice new logics of work in late capitalism through their autonomous projects and make themselves well prepared for changing work environments in addition to producing values for free. It makes them desirable as a reserve army of labor who are well disciplined through self-learning and produce valuable resources even when they are held in reserve for and from the paid workforce as the unemployed. This is indeed an achievement of the changing mode of capitalist accumulation based on the voluntary participation of Internet users.

As the gallery and the review book project Painter of the Wind show, DCinside users enjoy what they are doing for their own fun and satisfaction no matter how much time and labor is consumed in doing what they do. Their activities directly affect the consumption and reputation of the drama, its actors, and broadcasting and Internet platform companies, including DCinside. The profits produced in this process are seemingly unexpected consequences, which makes it difficult to then associate the process with unfair exploitation. This new structure of capitalist
accumulation is not based on a coercive process but on the autonomous participation of individuals. The matter, therefore, is not whether people join this process voluntarily and freely for their own sakes but how the new mode of capitalist accumulation supports the system in which people’s lives outside of labor time (waged work) come to be exploited in the form of unpaid labor.
Conclusion

My dissertation is about the culture of Korean Internet users who call themselves “Internet freaks” or “surplus (humans)” in self-mocking ways as they gather on DCinside.com. Users of DCinside, my research subjects, produce and post multimedia content commenting on the poor and unpromising lives of Koreans. They have created and promoted various images of social losers, freaks, and surplus populations in styles that they call “DCinside-like feeling” or “full of idiotic tastes,” a culture that I have dubbed “loser aesthetics.” Throughout the dissertation, I elaborate on the meaning-making process of self-reflexive mockery, gender politics based on sexuality, and the exploitation of unpaid immaterial labor. The youth of South Korea have played an important role in creating new cultures of online communities while struggling to find their place in a precarious labor market as well as a subjugated social stratum as the underemployed. Despite their hard work and efforts, most Korean youth come to be disenfranchised and disillusioned because severe social competition allowed only the very best to succeed. Exploring the impact of late industrialization and amplified neoliberalization since the Asian financial crisis, I argue that DCinside users are ambivalent subjects who try to become desirable and successful neoliberal subjects but who, at the same time, are aware of their subordinated status in which they can easily become a failure and fall into the position of social loser. The culture of “anything goes” at DCinside enables its users to speak out in a way that belies the consequences of neoliberalization. This makes up the politics of loser aesthetics at DCinside. Their self-reflexive and self-mocking insights have culminated in the politics of loser aesthetics, creating DCinside into a carnivalesque space where social losers take up power and challenge the components of the dominant social order, such as class and gender. Therefore, I consider loser aesthetics to be a meaningful way of resistance toward neoliberalism.

I encountered DCinside through the cartoon series The World of the Freak in 2002. As I became familiar with DCinside I felt as if I had found what I was looking for: something different. Here I had found something that was not always politically correct, progressive, or innovative, which was what I felt netizens were always striving to be, but something subversive, defiant, or silly, something just ahaehhaeh. I felt as if this something really opened my eyes to the world around me because grasping the implications of the Asian financial crisis (I barely understood how finance works, but it became an everyday vocabulary) and ICTs (I had difficulty even for using
the email) was an overwhelming prospect. Even though I was one of the early users of the domestic networking service, the Internet was a scary new thing to me especially because of all the English words I had to use. Besides, there were so many confusing new terms: globalization, competitiveness (which was hard to figure out how to be more), restructuring (I did not even know what the old structure was like), and mass layoff (which I often ran into through people around me and in media). I felt as if I was a loser because there were so many things I could not figure out, but I kept my secret to myself and tried to hide the fact that I felt as if I were a loser. When I found this sentiment was shared by others in DCinside, it was a relief to know that they too felt this way but coped with it through humor.

I found the same excitement I had for DCinside in my interviewees. They were thrilled when they found DCinside and started to indulge in running in the galleries. I wanted to unpack the uniqueness of DCinside which appeals to countless Korean Internet users including me. I conceptualized its uniqueness into loser aesthetics and situated DCinside in a broader context of Korean Internet culture. The Internet in South Korea has rapidly developed since 1982 and has been an integral part in South Korea’s economic transition from the Fordist mode of production to that of post-Fordism. Korean Internet users are also the people who have struggled with the rapid socio-economic changes of neoliberalization. They have constructed different online identities from netizen to online avatar, Agorian, and malicious commenter. DCinside and Internet freaks emerged in this broader context of Korean Internet culture with their own unique methods of coping with the rapid cultural changes in their homeland.

The loser aesthetics of DCinside are deeply related to the social changes that neoliberalization has brought about. The sentiment of being a loser reflects on the incredible societal pressure on subjects to be self-responsible and self-sufficient while being competitive and a winner. In an attempt to save themselves from loser status, people set out to protecting the middle-class as a goal, and education becomes a strategy to achieve this goal. Youth, in this process, become vulnerable in terms of their newcomer status in the labor market and ideal subjects in terms of creating new commodities as well as new jobs. Most of my interviewees were underemployed youth and told us stories about their lives and their struggles to be desirable neoliberal subjects while finding some dignity in the online world. They are Internet users, freaks, fans, and counterpublics. They are aware of their subordinate status but actively speak out by using the productive power of digital media in their hands. However, their activities based on unpaid work
also contribute to the capitalist mode of production, not through a coercive process, but through autonomous participation. DCinside users, in this sense, are ambivalent subjects. Throughout my dissertation, I have tried to lay all of this ambivalence out in its complicated contradictoriness.

The Internet boom in South Korea under amplified neoliberalism after the Asian financial crisis is the process within which a new social imaginary on the economy was formed to legitimate a new political rationale related to contemporary economic changes. In other words, the Internet became the key media technology of Korean neoliberalization, although internet technology did, in fact, preexist amplified neoliberalism in the country. The significance of talking about this relationship is that such a relation itself would be acknowledged as common elsewhere, for example, as the “dot-com bubble” at the end of 1990s and the early of 2000s affected both North America and South Korea, showing how flows of speculation funds targeted the newly emerging IT industry. My study of the South Korean case can contribute to understanding the connection between the Internet and neoliberalism, with its particular focus on the position of youth within the social field marked by those two factors, and the intensity of amplified neoliberalization in late industrialized countries like South Korea. Internet users who have gone through neoliberalization have used the Internet as a tool to become desirable neoliberal subjects as well as to reflect on and resist neoliberalism at the same time. The formation of new neoliberal subjects mediated by the Internet is what I have tried to elaborate through my ethnography and is related to articulating the politics of loser aesthetics. I see loser aesthetics as a meaningful way of resisting neoliberalism in terms of self-reflexive and self-mocking insights as well as the carnivalesque of DCinside. Stranger sociability and interactions among users turn the self-reflexivity and mockery into a collective, ironic humor of a sort that is beyond cold sarcasm. While individuals try to fulfill neoliberal norms, they experience the discrepancy between neoliberal ideologies and the failures of such ideologies. The formation of neoliberal subjectivities, in this sense, is an on-going process of negotiation, contestation, and reconfiguration. Both the conformity and the resistance emerge in this same process because the borderline between what amounts to being mainstream and what amounts to resistance has never been clear cut, but has always been porous. Internet freak youth is a good window to show how that complicity in and reproduction of the mainstream system can actually co-exist within a particular way of resistance. Loser aesthetics can be a key to learn about the double-edged subaltern politics taking place in neoliberal South Korea.
Let me close up my conclusion by opening up another window. The phenomenon of “Ilbe” has sprung up in the period since I finished my field research. Ilbe is an abbreviation of a website titled The Best Daily Posts Archive (Ilgan pesŭt‘ŭ kesimul chŏjangso, www.ilbe.com). Despite being known and promoting itself as having a culture of anything goes, posts slandering others in ways assessed as “extreme” can be and have been deleted by DCinside staff based on reports by other DCinside users. Ilbe was created by a small group of DCinside users who were disgruntled that certain posts had been deleted. The name of this website literarily means an archive of the best daily posts of DCinside. Ilbe has evolved into an extreme right-wing website in which posts are mostly slanderous, especially and explicitly targeting minority groups including women, foreign workers, and people from Jeolla province (Jeolla province has a long history of stigmatization in Korea, is considered by many to be backward and out-of-the-way, yet looms large in social activist imaginaries due to key roles people from the province played in democratization movements, particularly throughout the 1980s). Ilbe users slander such groups as undeserving interlopers on the wealth of South Korea, stealing jobs and tax money from Korea’s productive members (i.e. men from Korea’s more affluent jurisdictions).

I have been interested in Ilbe for some time because it was derived from DCinside and reveals the possibilities of different interpretations of the online culture of “anything goes.” This interest crystallized after an event which Ilbe members expanded from their online posts into the off-line world and in doing so brought about a huge public sensation in Korean society. On September 9, 2014, Ilbe members gathered in Seoul Square for an “overeating strike” (p’oksik t’ujaeng) setting themselves symbolically against a hunger strike taking place nearby by groups of parents protesting after having lost their children in the Sewol Ferry disaster of April 16, 2014 (a total of 304 people perished in the incident, many of them high school students; the resultant national trauma was deeply inflected by the fact that many of the victims were filming themselves as well as talking and texting in real time with loved ones using ICTs as the ferry sank). The parent group had been demonstrating as part of their demands that the government enact a special law to get to the bottom of the ferry accident, since the group saw it as a consequence of a corrupt social system. Around 100 members of Ilbe ate pizza and chicken in front of the hunger-striking group of mourning parents. The message Ilbe members tried to deliver was in chorus with other activist conservative citizen groups, who insisted that the parent group was blaming the
government over an “accident,” draining government resources and weakening it, particularly from threats from North Korea.

There have been several occasions in which DCinside users take action in the off-line world. For example, DCinside users created a group named “Invincible Army of Polling” (mujŏk ŭi t’up’yo pudae) and joined street demonstrations to encourage polling the general election (held on April 15, 2004), and most especially young generations. They created and posted humorous parodistic images made up of propaganda posters from Germany and the Soviet Union during World War II to encourage polling in online space. This movement was a resistance to the presidential impeachment of President Roh Moo-hyun passed by a collaboration of conservative parties in March 2004. As a result, the ruling party won the majority of votes in the general election. DCinside users especially from the Sundry Food gallery (kit’a ŭmsik kaellŏri) also participated in the Candlelight Rallies in 2008 by creating a group named “Invincible Army of Seaweed Roll” (mujŏk ŭi kimbap pudae). Their main job was to ask for donations and supply free seaweed rolls as a meal to the rally participants. Political actions of DCinside users which expand to the off-line world have been prodemocratic or liberal. Ilbe’s political action expanded to the off-line world was different.

What was striking to me about Ilbe’s overeating demonstration was the way in which important components of loser aesthetics such as humor and satire, the culture of “anything goes,” and deliberately shoddy styles have created a new style of political action on the part of the right wing. The phenomena of Ilbe gives me a lot to think about regarding my interpretation of loser aesthetics as meaningful resistance against neoliberalism. I do not mean that the phenomena of Ilbe changed my thoughts about DCinside and its politics of loser aesthetics. I still believe that loser aesthetics of DCinside is a meaningful resistance to neoliberalization. However, the phenomenon of Ilbe has made me start thinking about the diverse directions it can take. The extreme right-wing move of Ilbe users sheds light on neoliberalism as a complex set of assemblages, including, in particular, an assemblage of interrelations between neoliberalism and neoconservatism. Also, the activities of Ilbe users show, as I discuss in the introduction, how seemingly similar formats of cultural politics can be used both to open and suppress a space for different voices. Their extremist actions show not only the discontent and dissensus that can take place within loser aesthetics, but how these can become reactionary towards loser aesthetics by
means of people taking up the position of winners by differentiating themselves from disadvantaged groups such as women, foreign workers, and people from less privileged regions.
Bibliography

Abbate, Janet

Abelmann, Nancy

Abu-Lughod, Lila

AGB Nielsen

Amsden, Alice H

An, Jungbae, and Dongwon Jo
2012a Interview of Jake Song (February 8).
2012b Interview of Jiho Kim (March 10).

An, Jungbae et al

An, Jungbae
2012 Interview of Hyunje Park (May 18).

An, Su-ch’an, Int’aek Im, Chi-sŏn Im, Chong-hwi Chŏn

Anagnost, Ann, Andrea Arai, and Hai Ren

Anderson, Amanda

Anderson, Benedict

Andrejevic, Mark

Ang, Ien

Appadurai, Arjun

Arvidsson, Adam

Asia Economy Online Issue Team
2015 Tae kiyŏp p’yŏnggyun yŏnbong 7500 manwŏn [The Average Annual Salary of the Major Companies is US$ 75,000] Asia Economy, June 8

Associated Press

Azuma, Hiroki

Bakhtin, Mikhail

Barker, Joshua, Erik Harms, and Johan Lindquist

Barker, Joshua

Baym, Nancy K.

BBC News

Benjamin, Walter

Bermejo, Fernando

Bird Man

Boellstorff, Tom et al

Boellstorff, Tom

Booth, Paul

Booth, Wayne C.

Burchell, Graham

Bury, Rhiannon
2005 Cyberspaces of Their Own: Female Fandoms Online. New York: Peter Lang.

Busker, Rebecca Lucy

Butler, Judith

Dewey, Caitlin

Campus & Society Watch

Castells, Manuel

Chang, Kyung-Sup

Ch’ae, Kyŏng-ok

Ch’oe, U-kyu
Cheah, Pheng

Cho, Chun-sang
http://legacy.h21.hani.co.kr/h21/data/L980511/1p5s5b01.html, accessed July 20, 2015.

Cho, Haejoang

Cho, Hui-yŏn
1998 Han’guk ŭi minjujuŭi wa sahoe undong: Pip’an·silch’ŏn tamnon ŭi pokwŏn ŭi chae kusŏng ŭl whhayŏ [Democracy and Social Movements in South Korea: For the Restoration and Reconfiguration of Critical Practical Discourse]. Seoul: Dangdae.

Cho, Tong-il

Choe, Sang-hun

Choi, Jang-jip

Choi, Jun-Ran
2012 <Kaegŭ k’onsŏt’ŭ: saengghwal ŭi palgyŏn> ŭi utŭm k’odŭ punsŏk. [A Study on Core Elements Provoking Laughter of <The Discovery of Life in Gag Concert>]. Munhwa t’ŏhagi k’ont’ench’ŭ [Culture Puls Content] 1:38–49.

Choi, Min-chae, and Sŭng-ch’an Yang
2009 Int’ŏnet sosyŏl midiŏ wa chŏnŏllijūm [Internet Social Media and Journalism]. Seoul: Korea Press Foundation.

Choi, Se-kyŏng

Choi, Yŏng-hun and Yong-sun Kim

Chon, Kilnam


Chon, Kilnam, ed.


Chon, Kilnam, et al
Chon, Kilnam, Hyungje Park, Jinho Hur, and Kyungran Kang
2013 A History of Computer Networking and the Internet in Korea. IEEE Communications

Chon, Kilnam and Jake Song
2012 Interview by Kuk-hyŏn Kim. Int’ŏnet 30 nyŏn taga ol mirae nŭn? [After 30 Years of the
Internet, What Will the Future Be Like?] DevOn 2012. 69.01 mins. Daum Communication,

Chon, Kilnam, Hyunje Park, and Heasoon Cho
https://docs.google.com/a/haja.or.kr/viewer?a=v&pid=sites&srcid=ZGVmYXVsdGRvbWFpb
nxrb3JLYWldGVybV0aGlzdG9yeXxneDplMjI3MTM0OTY0YjExNDbK, accessed July 20,
2015.

Chŏn, Ki-sang

Chŏng, Hyŏn-chu
2003 “Ŏmma-appa ka p’ilyo haeyom”: Saibŏ kajok, tto hana ŭi saenghwal kongdongch’e [“I
need mom and dad”: Cyber family, another living community]. In Tto Hana ŭi Munhwa, vol.
17: Nugu wa hamkke sal kŏt in’ga: Saero ssŭnun kajok iyagi [Alternative Culture Vol. 17:
Seoul: Tto Hana ŭi Munhwa.

Chŏng, In-sŏl. 2014. Samsŏng chŏnja 10 nyŏn ch’a, SKT 13 nyŏn ch’a “ŏk tae yŏnbong” [Ten
Years Working at Samsung and 13 Years Working at SKT Gets Employees US$ 100,000 in
Compensation]. The Korea Economic daily, April 1.
2015.

Chŏng, Kyŏng-hwa
2008 Tûrama rŭl sarang handa myŏn te chŏkkŭk chŏk ŭro [Be More Active If You Love TV
Drama]. Mydaily, January 23.
January 17, 2015.

Chosun Ilbo
1995 Chosŏn ilbo segi chŏngbo hwa p’orŏm “sanŏp hwa enŭn nŭjŏt chiman chŏngbo hwa eŭn
apsŏ kaja” [(21#) Century Information Forum “Although Industrialization Was Late, Let’s
Informatize in Advance”]. Chosun Ilbo, March 5.

Chung, Jae-a
dissertation, Department of Anthropology, Rice University.
Clarke, John

Coleman, Gabriella E.

Creighton, Millie

DCinside
2015 Kwanggo tanga p’yo [Advertisement Unit Price]

Dean, Mitchell

Dongbang Kihoek

Dunk, Thomas W.

Electronic Times

Erwik’usū
2009 Abat’a kwallyŏn kŭn’gŏ (2000 nyŏn 6 wŏl 15 ilja p’ūrich’ael meil chung esŏ) [Supporting Data for Avatar: From Freechal Email on June 15, 2000]

Farivar, Cyrus

Fiske, John
Foucault, Michel

Foundation for Broadcast Culture

Fu Su Yin, Kelly, and Kai Khiun Kiew

Ganti, Tejaswini

Gee, James Paul, Glynda Hull, and Colin Lankshear

Giddens, Anthony

Ginsburg, Faye D., Lila Abu-Lughod, and Brian Larkin, eds.

Glazer, Nona Y

Gordon, Andrew

Gordon, Collin

Gray, Jonathan, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington, eds.

Hahm, Inhee
2012 Sahoe kyŏngje chŏk wigi wa chungsanch’ŭng kajok ū “p’umwi harak” [Socio-Economic Crisis and “Falling from Grace” of the Middle Class Family in Korea]. Han’gukhak yŏn’gu [Korean Studies] 43:531-569

Hahm, Inhee, Tong-wŏn Yi, and Sŏn-ung Pak
2001 Chungsanch’ŭng ūi chŏngch’esŏng kwa sobi munhwa [Middle Class Identity and Consumer Culture]. Seoul: Chimmundang.

Ham, Yŏng-hun

Han, Ju Hui Judy

Han, Ok-chu
2011 “Samagwi yuch’iwŏn,” kasŭm ap’un taegiŏp ch’wijik hanŭn pŏp konggae [“Mantis kindergarten” Introducing a Heartbreaking Method to Get into a Major Company]. Etoday, October 16.

Han, Se-hŭi
2010 Intŏnet idiom #13 ingyŏ [Internet Idiom #13 : “Surplus”]

Han, Yun-hyŏng

Hankooki.com News Team
2005 Chŏngbu ‘int’ŏnet silmyŏngje’ kŏmto [State reviewing the Internet Real-name Policy]. Hankook Ilbo, June 16.

Harvey, David


Hŏ, Sang-su 2006 Han’guk sahoe wa chŏngbo t’ongsin kisul [Korean Society and Information and Communication Technologies]. Seoul: Paesan Sŏdang.


Hong, Doo-seung 2005 Han’guk ŭi chungsan ch’ŭng [The Middle Classes in Korea]. Seoul: Seoul National University Press.

Hong, Sang-su
2001 O! Sujŏng [Virgin Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors].

Hong, Sŏng-bae

Huws, Ursula

Hwang, Sang-min

Hwang, Sun-ku

Im, Hye-yŏng

Im, Hyŏn-ch’ŏl

Im, Kwon-taek
2002 Chihwaseon [Ch’ihwasŏn, Drunken Master of Fine Art]

Incorvaia, Antonio and Alessandro Rimassa

Incruit
Interview of Kilnam Chon (Sunyoung Yang, May 9, 2008)

Itoch, Makoto

Janelli, Roger L.

Jang, Hee-Chang

Jenkins, Henry

Jin, Dal Yong

JobKorea

Joo, Eunwoo

Joo, Miyung Rachael

July1983
2007 Tisiinsaidŭ 3 dae yujŏ [The Top Three Malicious Commenters of DCinside].
http://kin.naver.com/knowhow/detail.nhn?d1id=8&dirId=8&docId=484354&gb=7KCE71Sk7 J2YI0vVhe2UjOufA==&enc=utf8&section=kin&rank=6&search_sort=0&spq=0&sp=1&pid=gm33hdo15UNsv4DeFhss--292538&sid=Th33VfKyHU4AAGS%40Jbg, accessed July 20, 2015.

Jun, Euyryung
2012 “We have to transform ourselves first”: The Ethics of Liberal Developmentalism and Multicultural Governance in South Korea. Focaal 64:99–112.

Kang, Hŭi-chong

Kang, Hye-sŭng

Kang, Nam-kyu
1995 Yŏndae sahŭl kan song chŏngch’I munhwaje [Yonsei University Holding a Three-day Cultural Festival of the Politics of Sexuality]. Hankyoreh Sinmun, Ocotorber 11.

Kang, Sang-hyŏn

Kang, Youn-gon

Korea Communications Commission and Korea Internet & Security Agency
Kelly, Tim, Vanessa Grayand, and Michael Minges  
2003 Broadband Korea: Internet Case Study. International Telecommunications Union, March.  

Kelly, William  

Kelty, Christopher M.  

Kendall, Laurel  

Kim, Ch’ae-hyŏn  
2011 “Samagwi yuch’iwŏn” Taegiŏp ch’wijik hanŭn pŏp konggae “1 nyŏn alba hamyŏn 1 nyŏn hakpi [“Mantis Kindergarten” Introduces a Method to Enter a Major Conglomerate: “Work for One Year to Pay for Tuition for One Year”]. Newsen, October 16.  

Kim, Chae-yun  

Kim, Dae-jung  

Kim, Dong-hyŏn  

Kim, Hoon-soon, and Min-jeong Kim  

Kim, Hwan-p’yo  
2012 P’aendŏm ŭi yŏksa: Injŏng t’ujaeng ŭl wihan ch’iyyŏhan momburim inga (1)” [The history of fandom: Is fandom a fierce struggle for recognition?], Inmul kwa sasang [Figure and Thought] 176:161–185.
Kim, Hyun Mee  

Kim, Hyun-ji and Dong-sook Park  

Kim, Ji Hye  


Kim, Mira  


Kim, Ŭjun  

Kim, Poong  

Kim, Sang-min  
Kim, Su-hwan

Kim, Seung-kyung
1997 Class Struggle or Family Struggle?: The Lives of Women Factory Workers in South Korea. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kim, Tae-ung

Kim, Ŭn-sil

Kim, Yong-ju and Sang-ok Yi

Kim, Yŏng-Kyŏng

Kim, Yu-sik
2004 Intŏnet sŭt’a kaejuk a taehanminkuk ūl chikyŏra! [Internet Star, Kaejuk, Protect South Korea!] Seoul: Raendŏm Hausŭ Chungang.

Kimi, Sŭng-yŏn and Chŏng-ae Pak

Kimjŏng, Hŭi-wŏn
2007 Ch’angejŏk konggongjae was saeroun si konggan ūl mandŭ nŭn saram tŭl: Minihom’i wa pŭllogu rŭl chungsim ŭro [People Making the Creative Commons amid New Time and Space: Focus on Mini homepi and Blog]. In Int’ŏnet kwa asia ūi munhwa yŏn’gu [Internet and Cultural Studies in Asia]. Cho(han) et al, eds. Pp. 79–120. Seoul: Yonsei University Press.

Kkoma wa changgun

Ko, Yangwoo, Jungbae An, and Dongwon Jo
2012 Interview of Jinho Hur (January 5). 
https://sites.google.com/site/koreaInternethistory/interview/interview-for-writing-a-book/jhhur,

Koc, Alican A. 
2014 White Skin and White Masquerades: The Performativity of “Whiteness” at Trinity 

Korea Communications Commission and Korean Internet & Security Agency. 
July 20, 2015.

Korean Framework Act Law No. 11290
http://www.law.go.kr/%EB%B2%95%EB%A0%B9/%EC%B2%AD%EC%86%8C%EB%85
%84%EA%B8%B0%EB%B3%B8%EB%B2%95 (in Korean) and  
http://english.mogef.go.kr/data/FRAMEWORK%20ACT%20ON%20JUVENILES.pdf (in 

Korea Internet Safety Commission
2000 Net’ijun yunri kangryông [The Netizen Ethics Code].  

Kosnik, Abigail De
2013 Fandom as Free Labor. In Digital Labor: The Internet as Playground and Factory. Trebor 

Kostakis, Vasilis 
2009 The Amateur Class, or, The Reserve Army of the Web. Rethinking Marxism: A Journal 

KTF Main Episode
2002 http://www.adic.co.kr/gate/video/show.hjsp?id=I91523 /  
http://www.advertising.co.kr/ads/list/showTvAd.do?ukey=102321&oid=&pageNumber=39, 

Ku, Kap-u and Chŏng-sik An
2009 Kim Yŏng-sam · k’ŭllint’on chŏngbu sigi hanmi kwangye [Korean—America relations 
between Kim Young-sam and Clinton governments]. Yŏksa pip’yŏng [Critical Review of 
History] 88:244–278.

Kwŏn, Man-u 
1996a Pusan kalmaegi nalgae rŭl talda [Pusan Seagulls Get Their Wings]. Chosun Ilbo, May 
30:39.
1996b Chŏngbo hwa sahoe e kŏlmat nŭn chawŏn pongsa [A New Volunteer Job Appropriate 
Kwŏn, Wŏn-ik
2005 Wang ŭi Namja [The King and the Clown].

Lamb, Sarah

Laningham, Scott

Lawson, Mark

Lazzarato, Maurizio

Leach, James, Dawn Nafus, and Bernhard Krieger

Lee, Dae-hyen

Lee, Soo-young

Lee, You-kyung

Lemke, Thomas

Lie, John

Lim, In-sook

Lim, Jung-yeon

Limb, Seong-Joon

Lin, Angel, and Avin Tong

Lukács, Gabriella

Mankekar, Purnima

Martin, Emily

Marx, Karl

McCurry, Justin

McElhinny, Bonnie


McLuhan, Marshall

McQuail, Denis

Media Trend Team of Korea IT News

Meyer, Birgit

Miller, Daniel

Mimesis

Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism
2008  Nara rŭl k’iunun pangsong yŏngsang k’ont’ench’u yuksŏng pangan-pangsong yŏngsang sanŏp chinhŭng 5 ka e nyŏn (’08~’12) Kyehoek [Plans Promoting Video Broadcasting Content as a Means of Developing the Country: A Five-year Program for the Promotion of the Video Broadcasting Industry (’08~’12)].

Ministry of Education

Ministry of Science, ICT, and Future Planning and Korean and Korean Internet & Security Agency
2013  2013 nyŏn int’ŏnet iyong silt’ae chosa yoyak pogosŏ [The Summary of the 2013 Survey on Internet Usage]. file:///C:/Users/yaaaaa/Downloads/131217%C3%81%C2%B6%C2%B0%C2%A3+%C3%82%C3%BC%C3%AD+2013+%C3%80%C3%8E%C3%85%C3%8D%C2%B3%C3%9D%C3%80%C3%8C%C2%BF%C3%AB%C2%BD%C3%87%C3%85%C3%82%C3%81
Ministry of Science, ICT, and Future Planning and National Information Society Agency
2014 Kukka ch’ŏngbohwa 20 nyŏn ŭi kirok [The Record of 20-year National Informatization].
http://www.nia.or.kr/bbs/board_view.asp?BoardID=201111281502566361&id=14452&Order=

MK Business News
http://newslibrary.naver.com/viewer/index.nhn?articleId=1969022000099201004&editNo=1
&printCount=1&publishDate=1969-02-20&officeId=00009&pageNo=1&printNo=904&publishType=00020, accessed July 20, 2015.

Morini, Cristina, and Andrea Fumagalli

Morris, Pam ed

Muehlebach, Andrea

Mueller, Milton L.

Mun, Ch’ang-chae

Myŏng, Sŭng-ŭn

Na, Myŏng-Su
2008 Igŏt i agora ta [This is Agora]. The Quarterly Ch’angbi 144 (Fall):94–101.
Nardi, Bonnie

National Internet Development Agency of Korea

Nelson, Laura C.

Nightingale, Virginia

O’Reilly, Tim

OECD

Oh, Myung, and James F. Larson

Ŏm, P’an-yo

Ong, Aihwa

Paek, Ho-min
2011 Yongmang ŭi pulkkot [The Flame of Desire]. MBC.
Paek, Chi-yŏng, and Ki-ho Uhm, ed

Paek, Uk-in, ed

Paik, Young-gyung


Pak, Kwŏn-il
2009 88 manwŏn sedae ron i umul e ppajin nal [The Day when the Talk of the $800 Generation Fell Down into a Deep Well].
http://xenga.tistory.com/entry/88%EB%A7%8C%EC%9B%90-%EC%84%B8%EB%8C%80%EB%A1%A0%EC%9D%B4-%EC%9A%B0%EB%AC%BC%EC%97%90-%EB%B9%A0%EC%A7%84-%EB%82%A0, accessed July 20, 2015.
2010b Kukka ka ch’immolhan kot esŏ inyang toen natsŏn airŏni [Irony Picked up Where the State Was Sunk]. Chaŭm kwa moŭm [Consonant and Vowel] (July/August).
http://xenga.tistory.com/entry/%EA%B5%AD%EA%B0%80%EA%B0%80-%EC%B9%A8%EB%AA%B0%ED%95%9Ce-%EA%B3%B3%EC%97%90%EC%84%9C-%EC%9D%B8%EC%96%91%EB%90%9C-%EB%82%AF%EC%84%A0-%EC%95%84%EC%9D%B4%EB%9F%AC%EB%8B%88%EC%9E%90%EC%9D%8C%EA%B3%BC%EB%AA%8%EC%9D%8CR, accessed July 20, 2015.

Pak, Mi-chu
2011 Ch’ŏngch’i un k’onsŏt’ŭ, “chŏngch’i t’ok’ŭ syo ro pyŏnsin [Youth Concert Changing into “Political Talk Show”] Asia Economy, November 24.

Pak, Pyung-young

Pak, Sŏng-hŭi

Pak, Su-sŏn

Park, So Jin and Nancy Abelmann

Park, So Jin

Peck, Jamie and Adam Tickell

Papastergiadis, Nikos

Rancière, Jacques

Review Book Project Team Painter of the Wind
2009 Param ŭi hwawŏn ribyu puk kŭrigo kŭrimyŏ [Drama Review Book Painter of the Wind: Drawing and Longing].

Ribeiro, Gustavo Lins
Ritzer, George, and Nathan Jurgenson

Rheingold, Howard

Rose, Nicolas

Ross, Sharon Marie
2008 Beyond the Box: Television and the Internet. Blackwell Publishing.

Russo, Mary

Rye, Hyŏn-chŏng

Salmon, Andrew

Sassen, Saskia

Scholz, Trebor

Schweingruber, David, and Michelle Horstmeier

Seo, Dongjin
2005 Chagi kyebal ŭi ŭiji chayu ŭi ŭi ji: Chagi kyebal tamnon ŭl tonghae pon han’guk chabon chuŭi chŏnhwan kwa chuch’e hyŏngsŏng [The Will to Self-empowerment, the Will to Freedom: The Understanding of the Transition of Korean Capitalism and the Transformation of Subjectivity through the Self-empowerment Discourses]. Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Sociology, Yonsei University.
2009 Chayu ŭi ŭi ji chagi kyebal ŭi ŭiji: Chagi kyebal tamnon ŭl tonghae pon han’guk chabon chuŭi chŏnhwan kwa chuch’e hyŏngsŏng [The Will to Freedom, the Will to Self-empowerment: The Birth of Self-empowering Subject in Neoliberal South Korea]. Gyeonggido: Dolbegae.

Shin, Jeeyoung

Shin, Kwang-yeong
2004 Han’guk ŭi kyekŭp kwa pulp’yŏngdŭng [Class and Inequality in Korea]. Seoul: Ülyumunhwasa.

Sim, Kwang-hyon, and Editorial Group

Simmel, Georg

Sim, U-chang

Sin, Tong-hun
Sŏ, Su-min

Son, Ch’ang-sŏp

Song, Jesook

Song, Ŭn-yŏng

Song, Yŏng-ok
1995 Sin sedae sŭt’ūresŭ haesoch’aek, ch’ŏngsonyŏn 5% na to obba pudae, 2 ch’ŏn 2 paek myŏng chosa [New Generation’s Solution of Stress Reduction, 5% of Youth Say Is Being a Member of “Troops For Big Brother,” Based on Survey of 2,200 Youth]. Kukmin ilbo, May 11.

Standing, Guy

Statistics Korea and Ministry of Gender Equality & Family

Tam, Pui-wing, and Shayndi Raice

Tae, Hee-won

Terranova, Tiziana

The Korea Economic Magazine
2009 Neowiz, Freechal, Daum, abat’a chaemi ssol ssol [Neowiz, Freechal, Daum, Making 
Good Profits with the Avatar]. The Korea Economic Magazine (342), June 24.  

The Korea Internet Safety Commission  
2000 Net’ijŭn yunri kangryŏng [The Netizen Ethics Code]. http://www.i- 
museum.or.kr/sub04/04/netiquette_read3.jsp, accessed December 9, 2014.

The Kyunghyang Shinmun  
1972 Kwahak han’guk taji nŭn k’ŏmp’yut’ŏ ŭi kisu Sŏng Kisu paks [Dr. Ki-Su Sŏng, Flag 
Bearer of the Establishment of Computer Science in Korea]. The Kyunghyang Shinmun, 
March 2.  
http://newslibrary.naver.com/viewer/index.nhn?articleId=1972030200329205003&editNo=2 
&printCount=1&publishDate=1972-03-02&officeId=00032&pageNo=5&printNo=8129&publishType=00020, accessed July 20, 
2015.

Turgenev, Ivan Sergeevich  
1954 Rudin: A Novel, translated by O. Gorckakov Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing 
House.

Turkle, Sherry  
20th anniversary ed.

Turner, Fred  
2006 From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the 

Ul  
2006 Tisip’yein taehoe [DC Freak Contest].  
http://gall.dcinside.com/board/lists/?id=hit&s_type=search_name&s_keyword=%EC%9A%B8, accessed July 20, 2015.

Uhm, Ki-ho  
2010 Ikŏt ŭn wae ch’ŏngch’un i aniran malinga [Why Isn’t This Youth?]. Paju-si, Gyeonggi-do: 
Prunsoop.

Virno, Paolo  
2003 A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life. Los 
Angeles: Semiotext (e).

Warner, Michael  

Wel k’ŏmyunik’eisyŏnjū
2002 Chŏng Usŏng, sarang hal ttæ sarang man handa —KTF Mein [Woosung Jung, I Only Love When It Is Time for It—KTF Main.  

Whedon, Joss 
1997–2003 Buffy the Vampire Slayer.

Williamson, Lucy 

Woo, Sŭng-hyŏn 

World Economic Forum 

World Health Organization 

Yang, Min-kyŏng 
2006 Chun’gi ya chik’yŏ pogo itta!: Tisi Chun’gi kael nunhwa sirijŭ ingi” [“Joon Gi, We Are Watching You!”: The Popularity of the DC Joon gallery “Nunhwa series”]. Tisi insaidŭ nyusŭ [DCinside News], February 17, 2006.  

Yi, Ch’ŏl-hyŏn 

Yi, Chae-sŏn 
2008 pabo ŭi mihak kwa chŏngch’i [Aesthetics and Politics of Fool]. In Han’guk ŭi utŭm munhwa [Humor Culture of Korea], Kim Yu-jŏng T’ansaeng 100-chunyŏn Kinyŏm Saŏp Ch’ujin Wiwŏnhoe, eds. Pp393–419. Seoul: Somyong.

Yi, Chae-yŏng, Hŭi-su Im, and Cha-yŏng An 
Yi, Chŏng-ae

Yi, Hee-young

Yi, Hyŏng-sŏp

Yi, Kang-bong

Yi, Kil-u

Yi, Min-hŭi
2013  P’aendŏm i kŏna ppasuni kŏna [Fandom or ppasuni]. P’aju, Gyeonggi-do: Alma.

Yi, Pyŏng-hun

Yi, Sang-gun

Yi, Sŏn-ki
Yi, Sŏn-Yi  

Yi, Suk-kyŏng  

Yi, Yun-chu and Taek-kwang Yi  

Yonhap News  
2008  Ch’otpul chiphoe ch’amgaja ttuk… wae chulŏtna? [Dropping number of participants in Candlerallies… Why?] Yonhap News, June 16.  
2014 Tae kiyŏp taejol ch’obong 3 ch’on 89 manwon [The entry salary of the major company is US$ 38,890]. Yonhap News March 26.  

Yoon, Sang-won  

Young, Kimberly S.  

Yu, P’al-mu  

Yun, Sang-ho

Yun, Sŏk-ho
2002 Kyŏul yŏn’ga [Winter Sonata], Korean Broadcasting System.

Yun, Suk-jin

Yun, T’ae-il

Zittrain, Jonathan L

Žižek, Slavoj

Websites
Ajumma http://www.zoomanet.co.kr
Cyworld www.nate.com
Daum Communications www.daum.net


