

DIGITAL DIASPORA ON THE WEB:
THE FORMATION AND ROLE OF AN ONLINE COMMUNITY OF
FEMALE KOREAN IM/MIGRANTS IN THE U.S.

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Digital diaspora on the web: The formation and role of an online community of female Korean im/migrants in the U.S.

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This study explores an online community (www.MissyUSA.com) formed among female Korean im/migrants in the U.S. as an example of a digital diasporic space in the new media age. This study employed multiple research methods including in-depth interviews, textual analysis, and grounded theory and examined the conditions and role of this online community focusing on identity, community, and media culture.

The findings show that for this ethnic gender online community, users' shared identity (i.e. being Korean, married, female, and living in the U.S.) is an important element in the formation and development of this online community, especially in the creation of a candid talking space—*sokpuri*—where they vent their innermost feelings about themselves and their lives in the U.S. *Missy* and *Ajuma* are the two gender identities found on MissyUSA. On the one hand, despite the consumerist origin and individualistic nature, some users embrace the *missy* image of a younger, independent, and modern woman. On the other hand, the spirited quality of the *ajuma* (less individualistic, active in sharing information and helping others) is well appreciated and identified as an empowering spirit for this online community. These women display

differing attitudes and perceptions toward their ethnic identity depending on their length of residence and immigration status. MissyUSA has become a space that serves as an imagined community for users to (re)connect to their home country and that facilitate active discussion of identity negotiation leading to less essential ethnic identity perception based on transnational ties and hybrid cultural practices.

This study found a weak sense of community with regard to MissyUSA, though they do recognize that the site has some communal functions, relating to access to customized information considered significant for success in their im/migrant lives: it is a network that provides resources, serves as a virtual dwelling place, and aids them with assimilation. While the Internet has become an important source for both home and host country media access, the *yeone* board has become a platform for a transnational culture and lifestyle. Thus, beyond their offline ethnic communities, this site enables them to create a digital diaspora for Korean female im/migrants based on active participation from a population of (Korean) “wi-tizens” (active female Internet users since the late 90s who are now married) in the U.S.

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Research Background

The Internet is inherently of special value as a virtual space for geographically dispersed people. The Internet's networking capabilities encourage the creation of online communities which can transcend distance between individuals and shift time for their interactions (Mitra, 2005; Srinivasan, 2006; Wenjing, 2005). Online communities, equipped with communal and virtual characteristics and coupled with the asynchronous and discursive structure of the Internet, occupy a major position within cyberspace¹. Numerous groups and individuals make use of online communities, including people who migrate transnationally, like immigrants or ethnic minority populations. These groups are most likely to use the Internet to maximize the advantages of an online community (Chan, 2005; Kwok, 1999), for online communities provide them a virtual space which is not limited by geographical distance and which enables them to build virtual networks in a new society.

The significance of diaphora creation and diaspora interaction has been increasingly revisited with the advent of new media and information technologies including the Internet. In addition, contemporary globalization provides one notable context in which diasporic people and their diasporic media intersect (Cohen, 1997; Tsagarousianou, 2001, 2004). The term *diaspora*² refers to the dispersal of any population from its original land and its settlement in one or various territories (Alonso &

¹ Cyberspace, originally a term from William Gibson's science-fiction novel *Neuromancer*, refers to the conceptual space where words, human relationships, data, wealth, and power are manifested by people using computer mediated communication technologies.

² The Greek word *diaspeirein* means "to sow" or "to scatter."

Oiarzabal, 2010). Although diaspora was originally associated with the exile of Jews from their historical homeland, suggesting forced dispersion and oppression in the host country³, it is now used metaphorically for minority expatriate populations who have migrated to new countries, such as political refugees, alien residents, immigrants, ethnic migrants and so on (Armstrong, 2007; Cohen, 1997; Safran, 1991).

In fact, new information and communication technologies along with the expansion of global media systems have accelerated contemporary diaspora formation, growth, and maintenance. The Internet is increasingly becoming the first point of “informational entry” for im/migrants, even before their actual arrival (Alonso & Oiarzabal, 2010, p. 2). It also becomes a new interactive link both to homeland and host country, and to diaspore members as well. Therefore it is significant to understand how diasporas make use of online space in their every day im/migrant lives and how new media can create digital diasporas, new forms of “coexistence” for diasporic groups on the web (Tsagarousianou, 2004, p.62).

One of the most effective ways to study digital diasporas is to utilize more detailed ethnographic approaches to examine how particular groups’ conditions in a society intersect with the space of online communities and how, in turn, online communities provide a meaningful place in which their lives are reconstructed. We can learn, through this, what kinds of new possibilities are enabled by online communities, allowing for contemporary im/migrants to contribute to the formation of digital diasporas. By doing so, new media technologies can be understood in terms of tools for building specific visions beyond what is passively imposed on the public (Srinivasan, 2006).

³ For more discussion on the history of the Jewish diaspora, see Tololyan (1996).

Research Purpose

Although some of the previous research has examined cyberspace as an arena for ethnic cultural practices and national identity discourses among specific diasporic groups (e.g., Indian online diasporic groups in Mitra (2005, 2006); Chinese immigrants online in Wenjing (2005), online communities by gender groups have not been well explored. Also, the relationship between online communities and integration into host society for diasporic groups has not been well examined, especially from the perspective of online communities as ethnic media space. This is mainly because the notion of the online community as a networking place for social goods (e.g., social capital) has been examined with the assumption that there is not much cultural conflict in these communities. A positive relationship between online communities and social involvement has been presupposed. Therefore, it is important to fill in this gap since the diasporic condition of migrating people is relevant to the online community as a site of diasporic media and identity negotiation.

Recognizing the gap in previous Internet and diaspora research, this study explores the online community formed among female Korean im/migrants in the U.S. Specifically, this study aims to analyze the largest online community of female Korean im/migrants in the U.S. (www.MissyUSA.com) focusing on the concepts of identity, community, and integration. By doing so, this study tries to understand how this diasporic group brings to the Internet a sense of identity and community in the digital media age. Also, this study attempts to illuminate the role of the online community in their transnational media environment and sharing of media culture.

To this end, this study examines how these women's gender and ethnic identities are negotiated in this online community, and in what ways these identities are related to their diasporic conditions and transnational links. Also, this study explores how these women perceive this online community, focusing on their awareness of communal feelings and the community functions of the site. In addition, these women's media use and related characteristics of their transnational media culture are examined, and this study goes on to explore the ways in which this online community can affect these women's integration into the host society.

This case study of an online community designed for the female Korean diaspora tries to capture the dynamics of diaspora identities and im/migrant conditions, and the creations of community and media space based on their lived experiences. This study also tries to examine the things that are enabled by this new online space in order to illuminate the digital diaspora phenomenon. By doing so, the study will expand our understanding of online community use for Korean women's digital diaspora and its meaning in the lives of diasporic im/migrants. Also, an examination of this gendered online community further contributes to the research on how female diasporas are created on the Internet and on the utilization of Internet technology and interactions by women. Therefore, this study contributes to the growing research on "digital diaspora[s]," which conceptualizes the phenomenon of "distinct online networks that diasporic people use to re-create identities, share opportunities, spread their culture, [and] influence homeland and host society" (Alonso & Oiarzabal, 2010, p. 11).

In Chapter 2, literature that addresses relevant studies of the Internet and diasporic groups is discussed. Specifically the reviews include online diasporic community, diasporic cultural identities, and diasporic media and integration. In Chapter 3 research questions are presented along with key concepts and analytical frameworks and a brief history of the online community MissyUSA. Chapter 4 discusses the methods of the study. In-depth interviews, textual analysis, and grounded theory are discussed as the three main methods used in this study. The detailed procedures performed in this study for each method are also presented.

The findings in this study are presented in the following four chapters. In Chapter 5 the findings about the ways in which MissyUSA has become a talking space based on these Korean women's shared identity and conditions are discussed. Chapter 6 discusses identity discourses, focusing on gender and ethnic identities. In Chapter 7 the ways that MissyUSA has become a communal space for resources and networking are discussed. Chapter 8 discusses these women's diasporic media use and transnational media culture.

In Chapter 9, the findings of this study are discussed while presenting four frameworks to understand these women's digital diaspora. Also, the theoretical implications of this study are discussed. Chapter 10 concludes with a summary of the study, the study's limitations, and avenues for future research.

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

The Internet and Community

The impact of Internet on the community

The dramatic increase in Internet use since the 1990s has led to much discussion and debate surrounding the potential impact on human communities brought about by new media technologies. Enthusiasts believe that the Internet has the potential to create new connections and communications between individuals without regard to race, creed, gender, or geography, and that this, in turn, will bring about positive social transformations (Barlow, Birkets, Kelly & Slouka, 1995; Rheingold, 2000). In contrast, critics worry that the Internet takes people away from meaningful interactions and signifiers in real life (Nie & Erbring, 2000). For example, Virilio (1995) has denounced new media technologies because they “virtualize” the “physicalized” understandings of landscape, geography and culture, causing concepts of “otherness” and “locality” to be lost (p. 1). While these diametric views fail to incorporate the ways in which technology shapes and is shaped by human life, the Internet has been largely acknowledged by many new media scholars as bringing new freedoms, democracy, and increased opportunities to society at large (DiMaggio et al., 2001; Newhagen & Rafaeli, 1996; Pavlik, 2008).

As for the impact of new media technologies on communities, a noticeable perspective has developed based on fears and critiques that the community might no longer be understood in the traditional sense of geographical proximity. Based on a long tradition of community studies that examine how the community has declined or flourished since industrialization, this view claims that traditional community life, which is locally based, closely bounded and homogenous, has been lost in modern times (Costa

& Kahn, 2001; Oldenburg, 1989). Along this line, Putnam (2000) claims media use is one of major reasons for the decline of community. As individualistic activities such as watching television and surfing the Net have increased, he argues, social spaces, in which civic participation takes place, have largely been in decline (Putnam, 2000). However, by narrowly defining what constitutes a community's boundaries, this view implies that a sense of community is absent from online activities. Also, by relying on a dichotomous view that behaviors and interactions of online and offline are mutually exclusive, the claim largely ignores the issue of technologically mediated social practices. In fact, the online community phenomenon enables us to understand community in a different dimension by revisiting its significance and various forms of social spaces mediated by the Internet and new media technologies (Willson, 2006).

Online community as community

There are increasing attempts to more loosely demarcate the concept of community. According to this view, community and community life are not lost but have been “under drastic transformations” (Quan-Haase & Wellman, 2002, p. 2). Scholars contend that while people do continue to socialize, many aspects of the community move from local involvement to geographically dispersed interactions (Guest & Wierzbicki, 1999; Wuthnow, 1998). Once free from narrowly defined boundaries based on location and proximity, we can thus see that many people live in long-distance communities that were not destroyed by technology but transformed in both their composition and practices. This perspective is well represented in social network theorists' explanations about how Internet technology intersects the dynamics of community transformation. They argue that changes in how people socialize have created a need to develop new

models for conceptualizing community. Thus community is no longer defined in terms of locality, but as social networks of interpersonal ties that provide sociability, support, information, a sense of belonging and social identity (Wellman, 2001).

By defining community in these broader terms, scholars began to foreground the use of technology. For example, they focus on *social* usages of new media technologies. Hence, the Internet, as the latest technological innovation in telecommunication, has emerged as a force that largely affects the transformation of communities (Kollock & Smith, 1999). Specifically, the Internet can positively impact community formation and sustenance through the sharing of information resources and the creation of common spaces for socializing and communication (Kollock & Smith, 1999; Wellman & Gulia, 1999). It is also contended that computer mediated communication appears to foster a sense of community among its user, yet it also embodies the impersonal communication described by Ong (1982) as “imitation talking” (p.102, as cited in Jones, 1998, p.13).

Furthermore, for some scholars, the Internet provides a new space, not only by transcending physical distance but also by creating another, probably more inclusive, virtual community (Castells, 1996; Poster, 1995; Rheingold, 2000). This is because they see that innovations in communication technologies create possibilities for new forms of sociality based on more fluid, multiple identities, which could be an answer to the search for a less exclusive or repressive experience of community (Poster, 1995, 1998; Rheingold, 2000; Turkle, 1999). Yet one could argue that recognizing the potential of the online community as more liberating and interconnected does not require “uncritically valorizing” (Willson, 2006, p. 2) the concept of a networked society. Willson (2006) argues, in this sense, that social network theorists take for granted that computer

networks become social networks. In fact, results of several studies suggest that Internet use serves to complement rather than substitute print media and offline socialization (Cole, 2000; Hampton & Wellman, 2000; Kavanaugh & Patterson, 2001; Robinson, Kestnbaum, Neustadtl & Alvares, 2002).

Although there has been much exploration of Internet media technologies' positive impact and usefulness in relation to community life (Chadwick, 2006; Marchi, 2005; Wellman & Gulia, 1999), almost the same amount of research concerns online communities as a genuine community and the nature of their interactions and relationships. Researchers have demonstrated that many online groups fail to form a virtual community. Among them, Kolko and Reid (1998) claim that failures in online community formation are tied to the loss of any notion of the continuity of the self, and this fragmentation of the online self is reinforced by the displaced nature of virtual space. Others criticize the fact that most online groups are highly homogenized, representing only certain interests, populations, or races. Hence they are more likely to evade the moral responsibility to confront the problems of diversity and inequality of 'real' life (Healy, 1997; Lockard, 1997). However, for others, this is not a problem solely belonging to online communities. Social construction of the reality that exists online partly comes from offline; Schuler (1996) expressed that "exclusivity, inflexibility, isolation, rigidity, [and] homogeneity," a critique of the "old concept of community" (p.9), can also take root in a computer-mediated one.

Understanding the online community

Given that the Internet permeates almost every aspect of human activity, there has been vigorous public discussions and academic research about the impact of the Internet,

attempting to address how it changes people's behaviors and lives and how this relatively new medium intersects with the existing structures of society. Among the various uses of the Internet, researchers have often focused on online communities due to two distinguishing features: *community* and *virtuality*. Most frequently, online communities have been examined in terms of the concept of the community. Many researchers question how these *new* communities are similar to and/or different from traditional ones (Jones, 1998; Norris, 2004; Rheingold, 2000; Willson, 2006). It can be claimed that such perspectives create analyses that would follow a line of research that emphasizes the collapse and transformation of traditional (Western) society since industrialization and its subsequent social and technological changes (e.g. Putnam, 2000). In these studies, the community aspect has been emphasized when examining how online communities affect people's life patterns, leisure time, ways of communication, and community building (Nie & Erbring, 2000; Putnam, 2000).

Due to the comparative perspective between traditional and modern societal modes, this approach has often resulted in a bifurcated position, which either supports or attacks online communities. However, some notable findings also have come from this approach. Studies suggest that the Internet sustains the bonds of community by complementing, not replacing, other channels of interaction (Kavanaugh & Patterson, 2001; Norris, 2004). Countering the claim that the Internet has a role in fragmenting human lives, some scholars argue that the Internet enhances social ties, which are defined in many ways, often by reinforcing behavioral patterns such as talking on the phone and contacting family and friends (DiMaggio, Hargittai, Neuman, & Robinson, 2001; Wellman & Gulia, 1999). Also, the Internet is considered a way to facilitate the creation

of social capital and other public goods by allowing information to flow more efficiently through residential or professional communities (Chadwick, 2006; Wellman, 2001).

Another approach addresses the virtuality of online communities and is geared more toward the inherent characteristics of online communities that make these places unique (Poster, 1995, 1998; Rheingold, 2000; Turkle, 1995, 1999). In other words, discussions focus on the virtual existence and innovative traits of online communities as a unique (cyber) space, which is very different from the traditional or normative community concept. This perspective allows us to recognize exclusive aspects of online communities enabled by new technologies, including discursive presences, asynchronous communication, and the de-centered structure of the Internet space. Nonetheless, this approach often presents simple appraisals of contemporary interactive features and the identity fluidity allowed by online communities; because of these features it has been argued that online communities are able to navigate away from the negative aspects of prior forms of community (Willson, 2006).

Neither of these two approaches can solely provide a complete picture of online communities, just as the singular terms community or virtuality cannot define nor encompass the entire concept of an online environment (Kollock & Smith, 1999).

Therefore, for a more comprehensive perspective this study approaches online communities as communities that emerged from online communication infrastructures, where the participants' online interactions are interwoven with their offline experiences (Jones, 1998, Kollock & Smith, 1999; Willson, 2006).

Thus, as for the comparison of online communities with real, offline ones, the literature is replete with instances where the isomorphic links between these

environments do or do not connect. But what is really important in this consideration is how well online groups are interwoven into the fabric of offline life (Jones, 1998). In other words, this issue now emerges centered on a more fundamental principle: how online communities provide a place in which offline existence is reconstructed in a meaningful way. In order to reach an understanding of online communities, we need to focus on what leads some people to experience them as communities, rather than asking whether online communities deserve the label of ‘community.’ In many ways, whether they deserve this label depends upon how we define ‘community.’ Thus, we need to be cautious in assessing the worth or the impact of online communities because, according to Baym (1998), it is also “fundamentally reductionist to conceptualize all ‘virtual communities’ as a single phenomenon and hence to assess them with a single judgment” (p.63).

Therefore approaching online community by solely focusing on the (traditional) community concept is difficult because it vaguely circumscribes both boundary and coherence (Wilson & Peterson, 2002). Individuals belong to many communities, bound to them to different extents and in varying ways. In addition, the idea that a community can be defined by face-to-face interaction is effectively challenged by Anderson’s famous argument that communities can be “imagined” beyond basic face-to-face contacts primarily through the process enabled by mass media (Anderson, 1983). Likewise, focusing too much on the ‘virtual’ communities, by contrasting them with face-to-face communities, is also incomplete because this fails to illuminate the ways in which people relate to themselves continuously into various communities. The ephemeral nature of the Internet adds another problem to a technology-focused definition of online communities.

Internet interfaces for online groups become quickly varied from Usenet newsgroups, mailing lists, chat room to multi-user domains (MUDs), object-oriented (MOOs), Wiki, Weblog⁴ and others. Some of them have become irrelevant in the wake of emerging technologies such Web 2.0 (Wilson & Peterson, 2002). Thus, a mutually exclusive view of community or virtuality is more likely to mislead us toward the separation of technology and community (either online or off). It ignores the abundance of communities and relationships operating both in virtual reality and aided in real life by technology. Therefore, Fernback (2007) argues, in order to understand how online communities are integrated into offline social life, new media scholars should move beyond the fixed “community metaphor” (p.65) and recognize that the meaning of community evolves as we devise new ways to employ it.

The Internet and Diasporic Groups

New media and digital diaspora

Most of the research focusing on the impact of the Internet in relation to ethnic groups and communities has illustrated how and in what ways new media are isolated from particular populations. This discussion is usually represented as a “digital divide” to explain the questions of access between the haves and have-nots in order to show the increasing or decreasing size of the gap (Nakamura, 2004; Warschauer, 2003). This thesis, though popular within public discourse, is somewhat problematic. The

⁴ Interactions in bulletin boards, conference groups, MUDs, MOOs, and other newer phenomena like MMOGs (massively multiple online games) and weblogs are still predominantly textual, conducted through a keyboard. This is changing over time with the increased sophistication of virtual reality technologies, the continual enhancement of graphic and video technologies, and the widening applications of digital technologies.

consequences of a digital divide can be explained in terms of ownership and the creation of ethnic biases (Chadwick, 2006; Srinivasan, 2006). However, referencing the inequality of physical access to the Internet can obfuscate other serious aspects; it may imply that overcoming the digital divide is simply about providing people with the technology itself, without considering how that divide is shaped and the problem of technological and societal systems (Srinivasan, 2006; Laguerre, 2010).

Thus, the digital divide thesis becomes weaker when other research presents evidence that new media technology, particularly Internet-based, holds the potential to empower ethnic and indigenous communities (Mitra, 2006; Siddiquee & Kagan, 2006). Specifically, studies demonstrate virtual space as a site of struggle within which certain minority groups can form their own communities (Gajjala, 2004; Mitra, 1997; Siddiquee & Kagan, 2006). Along that line, a number of scholars have also focused on how emigrant communities (e.g., Arab, Chinese, Indian, and Filipino) utilize online and mobile technologies to communicate, interact, maintain their identity, and enhance political mobilization, while assessing their impact and implications on diasporic emigrants' daily lives (Anderson, 1997; Ignacio, 2005; Mitra, 2006; Sun, 2005). A growing body of literature adopts a social network perspective for the analysis of contemporary im/migration (e.g., Brettel, 2000; Portes, 1995; Vertovec 2002). In this sense, im/migration is understood as a multidirectional and dynamic movement, which becomes a networked system facilitated by information and communication technologies in the context of so-called information and knowledge societies (Alonso & Oiarzabal, 2010; Castells, 1996)

By recognizing the potential for media technologies to serve specific communities, online communities can be viewed as places for new interpretations of ethnicity and alternative paradigms (Hall, 1973), with properties different from those of mass media (Newhagen & Rafaeli, 1996). This leads us to examinations of how the online community, enabled by the new networked, web-based technology, is utilized by diasporic groups. Under what conditions did diasporic online communities come into being, and what kinds of possibilities and contradictions are created within these spaces? What is their role in the construction and negotiation of cultural identities within diasporic groups? Questions such as these provide a framework from which to look into the relationship between media-based communities as an ethnic media and diasporic groups. The recent attempt to theorize “digital diaspora” by some scholars embraces these questions and the framework. According to Laguerre (2010), digital diaspora is defined as the use of cyberspace by diasporic groups, including immigrants or descendants of an immigrant group, to participate or engage in online interactional activities. The digital diaspora, which is a “cyberexpansion” of real diaspora, tries to grasp the engagement of its members in distinct online networks and the activities that occur therein (Laguerre, 2010, p.53). It is through this conceptualization that diasporic online communities’ have the potential to be a place for recreation of identities, opportunity sharing, spreading cultures, and influencing both the homeland and the host societies (Alonso & Oiarzabal, 2010).

Globalization and Diasporic Media

Diaspora and globalization

Diasporic conditions in the new media age have a close relationship with globalization (Cohen, 1997). Characterized by global flows connecting people across distance and via technological mediation, globalization produces an “ethnoscape,” the transnational movement of people resulting in diasporic populations (Appadurai, 1990, p. 589). Unlike international interactions existing in previous eras, contemporary globalization accelerates this transnational movement based on increased density and interconnectedness of the world economy and through a new division of labor (Appadurai, 1990; Cohen, 1997). This global economic geography engenders international migration, not only based on permanent or exclusive settlement but also on contractual, intermittent stays. This movement, coupled with the *detrterritorialized* global culture and accompanied by new communication technologies, becomes a major force of global cultural flow (Cohen, 1997).

Furthermore, as Appadurai (1990, 1996) argues, the relationship between media and migration becomes a key to understanding the link between the global, modern trajectories of transnational flows of people, technology, capital, media images and ideologies. In all, these global and technological environments accelerate diaspora formation, growth, and maintenance (Alonso & Oiarzabal, 2010). The term diaspora, according to Alonso & Oiarzabal (2010) conveys different meanings and includes historical phenomena such as globalization and trans-localities, which both are closely related to the information and communication technologies. In many circumstances im/migration, which is a phenomenon spanning time, generations, and geographies, becomes “a question of identity, a diasporic process” (Alonso & Oiarzabal, 2010, p.7). Thus, a diaspora transcends im/migration and has a clear political connotation that is

reshaped economy, politics, and technology in the era of globalization (Alonso & Oiarzabal, 2010).

Diasporic media

Within this intersection of media and diaspora in the context of globalization, scholars have revisited the role and the importance of diasporic media. According to Tsagarousianou (2004), diasporic media is a term that refers to a considerable and highly diverse array of organization, practices and settings where diasporic narratives are constructed (p.62). Although there is some disagreement about their institutionalization, durability and accessibility as well as their popularity and the nature of the diasporic media, most scholars agree that their significance and capacity are increasing and becoming more complex in this globalization age (Morley, 1997; Srinivasan, 2006; Tsagarousianou, 2001, 2004). A variety of media spaces, from traditional print media to mobile technologies, support and sustain diasporic media roles not only in the articulation of their identity in the strict sense, but also in the process of providing narratives that “[hold] together” or “[reconfigure] the constellations of flows, networks and relationships referred to above” (Tsagarousianou, 2004, p.62). Thus, the online community that makes possible flows, networks, and relationships becomes an important media space to the diasporic groups as Mandaville argues:

We need to understand these media as spaces of communication in which the identity, meaning and boundaries of diasporic community are continually constructed, debated and reimagined. (Mandaville, 2001, p.169)

Then the capacity of diasporic media, together with other cultural, political and economic processes, can transform diasporas from little more than “aggregates of migrants” into active and vibrant “diasporic networks” (Tsagarousianou, 2004, p.63).

The Internet as diasporic media

While various media, information and communication technologies are utilized by diasporic peoples, electronic media, including the Internet, hold some significance by effectively giving people the opportunity to produce new spaces where remote localities and their experiences come together and become synchronized (Scannell, 1996; Tsagarousianou, 2004). The Internet especially presents several unique and advantageous features that can help diasporic groups form their own space. Due to its networking capability, which can overcome physical proximity, the Internet can be applied to the increasing dispersion of new immigrants and their residential patterns. For example, Mitra (2006), in his examination of Indian immigrants’ online community, suggests that as many new generations of immigrants scatter across all continents (particularly North America) the potential to utilize new, networked media technologies to connect distributed ethnic populations across geographical distance increases. Moreover, the speed of communication and global reach of the Internet can be helpful in empowering diasporic groups, as shown in the rapid mobilization of Chinese-origin communities during several critical events (Kwok, 1999) and in an example of becoming a discursive place in which marginalized voices can be heard (Mitra, 2005).

Unlike traditional print media, the Internet allows users to more easily and quickly produce their own discourses that may counter hegemonic perspectives. Jon Anderson’s study (1997) on the use of electronic media within Arabic diasporic

communities reveals how the Middle East's overseas immigrants are able to retain aspects of their culture while creating new practices of interaction and identity through their online communities. In addition, beyond its immediate access to resources and spaces, the Internet's networking structure allows diasporic people to find each other and form communities that are decentralized and non-hierarchical in the sense that messages are created mainly based on horizontal interactions and activities.

Although the Internet has advantages for diasporic migrants to create a voice in society, it also has limitations. Chan (2005) points out that it is still an elite medium, more accessible to the educated and affluent sectors of diasporic people. In addition, there is always the possibility for online communities to become an "ethnic enclave" (Mitra, 2006), promoting only their native language and parochial nationalism. Bahk and Jandt (2004) also imply that access to diasporic media could be one of the causes of an inability to connect to the host culture by demonstrating that using ethnic media is strongly related to psychological anxiety and host language incompetence. In a broader frame, Gibbs, Ball-Rokeach, Jung, Kim, & Qui (2004), in their examination of everyday Internet use of diasporic groups in relation to their visions of globalization, have found that connections made through the Internet and other media spaces reconnect them to homeland and host society, but these connections mainly follow the contours of ethnicity rather than crossing borders. However, these limited connections can also be read, not as a fixed outcome of diasporic media use, but as the basis for the diasporic groups' constraints within the host society. Their marginality and unfamiliarity with the mainstream culture of the host country and their need to rely on ethnic networks are reflected in their media use. Thus, these conditions and constraints eventually lead

im/migrants to cyberspace and various virtual activities. Thus, these limitations do not overshadow the potential of online communities. Furthermore, online communities of ethnic migrants keep changing as the Internet adopts multimedia technologies. By incorporating products such as digital TV programs and DVDs, online communities constitute a new ethnic media channel through which immigrants can access various media products from both their home and host country.

Dynamics of Identities

Ethnic identity of diasporic people

Due to transnational migration, diasporic people, including immigrants, migrants, sojourners and travelers, become disconnected from various home-based communities, and their communal ties undergo transitions as the relocation proceeds. Their use of the Internet to form online communities implies a way of dealing with the changes and the adjustment process. In this context, online communities of migrating people present a centralizing field for their cultural identity to be connected to a place of origin (Mitra, 1997, 2006; Siddiquee & Kagan, 2006). Like the method of banding together in metropolitan areas, the creation of online communities can offer a virtual center around which a national or ethnic place can be imagined (Mitra, 1997). As print media played a role in imagining a national community (Anderson, 1983), electronic media have a similar impact on diasporic migrants (Appadurai, 1996). In this way, online communities highlight shared aspects of individual identities in terms of common culture, geography, and history, fostering a sense of solidarity (Chan, 2005).

Yet, while online communities provide a place of “imaginary coherence” (Hall, 1990, p. 394) that often results in reinforcement of collective ethnic identity, researchers also present a different dynamic in relation to the virtual ethnicity. Poster (1998), for example, notes that ethnicity in cyberspace can reveal or opens up a subject position of “never before” rather than the assumed always or already fixed historical ethnic identity (p.208). This echoes some scholars’ arguments about the relationship between identities and the Internet; the discursive and networked nature of the Internet promotes unstable, multiple, fluid identities and works against the unification of fixed ones (Poster, 1998; Turkle, 1999).

Similarly, Mitra (1997) claims that Internet space can display a substantial fragmenting force toward a monolithic national identity and discourse. On one hand, national identity is imagined simply via its membership in virtual space; on the other hand, there is also fragmentation due to disagreements and multiple, fractured narratives instead of a single dominant narrative about a nation. In these cases, ethnicity, Tsagarousianou (2004) argues, does not hold the capacity to include the complexity in notions of diasporas, such as transnational dimensions, or the linkage with globalization. Thus, diasporic identity can be positioned to refer to complex multidirectional flows of people, ideas, and products and to various interactions and negotiation processes, in addition to the established concept of ethnicity (Tsagarousianou, 2004).

Diasporic identity

Although scattered across the world, diasporic transnational im/migrants share similar spatial characteristics of living within cultural borderlands where displacement and contradictions shape their identities (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992). Sometimes, diaspora

members hold tight to their identities defined by home-country nationalism or traditional culture. However, when they are put into the context of current migration, struggling in different cultural frames, such a fixed link becomes only part of the construction/negotiation process to define their identities, rather than a display of them (Shi, 2005). In this regard, scholars working within a postmodern framework have theorized ethnic and cultural identities to be hybrid, dynamic, fluid, and multilayered (Anzaldua, 1995; Hall, 1990; Nagel, 1994). They argue against essentialist notions of identity as fixed and bounded. Therefore, Hall (1990) argues that cultural identity is a matter of “becoming” as well as of “being.” Instead of being fixed in the past, identity is created from transformations related to the present and future as well. What defines the diasporic lives of transnational im/migrants is their common experience of encountering cultural differences (Hall, 1990). Thus, diasporic cultural identities emerge from the interplay between discontinuity from one’s country of origin and differences from the host culture. As Hall describes:

[T]he diaspora experience...is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of ‘identity’ which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*. (Hall, 1990, p.235)

Researchers often examine this “hybrid” nature of diasporic cultural identities with several conceptual approaches. Among them, “liminality”⁵ has been adopted in several studies (Chan, 2005; Naficy, 1993; Sun, 2005). The *liminal* belongs neither here nor there, positioned in between by law, custom, convention, and ceremony (Naficy, 1993; Turner, 1969). Naficy (1993)’s study on Iranian immigrants in Los Angeles

⁵ “Liminality” is a concept theorized by Turner (1969), who drew from the work of the French ethnographer Arnold van Gennep.

illustrates how they are separated from their home and put into a state of “in-betweenness,” which is part of the evolution from “liminality” toward incorporation into the host society and media structure. Other research on Chinese diasporic groups also investigates the hybrid cultural experience in relation to homeland television audiences (Sun, 2002) and the liminality of nationalist discourse on the Internet (Chan, 2005). Therefore, in order to look into online communities in relation to diasporic identity that is always situated within complex and uncompleted processes, one has to focus on the experiences of migrating people and the negotiation of the “otherness,” confusion and contradictions they encounter in the process of redefining their cultural identities.

Gender identity and online community

From the purpose of this study, which focuses on Korean women’s diasporic online community, gender identity or consciousness is also interconnected to this identity dynamics. Gender identity, as a discourse of a set of “overlapping and sometimes contradictory cultural descriptions and prescriptions referring to sexual difference” (Zoonen, 1994, p.33), also allows us to capture another aspect of this *gendered* community in this study.

A few researchers have examined online communities’ empowerment of transnational women im/migrants (e.g., Siddiquee & Kagan, 2006). Among them, Gajjala (2004) discusses the case of a Southeast Asian women’s cyber-community as a hybrid, half-public space for subversive discourse and counter-cultural exchange. Most often, however, the media spaces of women’s diasporic groups, which reference women’s shared issues and matters, become differentiating points from other cultural or national identities (Lee & Cho, 1990).

In order to understand the particular points that the users of the online community in this study adopt to differentiate themselves in terms of gender identity, we need to look at some relevant characteristics concerning the transformation of the modern South Korean women. In a generational sketch of modern South Korean women, Cho (2002) describes that they have been through transitions with regard to motherhood, wifehood, and femininity as their society passes from colonial-modern to modern and post-modern times. Unlike the older generations⁶ who were busy running the family and ensuring economic security throughout the period of Liberation (1945) from Japanese colonial rule, the Korean war (1950-1953) and the rapid industrialization period, these young South Korean women are the first generation to enjoy the fruits of South Korea's economic success without actually having been directly involved in this success. These women, who were born in 1960's and 70's and are termed as the "daughter" generation by Cho (2002), often find themselves caught between conflicting subjectivities. While they witnessed the democratic transition of their society and the development of feminist movements, they also experienced conflicts between the materialistic ambitions of their mother's generation and their own self-realization as independent women (Abelmann, 2002). The struggles of these young South Korean women are not always successful. They sometimes easily compromise with commercialized consumer culture (Kim, 2006) and at times move toward neo-conservatism, adapting themselves to the existing patriarchal system (e.g. finding power in having a son) (Cho, 2002). They may also find

⁶ Cho (2002) described the three generations of middle class South Korean women as "grandmother," "mother," and "daughter." In her loose and symbolic generational classification, women in the "grandmother generation" were born in the 1920s. The next generation would have been born around the 1940s and 1950s. Thus, older generations here includes women in these two generations.

empowerment in being a sex object and may use this position to move upward in class (Abelmann, 2002).

These contradictory positions are also found in the term *Missy* and the related discourse. Under a relatively liberalized socio-economic climate including economic prosperity, political democratization, and feminist cultural movements in South Korea since the early 1990s, young married women have come to be called “*Missy*,” which implies a young and sophisticated married woman who voices her thoughts. With a connotation of active and self-expressive and often self-assertive subjectivities, the word displays generational characteristics and encompasses their identity in relation to femininity, wifedom and motherhood as described by Cho (2002). “*Missy*” has become a buzzword, and the appearance of these liberal, independent women has been embraced by various popular culture texts (Kim, 2006). The identity of the *Missy*, however, as hinted by its ties to the consumer market⁷, was mainly defined in a consumer context. According to Lee (1995), the rise of self-assertive, individualized young married women can be explained as the rise of a “target market,” which was used to revitalize a saturated market in a post-Fordism system (p.1). Thus, despite some positive aspects, Cho (2002) calls this cultural trend deplorable because images of liberation and independence can be commodified and because its emphasis on the individuality of these ‘Missies’ may not always contribute to their collective empowerment.

⁷ The word “*Missy*” was coined by a South Korean department store during a sales promotion campaign. In late 1993, the department store sought to attract women in their mid-20s to early 30s – who comprised almost 80% of its customers – naming them as a distinctive consumer group. Since then the so-called “*Missy* marketing,” which depends on individualistic and distinctive consumption patterns, has been adopted by various industries and become successful.

Another characteristic of this young generation of South Korean women is the exposure to and influence of Western Media products. For them, the Western and/or global media products are also combined with experiencing globalization not only as a trend or idea but also in their everyday practices. According to Kim (2005), the cultural experience of globalization among young South Korean women is primarily experienced through global media texts. This impinges upon their lives by creating reflexive perspectives both on their own life conditions and the one of Western women (Kim, 2005). This generation of younger Korean women, who are married and have moved to the U.S., are the majority population of the online community analyzed in this study. Thus, looking at the issues and discourses in these online space can provide an understanding of their motivations in forming and participating in these gendered online communities, especially those produced under the context of their migration and subsequent lives in a new culture.

Integration and Diasporic Media

The role of diasporic media

In terms of their relations to a host society, two major roles of diasporic online communities have been proposed. First, diasporic online communities can be understood as a means of coping with the tension or sense of loss produced by migration (Mitra, 2006; Siddiquee & Kagan, 2006; Tsagarousianou, 2001). Especially with the increasing anti-immigrant sentiments in the post-9/11 world, the insecurity felt by diasporic people has intensified this role (Mitra, 2006) and the need for a feeling of virtual safety. As Mitra (2006) states:

The little-Indias that were brazenly conspicuous within the metropolitan spaces of the West are now supplemented by the virtual Indias in virtual space which is not so blatantly under the surveillance of any particular dominant culture . . . This characteristic of the internet offers a degree of protection from the gaze of onlookers (p. 261).

Thus, for many migrating people, virtual space provides more of a feeling of safety than actual space does.

The second role of diasporic online communities is to aid in integration into a new country of residence. Notable past research has examined ethnic groups' media usage by mainly focusing on the relationship between mass media use and acculturation to host countries. This research has discussed the effect of both ethnic and host mass media on the assimilation of immigrants: The more they used host media, the more they were acculturated (DeFlour & Cho, 1957; Nagata, 1969); the less they used ethnic media, the more they could adapt (Kim, 1984).

More recently, Bahk and Jandt (2004) examined the relationship among various demographic and psychological factors in the use of ethnic and host media by Korean immigrants in the U.S. Their research showed that the use of ethnic media was associated positively with interracial communication anxiety and perceived White racial dominance and negatively with English language competence (Bahk & Jandt, 2004). Although this research tries to map the effects of the choice of diasporic media use, including the Internet, it lacks consideration for other compounding factors such as generational divides and global media flow. For example, with global media expanding and converging with new media technologies, some imported media products are so popular in certain foreign countries that immigrants choose to watch these programs while living abroad, not just because they are host media products but because they have been

influenced by their home country's cultural trends as well. Thus, in many cases, the rigid distinction between host country and home country media gradually disappears.

Moreover, the theory of acculturation begins to be challenged, as a more deterritorialized, cosmopolitan social identity emerges in favor of overlapping and multiple-form subjectivities (Cohen, 1997). Therefore, this study tries to capture various positions and strategies of integration among these female Korean im/migrants using the online community. By doing so, the notion of acculturation and its traditional approach to the universal process of assimilation can be revisited.

Rethinking acculturation

Assimilation, acculturation, and integration are all used in academic and public debates to point to the path along which immigrants find their place in the host society (Berry, 1997; Berry & Sam, 1997). Specifically, Berry and his colleagues proposed the theory of acculturation as a set of strategies or methods used in responding to new, stress-inducing cultural contexts. "Assimilation" occurs when the individual decides not to maintain his or her cultural identity by seeking contacts in his/her daily interaction with the dominant group (Berry, 1997). "Separation" is adopted when individuals from the non-dominant group "place a value on holding on to their original culture" (Berry & Sam, 1997, p.297). "Integration" means the maintenance of strong ties in everyday life both with one's ethnic group as well as with the dominant group. Finally, "marginalization" is when individuals lose cultural and psychological contact with both their traditional culture and the larger society (Berry, 1997). In this framework, integration is considered the optimal acculturation strategy, implying both the perspective of home culture and an active involvement with the host culture.

Although the theory of acculturation has been applied in many studies for the assessment of the acculturation levels among various immigrant groups (e.g. Gudykunst & Kim, 1997; Hofstede, 1997), various scholars have challenged it. One of the main points of criticism is that the acculturation strategies are based on a universalist assumption that all immigrant groups undergo the same kind of process even though there are significantly different histories and processes between “old, western” immigrant groups and “new, non-western” ones (Bhatia & Ram, 2001, p.8). Also, the process of assimilation is not a linear, one-to-one relationship such as assuming the adoption of host culture implies abandoning one’s ethnic culture. Others criticize the concept of a dominant culture because there might not be a singular core culture that immigrant people can blend into (especially in American society). Notably, Bhatia & Ram (2001) argue that gender is rarely paid much attention when theorizing about the acculturation process. Cultures of immigrant groups are often regarded in homogeneous terms and the specificity of women’s experiences in their migration are largely ignored.

Therefore, acculturation becomes increasingly complicated, particularly in a context of globalization as described in the term “ethnoscape” by Appadurai (1990). Moreover, looking into the narratives of women’s diasporic groups, as in the case of the online community in this study, requires rethinking the universal model of acculturation. Thus, this study tries to understand how migrant identity and post-migration life relates to socio-cultural factors of a certain diasporic group such as gender, generation, and im/migration status. In doing so, the study aims to capture the meaning of mediated, structured and reorganized “integration” through participation in the online community. Therefore, the notion of diasporas, as theorized in postcolonial studies, entails

reassessment of the concept of integration strategy. This in turn reveals how the concept of diaspora might provide an alternative way of thinking about the role of home and host cultures, and ethnic and diasporic identities in an acculturation process.

CHAPTER 3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This chapter introduces the key concepts that will serve as basic analytical grounds for this study. Also there is a brief history of and information about the online community analyzed in this study. The research questions guided by the goal of this study follow.

Key Concepts and Analytical Frameworks

Online community

Drawing upon the two key features of ‘virtuality’ and ‘community’ and their conceptual frameworks, online communities are defined in a variety of ways: online interactions of dispersed groups of people with shared interests (Wilson & Peterson, 2002); social aggregations that emerge from the Net as loosely interconnected computer networks using computer-mediated communication technology to link people around the world (Rheingold, 2000); communities that exist within cyberspace in the form of bulletin boards, conference groups and other interactive communication systems such as MUDs, MMOGs (massively multiple online games) and weblogs (Willson, 2006). According to Wilson and Peterson (2002), an online community has to be defined in terms of how off-line social roles and existing social structures are played out in this new space. This will also help determine the new media’s potential for online community building and what patterns this process has taken or might take (Jones, 1999; Rheingold, 2000; Schuler, 1996). *All* communities, not only those online, should be investigated in “the continuum of communities, identities, and networks that exist—from the most

cohesive to the most diffuse—regardless of the ways in which community members interact” (Wilson & Peterson, 2002, p. 456).

For the purpose of this study—to analyze a web-based online community among the female Korean diasporic group—I have chosen the definition “communities experienced through technological mediation over the Internet” (Willson, 2006, p.2). This broader definition is particularly useful when we consider on-going contradictions and problems of computer mediated communication. Since this study is more interested in exploring the nature of online communities rather than providing a clear-cut answer to the question of whether or not the Internet and accompanying CMC are positively related to community building, a more loosely defined concept open to all possibilities is more appropriate. Approaching the problem from this perspective adds a level of flexibility to encompass constantly changing technological and social contexts as well as the complex relationships between cultural and gender identities.

Diasporic identity

By ‘diasporic identity,’ which has often been described by the terms ‘hybridity’ or ‘liminality’ in previous literature, I mean an ambiguous identity forged between discontinuity from a country of origin and differences from the host culture (Hall, 1990). By nature, diasporic identity has complex and multiple ties and thus, the nuance of it will be more clearly captured when it is approached in terms of its relationships with other cultural identities. It implies the relationship between online community and diasporic identity also carries multiple links and dimensions such as ethnicity, nationality, gender, class, location, and so on. Due to the fact that the online community in this study is a

gendered community that confines membership to married women, an examination of gender identity, which will be defined in the following section, is useful in examining their identity negotiation.

In a way, then, diasporic identity formation through online communities relies in part on the existence of actual spaces (communities, countries) and traditional national and gender identity as much as it relies on their absence. This entails an analysis of more detailed personal experiences and narratives in order to show how the diaspora members negotiate the difference, confusion and contradictions while understanding the nature of their diasporic lives.

Gender Identity

In considering gender identity in this study, I am first of all concerned with gender in its common use to refer to men and women. Here, I am interested in the particular roles that women play in the daily production of their private and social relations, including marital and familial relations (Abelmann, 2002). Second, I am interested in gender in terms of the ways in which power and discourses are produced (Scott, 1988). This implies that other cultural identities and characteristics are coded as somehow “male” or “female” in a certain way. Thus, notions of maleness or femaleness constructed in society are not ahistorical or fixed in a certain form; they are continuously being challenged and transformed (Abelmann, 2002). Therefore, the gender characteristics and images essentially reflect dominant ideological perceptions and power relations produced in a certain society. Furthermore, the broad gender discourses among transnational im/migrant women, as Abelmann (2002) pointed out, are constantly producing subjectivities for women that are intersecting their gender and national/ethnic

identities. This is evident in the subjects of this study because it focuses on gender identity and discourse of a particular im/migrants group – South Korean females who have transnationally migrated to the United States. It is also evident, for instance, in the “Missy” discourse which was originally produced in South Korean contemporary society (Cho, 2002; Kim, 2006) as a gender image of married women. The discourse was then intertwined with and extended to the im/migrant lives in the U.S. The discourse is also mediated by their online experiences as it is shared in the MissyUSA community. Therefore, gender identity in this study has been examined through the general question of how users and participants in the online community identify their femininity, wifehood, and/or motherhood. Furthermore, how these identifications are intertwined and challenged in their immigrant lives are also explored.

Community

Numerous studies of community have revealed various definitions of the word.

According to Fernback (1997),

community is a term which seems readily definable to the general public but is infinitely complex and amorphous in academic discourse. It has descriptive, normative, and ideological connotations . . . [and] encompasses both material and symbolic dimensions (p.39).

Also, traditional community concepts are drastically challenged and have become a constantly debated subject especially in relation to technologically mediated community forms including online communities. Thus, a basic guideline for a community concept in this study is, most of all, not to confine it around the “unproblematized notion of place” (Jones, 1998, p. 15). In this study, community will be approached as a type of social network. This is useful for the study of online communities because it focuses on the

interactions that create communities and shifts the sense of space by “decentering” the notion of place (Jones, 1998, p.15).

In addition, this study has also been guided by relational characteristics such as bonding, reciprocity, recognition and commonality of communities. Specifically, this study considers in what ways and to what extent users and participants in the online community conceptualize the notion of community experienced through their online activities. In this way this study is to expand understandings of community in online spaces in relation to participants’ living conditions and their on- and off-line interplays (Baym, 1998; Fernback, 2007; Kolko & Reid, 1998).

Integration

As mentioned in the review of an acculturation thesis in the previous literature section, examining these online communities as an integration strategy requires a cautious, yet critical approach to this analysis. The acculturation process, especially in the post-colonial history and contemporary globalization context (Bhatia & Ram, 2001), cannot be approached as a singular and linear process. This is also true for the ethnic gender group selected for this study. The use of and participation in the online community may or may not lead to integration in the host society. Some may utilize these websites as a means of relieving acculturation stresses and ultimately adopting the “integration” strategy, while others, using a strategy of “separation” or “marginalization,” may see them as a hiding place. However, these two seemingly different processes are not necessarily contradictory. Further, they could exhibit a new, different attitude toward integration leading to online communities which allow expression of their own, unique form of “integration.” Thus, this study does not adhere to the position that assumes a

grand narrative of acculturation processes which then tries to assess the extent to which individuals or groups are successfully integrated. Rather, this study aims to understand how a specific ethnic gender group's narratives and discourses develop in relation to integration and the role the online community plays in such a process.

MissyUSA

Using these defined concepts, I examined a cyberspace community tailored to female Korean diasporic groups, MissyUSA. MissyUSA (www.missyusa.com) is the largest online community for Korean women living in the U.S., maintaining a membership of 60,000 in 2005⁸. It provides a variety of information, from recipes and raising kids to immigration help and current affairs. Many female Korean im/migrants⁹ including long-term residents, international students, correspondents, and expatriates, visit this online community to acquire information during the relocation process and to get some idea of what it will be like to live in the U.S. Members settled across America and in some Canadian cities utilize this site for various reasons, from obtaining practical tips for their new lives abroad to finding information on how to join a support group for overcoming loneliness and isolation.

MissyUSA was initiated as a small cybercafé inside one of the Korean web portals (such as Yahoo! or MSN) in 1999 by a group of women who were the wives of Korean international students in the U.S.¹⁰ As more and more people visited the café, it

⁸ The document 'about MissyUSA,' retrieved from <http://missyusa.com/company/content/company.asp>.

⁹ I will use the term "im/migrant" throughout to describe MissyUSA users in order to clarify the two groups of populations (immigrant and non-immigrant status residents) and also to imply that many migrants and non-immigrants make the transition to immigrant status once they become long-term residents.

¹⁰ Especially with regard to the number of Korean international students, there has been a constant rise since the 1965 Immigration Act of the United States, which added professional knowledge and skills as new criteria for admitting immigrants (Shi, 2005). As a result, the post-1965 era has witnessed an increasing trend in young students and professionals coming to the United States for various reasons

left the web portals in 2002 and became an independent online community with its own server and domain name (www.missyusa.com). The site is open to im/migrants of all statuses to the U.S. (and some cities in Canada) except short-term visitors. Based on notions of like-mindedness, MissyUSA has become one of the most popular online communities not only among female Korean immigrants but also for Korean im/migrants in general¹¹. The contents and directories of the website cover a variety of matters concerning the members' migratory lives and needs. Seven sections make up the main web board and are subdivided into various thematic subcategories (see Table 1). In addition, it has links to chat rooms, web blogs by MissyUSA members, small group communities, as well as an online shopping mall, which was recently added.

including better education and personal fulfillment. According to a recent report by the Association of International Educators (NAFSA, retrieved from <http://opendoors.iienetwork.org/?p=Fall2006Survey>), which tracked international students at U.S. colleges and universities, South Korea ranked third in the enrollment rate of international students, following India and China, but had the second highest rate of increase. Such steady growth in this type of Korean migratory population is one of the underlying forces for the development of online communities such as MissyUSA.

¹¹ Some of the contents of the MissyUSA site can be accessed by non-members, including male users with an associate membership.

Table1. Contents and Directories of MissyUSA (As of July 2011)

Sections	Sub-Categories
TALK LOUNGE	Sokpuri/ Yeone/ Politics & Society/ American life Q&A/ Religion/ Want to Meet-up/ Music/ Culture/ Heartwarming/ Housekeeping Know-how/ Humor, etc.
HEALTH&BEAUTY	Beauty Salon/ Fashion Talk/ Hair Styling/ Fitness/ Diet/ Health Clinics
HOME&FOOD	Food/ Baking/ Hit Recipes/ Restaurant Review/ House Maintenance/ Sewing/ Gardening/ Pets, etc.
MOTHERHOOD	Pregnancy/ Delivery/ Infertility/ Raising Kids/ Baby party/ Story Time/Autism/ Baby Sitter/ Daycare & Preschool/ Kinder& Elementary/ Middle & High/ Extra-Curriculum
LIFE INFO	Real Estate/ Finance & Tax/ Career/ Business Q&A/ Rent/ Sublet/ Moving/ Visa & Green Card/ English Clinic/ Auto/ Immigrants News/ Cases of Immigration Laws, etc.
BUY&SELL	Flea Market/ Kids Market/ Moving Sale/ Car Sale/ Books for Sale/ Wanted/ Free Items/ Feedbacks
MISSY WRITERS	AM 00:30/ Living in America/ Southern Life/ Love and the City/ Hello Stranger!/ Jolie's Choice/ Amie's so chic/ Happy House/ Creative Craft/ Textile Design, etc.

Research Questions

The goal of this study is to explore the online community that has formed among female Korean im/migrants in the U.S. to understand the online diasporic community's conditions and role in the digital media age. To this end, this study examines how these women's gender and ethnic identities are negotiated on this online community, and how these identities are presented in relation to their diasporic conditions and the transnational connections. Also, this study explores how these women perceive this online community, focusing on their awareness of communal feelings and the community functions of the site. In addition, these women's media use and related characteristics of their transnational media culture are examined, and this study goes on to explore the ways in which this online community can affect these women's integration into the host society. Therefore, considering the goals of this study and based on the key analytical concepts described in the previous section, the following set of research questions has been conceived.

- 1) What kinds of needs and conditions from the female Korean im/migrants' lives in the U.S. come into play in the formation of this online community?
- 2) Why do female Korean im/migrants in the U.S. participate in this online ethnic gender community?
- 3) What kinds of gender identities and images are presented on this online community and how do they affect these im/migrants' use of and participation in the online community?

- 4) In what ways does this online community facilitate and/or hinder the development of diasporic cultural identities? How do female Korean im/migrants on this online community negotiate their national, ethnic, and diasporic identities?
- 5) How do these female Korean im/migrants perceive their online community? What kind of community perceptions emerge through their online activities?
- 6) How are communal feelings and activities forged among users of this online community? In what ways can this online community function as a community for these women?
- 7) In what ways do these women utilize this online community for media use in their im/migrant lives? What kinds of media use patterns and what kind of media culture are presented among these women?
- 8) How do participants of this online community understand integration into the host culture and how do they perceive this process? What is the role of the online community in their integration process? Do these online communities help or hinder integration into the host society and culture?

CHAPTER 4 RESEARCH METHODS

This research employs multiple methods, including participant-observation, textual analysis, and in-depth interviews, as well as grounded theory techniques. For the participant-observation and textual analysis, I chose two web boards, *sokpuri* (catharsis through storytelling) and *yeone* (entertainment news), from the website MissyUSA (www.missyusa.com). In order to further explore the experiences of the website users, in-depth interviews were conducted. Data from the textual analysis and the interviews was analyzed using qualitative methods based on grounded theory techniques. In addition, basic quantitative analysis was used to provide a description of the topics of posts and user-interactions.

Textual Analysis

Web boards: Sokpuri and yeone

Among the various web boards¹² available on the MissyUSA website, I chose two, *sokpuri* and *yeone*, which are examples of important platforms where online community members can voice their feelings and opinions about what it means to live as part of a diasporic gender group, and where their cultural identity discourses are displayed. *Sokpuri* is a unique Korean expression that means something to appease one's mind, often through the telling of a story, secret, or event and is usually used to vent anger or feelings of depression. Hence, the *sokpuri* web board, located as a subcategory of a discussion forum section, maintains anonymity using only abridged IP addresses, unlike many other web board sections with transparent identification. Various topics are posted,

¹² Approximately seventy web boards are available on this site as of February 2011.

commented on, discussed and debated on this web board, including private matters and intimate stories, feelings of desperation and helplessness, experiences of racial discrimination, and complaints about the perceived absurdity of institutional systems in the United States. In most cases, the users of this web board usually write warm consolation messages in response, but sometimes they give harsh commentary on the more controversial posts, leading to heated debates. For this reason, the *sokpuri* board is one of the most popular places to visit on the website of MissyUSA.

The other web board that was analyzed in this study is *yeone*, which means “entertainment” in Korean. The contents of the posts are related to entertainment news, celebrity gossip, stories of fandom, media reviews and so on. Most of the information posted here relates to Korean society and culture; however it is not limited to Korea. A fair amount of the posts contain information about entertainment in the U.S., China, Japan and elsewhere. This section is also very popular in terms of the number of both posts and views. As in the case of the *sokpuri* board, the *yeone* board also maintains anonymity through the use of abridged IP addresses¹³.

Data formats for analysis are mostly texts and images. Compared to the *sokpuri* board, which is a site for personal venting and is therefore predominantly text-based, the *yeone* board usually contains more posts with pictures or video files due to its role as a place to share entertainment news. For their popularity, rich stories, and active discussions, these two web boards were chosen for analysis. The two boards are useful to observe the nature of this online community and also to understand why people use the site and what makes it popular among Korean im/migrants. Thus, an analysis of these two

¹³ Therefore, in order to identify the author (source), I will provide the abridged IP addresses in the citations for the texts on the web boards.

web boards gives insight into the personal experiences of a large cross-section of this diasporic gender group.

Procedure

Using an ethnographic approach, I adopted the role of participant-observer not only to view the posts on the web boards of this online community, which allows access only to member users, but also to acquire a better understanding of the interactions between users and the context in which posts and responses are made. Based on my observations, I catalogued posts made between 2009 and 2011 from *sokpuri* and *yeone* boards. Instead of choosing a time frame of consecutive months, I selected certain months according to appropriate seasonal changes or trends affecting the lives of the website users. For example, January or February was selected for the beginning of the year and the Korean New Year's holiday, summer months because they are the peak time for visiting Korea and the usual arrival time for newcomers to the U.S. (especially international students), and November and December for the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays. This method of selective-month data gathering is considered one way to reflect important patterns in the usage and contents of websites. In addition, I read and analyzed the columns posted by interview participants¹⁴ with personal columns on the site. Most of the columns were posted from 2006 to 2010.

Thematic textual analysis

Thematic textual analysis is considered an important method in doing Internet research because it can incorporate intertextuality, nonlinearity, and the interactive

¹⁴ Among my interview respondents, Alley, Eunice, Jiwoo, and Jung are writing columns on their own column boards on the MissyUSA site.

characteristics of Internet discourses (Jones, 1999). There is, however, an attendant concern in “freezing” the texts produced in computer-mediated communication because capturing and saving computer-mediated communication as a fixed data set might not reflect the constantly changing contexts and interactions in which the texts are embedded (Jones, 1998, p.4). With an awareness of this underlying limitation in Internet research, this study is designed to focus on finding themes emerging from recursive and spontaneous posts (and responses) on the two web boards. This thematic textual analysis provides a list of relevant themes that occurred frequently, that were responded to often, and that were treated as problematic among the web board posts. The ways in which the themes are suggested, displayed, discussed, and reacted to are also examined as important information.

Methodological issues

A couple of methodological issues arise from general concerns in relation to research in computer-mediated communication. Particularly in ethnographic research, there has been a long-standing issue of balancing a naïve interpretive understanding and objective systematic analysis (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, Paccagnella, 1997). An ethnographic researcher should try to reach a systematic interpretation by moving away from a comprehension totally based on immediate and intuitive mechanisms to a conceptual re-construction of meaning. This provides a basic, yet useful, guideline in performing participant-observation in this research by distinguishing the systematic observation and interpretation process from a simple process of empathic identification or sympathizing (Paccagnella, 1997).

Another issue is more specific to the study of online communities. Recognizing the importance of this new medium's characteristics and the social context surrounding the use of the medium, scholars have discussed how to achieve a naturalistic approach in this area of study (Baym, 1998; Jones, 1998; Newhagen & Rafaeli, 1996; Paccagnella, 1997). This concern is sometimes expressed as a limitation of laboratory experimental study design, which usually oversimplifies the forces that affect computer-mediated communication (Baym, 1998). In other cases, this calls for unobtrusive techniques due to the problem of the presence of the researcher (Jones, 1998; Paccagnella, 1997). It is thus not safe to think of captured data as a kind of objective reality frozen by the computer. Rather these archived messages and texts are "representations of the on-line phenomena as perceived by participants" (Paccagnella, 1997, p. 11). Online-community research should always be sensitive to the relationship between actual social reality and on-line phenomena by recognizing the nature and dynamic dimension of the interaction in the space. In order to respond to this issue, I have tried to provide descriptions of specific venues in these two web boards of the online community.

A final issue is concerned with new ethics in cyberspace research. This issue is inevitable, particularly in field research with unobtrusive techniques such as participant-observation. Scholars generally do not agree on common ethical guidelines about the obligation to obtain explicit permission for online observation (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; Paccagnella, 1997). Privacy of individual users however is strongly protected with name changes, pseudonyms, or the use of addresses from logs. Along this line, the participant-observation and collection of posts in my research were performed without an explicit process for getting permission for two main reasons. First, it reduces the dangers of

distorting attitudes and behaviors and eventually posts or text data due to the presence of the researcher. And second, the targeted web boards are already anonymous so are less likely to carry privacy concerns compared to other web boards. The posts on the two web boards are treated as a public discourse without full identification of posters.

In-depth Interviews

For further data collection, in-depth interviews were conducted in order to examine how members of the Korean female diasporic group utilize the MissyUSA online community in their im/migrant lives. I adopted this method to acquire more specific background information about individual users in an effort to complement the textual analysis, which mainly focuses on thematic issues emerging from everyday experiences in an anonymous setting. To this end, I designed a qualitative interview with semi-structured questions. The qualitative interview has developed as a key method in most social science areas such as sociology and anthropology (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002) and has been endorsed especially for research aiming to capture the complexity of human life and experience (Berger, 2000, Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). One of the purposes of the qualitative interview, as McRobbie (1994) suggested, is to gain an understanding of “the social conditions and experiences which play a role in constituting subjectivities and identities” (p.193). Thus in-depth interviews, unlike other quantitative methods such as the closed-ended question survey, allow me to explore on multiple levels the relationship between the use of the online community and the social conditions and experiences of these im/migrant women (focusing on cultural identity, the concept of community, and media culture).

Procedure

A total of eleven in-depth interviews were conducted in this study. Five of the interviews were done in person and the other six via e-mail during July 2010 – January 2011. Each interview was conducted individually; follow-up interviews either in person or via e-mail were done when necessary. For in-person interviews, the length of the interview varied slightly, from one and a half hours to over two hours on a few occasions. I recruited interview participants using snowball sampling; recruiting was initiated from my personal network and then extended using references from interview respondents. Semi-structured interviews were performed, in which the interview participants responded to a preset list of questions that gave overall guidelines of the interview (see the Appendix A for the interview questions). My role as an interviewer was to be a flexible moderator as much as possible rather than to exercise tight control (Berger, 2000). E-mail interviews were performed for six interviews and several follow-up questions. Compared to in-person interviews, some of the e-mail interviews followed a more structured protocol because interviewees may have tried to organize their answers or to provide guarded and perhaps contrived responses. In those cases I did follow-up interviews to gain richer and more elaborate responses. Consent, with permission for audio-recording in the case of in-person interviews, was obtained for each interviewee (see the Appendix B for IRB reviewed consent form). The interviews were fully transcribed in Korean and I translated the quotes to be used in my writing. Hence, all the quotations from the interviews (and text analysis as well) are my translations¹⁵.

Participants

¹⁵Therefore, liabilities in translation are mine.

The 11 interview participants became members of the MissyUSA website sometime after they came to the U.S. and have been using it since then. Although the participants are demographically diverse and exhibit different (Internet) usage patterns, all the participants were born in South Korea and moved to the U.S. between the years 1976 and 2005. Five of them came to the U.S. for reasons of education, either for themselves or for their spouses. Four of them immigrated with family; two of them came when they were children and the other two came at the ages of nineteen and twenty-two, respectively. The other two moved when they married Korean Americans.

The participants' ages were between 30 and 56 at the time of interview. Five of them identified themselves as full-time housewives, two are full-time employees and one is retired. The participants are, overall, highly educated. All have at least two-year or four-year college degrees; three have post-graduate education. Hence, the proportion of women with college education and beyond among my respondents was much higher than the proportion (35%) among female Korean immigrants in the U.S. in general (Esterchild & McDaniel, 1998). Four of them currently contribute to the website by writing regular columns about topics such as crafts or life in the south. Areas of residence are the west coast (5), east coast (4), mid-west (1) and south (1). All of these women are married, two of them to non-Koreans. Eight of them are currently raising children.

Data Analysis

Grounded theory

Grounded theory advocates the inductive development of theories from qualitative data through multiple stages of coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Strauss &

Corbin, 1998). According to Strauss & Corbin (1998), who have characterized the grounded theory building process, it is termed “grounded theory” since theories are *derived from*, rather than pre-given. In this method, data collection, analysis, and eventual theorization proceed in close relationship. A researcher does not begin with a rigorous theoretical framework; rather, the researcher allows the theory to emerge from the data. The method provides a meaningful guide for understanding data because they are “more likely to resemble the ‘reality’” than the concepts solely based on speculation (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 12). Thus, I adopted grounded theory as a systematic guideline while I followed the tradition of “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) in which theoretical analysis reflects the realities of participants (of the two web boards and my interviews). I applied the grounded theory method especially during the data integration and analysis stage because I intended to systematically incorporate the interview and textual data for a more substantial, comprehensive examination of the research findings.

Coding procedure

The coding procedures of grounded theory are involved with conceptualizing data, reducing them into categories, elaborating themes, and identifying relational dimensions (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Following this procedure, I conducted several steps of coding. At the first stage, I initiated “open coding” by carefully reading through the selected web boards and interview transcripts to get a sense of overall themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Then, I coded and highlighted each meaning bloc by labeling them with a small theme (e.g. trouble with in-laws, visa problem, discrimination, media sharing, seeking emotional support).

For the next stage of coding, I examined my initial codes assigned to the meaning blocs. Through “progressive focusing”, I took notes on the conditions, interactions, strategies and consequences among those codes of meaning blocs (Charmaz, 2003; Park, 2005). In this process, I merged and ranked some codes accordingly as broader themes began to emerge. I kept writing short memos and notes, when needed, reflecting on my research questions and theoretical foci corresponding to each code.

In the final stage of coding, I organized my codes into the categories of identity, community, media, and integration. Then, I looked through my codes and also reviewed my notes and memos in order to find any themes that could be assigned to subcategories under the four categories. This stage enabled me to recognize any relationships among codes, themes, and subcategories, if any, and to construct a hierarchy of broader codes and categories, which eventually became my analytical framework. The organization of chapters addressing research findings in this dissertation is the product of this framework.

CHAPTER 5 A TALKING SPACE BASED ON IDENTITY

This first chapter begins with a discussion about how MissyUSA is based on a specific ethnic gender group's identity. Findings about a popular web board on this site follow, and a discussion about the ways that this board has become a talking space based on the female Korean im/migrant identity is presented.

Membership as a Reflection of Identity

Regarding questions about the identities of users of this online community (Can anyone be a member of this community? Who are the participants? How do they identify themselves?) MissyUSA, from the outset, has targeted a very specific ethnic gender group in the U.S. Its membership is for married Korean women, so membership reflects major parts of their identities, including their gender, ethnic, and cultural identities. Thus, the membership qualifications of this online community determine in large part the nature of identity discourses on this site and provide a basic framework for the analysis in my study. Membership is independent of residence status (though short-term travelers are excluded), as long as certain other conditions are met (i.e., one must be a married Korean female residing in the U.S.). Hence, the site's membership composition includes women of various statuses such as immigrants, permanent residents, international students, long-term visitors, professional workers, and migrant laborers. According to my interviews and information from text analysis, they are housewives, full- or part-time employees, small business owners, or professional workers. Many of the participants, especially on the two web boards, are international students or the spouses of international students,

perhaps because it was initially founded by international students' wives as an Internet café in 1999.

Since membership itself reveals a lot about one's identity, MissyUSA has maintained a relatively strict membership policy. The application process included a (Korean) social security ¹⁶screening to prevent false check-ins from male users. Since 2005, the application process has only required one's date of birth. The process also requires a personal statement and a mandatory greeting post in order to get full-access. The personal statement asks that an applicant provide her wedding anniversary date, family information, residing city and state, reason for coming to the U.S., purpose for becoming a member, and other introductory comments. This process is designed to prevent access by single females and non-residents of the U.S. and Canada. Although the application procedure is not flawless in preventing access from non-target users, the screening process supports a feeling of communion and a sense of homogeneity among the users. In other words, users do not think it is a one hundred percent man-free space, but still consider it a women's community with at least some level of security.

For example, one of my interviewees said that "the site has a strong appeal to women who want to share a common feeling, but it also appeals to a few voyeuristic men who want to peep into a lady's world" (Eunice, e-mail interview, November 18, 2010). Iris, another interviewee, identified a moment that demonstrated the distinction between the supposed characteristics of the members of the community (according to membership guidelines) and the actual characteristics of the community. When reading a post explaining in great detail high-tech electronic products, Iris observed, "Moms (women)

¹⁶ Korean social security numbers are set up in a way that gender is identified by the first digit of the second part – 1 for male, 2 for female.

are usually bad at these kinds of things. But the information was extremely knowledgeable and detailed, so I thought it was definitely a dad's (man's) writing" (Iris, in-person interview, August 24, 2010). Although Iris made an assumption based on a gender stereotype – women know nothing about high-tech products – it is interesting to note her use of such stereotypes in order to mark the boundaries of the site and to understand that this is a space for women only.

Despite this awareness of the presence of male users, my interview participants overall agreed on the fact that MissyUSA functions as a women's site and on the site's general homogeneity, describing it as "a space where women are talking" (Alley, e-mail interview, December 4, 2010), "a much more comfortable space than other communities [that are shared with men]" (Jung, in-person interview, July 28, 2010), and a place that, "because there are women only, at least no curses are exchanged!" (Chris, e-mail interview, January 28, 2010)

Their identities as Korean women, wives, mothers, daughters, and also as people who have transnationally relocated, have set the direction for this online community both during its design and as it maintains and expands itself. Therefore the website's contents are closely related to qualities that may be associated with each of these identity groups. The website language is predominantly Korean except for headings for the eight main sections and subheadings under each of the main sections, which are written in English¹⁷. Topics on this website cover a wide variety of aspects concerning life in the U.S., from everyday things to serious legal and social concerns. As a women's community, the

¹⁷However, writing posts and replies in English is not unwelcomed. As far as I observed, this activity was never criticized on this site since users understand some computers at work or public places are unable to type Korean or some im/migrants are not good at Korean, etc.

cooking section and the motherhood section are particularly popular. Also, sections related to media sharing, entertainment news from home and host countries, and immigration news and related laws are popular and reflect the users' im/migrant life conditions. The cooking section has been so popular for its useful and rich recipes that it has become a main reason for people to access the site. Among my 11 interviewees, 9 respondents mentioned the cooking section as either their favorite section or a place that they frequently visited; Sunny is one of them:

What I was intrigued by, right after becoming a member, was food! Because I was not good at cooking then, and especially because I had just moved to the U.S., I was anxious to learn how to cook Korean food whenever I wanted it. I was also concerned because here in America many ingredients are not the same. However, when I followed a recipe I found in the cooking section, it worked. It was easy and using ingredients from here... was really useful. I think it showed an aspect that is unique to a women's site. Cooking is an everyday routine, yet something that is very important. (In-person interview, December 2, 2010)

Another interviewee, Mihee also said that cooking information was extremely useful, especially when having company. She said that she found detailed guidelines for accommodating people from the U.S. and other countries (Mihee, in-person interview, July 22, 2010).

Motherhood is another valuable section for MissyUSA users. For the respondents who have given birth while in the U.S., the pregnancy and delivery web boards in the motherhood section were most helpful:

A point when the site was critical to me was during my pregnancy. Since I was pregnant, the stories there [the pregnancy board] were my stories . . . Is this normal at such and such a month? Who is a good doctor? What kinds of health services are available? Things like that. (Iris, in-person interview, August 24, 2010)

Having kids in a new environment puts them greatly in need of information. The transition to the U.S. and the lack of support and care from family in particular drives them to seek out information from people with similar experiences, and MissyUSA has become a platform where such information can be shared among women who are pregnant or have had a child. Thus, the motherhood section, which includes categories on pregnancy & delivery and raising kids, is often considered the main reason that many users access this community. As such, while the topics and contents of this website widely cover everyday life for Korean im/migrants in the U.S., sections like cooking, pregnancy, and raising kids can be seen as hallmarks of a women's community and are an intriguing feature for many users who want access to a wide variety of firsthand information.

Among users, there is a sense of “we-ness” as a specific ethnic gender group. Such a sense comes from clearly defining their commonalities and from addressing issues and concerns directly related to their conditions. Cho, one of the founding members of the website, described it as follows:

We have received tremendous support from Korean ladies who are struggling with problems in their everyday lives in America. There are common themes among us which are different from other ladies in Korea and also from our spouses. This is an arena in which we can express our own affliction, solitude, and curiosity caused by living in America as Korean women (cited in Kang, 2003).

These common experiences have created a sense of “we-ness” and this, in turn, has promoted loyal participation among users. This shared feeling has enabled users to actively post their candid and sometimes intimate stories. Again, the two big themes of their identities—being a married woman and living in America—underpin the kinship, as

evidenced by the restrictions on and the requirements for membership, and by the web content. Yet, there exists a subtle difference in the context in which many of the participants express themselves. I have noted that many active participants in MissyUSA have reported (e.g. in their introduction posts or in interviews for this study) that they came to the U.S. as dependents; the reason for their im/migration is primarily related to their spouse and not directly to themselves. Thus, their legal and socio-economic status in the U.S. is dependent upon that of their spouse. Those with dependent visa status are in general very limited in any legal or economic activities so this kind of restriction often reinforces feelings of helplessness and subordination among them. Thus, this status of being dependent and vulnerable can be understood as something that binds them and drives them to maintain a “married only” site instead of a general one for all female im/migrants including single women. One post on the *sokpuri* web board expresses the feeling:

I cannot go to the DMV by myself and get my driver’s license test alone since I don’t have a social security number. This means that I must be accompanied by my husband. It’s awful to be here as an F-2 (visa status for the spouse of a student). (12--4577, posted on the *sokpuri* web board, May 6, 2009)

This feeling makes them turn to each other for emotional support. It is thus notable that the *sokpuri* board came into being in this context, by creating a space that focuses on the function of sharing or venting frustrations concerning everyday life. From their “minority” perspective they can reflect on being women and im/migrants in the U.S. It serves as a kind of like-minded atmosphere where users feel comfortable sharing their stories, information, and advice. Jiwoo and Erin talked about what it’s like to have this minority perspective:

As I have lived here [as the wife of an international student], I have sometimes realized that this is how the lower-class people live in a society... (Jiwoo, e-mail interview, November 9, 2010)

Many [international students'] wives like me don't have health insurance so I was anxious about what to do when I'm sick. So I looked through the site... One thing that was interesting to me was that even if you ask a bit of a silly question, quite helpful answers appear... Seeing this, I wondered, are they showing off their knowledge? But rather I think that this comes from empathy. (Erin, in-person interview, September 16, 2010)

In this sense, MissyUSA reflects a need to create a supportive and resourceful community to deal with challenges and difficulties due to migration to a new place. Users are empowered by the fact that there are many other women like them, who share not only the same language and culture, but also the same limitations and conditions that come with being an im/migrant in a new society. They are willing to share and to respond to each other through this online community, even for things that are trivial or small.

The Sokpuri Board as a Talking Space

Popularity of the sokpuri board

In addition to the useful information available in sections related to cooking, raising children, and living in America, many users are attracted to this online community because of the popular *sokpuri* board, which provides an interesting arena for these women to talk about themselves and their lives in the U.S. Since the website opened, the *sokpuri* board has been one of the most visited spots, along with the *yeone* (entertainment) board. The *sokpuri* board maintains the highest number of daily posts. The number of posts on this board on six randomly selected days were 263 (March 3, 2010), 290 (May 5, 2010), 436 (November 24, 2010), 292 (December, 10, 2010), 335

(January 27, 2011), and 266 (February 6, 2011), for an average of around 314 posts per day.

In terms of the number of views per post¹⁸, the *sokpuri* board is not as popular as the *yeone* board (See Figure 1). For example, the *sokpuri* board, on a given day, had a high of 2,687 views and a low of 85 views (May 5, 2010), and the *yeone* board had a high of 8,301 views and a low of 94 views (January 26, 2011). However, many posts on the *sokpuri* board reach a relatively high number of views when compared to posts on all the other boards on the site. Another figure that can be used to get a sense of the popularity of a particular web board is the number of replies. This information is also displayed on the board's main page, right next to each post's title (see Figure 1). A high number of replies usually attracts more views because people want to see what is being discussed. It therefore becomes one of things that users check first when scanning the main page, along with the number of views and the title of each post. One of my interviewees said that she sometimes skips the original post: "I usually [select a post with many replies and then] read the replies first, and if I find something in the replies mentioning '*won-gul-nim*' [the original poster], I *then* go back to the original post to read it" (Mihee, in-person interview, July 22, 2010). In this way, the number of replies and the number of views have an overall positive correlation.

¹⁸ The number of views is one piece of information about each post that is displayed on the main page, along with the post's title, the number of responses, and the date of the post.

Figure 1. Main Page of The Sokpuri Web Board on the MissyUSA Site

The screenshot shows the Sokpuri Web Board interface. The main table lists posts with the following columns: 번호 (Number), 제목 (Title), 등록일 (Registration Date), and 조회수 (View Count). The 'Number of replies' column is circled in blue, and the 'Number of views' column is circled in red. Two callouts with arrows point to these columns, with labels 'Number of replies' and 'Number of views' respectively.

번호	제목	등록일	조회수
21	계시물 이동 및 삭제대상 게시물 안내	2009-04-09	27507
20	남편이 싫어졌어요. 2 [5]	2010-1-1	716
19	새해 첫날부터... [3]	2010-1-1	133
18	2009 마무리 [3]	2010-1-1	79
17	치과의사님들.. 질문이요..(무통기질) [4]	2010-1-1	249
16	***** 2010년 이글을 읽으시면 건투 이루어지실 것으로 ***** [33]	2010-1-1	792
15	신기한 일이 제게 일어났어요.... [4]	2010-1-1	2287
14	아직도 안 들어오고 있는 남편 [18]	2010-1-1	770
13	미시날을 새해 복 많이 받으세요~~~ [6]	2010-1-1	63
12	새해맞았어요 ㅋㅋ [12]	2010-1-1	354
11	컴터 바이러스때문에 속상해요 [3]	2010-1-1	258
10	크리스마스 이브날 8시, 뉴이얼스 이브날 와인 한잔 마시고 12시5분 에 자는 남편 [9]	2010-1-1	395
9	생리통 심하신 분들 생강차 드셔보세요 [7]	2010-1-1	594
8	*** 하면 하하하인가요? 아님 허허허 아님 해해해 [28]	2010-1-1	419
7	결혼도 했고 아이도 태어나고... 그런데도 세상이 같수록 우울한 나... [13]	2010-1-1	972
6	감사로 시작합시다! [5]	2010-1-1	195
5	딱 잘 먹는 미국사람도 있나? [24]	2010-1-1	916
4	happy newyear!!!!!!!새날들~~~ [4]	2010-1-1	82
3	감기 잘 안걸린다고 건강하다고 자랑할수 없는거요? [7]	2010-1-1	262
2	미국사람들 대단하세요. [18]	2010-1-1	1396
1	저 10일만에 5-10파운드 곡 빼야해요 ㅋㅋ [34]	2010-1-1	301

The basic function of the *sokpuri* board is to allow for open conversation without any means of identification. Hence, the board's popularity and high level of participation are in large part related to its anonymity and openness to a variety of topics. While there are no limitations as to what topics can be discussed (unlike the other web boards with specifically assigned topics such as Politics and Society, Moving, Gardening, etc.), the posts, as the title of the board (*sokpuri*: catharsis through storytelling; appeasing one's mind often through the telling of a story, secret, or event) implies, should be related to venting about frustrations, stress, or other concerns. Posts can be about having a bad day, difficult experiences, complaints about relationships, and so on. Because many posts often deal with personal stories, the board is designed so that real names, account ID, and screen names are not revealed; only an abridged IP address (e.g. 54--7718) is available.

Also, this board is open only to members, unlike some of the other boards, which allow non-members to read posts. These circumstances (the anonymous setting and the freedom with regard to subject matter) allow users to disclose candid stories without reluctance and encourage members to actively respond to others. This in turn makes the board a popular place where people can find stories to which they can relate or simply find something interesting to read.

Themes of the sokpuri board

The subjects most frequently posted about on the *sokpuri* web board are related to in-law problems, loneliness, cultural differences, divorce, child care, health, etc. More detailed examples of the types of posts (retrieved on the randomly selected day of January 2, 2010) are listed in Table 2. The table shows that the top three most frequently discussed themes fall into the categories of complaints, child care and education, or asking advice. Sub-themes related to married life, such as complaints about one's spouse, stress from the relationship with one's in-laws, or requests for marriage advice, are common topics for discussion. Users frequently post their everyday concerns about raising children. This can include discussions about symptoms of certain childhood sicknesses, schooling, or behavioral issues related to things like drugs or bullying.

The most viewed post on the day that data was collected was titled 'divorcing an American spouse' (2,759 hits) and the post with the most replies was 'let's talk about unforgettable sayings from your mother in-law'. Since this post invited readers' replies by suggesting a "talk in relays," it naturally drew many responses (106 replies). Other posts with high numbers of views and replies included 'life in the U.S. is tough,' 'which

Table 2. Examples of Sokpuri Postings (January 2, 2010)

Themes	Number of Postings	Sub Themes & Number of Postings
Complaints	34	Complaints about spouse 9 Dealing with relationships 6 Complaints about markets & restaurants 5 Difficult (unfortunate) life 4 Others (bad dreams, grade dispute, rude people, etc.) 10
Child Care & Education	30	Questions about symptoms 10 Raising kids (schooling, problems like drugs, bullying...) 8 Questions related to pregnancy 6 Others (Breastfeeding, raising kids as a single mom, etc.) 6
Asking Advice	27	Marriage 7 Car accident 3 Others (career, depression, gift idea, etc.) 17
Living	21	Having a career as a mom 2 Confused with bills (electricity, credit card...) 2 Others (language barrier, choosing a church, etc.) 17
Questions	15	Questions about sex life & pregnancy 6 About cooking or food 3 Others (product return policy, extra job at home, etc.) 6
Lifestyle	12	Debate on wearing fur (mink) coat 3 Wish for a different lifestyle (career woman, wealthy life) 2 Others (language barrier, desire for city life, etc.) 7
In-law problems	10	Stress from the relationship with in-laws 8 Others (sending baby to mother-in-law in Korea, etc.) 2
Beauty & Diet	10	Want to lose weight 5 Others (skin care, aging, etc.) 5
Divorce	8	Divorce process in the U.S. 4 Others (counseling, anger management, etc.) 4
Cultural differences	5	American etiquette 3 Others (understanding non-Korean spouse's culture, etc.) 2
Gossip	4	Gossiping 2 Others (heartwarming story, celebrity gossip) 2
Others	8	Relationship with mom, missing one's mom in Korea 4 Boring day, anybody want a friend? 3 English expression 1
About the site*	9	Responses expressing thanks, Can't live without MissyUSA... 3 Lost or deleted postings, postings by men, rude replies... 6

country (Korea or America) is better for poor people,’ ‘rude kids in a restaurant,’ and ‘can anyone recommend a good lawyer for dealing with theft.’

The board is designed to allow posters to express their frustrations or disappointments, and in return receive feedback. Because of this, there is an expectation for understanding and support; responses are often comforting or consoling in tone. The supportive attitude of this board seems to contribute to the sheer volume of posts, which often contain candid stories and honest opinions. Many posts here include comments looking for reassurance or confirmation about personal topics, like “I want to make sure that I’m not wrong or weird, and/or the only one who’s having such and such troubles.” This kind of frankness often is a source of entertainment for readers or, in some cases, can generate heated debates. Jiwoo, in her interview, made this point:

Once when I was having a hard time, I happened to visit the *sokpuri* board and found that it can be so much *fun* [italics added] to read. It also provided me with a sense of relief. Since then, I have visited almost twice a day reading every post there. I was a *juk-suni* [one who visits so frequently that they are virtually always present] for a while, and I commented a lot and participated in the debates often.

In addition to posts that elicit sympathy, there are people who make posts that seek out solutions or professional advice. Mihee, one of the interview participants, explained her experience in relation to this:

There are many posts in which a ‘real’ solution is being sought. Maybe I tend to read these serious posts more. Anyway, I have seen many problematic issues being discussed, which require some sort of help from professionals, like a lawyer. And there are sometimes replies that give such professional advice or very wise answers. After seeing these, I would think, ‘Oh, I would do that in such and such a case!’ (In-person interview, July 22, 2010)

There are also many posts that are related to health issues. These posts are usually from mothers dealing with sick children or women seeking information about topics like pregnancy or depression. Sometimes their concerns are serious and urgent, but some posts are made out of simple curiosity. Although these types of health-related posts are unrelated to the original purpose of the *sokpuri* board¹⁹, people use this board to post about such topics because they think that many more people will see their posts here. By posting to the *sokpuri* board, these women expect that they will receive a large number of quick responses that are of high quality.

Meanwhile, due to the board's popularity (i.e. many visitors and replies), candid tone, and private content, many posts contain sensational or implausible stories and hence lead to unproductive controversies. Sometimes readers find that some personal stories about things like divorce, marriage, and personal conflicts are overly dramatic and sound too extreme to be true. In other cases, blunt or unfavorable responses to sensitive issues can cause conflict between users. Moreover, anonymity on this board can sometimes be illusory, as more and more Korean women in the U.S. visit the board and talk about what they read on it with people in their personal and local networks (e.g., church group, school gathering, etc.). Sunny talked about this in her interview:

I saw someone on the *sokpuri* board complaining about an acquaintance that visited her house. The person in the story found out about it herself and then left a response to the original post . . . That's how they got into a fight. I guess it's becoming less and less confidential. (In-person interview, December 2, 2010)

¹⁹ The MissyUSA website has a section specifically for health issues, entitled Health and Beauty. Also, the Motherhood section has various boards focusing on themes like pregnancy/delivery, infertility, and raising kids, in which similar health issues can be discussed.

Also, sensitive issues like politics and religion can easily generate heated debates. Since the board is anonymous and conversation can be personal and honest in tone, such discussions often become emotional. Although some people who visit this board are attracted to such things, this, along with the board's vulnerability to sensational and implausible stories and the sometimes tenuous level of anonymity, can be considered negative aspects of the *sokpuri* board.

Nevertheless, as a venue for venting frustrations and sharing concerns, the *sokpuri* board overall functions like a friend with whom one can commiserate. It also is effective as a means for receiving emotional support, counseling, answers to simple questions, and an idea of what it means to live in the U.S. in general. With the additional qualities of being fun, conversational, and sometimes controversial, the board serves as a talking space where female Korean im/migrants can come together, socialize, and try to cope with life in America and with life as women, mothers, wives, and daughters.

CHAPTER 6 IDENTITY DISCOURSES

Findings about identity discourses on the MissyUSA site are presented in this chapter. First, the gender discourses based on the images of “*Missy*” and “*Ajuma*” are discussed. The two concepts are influenced by a South Korean cultural context, especially in relation to (married) women’s identities. Next, findings about how these women’s im/migration experiences in the U.S. affect their ethnic and diasporic identities are followed.

Two Gender Identity Discourses

Although most posts on the *sokpuri* board explicitly deal with the process of relocation to the U.S. (or sometimes back to Korea) and the post-im/migration lives of these women, these subjects are related to larger themes about themselves and their identities. Discussions about the practicalities of living in the U.S. become opportunities to explore grander personal narratives. In other words, talking about these issues and solutions both directly and indirectly relates to ideas about having a better life and a better family and being a better person, ideas which are enhanced and enlivened in the context of their im/migration status and their transnational condition. Thus, a large part of the *sokpuri* talk deals with questions like “Who am I?” “What am I doing here?” and “What kind of life do I want to live?” For instance, Alley, an interview respondent who writes regular columns for MissyUSA, described herself and her life as follows:

There are many ‘I’s’, who so far have worked hard and lived—a student, born and raised in Korea; a member of the U.S. Navy, who served for 22 years after coming to the U.S.; a full-time housewife for 2 years; a

working woman for 5 and a half years. I . . . now enjoy volunteer work while having a part-time job in a non-profit organization and try to continue to stay fresh. (E-mail interview, December 4, 2010)

Alley immigrated to the U.S. thirty years ago and is now in her late fifties. Here is the case of a woman who has successfully settled into a new host society as a working mom with two children while having had careers in both the Navy and a public research center. After retirement, she has been writing her column for several Korean-American newspapers and MissyUSA as well. Compared to Alley, many other younger MissyUSA users are still in the process of making their lives more desirable and successful. Therefore, there are numerous exchanges of opinions and debates on the subjects of what type of woman they want to be and what kind of life they want to live. From these, some key concepts and discourses emerge, and they are useful for looking at how they reflect and define these women's collective identity. Among them, two distinct yet related identities, "*Missy*" and "*Ajuma*," are found.

Missy discourse

The term *Missy*²⁰ was coined in the context of South Korea's socio-economic transition to a post-Fordist system (Kim, 2006). In late 1993, according to Kim (2006), the term was first used in relation to a consumer culture in which young married women with a distinctive and refined consumer sense in particular began to be called *Missy* so as to fragment them as a "target marketing group" (p.21). It came to be used in a broader sense to refer to young married women in their twenties and thirties who pursue an active and independent life style and have distinct cultural tastes. Since then, the term *Missy* has

²⁰ I will italicize the word "*Missy*" throughout the chapters according to APA style rules for foreign terms because it has been coined in a South Korean socio-economic context, and so has a different meaning from the original English word.

become so prevalent that it has come to connote a woman who is married yet maintains a sophisticated and independent lifestyle, regardless of age. For example, a survey conducted by a daily newspaper in June 1994 showed that 72% of female respondents in their 20s and 30s and 58% of those in their 40s and 50s regarded themselves as a “*Missy*,” and they defined a “*Missy*” as “a person who continuously tries to live an active life while pursuing personal development” (The Chosun Ilbo, June 2 1994, cited in Kim, 2006). This reflects the wide circulation of “*Missy*” discourse in South Korean society. MissyUSA users, especially those who are young and recently im/migrated, are influenced by the concept as well by use this as a part of the title of the website (www.MissyUSA.com).

Thus, the word, *Missy* is used as a kind of official term of address on this online community. The word is particularly convenient when there is a need to address all members of the site collectively. For example, it can be used in the following ways: “Hello, *Missy-nim*²¹, I would like to ask . . .”; “Please, help me by giving a piece of wise advice, *Missy yereh-boon* [“you all” in Korean].” Because the word *Missy* has increasingly become accepted as a term for the younger generation of married women in general and therefore connotes youthfulness, the term “*Missy*,” rather than “Mrs.” or “Ms.,” was chosen as the name of this community. Therefore, it is important to look at what meanings these women attach to the term and how discourses about a desirable lifestyle and the ideal role for a woman revolve around the concept of *Missy* on this site.

First, many women on this site, despite adverse conditions brought on by their im/migration, want to keep pursuing their own careers. Many of these women are doing

²¹ *Nim* is a suffix in Korean to address one with respect.

well in their career, yet many have to stay at home upon moving to the U.S. for various reasons (taking care of kids, visa status, language barrier, etc.). Thus, they are very interested in sharing information and resources regarding subjects like getting a job, maintaining a successful career, and being successful at work. Of course, attitudes toward having a career and socio-economic reasons for having a job are not universal; some women choose willingly to be full-time housewives, some have to work, and some want to do both. For example, full-time housewives often express a different perspective with regard to the choice between having a career and taking care of the family, so there can be tension between them and women who work. However, attitudes can be described overall as supportive and understanding. In addition, the MissyUSA site is used as a helpful resource where those who want to have their own career can share information and advice. Posts with tips and advice in relation to job search, salary negotiation, changing careers, etc. are frequent topics on the *sokpuri* board;

At the age of 40, I am going to start working as a nail technician. It'll be a big challenge and I want a fresh start, leaving behind everything [I did] before. . . . Please provide me with some encouragement (17--9825, posted on the *sokpuri* board, March 21 2011)

There will be a performance review in my company and I want to negotiate my salary this time, but I have never done this so I don't know what to say. . . . Will it be okay to request a raise in this poor economic climate? My company is doing well and hasn't been impacted much by the economy, though... What if they say no? I am afraid of being turned down... What would be the best way for me to bring this up? (35--2333, posted on the *sokpuri* board, March 21 2011)

I am desperate to get good advice from *Missy-nim* who have lots of life experience. . . . I am a 26 year-old mom with a two and half year-old daughter. I came to the U.S. 5 years ago with my American husband . . . I graduated cum laude, majoring in International Studies at a good state university. I did study hard during my college years and my English is good. I have been trying to get a job, but still haven't been able to. . . . I

applied to more than 100 positions, from a bank teller to a part-time job. . .
 . I am getting nervous waiting at home feeling like I am wasting my life.
 (19--4325, posted on the *sokpuri* board, January 3 2010)

Besides being a resourceful network, the site itself has often been used as a career development tool for these women. For example, a member who runs a company selling organic pet toys posted a CNN news clip which introduced her business. She posted this message on two different boards, *Yeone* and *Pets* (July 22, 2010). Her intention was basically to share her good news. The post had a personal tone, so the majority of the replies were supportive, except for some comments expressing jealousy. Yet, it also served as a way to publicize her organic pet toys among Korean women im/migrants through this site.

Along this line, several interview respondents pointed out that there are some users who have become famous on this site and developed their careers through this. Sunny talked about a famous poster who became popular with her recipes on the cooking web board and then later began to work as a professional cook in Korea. Based on her recipes and activity here, the poster published a cookbook in Korea and has become quite famous, having been invited on a TV cooking show in Korea. Sunny said that “Hong (the poster)’s recipe was really useful and great... [and was] easy to follow and yummy. I saw many MissyUSA users talking about her being on TV, her cooking class, and also how young she is!” (Sunny, in-person interview, December 2, 2010) Sunny also commented on the fact that people gradually have come to realize that the site can be useful for their career in this way.

Seeing the case of Hong, as well as a couple of other cases, has had some unintended consequences as well. It is a good thing, in my opinion, for women to have some special interest areas and to be able to publicize

them here on the MissyUSA site. . . . Doing something beneficial for their future career or even being famous later might not be the intention from the outset [when these women engage in activities such as writing a column], however, after seeing such cases, everyone has those thoughts like maybe it would be helpful somehow for my future career . . . and even then people with such intentions become major contributors. (In-person interview, December 2, 2010)

Similarly, Erin pointed out that this might be one of the motivations for the creation of columns/personal blogs on this site: “Nowadays people have become smarter, so they know that writing a column on this site, with such a huge number of users, can be a good opportunity . . . I think that could be leading them to do such activities” (Erin, in-person interview, September 16, 2010). Although becoming successful through this site is not a common occurrence and is therefore not the intention for most contributors, it is largely true that MissyUSA provides a space for those who want to develop or maintain their professional careers. Jung, who studied textile design in the U.S. and has stayed at home as a housewife since then, explains how she also began to write her regular column about textile design and crafts on this site;

For personal reasons, I didn’t get a job after finishing my studies. While staying home, I was doing my work alone because I felt I shouldn’t take my hands off it. Then, I had a baby . . . and it was so hard to keep doing my work after having a kid. I was feeling kind of afraid to stay away and lose my sense for the work, so I searched for something I could do . . . then, I found that I could write a column²² on MissyUSA to share basic knowledge and skill in textile design & crafts. (In-person interview, July 28, 2010)

As such, MissyUSA is utilized by many active Korean female im/migrants, who are currently working or preparing for a future career, for information, emotional support, and career management.

²² There is a section, MissyWriter on the MissyUSA site and the section includes 69 regular columns.

The significance of the *Missy* concept is also apparent in the site's themes and topics, which convey these women's interest in maintaining their sophisticated taste and style. The Health and Beauty section is specifically dedicated to such themes and topics; it contains five general discussion boards about topics like fashion, make up, and DIY cosmetics and four column boards written by MissyUSA users that also deal with such topics. In addition to the web board space allocated for these specific interests, the concept of *Missy* is well reflected in discourses on the general discussion boards, specifically the *sokpuri* and *yeone* boards. One notable theme on these boards concerns the transformation of these women's lifestyle after marriage; in these conversations they bemoan such changes while discussing how to resist them. In her interview, Jiwoo mentioned one of her columns, titled "Why can't moms have long hair?" (Posted on Jiwoo's column board, November 19, 2006). Jiwoo said that she has had long hair since her college years, and even now, with two babies, she still does. But she has often encountered unfavorable opinions about her hairstyle: people generally think that long hair is not quite suitable for women with babies and that it is a style more appropriate for young single women. Although this has made her question whether her hair is acceptable for a mother of two young children, she has resisted changing her hairstyle for this reason only. Instead, she has concluded that she would consider changing it only if it is because she is pursuing a new style, but not because of the perception of others. (Jiwoo, Interview, November 9 2010). As such, women on this site have a strong interest in looking young and sophisticated. Hence, MissyUSA becomes the place to share various information regarding beauty products and fashion styles. In addition, it is a space for

them to talk not only about style and appearance, but also about how difficult it is to live up to such ideas due to various reasons (e.g. marriage, aging, having kids).

Discourses about maintaining the *Missy* lifestyle (i.e. young, sophisticated, independent) also display how these women perceive their current lifestyle and how they comprehend the changes in their lives due to their relocation to the U.S. Most of all, the concept can serve as a benchmark when they complain about their downward social mobility and the quality of their im/migrant lives. For example, one of Jiwoo's posts showed her thoughts in relation to this:

‘*Doenjang-nyeo* (soybean paste girl),’ it’s a buzzword nowadays on the Internet. People, especially jealous folks on the Internet, criticize these girls, but I rather envy them. . . . Why? Because I can’t possibly be them! While she drinks a 6 buck (Starbucks) coffee, I have cheap instant coffee at home. . . . She enjoys window shopping, strolling from aisle to aisle, but for me there are only quick trips to the store, holding crying babies. She uses expensive cosmetics, but my make up case is filled with supermarket brands. She asks guys to buy her dinner, but I have to cook on my own! (Posted on Jiwoo’s column board, October 3, 2006)

Here, Jiwoo effectively laments the loss of her (previous) taste and style by bringing up the quite controversial concept of the “*Doenjang-nyeo* (soybean paste girl)” and comparing this to her present status. *Doenjang-nyeo*, which literally means “soybean paste girl” in Korean, is a term used for young women who are consumption-oriented and who like expensive, brand name products²³. In order to make a clear contrast between her previous lifestyle and her new lifestyle after marrying and moving to the U.S., Jiwoo uses a buzzword that is directed toward young single girls in current South Korean society.

²³ The word first appeared on an Internet bulletin board in 2006. The significance of the word (i.e. why it is used in this way) is not clear, however, it is widely accepted as a term for young women who pursue high quality, luxurious, brand name products which usually they can barely afford. For example, even after having cheap instant ramen noodles for lunch, they drink a Starbucks coffee that costs more than twice as much as the noodles; or they buy a Louis Vuitton bag that costs almost a month’s pay.

Hence, although there is some exaggeration in her comparison, she clearly expresses her dissatisfaction with her current lifestyle. This implies that, from the perspective of someone who has the ideal *Missy* lifestyle, the “soybean paste girl,” despite the negative connotation, has certain aspects of their previous but now impossible lifestyle that they would like to retrieve.

This shows that even though they are married, maintaining youthfulness, which is usually meant to gradually give up for them, is the desire behind the label of “*missy*.” In this way, the “*Missy*” concept and lifestyle becomes a mechanism to understand the transformation of their lives in a new country. Jiwoo of course is well aware that her move to the U.S was not the sole reason for this lifestyle change. Yet, the im/migrant influence is evident in the last lines of her reflection where this social syndrome was interpreted from her perspective as a married female im/migrant:

She [the soybean paste girl] enjoys American sitcoms and deludes herself into believing she is a New Yorker, whereas I, *who am living in* [italics added] the U.S., watch Korean dramas everyday and delude myself into thinking I am in Korea. (Jiwoo, Posted on her column board, October 3 2006)

Jiwoo’s post drew many replies from users who appreciated her frankness and sense of humor. Many of them read her post and recognized her vivid description of the emotional instability associated with major life transitions (e.g. marriage, motherhood, resettlement in a new location, etc.). Some showed active support, arguing that maintaining the attitude of a soybean paste girl is okay and to some extent that it is “good for [our] psychological health to take care of and please ourselves” (Young-hee, replying to Jiwoo’s post, October 5, 2006). There were, however, responses that were critical, saying “There are those of us who are by no means as young and pretty as the [soybean

paste] girls, but who are still humbly trying to make a living in a strange place [the U.S.] . . . Go, go, such *Missy-nims!*” (Grace, replying to Jiwoo’s post, October 4, 2006); “The [soybean paste] girls take care of themselves, but we take care of our families. I am happy to hold my kids, rather than a pretty bag or a fancy dress” (Hyemin, replying to Jiwoo’s post, October 22, 2006).

Such discourse also reveals the weakness of the *Missy* concept as well. Many women on this site, as in the case of Jiwoo, are limited more or less in their ability to actually enjoy the *Missy* lifestyle because of money, time, and the fact that they are living in a new country. Nevertheless, they keep trying to pursue such a way of life, usually focusing on appearance and consumption. Thus, *Missy* culture can be easily associated with consumer culture as roughly epitomized in the soy paste girl’s example. Therefore, some of the positive and empowering aspects of the *Missy* concept, such as its independent and self-expressive image, are often achieved through consumption. Kim’s (2006) findings undergird this, showing that the *Missy* discourse has been vulnerable to backlash from conservative circles, especially when the economic situation is not good²⁴. Therefore, many debates arise on MissyUSA as well when these women’s *Missy* lifestyle is connected only to consumer culture or a life of extravagance.

Ajumma discourse

If the *Missy* concept, despite its vulnerability to individualistic and consumerist tendencies, is one image the younger generation of married women on this site can relate

²⁴ Kim (2006) argued that during the Asian financial crisis, which resulted in an IMF bailout in 1997 in South Korea, the “Missy” concept shifted, conjuring images of women as “unreal . . . [and] irrational consumer[s]” (Kim, 2006). And the concept of an independent woman and distinctive cultural assets of “Missy,” according to Kim (2006), was displaced by the idea of the “virtue of frugality” in major mass media discourses during the period

to, then an equally important identity, but one that contrasts with the *Missy* concept in several ways, is that of the *Ajuma*. While the word *missy* is a term that was coined in the commercial and cultural sectors, *ajuma* is a native Korean word that generally is used to refer to a middle aged married woman. Hence, the word *ajuma* was more frequently used by my interview respondents when addressing the MissyUSA users and was also sometimes used when identifying themselves. However, the younger interview respondents tended to use it less often when referring to themselves, perhaps because the word is not really associated with youthfulness. In fact, as the images of women have transformed in conjunction with the rapid economic development and social changes in South Korea since the 1960s, the word has come to connote a woman who is older, unsophisticated, and not particularly wealthy (Cho, 2002, p.177). According to Cho (2002), the image of a strong (and somewhat masculine) traditional mother figure, displayed by the older generation after the Korean War, became, in the next generation, an image of an aggressive modern wife with an endless desire for upward mobility as capitalistic competition became further entrenched in South Korean society. Some negative images of these women, such as that of the “*bokpuin*” (“Mrs. Realtor”), appeared in the 1980s, portraying them with a pushy attitude, especially with regard to household financial management. Among these, “*samonim*” is perhaps the most general term since it literally means “the honored wife of a teacher” and is now used for any woman who has money and taste, in order to distinguish her from an *ajuma*—a poor, ordinary woman. Thus, Cho (2002) saw *Missy* as a variation on the “Mrs. Realtor” or “*samonim*” prototypes in the younger generation because a *Missy* is distinguished from an *ajuma* not only in terms of age, but also with regard to buying power and taste. A

washing-machine commercial that aired during the time the “*Missy*” image was popularized described the principles of a *Missy* as follows: “1) Never give off the air of an *ajumma*. 2) My husband and the children are important, but I invest in myself. 3) I am a professional at housekeeping. 4) I know how to save money by shopping during the sale season.” (Chung-ang Ilbo, October 14, 1994, cited in Cho, 2002, p.186) Hence, on the MissyUSA site, the word *ajumma* is often used in condescending ways, as in the following examples:

I am just living as an ignorant ‘*ajim*’ (abbreviation for *ajumma*) (Posted on the *sokpuri* web board, May 5, 2010)

I am such an uninformed blockhead *ajuma*, who has only just learned the expression ‘soybean paste girl.’ (Yoon-hee, responding to Jiwoo’s post about ‘soybean paste girls,’ October 11, 2006)

However, *ajuma* is also often used to describe a powerful collective of women. As Cho (2002) pointed out, unlike the image of a *missy*, the image of an *ajuma* can be seen as that of a woman who is free and powerful. Along this line, MissyUSA is often referred to as a place that is supported by the positive and powerful spirits of *ajumas*.

It [MissyUSA] is a place where you can feel the power of *ajumas*. . . . All the information comes from what these *ajumas* have and share. (Iris, in-person interview, August 24, 2010)

I felt like ‘Wow, how powerful these *ajumas* are’ . . . I think I said to my husband proudly ‘Do you guys have this kind of thing for men?’ (Erin, in-person interview, September 16, 2010)

Here in MissyUSA, by the virtue of *ajumas*, women are eager to help other people with their problems If someone posts something like ‘Please translate this into English,’ then someone comes and does it . . . and maybe they’d do so even in German. What astonishes me is that there are always translation requests similar to my own, and moreover, there is always a very good English translation among the answers. (Sunny, in-person interview, December 2, 2010)

As such, *ajuma* conjures the image of a rough, uncultured woman who is neither pretty nor young, but is very active, unreserved, and energetic. Since they usually lack the considerable buying power of upper class women, they are often very keen when it comes to acquiring information, tips or know-how about things like housekeeping, childhood education, economical shopping, and so on. Unlike the *missys*, they tend to acknowledge that they're not young and attractive any more. By doing so, they can be relatively free from superficial concerns and thus *ajumas* are able to inspire a kind of culture that is less individualistic and more open to and engaged in sharing and helping others. In this sense, Cho argued that *ajuma* culture is what we are losing in the era of the young, attractive, sexy woman, in which a woman's image has shifted "from the industrious and resourceful *ajumma*" to the indolent and private single woman (2002, p.189). In addition, according to Cho, the *missy* concept is another manifestation of aggressive materialistic culture, which was pursued by the older generation (i.e. *samanim* culture) and resulted in fragmentation among contemporary women due to its "relative deprivation" (2002, p. 188).

However, one can easily observe that many MissyUSA users do not like to be called *ajuma* personally. It is probably because the Internet is populated by the younger generation, and they therefore want to avoid sending the impression that they are older women. The users on this site also appreciate the spirited quality of the *ajuma* identity and accept it as part of their collective image. Yet, this does not mean that they view the *missy* concept as conflicting with the *ajuma* identity. As shown in the previous quotes from interviews and text analyses, site administrators and users as well have used the two titles selectively, depending upon the context of the message. By using *missy*, which is

part of the site's title, to address users, they both avoid the negative associations of the word *ajuma* and adopt the positive connotations of the *missy* concept (e.g. missys as independent and modern). Additionally, as a community for married women, utilization of the constructive image of the *ajuma* (i.e. active, resourceful, less individualistic), which is an indispensable part of their collective identity, is also important.

Ethnic and Diasporic Identities

Another important type of identity discourse on the MissyUSA website relates to ethnic identity. These female Korean im/migrants, who are scattered across the U.S. and Canada²⁵, gather in this online community to acquire news and to comment on issues relating to their home and host countries. Accordingly, MissyUSA also serves as a platform for discourse about ethnic identity, including users' perceptions of being Korean and/or Korean American, their attitudes toward other ethnic groups, their feelings about living in a new country, etc. Because these women are different in terms of their immigration status²⁶, period of residence, and transnational connections, this discourse reveals the complicated and sometimes contradictory nature of how they perceive their ethnic identity.

People here often reveal stories of homesickness and loneliness resulting from a life away from family and friends. This is particularly true for newcomers who have not yet established social networks. Jung, one of interview respondents, said that “there is a

²⁵ Since the community was originally for international students' wives, the site ended up focusing on the two countries with the largest populations of Korean international students.

²⁶ Immigration status varies among MissyUSA users, and includes citizens, permanent residents, long term visitors (such as international students), professional workers, sojourners, expatriates, and illegal aliens (such as visa overstayers).

lot of loneliness in living in the U.S.,” and this was especially true for her before she had a baby and got involved in church activities (in-person interview, July 28, 2010). She added, “That’s one of the reasons why I decided to write a column about my work (textile crafts) on MissyUSA” (Jung, in-person interview, July 28, 2010). Thus, topics dealing with the feeling of isolation that they experience as im/migrants are found very frequently (e.g. missing one’s family, food or hometown, needing a friend, and so on). On the other hand, those who came to the U.S. at a relatively young age, like second-generation immigrants, do not carry such feelings of homesickness or loneliness. These so-called old-timers also show some feelings of longing toward their home country, but the nature of these feelings is a little different.

I’ve been living in the U.S. for 36 years. For the first few years, I didn’t have much interest in Korea... However, at some point I came to really want to visit Korea and experience Korean culture . . . I came to have an interest in things related to Korea . . . I’m getting used to American life more, yet feel a dim nostalgia for Korea . . . It was the World Cup in 2002 when this feeling was clear to me. While outwardly supporting America, on the inside I found myself wanting Korea to win. (75--241.251, posted on the *sokpuri* board, January 5, 2010)

For this user, who has been living in U.S. for almost four decades, America is a much more familiar place, where her day-to-day existence happens. Yet, she has found that an emotional attachment to Korea, the country she left long ago, remains with her. In other instances, Korean immigrants may try to identify with their home country in a more active way, as Chris described in her interview:

I came to the U.S. when I was young [at 12 years old] and grew up here, but I have never thought of myself as an American. Rather I have liked Korean culture more and thought of myself as Korean, so I always miss Korea. . . . It is true that I like using MissyUSA because of that; I can connect with the [Korean] culture that I like in my favorite language [Korean]. (Chris, e-mail interview, January 28, 2011)

Notably, Chris pointed out that her use of MissyUSA is related to her preference for Korean culture and identity; although she is fluent in English and can therefore use English online communities without a problem, she prefers MissyUSA. As such, MissyUSA becomes a virtual place where female Korean im/migrants can express their “Koreanness,” whether they are newcomers or old timers, and whether their attachment to Korea is due to a clear sense of homesickness, an ambiguous emotional connection, or an active interest in the culture of their home country. These women create an “imagined community” (Anderson, 1983) of their home country on the MissyUSA site.

This notion of an “imagined community” can be better understood when considering the myth of return, which Shi (2005) explained as the tendency for im/migrants to constantly “mythify” a return to their home country. Discussions about Korea on the *sokpuri* web board often include expressions like “when I return to Korea . . .,” “I will go back someday . . .,” “I wish I were in Korea,” or “If I can go to Korea” Clearly these expressions represent a variety of perspectives. Some long-term residents may in fact return eventually, while many are quite indecisive in terms of where to permanently settle down; and for some, returning is not an option. Nevertheless one can infer from these expressions that these women constantly think about, talk about, and imagine returning to Korea, regardless of the likelihood that this will happen. By doing so, they keep producing in their imagination a scenario to which emotions and expectations are attached rather than actually making preparations for return. Thus, it becomes a “mythifying” process.

It can also be understood as a myth because they often find that their expectations are not fulfilled when they return to Korea. While connections to the home country continually remind these women of returning, they often find themselves already adjusted to the host culture. Jiwoo felt this when she visited Korea after having been away for a while:

Among friends who were enjoying a life with certain western-style conveniences, I, the one who was returning after staying a while in America, was seemingly the unsophisticated one who felt like everything was unfamiliar. As Korea changes quickly and its standard of living improves, I do feel different, and more left out. (Jiwoo's column, August 15, 2006)

Although many of these women are reluctant to completely assimilate to American culture, they often find that they feel detached from Korean ways and are fearful of going back to old Korean practices. One of the responses to Jiwoo's above post illustrates this. Mina, commenting on her return to Korea, said:

Korea... just hearing the word used to make my heart flutter. But now I think of it as just one country among many. It's sad, but still [people in Korea] care more about what other people think [and] worry a lot about trivial things. . . . With such a small amount of land for such a large population, people are so competitive. They have the mindset that if they don't take it first, then they'll lose out and never get it. (Mina, responding to Jiwoo's post about 'Brunch in Korea', August 18, 2006)

It is quite common for women who return to Korea to express unsatisfied expectations and changed perceptions of their home country. This often leads to a more critical perspective of the home nation, people and culture. For example, an interview respondent expressed the following criticism of Korean culture: "[Korea's] group consciousness, which sacrifices the value of individuals for the sake of collective goals . . . I don't like such a culture." (Eunice, e-mail interview, November 18, 2010)

Therefore, these women create an imagined community through the MissyUSA site to cope with feelings of isolation. While there is continuous discourse about the myth of return, their actual perceptions toward their home country keep changing due to their transnational circumstances. These mixed feelings and changing perceptions become more complicated as another identity emerges: living as a (Korean-) American.

Many of these women agree on the advantages of living in the U.S. and see this as an opportunity to escape some of the personal, institutional, societal, and cultural problems of their home country (e.g. in-law conflicts, competitive work environments, pressure of education)

Most of all, I feel comfortable living here [in the U.S.], remote from my parents-in-law. In addition, I like that my husband is away from the competitive and severe workaholic life back in Korea. It's good for me and my family as a whole. (67--67.157, posted on the *sokpuri* board, January 5, 2010)

My husband and I were born in the U.S. and we moved to Korea for his business. After a year, I first came back with my kid and here I feel like I can breathe easy now. It was tough and stuffy for us in Korea. (71--13190, posted on the *sokpuri* board, March 21, 2010)

Further, some women exhibit a very positive attitude toward living in the U.S. and toward American culture in general. Eunice, an interview respondent is one of them:

I like living in the U.S. I think it's a much easier place [for me] to live with my distinct individuality. . . . Meeting many people on MissyUSA, I have found that there are many different types of Koreans. When I 'watch' them [people on the MissyUSA site], I feel that I have become very Americanized. (E-mail interview, November 18, 2010)

There is also a group of older immigrants who came to the U.S. in the 1970s and 80s and strived to adjust to the host society, like my interview respondent Alley:

From the first day I immigrated here, for a long time I was only focused on making a living. . . and there was no room for other things. Korea also felt so far away So I have just lived life to the fullest as a member of

the U.S. Navy and as a mom and wife. . . . And I have been able to adjust well to life in the U.S. (E-mail interview, December 4, 2010)

Alley's story is like most of the first generation immigrants who worked hard to make America their home. She is also an example of someone who settled in a place (Alabama in Alley's case) where there is not a significant Korean population, and it is therefore not easy to maintain links to home culture. For instance, Alley said that she felt herself gradually losing her Korean and this made her decide to write a regular column on MissyUSA because she thought it would be a good chance to practice her Korean writing (E-mail interview, December 4, 2010). However, many im/migrants of the younger generation display a more flexible and engaged attitude when it comes to maintaining their transnational ties. An example of this is Chris, who in an above quote explained how, although she came to the U.S. as a child, she has kept exposing herself to Korean culture and to the Korean language. In addition, the region in which a person settles also has a role in awareness of ethnic identity. For example, Soyoung, who has been living in Los Angeles²⁷, addressed her distinct awareness of living as a Korean in America;

I am more aware that I am Korean living in the U.S. . . . My appearance says it so I can't deny it. So [I] need to live as a 'prepared Korean.' I think we need to love the Korean language and Korean culture and learn more about them. (E-mail interview, January 28, 2011)

As such, my analysis finds that, on this site, female Korean im/migrants have a multi-layered perception of their ethnic identity as it relates to both their home and host countries. It also shows that their identity awareness varies depending on their generation, period of residence, and geographical location. MissyUSA has become a place where

²⁷ The Los Angeles metropolitan area has the highest Korean American population with 300,047 people as per the 2009 American Community Survey. Retrieved from http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/DatasetMainPageServlet?_program=ACS&_submenuId=&_lang=en&_ds_name=ACS_2009_5YR_G00_&ts=

those who have limited access to their home culture can reconnect with it or (in the case of the younger generation/newcomers) maintain a relationship with it.

It is also notable that other factors such as relationships and economic status influence their identity awareness, as suggested by following quotes: “As a wife, I like it here [America]. Friends in Korea say that they can’t see [their husbands’] faces [at home]. . . . But my husband seems to miss living that type of life [laugh]” (Jung, in-person interview, July 28, 2010); “I am divorced and now dating an American guy. But my parents don’t approve. . . . Should I marry a Korean man?” (32--13419, posted on the *sokpuri* board, December 21, 2010). Some women point out that money can be another important factor that affects how they perceive their transnational circumstances:

In terms of living in Korea or the U.S., I’ve always thought that if I was able to live in Korea with a certain amount of money, then I could be much more *American* in Korea than in the U.S., living like a New Yorker. (72--53.221, posted on the *sokpuri* board, September 20, 2009)

I don’t agree that Korea is always good only because it is my home country. . . . I am married to a Korean-American and my in-laws are here, but my family is in Korea. However, maybe because my family in Korea has not been doing well economically, I feel strange and uncomfortable when I am in Korea . . . [and] it was not like that when my family was doing okay. . . . Maybe because my life here is better . . . I like America more than Korea. (68--19554, posted on the *sokpuri* board, March 22, 2010)

Although the attitudes in the above quotes may sound opportunistic or simplistic in the sense that purchasing power and having more money are associated with a better life, they also indicate that there are factors other than national or ethnic awareness involved in the construction of their identity perceptions. For these women, who im/migrated to the U.S. for various reasons and at different times, their identity cannot simply be categorized as Korean-American, Korean, or American. Rather, it is based on myriad

factors like immigration status, age, period of residence, economic situation, and gender.

Thus many of them often find that understanding their identities can be complex and confusing:

After I came to the U.S., there was much confusion . . . ; confusion between English and Korean, confusion about my identity and culture. And whether the person is a newcomer or a Korean American is all confusing too. . . . So I became silent more and more, and I'm living like a mute . . . many times here in America. (19--33728, posted on the *sokpuri* board, March 11, 2007)

Therefore, it is helpful for them to talk about their identities on this site. This process reveals to them the in-between nature of their identity. These im/migrant women find that this is an on-going and open-ended process. Also they know that their survival and well-being are dependent upon finding some type of understanding. Erin elaborated on this:

I think there's a time of change in life. . . . I was living like a kind of a patriot back in Korea. But, things looked so different after I came here. . . . Korea was not so cool. Koreans were mean, which made me mad. Eventually I came to see the bigger picture. There was a period of denial of my pride in being Korean. As a result, I tried not to socialize with Koreans. I don't mean that I completely pushed them away, but I didn't make an effort. Instead I tried to learn about American society and tried to meet people. . . . But after a while I felt tired . . . and I was not able to be satisfied. . . . So I turned to Korea somewhat positively. I would say that all the reasons for that were to survive . . . because I believed that I couldn't survive if I didn't. . . . But, you know what? That was an experience when I was a housewife. If I do study and have my career here, then all those things will look different to me again. (Erin, in-person interview, September 16, 2010)

Meanwhile, a negative aspect of in-group identity discourse reveals itself in these discussions. Yujin pointed this out in her interview:

There is a considerable amount of talk about racial stereotypes. Users on this site make a lot of posts about their experiences with people of other ethnicities, and they are often very negative. People easily generalize and even ask other users to agree with them [especially on *sokpuri* board]. . . . In this way, MissyUSA makes people, especially new comers, have some

type of prejudice toward certain ethnic groups, I think. (In-person interview, January 25, 2011)

In fact, there is a tendency for MissyUSA, as an im/migrants' community, to host very active discussions about race, ethnicity, and national identity, and such discussions in a place like this (i.e. an online space) often include extreme arguments and blunt expressions, particularly on the anonymous web boards (*sokpuri* and *yeone*). For instance, posts on Japan's earthquake in March 2011 got overly intense, with Korea's colonial experience with Japan and the general nationalistic sentiment a contributing factor to the impassioned nature of the discussion. The discussion quickly escalated into heated debates between people who focused on parochial nationalism and national interests and people who argued that giving help for disaster relief should go beyond the two countries' history. Therefore, the website administration moved all the posts regarding the issue to the "politics and society" board, where posts are identified with users' real names. In the sense that parochial nationalism and typical racial stereotypes can be promoted in web environments due to certain characteristics (e.g. more blunt and controversial posts getting more attention, having an anonymous setting, it being easy to delete their own posts, etc.) MissyUSA can possibly serve as an "ethnic enclave" (Mitra, 2006).

Nevertheless, discussions of race, ethnicity, and nationalism have not always produced negative effects. Of course there is the possibility for racism or parochial nationalist discourse. However, the discussion itself develops by the constant challenging of arguments, allowing for an opportunity to think critically about such issues, as Yujin pointed out: "Such racial stereotypes can have a greater influence on newcomers, I think.

But if you observe for a little longer, then you can find they're often commented on critically and become a subject of discussion . . . (In-person interview, January 25, 2011).

Thus, the possibility of such negative effects does not seem to overshadow other positive aspects that can be found on this site, particularly acknowledgment of the ongoing nature of their identities. These female Korean im/migrants somehow convey the feeling of being uprooted from their past and their home, so they re-create an endless desire to return to "lost origins" (Hall, 1990) in this imagined community. However, they realize more and more that these feelings cannot be fulfilled and wrestle with the cultural complexities, doubts, and confusion of their in-between lives. These women adopt many different strategies to deal with such unfulfilled desires and confusion. This process entails a reflective attitude toward their ethnic and national identities, and home and host cultures as well. It also makes them realize they are actually in an ongoing process of construction of their diasporic identities. Therefore, identity discourses on the MissyUSA site simultaneously promote an awareness of the nature of diasporic identities while producing an exclusive in-group ethnicity.

CHAPTER 7 COMMUNAL SPACE FOR RESOURCES AND NETWORKING

This chapter discusses the findings in relation to the community perception and communal feelings on the MissyUSA site among the interview participants. It also presents the ways in which the site has become a communal space for resources and networking.

Community Perception

Weak community perception

Regarding the perception that MissyUSA is a community, most of the interview respondents in this study said that they do not have a strong feeling of community toward MissyUSA. They do not identify MissyUSA as a “community” to which they feel a sense of belonging or to which they must make a strong commitment. Rather, they tend to define MissyUSA as a place for information, fun, and ideas:

I haven’t used the site for very long, but regardless of that I don’t think I am a member of a community. I think many people would agree with me To me, this site is just for information, a little of comfort, and some fun. (Mihee, in-person interview, July 22, 2010)

In general, I don’t care that much about a sense of belonging. . . so I think I’m just one user of MissyUSA and the site is a place where many people like me gather and share opinions. (Eunice, e-mail interview, November 18, 2010)

I have never thought of this as [my] community. Maybe it’s just a space many different people share . . . ? (Chris, e-mail interview, January 28, 2010)

Although words such as “comfort,” “fun,” “share,” and “gather” suggest the idea of “community,” they were reluctant to clearly identify the site as their community. This

implies that my interviewees consider the concept of community something more like a *Geminshaft*, characterized by meaningful commitment and sustained interaction (Fernback, 2007). Thus, based on certain characteristics of this online community, such as the anonymity of a few popular web boards (e.g. *sokpuri* and *yeone* boards), the limited interactions, and the discontinued relationships, they think of MissyUSA as a large online aggregation in which a sense of community is not easily developed. My interview respondents pointed out that the users of the site are so diverse that it is difficult to think of themselves as part of a homogeneous group. Also, most of my interviewees thought that they were not active enough on the site to feel such a clear sense of community and also said that making meaningful relationships is not their main purpose for using MissyUSA. Erin described her feelings about this:

There are active contributors and passive visitors . . . As a passive visitor, I am one of the anonymous, and so I can't think of it as my community. . . . In fact, when I receive help [from the site] there is this feeling of indebtedness . . . No one says anything specifically, but I just have this feeling. . . . I feel like I should contribute something. But it seems that my online response to this feeling is different from what my offline response would be . . . (Erin, in-person interview, September 16, 2010)

Erin's words imply that even though she feels indebted and wants to give something back to others, there is no obligation to do so in online relationships and in online spaces, making her somewhat passive in this regard. She pointed out that such an attitude can be attributed to the weak sense of community on the site. On the other hand, Eunice expressed in her interview a more personal resistance to the concept of community. Compared to Erin, Eunice is much more active: she regularly writes a personal column and also participates in a small-group community on the MissyUSA site. Also, Eunice is a kind of public figure on the MissyUSA site because many MissyUSA users like her

column²⁸. In spite of this, she emphasized in her interview that she is not very social and does not like the concept of community per se (Eunice, e-mail interview, November 18, 2010). In a sense, she is expressing resistance to the sense of collectivity (as opposed to individuality) inherent in the concept of community.

Meanwhile, other interview respondents addressed their awareness of differences among users that prevent them from having a feeling of community on the MissyUSA site. For example, Alley pointed out that it is hard for her, as a relatively older immigrant, to understand Korean popular cultural or popular public sentiment, especially that of the new generation of im/migrants who have come to the MissyUSA site:

The sentiment on several web boards such as *sokpuri* and *yeone* is very strange to me so I stopped visiting at some point. It seems that those [boards] are where the changes in people's sentiment since I left Korea [in 1976] are most apparent and that I can't relate to such things So to me this generation gap is especially difficult. (Alley, e-mail interview, December 4, 2010)

Along these lines, Mihee, who is one of the youngest interview respondents, talked about her observation of the generation gap on the site:

Sometimes young people, in their late 20s, early 30s, post that they want a divorce, and then the responses from serious older members are either: 1) Don't be so immature and childish, that's life; or 2) Make up your mind quickly. . . . [I have found that] people tend to agree with a decision to divorce if there's been domestic abuse. . . . In such an atmosphere, the younger people are often in conflict with the older people, who are almost the same age as the younger people's mothers. (Mihee, follow-up interview, July 31, 2010)

Since the creation of MissyUSA occurred more than 10 years ago (as of 2011) and many new comers keep visiting the site, the age range of the users continues to get wider. In addition, many old timers, who may be in their 50s or older, are recent users of

²⁸ Her column deals with her everyday struggles and is quite popular among MissyUSA users.

MissyUSA, as it has become popular among Korean im/migrants in the U.S. Thus, when these older women express somewhat conservative opinions on gender or social issues, conflict can quickly form between them and younger newcomers. Moreover this generational gap becomes more complicated when younger newcomers show a critical view of Korean-American culture, which can be distinct from current trends in the home country. For example, a topic that native Korean women frequently post about on the *sokpuri* board is their difficulty in dealing with their Korean-American family in-law. For example:

When I first met my [Korean-American] mother in-law, she said ‘We’re not like Korean mothers in-law. . . . Daughters in-law in the U.S. do not live like they do in Korea. So I expected she would be cool and independent. But surprisingly, I found that she insisted on following some old customs and things that have almost disappeared from Korean society. (98—23936, posted on the *sokpuri* board, February 5, 2011)

In this way, the generation gap gets more complicated in this transnational cultural context because different generational and cultural characteristics are brought together by the younger newcomers, old timers, and first- and second-generation immigrants.

Iris described the differences in economic and class status among users on this site:

I think many users [of MissyUSA] have the ability to do all sorts of leisure activities . . . due to their stable career or social status. I sometimes feel a division and it makes me think, ‘These people are very different from me.’ For instance, I recently found a post that was shocking, at least for me. It said that you could get a laptop if you put \$100,000 into an account, and I didn’t see many responses to criticize it. But my response was that if you already have such an amount of money, then just buy a computer! (Iris, in-person interview, August 24, 2010)

Iris, who is a graduate student and also the breadwinner of the family [her husband holds a dependent visa so cannot work in the U.S.], said that she is a busy mom. Thus, her major interest on this site lies in finding information on economical shopping, such as big sales, coupons, or flea markets. She does not go to the *sokpuri* or *yeone* boards, where “people talk about themselves a lot to the unspecified individuals and mostly sound like they’re in a better economic situation than I am” (Iris, in-person interview, August 24, 2010).

As such, MissyUSA is perceived by my interview respondents as a loosely connected cyber group with weak ties, rather than a homogeneous group of people with a strong feeling of community. Instead, they view it as a place where many different people get together to share information and comforting stories and to have fun. While they don’t deny that some of the more active participants may have a stronger feeling of community toward MissyUSA, most of them do not identify themselves among the more enthusiastic members. The reasons that they lack this feeling of community include the tendency to become a passive user in this online environment, the generation gap often linked to home and host cultures, and class differences.

Acknowledgement of some communal feeling

However, my interview respondents acknowledged that there were some moments that triggered a communal feeling in a broader sense. Such instances were essentially based on national or gender identity, im/migrant status, or a similar social view. Yujin identified several of them:

It is not easy to have a community spirit in a cyberspace, but sometimes . . . when I see some posts by like-minded people in the politics & society web board, or during certain sporting events, like when I

supported Kim Yu-na [South Korean figure skater who won a gold medal at the 2010 Olympics] on the *yeone* board, I have had such a feeling. (Yujin, in-person interview, January 25, 2011)

Another situation that generates this feeling of community is when the in-group and out-group boundary is broken:

There's this kind of feeling . . . for example, when there's an intruder . . . like if there are comments that are too blunt and seem like they are coming from a man . . . then, I suddenly become aware that there's certain people who are here that shouldn't be here. . . . I sometimes feel offended when I see posts that are so obviously made by a man or a young single girl, and I think to myself that this site is ours. (Erin, in-person interview, September 16, 2010)

This kind of in-group and out-group differentiation is a topic that is occasionally talked about on the site. Although most users think it is unavoidable, many women still point it out when they find posts presumed to be done by men or single women. Depending on the content of the out-group members' posts, they sometimes gently scold the offenders in the replies or seriously criticize them for their intrusion, offensive content, or ridiculous comments. Mihee added her observation here:

One time, an *ajuma* said that she had already fixed snacks for her kids so that she could keep using MissyUSA because she really likes it here. There were many replies. Someone said that she had even fixed dinner already [laughing] and another said that she had prepared a couple of days' worth of meals. But then someone wrote something like 'Tsk tsk, what're you guys doing not taking care of your kids . . . ?' and people responded with comments like 'Hey, mister! Get out of here' and 'Go home, grandma.' (Mihee, in-person interview, July 22, 2010)

As described above, users are likely to humorously and casually dismiss a message that is assumed to be from an intruder. In terms of in-group and out-group distinction patterns, they tend to assume that comments that are negative or unfavorable to women are comments from outsiders. Yet, it is still true that this feeling of intrusion raises their

awareness that they are on a women's site and can consequently arouse a feeling of community among them.

Other moments that stimulate a feeling of community include getting a season's greetings message from the site's administrative staff, exchanging short messages²⁹, and writing a post or reply. Some of my interview respondents illustrated activities like this that they have experienced:

I'm a night person so I'm usually on the [MissyUSA] site until 3 or 4 am. . . . Then people on the *sokpuri* or *yeone* boards say things like 'Missy-nims who're still up, have a good night . . .' I thought this was fun so I replied 'You too!' and other *ajumas* said 'Have sweet dreams . . .' The original poster said 'Thank you, night owl *missy-nims*. (Mihee, in-person interview, July 22, 2010)

One evening, I was kind of depressed . . . and wondering why there was no one around whom I could talk to about my field of work [textile design & crafts] instead of talking about shopping or kids. And among the replies to my post I found one person who said that she had studied a similar area and if we met, we'd have many things to talk about . . . So I sent a message to her, then she replied right away . . . saying she could understand how I was feeling. (Jung, in-person interview, July 28, 2010)

Such online interactions make the users feel like they are actually interacting with someone like them and provide a basic feeling of community. These interactions take the form of helpful exchanges, as Erin described:

At times when I visit the English board . . ., someone will say 'Urgent! Please help me with my English sentence' . . . If it's something that I can help with, I sometimes leave an answer. . . . I guess that's part of the community mindset in a broader sense. (Erin, in-person interview, September 16, 2010)

²⁹MissyUSA does not have an e-mail service and has a short message function instead.

People on this site and other online spaces as well do so regardless of emotional bonds or personal benefits. Though they may not always associate these activities with the concept of community, providing (and/or getting) help is one of basic hallmarks of being a member of a community, as Erin pointed out:

I guess people do not think of activities like writing replies and answering questions as being part of a community . . . but I think these activities can be considered community activities. Most of all, it helps to overcome the feeling of having nowhere to go in our lonely [immigrant] lives. (Erin, in-person interview, September 16, 2010)

Communal Spaces

MissyUSA as a virtual space for dwelling and assimilation

In fact, MissyUSA, as an online community, performs some communal functions that users of this site utilize. I have found that such functions can be identified as providing a network of resources, serving as a virtual dwelling place, and aiding in assimilation. First, as in off-line communities and social networks, this online community becomes a network in which many resources are shared to solve problems found in the everyday lives of these im/migrants. The resources here are mainly in the form of information, advice, and emotional support, yet the site can also be used to collect money, set up in-person gatherings, or organize for political purposes.

One of my friends is addicted to MissyUSA, visiting more than ten times a day. Her favorite board is neither *sokpuri* nor *yeone*. It's the motherhood section; she said there's so much great information . . . (Mihee, in-person interview, July 22, 2010)

There is some networking aspect . . . like the fact that instant responses can come through . . . One lady posted that her kid is bleeding and asked what to do on the 'yeone board!' Of course it does not fit with the theme of the board, but she did so because many people come to the [yeone]

board. I would also do that [post on the *yeone* board] if I was in such an urgent situation. (Sunny, in-person interview, December 2, 2010)

Contents accumulated on each directory of the site become informative resources that these women can access when they need them. In addition, these women utilize one of the more popular web boards to get instant help. Hence, the site in this way serves as a virtual network, connecting MissyUSA users who are on-line at the same time. This network is often used for searching off-line contacts or making off-line relationships as described in the following:

It seems like people meet up through MissyUSA. I saw some older ladies looking up their high school friends here . . . like ‘Hello, [this message is for] Kim Kyong-ja, who is class of such and such year at Jinsun Girls’ High School. I heard that you immigrated to San Diego . . . If you see this, please contact me . . .’ (Mihee, in-person interview, July 22, 2010)

I am now participating in a book club that I found out about on MissyUSA. (Yujin, in-person interview, January 25, 2011)

Traditional social networking nodes, such as a local religious group, a school association, or a business network, are of course still utilized by these women, yet more and more people expand their networks beyond their local boundaries by making online connections such as MissyUSA. Also, online ethnic (gender) communities, which can transcend geographical proximity, correspond to im/migrants’ new patterns of residence. Unlike the earlier immigrants who dwelled in the “Koreatowns” of metropolitan areas, the new professional Korean im/migrants (e.g. international students) are spatially dispersed throughout the U.S.

I am living in a small town. Here, there are no fun places for me to enjoy. There are few Koreans so it’s not easy to make friends. I even have no money to spend in my leisure time since my husband is a poor

international student. When he is in school and I am at home alone, I basically live at the MissyUSA website. Is there anyone who can be my friend? (35—67110, posted on the sokpuri board, August 9, 2008)

This residential pattern of the newer im/migrants and their need to form a community requires that the community transcend traditional geographical boundaries. For them, an online community is a virtual space that is free of the constraints of place and that shares a language and system of meaning, rather than based on geographic closeness (Anderson, 1983; Wenjing, 2005). In this sense, MissyUSA has become a virtual dwelling place especially for those who are living in a small town where not many Korean people reside, which is the second function that the site performs in relation to being a community. It is however true that a virtual dwelling place can be meaningful even to those who are living in metropolitan cities that have a large Korean im/migrant population. For example, Chris and Yujin, who are both living in the Los Angeles area, use the site as their virtual dwelling place:

My computers are always on at home and work. Whenever I turn on the computer, MissyUSA is open in a window. I'm always logging on to the site and I check for updates very frequently. Compared to when I first found out about the site, for the last two years I have used it addictively. I feel pretty strange and get curious if I skip it for a day. I would say MissyUSA is my window to the world. (Chris, e-mail interview, January 28, 2011)

I use the site very often, almost every day. I use it during slow times at my office . . . which is a big reduction compared to before. (Yujin, in-person interview, January 25, 2011)

The third function is related to the use of diasporic online communities such as MissUSA for assimilation to the host country. While the question of how such a dwelling affects these women's im/migration and subsequent lives can be approached in several

ways, most of my respondents talked about it in terms of adjustment or assimilation to the host country:

Because there is a lot of sharing of information about living in the U.S., I think it's definitely helpful for immigrant life. People now can skip the rough parts that I had to go through. When I first came here, there was no such resource like this. So, these women now can be more informed and more active with regards to adjusting to American society . . . well, it all depends on what choice they make. (Alley, e-mail interview, December 4, 2010)

Here, Alley indicates that having this kind of online community means that much more information is available for new im/migrants compared to when she first came to the States, which was in 1976. She thinks that this helps them assimilate easier and faster because they can avoid the struggles that she had to go through. However, this does not necessarily result in a higher rate of assimilation of new im/migrants, as she pointed out that it is contingent upon the choice of the individual. Jiwoo also mentioned that the usefulness of MissyUSA in terms of aid for assimilation can be different depending on a user's im/migration status:

If you immigrated to the U.S. and will live there for good, then MissyUSA can be helpful in a way, but maybe not in the long term. It however is definitely helpful for people like me, who are married to international students and will probably return to Korea some day. (Jiwoo, e-mail interview, November 9, 2010)

In a similar vein, Sunny talked about her change of attitude once she decided to settle down in the U.S.:

It was helpful only due to the fact that there are many people like me there [on MissyUSA] . . . and that it gives me an idea about how to view [U.S.] society. I didn't think I'd stay here for long . . . but, now I think that me [and my family] won't go back [to Korea]. So now I see things from a different perspective . . . , Knowing that I would actually be living here, things began looking different. (Sunny, in-person interview, December 2, 2010)

Interestingly, when she thought she would return to Korea, she paid more attention to the unique things from the U.S. society that she could learn about, such as its multi-cultural environment or its advanced education system. This changed however when she and her husband decided to live in the U.S. permanently. She said that she began to look for information on MissyUSA that was more directly related to adjusting to U.S. society, e.g. how American people view Korean im/migrants or Korean-Americans, instances of discrimination according to race or education, etc. She also researched more practical things such as effective English speaking skills and general cultural norms. She said that she started to pay more attention to small things, such as whether it is okay to flush a toilet with one's foot in a public bathroom. (Sunny, in-person interview, December 2, 2010)

On the other hand, Chris, who came to the U.S. when she was 12 years old, presented a different perspective in relation to the role of MissyUSA in aiding with assimilation.

For me, MissyUSA is fun. Yet, I'm not so sure that it's very helpful for adjusting to life in the U.S. . . . I think that it's different case by case, but I would say 'no' as a person who was grown up here. . . . Well, maybe it can be a companion to married women with kids, who rarely have time to meet with friends. . . . They can talk about their problems, complain about their in-laws, and get advice for difficult things . . . Then, in this sense, it would help their lives in America. MissyUSA is more like a friend to me. (Chris, e-mail interview, January 28, 2011)

For Chris, MissyUSA is not really about American life and how to survive it; rather, it is about the fun parts of Korean culture. As mentioned in her previous quote, she comes to the site in order to enjoy Korean popular culture rather than to get help for assimilating to

American society. Thus, assimilation is not something that is universally desired among these women. Mihee added her observation along this line:

I have found that ladies who are married to American husbands make good use of this site. . . . And I've also seen the opposite case, of Korean-American women who were born here and are married to native Koreans. I have occasionally found postings with a lot of typos in Korean . . . I wondered why this was . . . I later realized that they're Korean-American and are interested in information about Korea, like its work culture or night life (Mihee, in-person interview, July 22, 2010)

As such, specific groups with different statuses and conditions use MissyUSA for different purposes. While it plays a very helpful role for new im/migrants during their initial settling period, old timers or second generation immigrants do not use the site for this purpose as much as new comers do. Rather they appropriate this site as a virtual platform where they can learn more about Korea. For those who have a multicultural background, as pointed out in Mihee's above quote, it becomes a place where they can learn about the culture of their spouse or socialize with people of their own culture.

MissyUSA as a social space for new im/migrants

Due to the fact that Korean is the dominant language – although English postings are well appreciated – and membership is only for married female im/migrants, one can view MissyUSA as a fragmented and exclusive Internet group. In this view, it may contribute to a “separated integration” (Berry, 1997) into host society. MissyUSA users, however, said that as women who have limited access to an actual social space because of a lack of time, money, and familiarity with the host culture, they need a virtual place like MissyUSA. The site serves as a repository of customized resources and advice for im/migrant life, and it becomes a dwelling place for lonely female im/migrants. These women are aware that their social conditions make them different from other groups of

“netizens” or Internet users (e.g. young, technology savvy students, middle-aged male users, etc.). Jiwoo used the word “wi-tizen,” which combines “wife” and “netizen,” to describe their distinctiveness from other types of Internet users:

Thanks to ‘wi-tizens,’ especially those living in the U.S., my Internet world is going rather well. . . . I really enjoy the ‘Internet talk’ of wives like me. What makes them such funny Internet chatterers and message board posters? . . . I guess it’s because they’ve been using sites like Nownuri, Iloveshool, and Cyworld³⁰ for decades. (Jiwoo, posted on her column board, January 31, 2011)

Responding to this, many users agreed with what Jiwoo tried to capture with the word “wi-tizen”:

Maybe I could live without the Internet if I were in Korea, but definitely not in the U.S. I would die of boredom without it. (Sumi, responding to Jiwoo’s post, February 1, 2011)

I do agree with the term ‘wi-tizen.’ I somehow ended up not having any good friends around me. I was only wrestling at home with my kids in the U.S. . . . so I have come to realize that Internet is a whole other world for me. (Jinsook, responding to Jiwoo’s post, February 4, 2011)

It describes the women of this younger im/migrant generation in the U.S., particularly those in their 30s and early 40s, who participated as young adults during the popularization of the Internet in the 90s and during its subsequent rapid growth. These are also the women who created MissyUSA in 2002 as a place for themselves. The site became a new social space in which these women could overcome their social and physical limitations and reach out to other women who were similarly trapped by domestic and local boundaries.

³⁰ These are all Internet portal and social network sites in South Korea, which opened between 1994 and 1999.

As more and more of these women become active Internet users, their Internet literacy as a group increases. Sunny and a couple of other interview participants mentioned this as well:

As I visit the *yeone* web board every day and read through the posts, I have found that these *ajumas* are quite Internet savvy . . . For instance, if some posts do not sound genuine, such as ‘fishing’ posts, then they know right away, with replies like ‘Are you getting paid for this?’ or ‘Are you an entertainment news reporter?’ (Sunny, follow-up interview, January 12, 2011)

Some people become overly absorbed and experience overuse of MissyUSA (and the Internet in general). Hence there is a need for caution, as expressed by Alley in the following comment:

Because they’re married women, they tend to stick together a lot, I think. I am glad to see people with the same hobbies or opinions encourage each other and share this environment. But I do worry a little about people who don’t actually experience things and only sit at the computer and complain about everything. (Alley, e-mail interview, December 4, 2010)

In relation to this, Eunice admitted this concern based on her own experiences, but she also added that she could control her Internet use.

I used to use the Internet a lot, even to the point where I would feel pain in my wrists . . . so I set a rule to spend a certain amount of time on the computer. . . . Since I write a column regularly on the MissyUSA site, the time spent surfing the Internet turned into time spent thinking about what and how to write. As I wrote mostly about myself, it was like sitting in front of a psychotherapist. . . . It’s been 3 years and it would have been much harder if I didn’t write a column on MissyUSA. (Eunice, e-mail interview, November 18, 2010)

As implied by the above quote, women of this younger generation have immersed themselves in the Internet. It at times causes some negative side effects, yet it is more likely to contribute to the creation of their own common culture and space. Thus, many of these young women experience their social activities on the Internet. For example, many

users on this site enjoy discussions and chattings on the Internet calling it “Internet *suda*” (*suda* means “talking or chatting” in Korean).

Other interview participants emphasized MissyUSA’s role as part of the diasporic media and its ability to address social issues in both home and host countries. For instance, Soyoung said that “one important reason for me to visit MissyUSA is that it gives me a sense of the overall opinions of Koreans in the U.S. (whether they’re American citizens or not) on current issues in America and Korea” (e-mail interview, January 28, 2011). As a diasporic ethnic medium, MissyUSA is a space where users share news and opinions on social and political issues in their home and host countries. Consequently, the site has been frequently utilized for Internet activism among overseas Koreans. For instance, when the late former-president Roh Moo-hyu committed suicide in 2009, in the chaotic social atmosphere that followed, Koreans in the U.S. issued a statement calling for the recovery of democracy in South Korean society. It was partly initiated in the politics and society web board on the MissyUSA site and many women participated in the statement through the discussion on the board³¹. Sangryun was one of them:

I am not usually interested in political events, but the [politics & society] board allowed me to think deeply about [South Korean] society and the current situation. . . . Really a lot of thoughts, knowledge, and opinions are constantly presented . . . and it is through this that I decided to do this [participating in the statement]. (Lee, interview with Sangryun Kim, “Don’t know how many more years . . . but there is a hope, definitely,” *Ohmynews*, June 26 2009)

While MissyUSA users support and appreciate the forum provided by the site for discussions and various activities, some members have expressed critical views of the

³¹ A total of 1,518 Koreans in the U.S. participated in this statement.

site's management. Yujin, one of my interview participants, who also actively participated in the discussion at that time, criticized the lack of objectivity of the site's staff when dealing with political and social issues:

I feel that the administrative staff of MissyUSA has a somewhat conservative political leaning. I see sometimes they're favorable or unfavorable to certain political parties . . . and they're not fair or consistent when they move particular posts from one board to another or delete them completely. (Yujin, in-person interview, January 25, 2011)

In fact, concerns about surveillance by the MissyUSA staff have increased since a 2005 controversy over commercialization of the site. The controversy started when the site tried to attract investments in conjunction with the launch of an online shopping mall, with rumors being that it would involve exposure of users' personal information. As a result of the huge debates surrounding decisions regarding ownership of the site, the copyrighting of posts, user information protection, profit model, etc., a few of the site's founding staff members and a group of active users left to create a similar site, Mizville.org. As opposed to the commercialization of MissyUSA, Mizville manifested its non-profit orientation from the outset by registering its domain extension as organization (.org) and emphasized the aspects of community based on participation from its members. Because of this, some users recognize MissyUSA as the more commercial site (Yi, 2005, Korea Times). Therefore, there is also a tendency to compare the two when it comes to the concept of community, as illustrated by the following comments from Soyoung and Erin:

I feel a greater sense of community on the Mizville site. It does have fewer posts, but I think the quality of users is higher on Mizville than on MissyUSA. Compared to Mizville, there are quite a few silly posts and rude replies on MissyUSA . . . sometimes I don't like to use it because of that. (Soyoung, e-mail interview, January 28, 2011)

I go to Mizville too . . . [It] emphasizes the community aspect more . . . like by asking for donations and by sending messages to members. People there use more polite language probably because the membership process is stricter or because they think anonymity is not assured . . . so people are more kind there. (Erin, in-person interview, September 16, 2010)

As MissyUSA has become the largest female Korean im/migrant online community, it has ended up attracting a considerable number of male or single female users. Thus, as a newer community, Mizville instituted and maintains a stricter membership screening process, as pointed out by Erin in the above quote and by Mihee in the following:

A friend of mine said that I should go to Mizville so I requested membership to the site and then . . . I got a phone call in the morning when I was still sleeping. She [a volunteer for Mizville] asked me questions like ‘When did you come to the U.S.?’ ‘How many people are in your family?’ ‘What’s your husband’s shoe size?’ . . . I was not fully awake so I fumbled a lot . . .” (In-person interview, July 22, 2010)

Also, Mizville tends to be promoted more by its users, as evidenced by the fact that Mihee’s friend recommended it to her, since it is more community-oriented and basically run by volunteers with donations from members rather than depending on advertisements, as is the case with MissyUSA. This creates a stronger feeling of community, a politer attitude, and a friendlier atmosphere, and it makes people like Erin and Soyoung feel more like they are part of a community on Mizville. Soyoung, however, also added: “But more people come to MissyUSA so it is definitely better for acquiring information” (e-mail interview, January 28, 2011) and other interviewees had similar comments about this as well. As such, while a large number of long-time users have continued to use only MissyUSA and while the site is still the largest online female community for overseas

Koreans, many users have become members of both communities. These women do not see the two communities as incompatible; rather they utilize both sites at their own convenience. Some people prefer one over the other and some focus on one while occasionally checking the other.

In fact, the two online communities have recently worked together for some activities, such as making online petitions or promoting donations for serious social and political issues in their home and host countries. For example, following the controversial decision by the South Korean government to resume the import of U.S. beef in 2008 and during the subsequent protests by Korean citizens, the two online communities not only became very active discussion sites on this issue, but also participated together in signing a petition and making a joint statement to represent the voices of Korean wives in the U.S. Notably, the statement³² specified that the association was initiated by Mizville and members of MissyUSA joined in to make the action more united and powerful. Also, a woman residing in New Jersey who is a member of both of these online communities participated in a TV discussion show on a South Korean broadcast via conference call. She refuted some Korean American leaders' pro-Korean government arguments and shared information about domestic safety regulations on beef in the U.S. In an interview with a South Korean newspaper, she mentioned the enthusiastic online activities of women like her: "Yes, each of us is just an ordinary *ajuma* (housewife), but together we can share a lot of information through the immense online discussions on our sites [MissyUSA and Mizville]. So we can essentially be more knowledgeable than anyone else. . ." (Kim, J. June 13, 2008, *Kyunhyang Shinmun*)

³² An association of Korean wives in the U.S. who demand renegotiations with the U.S. over the beef import terms, May 7, 2008, retrieved from http://www.seoprise.com/board/view.php?table=seoprise_11&uid=91155

This kind of bond is possible mostly because there is much overlap³³ between users of the two sites. Therefore topics can be easily transferred between the two. The combination of MissyUSA's large pool of member users and information and the community spirit of Mizville has allowed these Korean women to create a new social space on the Internet where they can make their voices heard in both Korean and U.S. society.

³³ To give a rough idea of the extent of the overlap, among my 11 interview participants 7 respondents said that they are members of both MissyUSA and Mizville.

CHAPTER 8 MEDIA CULTURE

As for the reason why MissyUSA has been successful, all of my interview respondents mentioned something about the abundance of useful information for those living in the U.S., and about sharing news and media from home and host countries on one site. These are all corresponding to what ethnic media provide to their im/migrant audiences. In this chapter I will discuss the role of ethnic media played by MissyUSA and examine how MissyUSA differs from the information one can find in other Korean media in the U.S., focusing on the customized information sharing and the way these women view it as information for survival. Several distinctive media cultures created on the *yeone* web board are also presented.

Customized Information for Survival

Customized information

MissyUSA provides a variety of information, from trivial to serious, that these Korean women need in their im/migrant lives in the U.S. It does so in a much more comfortable environment since it is based on the same gender, language, and ethnic culture as pointed out by Alley:

It's a place to share everything good and bad about living in the U.S. with people who have the same language and culture. The abundance of information in particular has been advantageous for the site to expand and be successful. (E-mail interview, December 4, 2010)

Also its responsiveness and the quality of information are relatively high and satisfactory to many users. Soyoung said that "To provide information which is fast and accurate to a

certain extent is the strength of the site. If [you] ask something on the Missy site, then [you] can get answers instantly.” (E-mail interview, January 28, 2011)

More importantly, they find that information here is useful because it comes from the real experiences of Korean women im/migrants like them. Much of the information is made up of what these women have experienced firsthand, and so is part of their real life stories. In this sense, Mihee expressed it as “tested information.” And she added:

Although there might be some variances, MissyUSA provides high-quality information for those who are going to live in the U.S., which they can hardly gain from anywhere else . . . yeah, that’s what one can’t deny. (Mihee, in-person interview, July 22, 2010)

For example, one of my interview respondents, Sunny has been interested in organic foods due to her kids’ health issue and had a couple of chances to share her experiences.

There was once a discussion about ‘raw milk.’ The sale of raw milk is not allowed in New Jersey [where she lives]. So I went to Pennsylvania to get it . . . and fed it to my kids and made yogurt from it. That’s a topic that I know well and is new to other *ajumas* [wives] so I wrote about it. (In-person interview, December 2, 2010)

This kind of information and the sharing of it is relevant to people of specific circumstances and limitations (i.e., female im/migrant, living in a new host country, a major care giver of a family, isolated location, and language barrier), and this applies to the people who are using MissyUSA. Such conditions and limitations also apply to the online environment as well.

Much of what I want to know in my daily life here is not quite right on *Naver* [Korea’s biggest search engine] nor on any English sites. (Sunny, follow-up interview, January 12, 2011)

Another interview respondent, Erin described something similar:

It is helpful . . . even when I need something small but there is nowhere else to ask . . . like things too vague to search for on an English site. For

instance, if I go to Orlando, then questions like ‘How’s the weather there?’, ‘What should I wear?’ . . . MissyUSA is the place where I can *ask* exactly what I am curious about, and I don’t have to navigate the Internet to find what I want. (Erin, in-person interview, September 16, 2010)

These women are in need of much information to settle down in a new home, new community, and new country. From food and shopping to health and legal issues, they need to adjust to new rules and new environments. Newcomers in particular are at the stage where many things are happening at once, usually with many ups and downs. In both the home country and the host country, common, everyday websites lack the information, tips, and advice needed to reduce such complications. This is where MissyUSA, as an information sharing community, comes in, specifically focusing on Korean wives in the U.S. Of course, as newcomers get used to their new host society, the demands for these things will gradually decrease. In relation to this, Iris mentioned that “it seems that you would probably get told off for asking questions to which many answers have been posted already . . . and people seem to think such scolding is not a big problem” (In-person interview, August 24, 2010). Yujin, who came to the States in 2001, also described changes in her information search patterns and demands since then:

Getting information on the MissyUSA site was fast and helpful and it’s still true now. However, as I use other search engines like Google more and more, I feel that its [MissyUSA’s] search results are a bit more limited, compared to those on Google. (In-person interview, January 25, 2011)

Thus, to prevent the same questions and answers from accumulating on this site, searching in advance before posting a question is usually recommended as a sort of netiquette, as in many other online communities.

Information for survival

Such customized and tested information on the MissyUSA site is in much higher demand and is used more intensively among newcomers. In fact, many basic things that are considered to be common sense by native people of the home country can be things that these people are unaware of. For example, getting cash back at a store when using a debit card was such a point of confusion to Erin, when she had just come to the U.S. in 2002:

Whenever I paid at the counter in the grocery, cashers asked me ‘Do you want cash back?’ But I couldn’t say anything because I didn’t know what it was! . . . I asked the cashier, but the answer was kind of brief and fast so I didn’t understand. And it was a whole new concept to me since there was no such thing in Korea . . . I called up my sister who immigrated before me, but she didn’t know either. So I asked her husband . . . well, he seemed to know what it was, but didn’t know how it works exactly [laugh] . . . Yeah, if I knew of MissyUSA then, I’d definitely have searched the site right away! (In-person interview, September 16, 2010)

For these women everyday life in a new home country is full of moments of curiosity, doubt, and confusion. No matter how much they prepare, the things they face here are very distinct. Thus it affects their attitude toward information and its source, as Erin has experienced:

I thought that many things that I was not sure about [in the U.S.] would become clearer the longer I lived here. However, not long after, I realized that I would never know things as clearly here as I knew them in Korea. . . And I thought that without having information readily accessible and without me being informed, I would never know how things worked here . . . As I felt that, I began to change . . . and began to search for information . . . (In-person interview, September 16, 2010)

This affects their use of the Internet, as Mihee said in the following:

If I were in Korea, the purpose accessing the Internet and my use of the Internet would have been quite different from what I did in the U.S., especially the purpose of using MissyUSA. Well, I don’t know about how much Korean society has been changing so that people need to depend on the Internet for new information, but at least I wouldn’t have spent time

using it as if I was doing research, searching desperately . . . like I do here, if I were in Korea. (In-person interview, July 22, 2010)

Mihee's description illustrates how these im/migrant women approach information. They see it as indispensable to making a smooth transition to a new home and having a successful im/migrant life. This attitude of needing information for survival becomes the basic reason for them to use MissyUSA. This is well described by another interview respondent, Erin:

Looking back, I did it [searching information] as if [it were a matter of] life or death. . . I found that no one really knows precisely . . . so I went to MissyUSA . . . things like Google were also recent stuff and also there's a language barrier and sometimes it's overwhelming to have so many search results. (In-person interview, September 16, 2010)

As such, information sharing is one of the important roles that MissyUSA plays as a type of ethnic media. The information provided and accessed on this site is particularly useful for these im/migrant women because it is customized. Their status as newcomers in the unfamiliar surroundings and conditions of a new society increases their demand for information. This affects their attitude toward searching for and acquiring said information, and it also results in the attitude of "information for survival."

Media Culture on the *Yeone* Board

Media use pattern

I was able to identify three general patterns in terms of home and host media use based on my interviews and text analysis. The first was very little use of Korean media and varying consumption of American media. Eunice, Alley, and Erin showed this pattern, though there were differences in the amount of American media consumption.

For example, Eunice watches “few Korean television programs” while watching “some American programs” (E-mail interview, November 18, 2010); Alley watches few Korean movies or television shows, yet uses various U.S. media such as newspapers, radio, cable TV, and magazines (E-mail interview, December 4, 2010); Erin on the other hand watches a lot of American media, and says, “I know the American TV program schedule really well” while she watches very little Korean media products. (In-person interview, September 16, 2010)

The second pattern is somewhat the opposite of the first. In this group, people rarely consume American media products but maintain steady access to their home country’s media. Among the interview participants who have this pattern, most of them do not subscribe to cable television at home. Hence the Internet is their main channel for media access and it is focused on Korean media products such as Korean dramas, shows, movies, news, or sports. For example, Jiwoo said that “I know almost nothing about American mass media; I disconnected the television. Instead, I registered with an Internet site and pay fifteen dollars a month to download Korean television programs” (E-mail interview, November 9, 2010). People in this group have very minimal access to American media. They usually check the news through news channels or the radio and on the Internet as Soyoung does: “I tend to watch much more Korean movies/television programs, usually through the Internet. And as for American media, I just check the news” (E-mail interview January 28, 2011).

The last pattern is maintaining access to both home and host media higher than minimum level. People in this group usually have access to mass media products of the host country through cable television at home and to their home country’s media mainly

through the Internet, as in the case of Mihee: “I watch some American TV like CNN news, American Idol . . . and also Korean stuff through many other sources like YouTube or other websites” (In-person interview, July 22, 2010). They can watch many more Korean programs through satellite TV or cable TV depending on the channel package. However, it seems that many people in this group access their home country’s media on the Internet.

One notable point from the patterns of home and host media use is that the Internet is one of the main means of access for them. Except for the first group, most women that I interviewed access the media, especially of their home country, through the Internet; my text analysis also showed this pattern. Also, for most users in the second group and some of those in the third group, other new media devices including the Internet, DVD, VOD, or podcasts have become an important way to access host media as well. A post on the *yeone* board said: “I don’t have cable TV at home. So I watch American shows through Netflix and Korean news on MissyUSA and other Korean Internet portal sites, too” (11--55673, posted on the *yeone* board, August 10, 2010). It is also notable that radio is another main source of host media, overall and especially for those who rarely consume host media and who do not subscribe to cable television at home. Interview respondents who have very little access to host media (e.g., Sunny, Yujin, and Soyoung) said that they used to listen to the radio more often than they watched TV. Also, Alley and Erin, who have high access to host media, said they often listen to the radio as well.

Thus these women also use MissyUSA to access the media of their home country and also of their host country, although this is not their predominant means of access. The

video board was created on the MissyUSA site specifically for this purpose. Basically people share all types of information and video files on this board. More often, when there is a request for specific media programs, people share a source for them. The most shared items on this video board are links that they can use to access video files of the programs. In order to prevent abuse in the form of commercial promotions, traffic overload, and copyright issues, this board is regularly monitored and maintained by the staff (e.g. deleting posts older than a week). The board is a useful source for the users of MissyUSA. However, other than providing links and allowing for requests (and short thank you messages), this board does not contain any further discussions. The *yeone* board, in comparison, provides much more active and diverse content.

Yeone board

Yeone means “entertainment” in Korean. Hence, all kinds of news and topics about entertainment can be posted and discussed on this board. As mentioned in chapter 5³⁴, the *yeone* board is one of the most popular sections along with the *sokpuri* board. The *yeone* board usually records the highest number of views and overall it maintains a very high number of posts and replies. Many of my interview respondents identified the *yeone* board as their most frequently visited board on the site. Chris is one of them:

Entertainment news and other world news are shared swiftly on the *yeone* board. Some useful information is also shared. Most of all, it’s fun to me, and the gossip is especially fun. (E-mail interview, January 28, 2011)

Also, both Eunice and Jiwoo, who have their own columns on the MissyUSA site, said that they are avid users of the *yeone* board. Eunice, who has been living in the U.S. for 18 years, emphasized that her use of MissyUSA is more centered on entertainment than on

³⁴ See Chapter 5 on the page 57.

getting information about the life in the U.S. (E-mail interview, November 18, 2010).

Jiwoo said that she has used several other web boards a lot, but she only has been visiting the *yeone* board and her column page nowadays (E-mail interview, November 9, 2010).

Sunny also talked a lot about her use of the *yeone* board during her interview. Notably, she compared the *yeone* board to the *sokpuri* board:

On the *yeone* board, things happening on the *sokpuri* board are coming in as well, like the fun stuff or fighting [e.g. flaming]. . . . If *sokpuri* is mainly intended to vent complaints, then things can be talked about more generally on the *yeone* board. (In-person interview, December 2, 2010)

On this board people not only share links for media sources where they can watch videos, but they also post pictures and videos directly, unlike the video board. Most of all, people talk about what they saw among home and host media products and about what they like or dislike about them, as Sunny described:

It seems that many people come to the *yeone* board to get relaxed or talk casually. . . to get the feeling that they're not alone . . . like the feeling of being connected to someone . . . ? Usually people talk about dramas after watching them, share major headline news, things like that. (In-person interview, December 2, 2010)

Along that line, Jiwoo and Chris also talked about their active participation on the *yeone* board.

I go to the [*yeone*] board very often and write replies as I get excited. Although I don't do that a lot, . . . I think I do so when I really get upset or excited, when I have a very clear idea that is in opposition to the original post. (Jiwoo, e-mail interview, November 9, 2010)

I leave replies quite often on there [the *yeone* board]. Of course I don't always write positive responses. But it's also interesting and fun to know that many people have their own different ideas. (Chris, e-mail interview, January 28, 2011)

As such, I found that my interview participants described in much more detail, compared to the *sokpuri* board, their direct participation in making posts and leaving comments and answers on the *yeone* board. This is perhaps due to the fact that, despite the anonymity of both boards, the *yeone* board is more neutral in terms of topics (see Table 3); *Sokpuri* contains mainly personal concerns or complaints about bad or unhappy aspects of their (daily) lives. In addition, many users agreed that the *yeone* board is more fun and entertaining.

Table 3. Examples of Yeone Board Postings (February 7, 2011; Total 232 postings)

Themes	Number of Postings	Sub-Themes
Korean Celebrities & Gossip	117	Korean celebrities Korean pop singers & movie stars, etc.
Korean Media	46	Korean movies and dramas Korean documentaries & current affair programs, etc.
American Celebrities & Gossip	20	American celebrities Korean-American pop singers & movie stars, etc.
American Media	13	American dramas & shows Super bowl games & commercials, etc.
Celebrities & Media (Other Regions)	10	Japanese pop singers & movies Chinese actresses, British celebrities, etc.
Fun Videos & Pictures	10	Fun video sharing Fun pictures and humor, etc.
Sports & Movie Recommendations	6	Movie recommendations Sporting events & stars, etc.
News in Korea & Social Commentary	5	News in Korean society Comments on social issues in Korea
American Life & Questions	5	Urgent questions about living in the U.S. English questions

Transnational media culture

Although media consumption usually occurs as an individual activity, these women make it a social activity through their interactions on the *yeone* board. For instance, they share strong feelings about certain characters of a drama or the actors/actresses; they express strong interest in the development of the storyline and suggest how it should go, and so on. This creates a natural fandom among these women on the board. Mihee described her observations in relation to this:

An idol star was cast on a [Korean] drama. Of course many *ajumas* [ladies] were really fussing about it. I even saw a lady who really liked his voice in the drama so she audio captured her favorite lines by him and burned the CD. She said she'd send the CD if anybody wants it. There were a lot of replies to her post. (In-person interview, July 22, 2010)

These kinds of interactions, based on sharing media and mutual fandom, makes people more actively express their feelings and opinions on the board, as Sunny described:

When I love what I'm watching, then I start searching a lot about the drama or the show. . . . It's really fun to see people's responses after watching it and to talk with them. I'm normally not an active poster, but I wrote several times about the love line storyline in a [Korean] show that I really liked. (In-person interview, December 2, 2010)

One notable aspect of such media culture is that it affects the pattern of usage of the MissyUSA site among these women. As my interview participants, Iris and Alley, pointed out, media consumption (especially the home country's popular media products such as dramas and shows) is one of the major factors that determines whether they can actively engage in the overall discussions on discussion boards such as the *yeone* board. Iris said that "another reason that I don't go often to the web boards like *yeone* or *sokpuri* on MissyUSA is that I do not watch [Korean] dramas" (In-person interview, August 24,

2010). Similarly, Alley described the relationship between her participation in the discussion boards and her use of host country media:

I don't follow entertainment or political news, which I am not familiar with, very much. Perhaps there are very few Koreans who do not watch Korean dramas while living in the U.S., and I am one of them . . . so I can't get into the discussions and debates because Korean popular culture and politics are not familiar to me. But I used to leave my opinions and comments on issues about the U.S. (E-mail interview, December 4, 2010)

Because of the active participation and shared media culture, the *yeone* board has become one of the busiest and most interesting places on the MissyUSA website. In turn, many pieces of information and news, big and small, are shared on the board:

entertainment news from home and host media, personal experiences related to entertainers, or various rumors and gossip. Not only entertainment and celebrity news, but also other, more general news is shared. In the case of general news, people usually share top news stories or very recent updates for hot topics. For example, following the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami and consequent nuclear plant accidents in Japan in March 2011, the *yeone* board was the main spot to share details and updates about the situation. One of the interview respondents, Mihee was on the board during those times to follow the event, and she said, "Updated reports and new stories were posted every moment; it was almost like Twitter!" (Mihee, personal communication, April 27, 2011)

Another interesting aspect that I found from my interview and text analysis was the transnational interaction among media news consumers and producers, and the quite flexible flow between them. It seems that the board has become a kind of resource for entertainment news reporters in South Korea, as several guesses and predictions about

[Korean] celebrities' private lives, e.g. marriage or marriage partner, which originated from this board turned out to be true. One poster described this in the following:

It's nothing new anymore that the Korean reporters are sitting at [the board] all the time in order to cut and . . . paste all the fresh information into the Korean internet portal sites. (23--77851, posted on *yeone* board, March 9, 2010)

Although it may be an exaggeration, the above quote describes specifically how this particular online community of female im/migrants makes transnational connections as a diasporic ethnic media. Such connections to its home media culture, i.e. to both affect and be affected by transferring information, largely became possible because of the large amounts of postings and information gathered by the participants on this site. For example, when Korean celebrities come to the U.S. for personal trips, many MissyUSA users post what they see on the airplane, at the airport, or around the city. Such facts and pieces of information are collected and often assembled into a story; sometimes these stories become exclusive news or the source for it. In relation to this, Sunny pointed out that "Korean entertainment news media are influenced by the MissyUSA site in America . . . I think that's very interesting" (In-person interview, December 2, 2010). What Sunny considered interesting is the "reversal effect," in that MissyUSA, which is an online community of female Korean im/migrants who want to catch up and connect to their home country through Korean media, now cause their home country's media to check the site for news. Mihee also pointed out that many active users on the *yeone* board are aware of this aspect:

You know, sometimes there's a 'fishing' post, like 'Isn't such and such actor in a relationship with this person? . . . Anybody know about this in more detail?' Then, people [on the board] respond like this: 'You're a

reporter, aren't you?' And they never give out any info, saying 'Do your job on your own!' . . . (In-person interview, July 22, 2010)

The potential to find accurate information on this board is partly related to the fact that MissyUSA is open to married females only, which naturally imposes an age limitation. Hence, it technically excludes minors who are not of the legal marriage age, unlike other online communities or web portals. Also, people presume that some MissyUSA users have direct access to news sources (e.g., professionals in the media industry and people from a high social class or who have connections to such people). An interview respondent, Mihee, said that:

I think some, or perhaps many users of MissyUSA are kind of upper class people [in Korea] . . . and they're sometimes giving out information from their personal connections or from what they've heard from someone in their network. It seems like that's why information or gossip here on MissyUSA has some credibility. (In-person interview, July 22, 2010)

However, this does not necessarily mean that the information on this board carries a high level of credibility. A South Korean newspaper article dealing with MissyUSA being a news source mentioned this as well:

As an overseas online community, MissyUSA has been the source of some news about celebrities' dating, weddings, and divorces. . . . It has become the talk among netizens for its accuracy at times, however at the same time it has produced ridiculous rumors and gossip as well. (Yi, "The source of their wedding news was MissyUSA" Feb. 11 2010, *Daily Sports*)

The *yeone* board is in fact not focused on producing information per se. Rather people on this board are meant to share and chat about something entertaining, as one user expressed, "The two [entertainers] are not actually in a relationship, but people are kind of wishing that . . . So people make them a prince and princess, and add an episode . . ." (11--33398, posted on the *yeone* board, July 12, 2010). As such, the media culture

created on the board is much closer to their wishful thinking (e.g. what they want to happen and what they imagine to be fun) than to the factual information. However, it is these same users of this board who also try to discern reality from fantasy. Sunny described such activity on the *yeone* board in the following:

Now with the Internet, unlike old times, I feel like we're in a situation where we need to doubt everything. . . People all pretend they witnessed something firsthand. . . there are real posts and fake ones too . . . People begin to cast doubt; some replies contain such doubt. If you follow those responses, then you'll know whether it's true or not. (Sunny, follow-up interview, January 12, 2011)

The doubt is thus balancing some of the rumors and the malicious gossip going around on the board, as long as it plays the role of “giving people a chance to be alert and not to be swayed by it” (Sunny, follow-up interview, January 12, 2011).

More importantly, this cautious yet proactive attitude combined with their enthusiasm makes these women's Internet presence turn into their digital diaspora on the web. Not only have these women produced customized information and networked resources to make the im/migrated country their home, but they have also created a transnational media culture to link them to both home and host societies. This transnational culture enables them to actively voice their opinions on the social and cultural issues that are related to overseas Koreans. For example, as mentioned in chapter 6, these women actively participated in the 2008 beef import controversy in Korea by providing information countering the South Korean government's explanation. Another instance is when a Korean-American rapper who became popular in South Korea got involved in a controversy over whether or not he really graduated from Stanford

University in the U.S. Many active users of MissyUSA participated in this controversy and provided strong evidence that countered the other side of the argument.

CHAPTER 9 DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In this chapter, I will discuss my findings, focusing on the role of this online community in the digital diaspora of these Korean women. The discussion will be presented using four frameworks that I suggest for a better understanding of these female Korean im/migrants' digital diaspora based on my findings. Then, I will provide the theoretical implications that this study has on the research of diasporas and the digital communities. This discussion will specifically revolve around the identity, community, and transnational media space of digital diasporas. The implications on the studies of gender and migration and the integration process found in this study of the female Korean diasporic group will be presented as well. Also, I will briefly discuss the implications on the five digital diaspora models suggested by Laguerre (2010), focusing on its application to the female Korean online im/migrant community.

Discussion: Understanding women's digital diaspora

A talking space for women

One important element in understanding the formation and development of MissyUSA is the shared identity of the users (i.e. being married Korean women living in the U.S.). MissyUSA, as an ethnic gender community, was created by im/migrants of a specific gender for themselves. From their shared identity comes the need and desire to have their own space online. Since the space is on the Internet, such a group of women can get together, transcending local boundaries and traditional im/migrant networks. The information and help provided on this site are extensive as this site draws a diverse group

of women in terms of visa status, citizenship, period of residence, and socio-economic status. Based on this shared identity, the extensive reach of virtual space, and the fact that this is a network enriched with information, these women have come to have communal feelings toward each other (though there is not a strong community perception, as shown in chapter 7) and have created a candid talking space on this site.

Sokpuri is one such talking space on the MissyUSA site. It is however very unique in its role in relation to these women's real problems and concerns in their everyday im/migrant lives. It resembles the "off topic" boards of other online communities elsewhere in the sense that the board has no specified subject. Yet, by labeling the board as "*sokpuri*," which in Korean means making oneself feel better through storytelling, it acts as a talking space for these women to vent out their frustrations, difficulties, and small/big concerns about themselves. The candid stories, active responses, and overall supportive tone make it the most visited and popular board on the site³⁵.

One notable feature of the interactions on the *sokpuri* board is that these women on this board seem to focus more on the act of 'revealing' themselves. They tend to expect warm consolation or positive solutions rather than impartial judgment. Of course, in the case of urgent problems that require instant action, people write in search of a solution. In most cases, however, people just want to share their stories like they would with their close friends and families back in their home country. In this sense, it seems the function of the *sokpuri* web board corresponds to its name: these women use this board as a platform in which to vent their innermost feelings rather than looking for

³⁵For more information about the popularity and themes of the *sokpuri* board, see the Chapter 5.

professional advice or people's approval. Thus the board is a place where these women talk about themselves, their lives in the U.S., and more specifically, what makes their lives rough.

The interactions and functions of the *sokpuri* board are evidence of the advantages that this virtual space offers as a digital diasporic community. The users are looking for an alternative outlet outside of their offline ethnic community, which is usually small and in which it is easy to become the subject of gossip. Although these female Korean im/migrants migrated to a new country to settle down in a family setting, this web board shows that there is still a need for them to keep searching for homo-social relationships in order to manage their own issues. This is not a 'new' phenomenon. These attitudes and issues are to some extent well established and general; these women have to confront them no matter where they are, be it Korea, the United States, or anywhere else in the world. They do, however, have to deal with them in a new environment and with a new medium. Thus, this virtual talking space in this online community enables them to expand their emotional support outlet beyond their local offline social network (e.g. church group, local community).

Other benefits of having this online talking space relate to the fact that it provides an environment in which one can disclose a story comfortably and can speak more honestly. For these women, as mentioned above, the storytelling itself is a cathartic process. The online anonymity and generally supportive attitude are effective for this process. Exchange of emotional support through replies, along with disclosure of one's stories, is what makes this *sokpuri* board active, vibrant, and useful. Not only does the person who posted the story receive feelings of comfort and sympathy, as well as ideas

and solutions for future problems, but so do those who merely read the posts and responses. Alley, one of oldest interview respondents said, “I think it is helpful to have such a space for women because it makes us speak more honestly and casually. Someone who is lonely or depressed will have some new perspectives from other women’s real stories” (E-mail interview, December 4, 2010).

What differentiates the *sokpuri* board from another popular board, the *yeone* board, is that the *sokpuri* users talk more about themselves. Unlike the other board, which mainly focuses on media content and entertainers/celebrities, the majority of the content on the *sokpuri* board is about users’ own lives, i.e., complaints, concerns, problems, or difficulties from their own experiences. Hence, the stories are more grounded in the context of their im/migrant lives in the U.S. Because of the specificities of their issues and concerns, it becomes an excellent source to look into how contemporary Korean female im/migrants are living their everyday lives in the U.S. Moreover, it tells us how their im/migration experiences affect their gender roles as mothers, wives, and daughters. Furthermore, their social relationships as businesswomen, female laborers, or professional workers, as well as their local community networks are also reflected in their discussions on the board.

Therefore, as a venue for venting frustrations and sharing concerns, the *sokpuri* board functions as a friend for most of these women who do not have many chances to make friends in a new country. Through this talking space, these women get emotional (and practical) support, which most of them lack due to the isolation from their families and friends in their home country. Maximizing the benefits of being an online community, MissyUSA provides a virtual talking space where female Korean

im/migrants can come together, socialize, and try to cope with life in America. Thus, framing this online community as a virtual talking space for these women provides a better understanding of their need to expand their offline diaspora to the Internet and the benefits this digital diaspora offers them.

Identity negotiation space

As an ethnic gender group that has im/migrated to the U.S., these female Korean im/migrants practice identity negotiation in their everyday lives. Among the various identities they engage with, my analysis was focused on two gender identities: *Missy* and *Ajuma*. Both are the image of a married woman and both are from contemporary popular culture in South Korea. *Missy*, which identifies a woman who looks young and maintains distinct cultural tastes and a self-assertive life style, is the main image that these women adopt as their implicit/explicit image. As shown in the title of this site, these women consider themselves to be a younger and newer generation of women, who want to have a lifestyle different from that of image of the traditional married woman (e.g. sacrificing wife and mother, submissive homemaker, etc.). Despite the commercial origin of the term³⁶, the image of *Missy* provides one way for these women to express their identity as young married women. The discussions on the web board center around themes such as fashion, appearances, shopping, and style, which shows their interest in living by the *Missy* image. Yet, their idea of the *Missy* image is better presented in their discourses about having careers, especially with those who had careers before marriage or coming to the U.S. For such women, MissyUSA becomes a place to access information, advice, and tips for maintaining or pursuing a career.

³⁶For more discussion about the origin and historical background of the term “Missy,” see Chapter 6.

Discourses about maintaining the *Missy* lifestyle (young, sophisticated, independent) also display how these women perceive their current lifestyle and how they comprehend the changes in their lives (e.g. marriage, having kids), including their relocation to the U.S. Most of all, the concept can serve as a benchmark when they complain about their downward social mobility and the quality of their im/migrant lives. In addition, the problems of adopting a dominant model to fit the *missy* image (e.g. a good wife, perfect mother, and professional housewife) appear quite often due to their im/migrant perspective. Also, these women often express conflicts between the Korean middle class's way of life, values, and beliefs with those of American society. On one hand, they want to take advantage of the benefits that come with living in the U.S., like a better opportunity for their children's education and a chance to experience cultural diversity. Yet, their im/migrant lives make them feel more frustrated since they experience a relative decline in social status, almost a downward mobility, in a new society at the same time. Thus, they find themselves more stressed when they realize that a better life in the U.S. is not always easy or even attainable. For example, lack of support in raising their children, a complex legal status, a language barrier, and other impediments often prevent them from pursuing their own career.

Such frustrations and ambivalent feelings cannot easily be overcome by the *missy* concept, which is more or less individualistic and consumerist. This is the point where the identity of the *ajuma* comes into foreground. Historically, the term *ajuma* has gone through changes in what it connotes, from the word at one point referring to a middle-aged married woman, to it becoming a term for a poor and somewhat unsophisticated ordinary woman. Thus, *ajuma* is distinguished from *missy* in many ways (e.g. in terms of

lifestyle, cultural tastes, and buying power). However, as discussed in chapter 6, women on the MissyUSA site do not see the two terms as totally opposite, so they do not use the words in an exclusive way. Rather, selective utilization of the terms is evident: they take the two concepts and images at times to describe an individual identity and at other times to describe a collective one. While they appreciate the spirited quality of *ajumas*, who are less individualistic and more open to and active in sharing and helping, and identify their online community as a place where the empowering *ajuma* spirit is strong, they still adopt the *missy* image of a younger, more independent, and more modern woman for their individual selves.

Another important identity that comes into play in their im/migrant lives is their ethnic identity. It is notable that these women display various attitudes and perceptions toward their ethnic identity. Newcomers, who moved to the U.S. in relatively recent times, are prone to feelings of homesickness and isolation. For these people their ethnic identity is clearly that of their home country and they miss it. On the other hand, im/migrants who left their home country a long time ago or when they were children are more complicated. Some women express a vague yet undeniable emotional attachment toward the home country while they feel much more familiar with the host country's way of life. Some are actively pursuing their home country's culture and identity. In all these cases, MissyUSA becomes a space for an imagined community to suit their feelings and attachment toward the home country accordingly. Compared to the discussions of other in-person, offline communities or support groups, discussions of identity on this site are more diverse and there are more perspectives that are expressed. Offline gatherings usually include people of a similar age, vocation, hobby or period of residence. However,

the discussions on this online site include a variety of perspectives from people of very different conditions. Although there are some drawbacks as well (e.g. can easily escalate into unproductive debate), there are still several benefits such as the fact that it is easier to bring up a subject and the fact that more upfront and honest opinions can be heard.

A clear moment when these women negotiate their identity between home and host countries is when they're disappointed by the home country or when they find themselves adjusted to the host country. I found that many first generation immigrants who have tried hard to adapt to the host country experience this. Some younger im/migrant groups show a similar attitude as well. At any rate, women in this case carry very critical perspectives of the home culture and prefer to live in America or to practice American ways. Although these women frequently discuss returning or visiting the home country, they find that it is never the same as they imagined. Thus, their discourse creates a "myth of return" as Shi (2005) described.

It is also notable that more flexible perceptions of ethnicity (as opposed to an essential position) increase as more of these women maintain transnational ties in the age of rapid globalization and new information technologies. As a consequence, many other factors such as economic circumstances, cultural preferences, or generational differences increasingly affect this negotiation process. Thus, as an ethnic online community MissyUSA becomes a space to talk about what it means to be Korean living in the U.S. and to be Korean-American while revealing the complicated and contradictory nature of such discourses. Also, talking about ethnicity and race on the site has the negative side effect of reproducing racial stereotypes, as discussed in Chapter 6. This aspect, however, does not mean that their discourses about race and ethnicity are useless. Rather, their

discussions about race, ethnicity, and national identity all contribute to their awareness of the on-going nature of their identities, especially in this diasporic context. In addition, active discussion of these topics makes people challenge racist ideas presented by others or even their own racist thoughts.

Communal space for resources and networking

In relation to whether there is a strong awareness of community among the MissyUSA users, my interview respondents showed a very weak perception of community, as discussed in chapter 7. Since they define a community according to a traditional understanding of the term community, it seems that certain characteristics of online interactions, e.g. anonymity, discontinuity, etc., prevent them from having strong community perceptions. The generation gap highlights the cultural differences between the older generation and a younger generation that often reflects current popular cultural sentiments in the home country. This prevents older im/migrants from perceiving MissyUSA as their community. Also, my interview participants identified differences in economic and class status as another reason that a community spirit is lacking. While most of the interview participants do not deny the possibility that a sound community perception can be developed among very active users, they tend not to identify themselves as such users. They also pointed out that even if they experience moments of communal feelings from time to time on the site, they can easily dismiss it in the online environment. Nevertheless, there are many moments that these women on the site acknowledge the communal feeling while they participate in MissyUSA. It is mostly based on a similar social and political view, national or gender identity, or similar im/migration (living) conditions and experiences.

Although MissyUSA is not easily recognized as their “community” in the traditional sense, it actually functions as a communal space, which becomes a resourceful network and a virtual dwelling place for these women. As a network for resources, most of the forms and types of resources accessed on this site are information, advice, or tips. Sometimes there have been occasions of collecting money for certain events or to help female victims, but informational resources are the predominant form so far to be shared on this site. Also, these women use the site to extend their off-line relationships such as finding old colleagues, creating offline local groups, and meeting up for similar interests.

The sheer volume of information and its quality and usefulness are the reason that my interview respondents mentioned most as a reason for using MissyUSA, and this is also supported by my textual analysis. There are three notable characteristics in relation to getting information on this site among the users. First these female Korean im/migrants utilize the site to get instant help in some urgent situations like a child being sick, small accidents, or questions about English. In particular, the *sokpuri* and *yeone* boards are frequently used for this kind of information sharing. Since these two boards have many visitors and high response rates, MissyUSA users who have urgent questions utilize these boards for inquiries even though their questions may not fit the boards’ designated themes and subjects. Second, most information on the site comes from these women’s real experiences. These im/migrant women are in immense need of detailed explanations and clear directions for a variety of issues, from everyday things to important issues; the demand for this by newcomers is much higher. Many recent female im/migrants intend to reduce the chance of making a mistake or getting into trouble by following the examples and experiences of old-timers. In this sense, MissyUSA provides them safe, tested, and

customized information. The third characteristic is about the attitude with which these women approach the information. As discussed in chapter 8, these women consider information about living in the U.S. indispensable and significant for their success and survival in im/migrant life. Because they realize more and more that understanding how things work in the host society cannot be taken for granted as it was back in the home country, they become very active in acquiring information by themselves. Thus they often adopt a “live or die” attitude, as one of my interviewees described (Erin, in-person interview, September 16, 2010).

This resourcefulness within MissyUSA can be understood as one type of communal practice because most of the women think their contributions and their sharing of information and advice comes from the spirit of the *ajuma*. They answer the questions from newcomers because they had had similar experiences; they share information because they understand what it is like living in the U.S. as female im/migrants and how critical having such information is. Thus, based on the *ajuma* characteristic of being eager to help others, these women create a resourceful online network for themselves on their own.

Transnational media and social space

Im/migrant groups in general have various media use patterns. This diasporic group of Korean women displays several types of media use patterns as well: low access to home media/high use of host media, steady or high access to home media/rare use of host media, and relatively steady access to both home and host media³⁷. The notable pattern and trend of media use among these groups is that the Internet becomes an

³⁷ For further discussion about media use patterns in my findings, see Chapter 8.

important source for both home and host media access. MissyUSA also provides a space for the sharing of media-related links, along with links to other Korean im/migrant websites³⁸. There is a video web board on the site meant especially for this purpose. It does not, however, contain other information and discussion, only links, requests and responses, and short thank you messages. The *yeone* board instead provides an arena for more active discussions and activities related to media sharing, media reviews, and various discussions.

By sharing entertainment news along with pictures and audio/video files, the *yeone* board is one of the busiest and most fun places among the many web boards on the site. These women not only talk about popular media but also discuss various kinds of news from their home and host countries (usually from other Internet news sites). In this way, the board becomes a converging platform of transnational media activities. For example, urgent news about Japan's earthquake in March 2011 was instantly posted and updated on the board as if it were Twitter. In this way, one interviewee described that "MissyUSA becomes a window [for her] to see the world" (Chris, e-mail interview, January 28, 2011).

One notable aspect of this platform is that it helps these women maintain a transnational lifestyle by allowing them to catch up on top news and find information on their home and host societies. On the *yeone* board they not only express their love of certain media products (e.g. music, dramas, shows, or films), but also exchange up-to-date information and news about top stars from their home and host countries. In particular, their active sharing of what they've seen and heard oftentimes leads to a

³⁸ For example, <http://www.heykorean.com>, www.baykoreans.com

reverse flow of news from MissyUSA to South Korean entertainment news reporters. This phenomenon is possible for a few reasons. First, many Korean entertainers visit America for various occasions and they can travel around much more freely compared to when they are in Korea; second, there are groups of women who are avid users of the board and are very keen when it comes to finding out such information and stories about celebrities. Interestingly, these active users of the *yeone* board become part of the group of people who are described as “wi-tizens” (Jiwoo, e-mail interview, November 9, 2010), a coined word that combines “wife” and “netizen,” meaning female Internet users active since the late 90s who are now married³⁹. Thus, it is this “witizen” population that came to the U.S. and eventually created MissyUSA, making it their own virtual social space where they can connect to their home culture while enjoying host media as well.

These women’s social activities on the net are not limited to entertainment. As in the case of the controversy over the commercialization of MissyUSA and the creation of Mizville, a more community oriented site (www.Mizville.org), which was discussed in chapter 7, these women show awareness of communal values and practices in relation to the protection of their personal information, copyrights, and the site’s expansion. Also, these women utilize MissyUSA as a space and a network for various social and political activities. People with similar political views actively participate in online discussions and other online activities, as well as off-line events. For example, during the debate over the resumption of U.S. beef imports in Korea in 2008, there was a candlelight gathering in New York City among overseas Koreans⁴⁰.

³⁹ See Chapter 7 on page 101 for more information.

⁴⁰ The overseas Korean netizens held a candlelight rally in New York City on June 7, 2008 in order to express their support for the South Korean citizens protesting because of this issue. This event was

Theoretical Implications

Implications on ethnic, diasporic, and transnational identities

This study has several implications on how cultural identity among diasporic groups is negotiated on the Internet. It also describes the characteristics of diasporic identity and its relationship with ethnic identity. As presented in the theoretical frameworks in studies of electronic media and diasporic groups, MissyUSA, as a female Korean im/migrant's online community, provides a certain space for "imaginary coherence" (Hall, 1990), where there is a centralizing field for their cultural identity to be connected to the country of origin (Appadurai, 1996; Chan, 2005; Mitra, 1997, 2006; Siddiquee & Kagan, 2006). For these women, the MissyUSA site becomes a virtual space where they express and talk about their "Koreanness" whether they are newcomers or old-timers who have assimilated to American society, and whether their attachment to Korea is due to a clear sense of homesickness, an ambiguous emotional connection, or an active desire to reconnect to their home culture. In this sense, this online community can be seen as a site in which ethnic identity is reinforced by constantly producing ethnic identity discourses and being a point of connecting to it.

Yet, the contents and meanings of such ethnic identity discourse on the MissyUSA site keep changing and evolving into a less essential entity due to these women's status as im/migrants and their transnational context. Many women on the site expressed their changed attitudes and perspectives toward their home country and culture as they lived in the host country longer and longer, and also as they came to have more objective views on both home and host culture. As a result, monolithic discourse and

assembled as a result of active discussions on several im/migrant websites including MissyUSA and Mizville.

fixed perspectives on being Korean, Korean-American, and also American are occasionally challenged and debated. In this regard, the site contributes to the formation of diasporic identity (Poster, 1998; Tsagarousianou, 2004), illustrating the social construction of ethnic identity.

The focus of most users' cultural activity on the site, however, seems to lean more toward connecting to their home culture, although they embrace the identity and culture of both home and host country. These women's recognition of their in-between nature in terms of diasporic identity does not always go further and transform into something unique or hybrid, although this sometimes happens, especially through hybridized practices (e.g. fusion food, language and customs mixed with other cultures). This reveals the difficulty of capturing the "hybridity" (Hall, 1990, p.235) concept on a collective level because MissyUSA and other similar online im/migrant portal websites (without an e-mail function) are so diverse that this "hybridity" cannot be easily captured and is not necessarily an explicit and dominant discourse on the site. In other words, even though many im/migrant women perform de facto hybrid practices (e.g. celebrating Thanksgiving with Korean food) in their everyday lives, the subtleties of this in-between nature do not necessarily translate into a substantial awareness of "hybridity."

The concept of "transnationalism" (Portes, 2003) is rather well theorized for the cultural identity among these women on the site. Transnationalism is defined as the process by which im/migrants forge and sustain multi-faceted social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement through the creation of cross-border and intercontinental networks (Portes, 2003; Vertovec, 1999). Although transnationalism is not a new phenomenon, it has been facilitated more recently by the advent of new

technologies in telecommunication and transportation that include telephone, Internet, and relatively easy, low-cost long-distance travel across borders (Plaza, 2010; Portes, 2003). Transnationalism is evident among female Korean im/migrants on MissyUSA, in the sense that they share “homing desires” while they maintain transnational lifestyles and cultural ties. A “homing desire” (Brah, 1996, p.180) is not the same thing as a desire for a return to the ‘homeland’ since not all of these women actually ‘return’ in order to fulfill the desire. As discussed in chapter 5, the discourse of “mythifying” their return evident among these women is also one form of “homing desire.” These women maintain transnational lifestyles through various activities on the site. Transnationalism incorporates not only the movement of people between nations, but the movement of images as well (Ignacio, 2005). Therefore, this online site of female Korean im/migrants effectively transfers various cultural images and symbols of their home country, and also their meanings as well. These women’s various cultural practices, from food and gossip to political discussion and media sharing, not only transfer them across borders but also recreate the attached meaning to alleviate their “homing desire.” The maintenance of their transnational connections and lifestyles provide the basement for their hybrid cultural practices as well as the possibility of its transformation into diasporic identity.

Implications on gender and im/migration research

This study also has implications on gender and migration research. Although my findings focus on the images of married women that influence many MissyUSA users and mostly originated from contemporary Korean culture, the understanding of such images by these women is in fact re-positioned due to their transnational im/migration experiences. Regarding the question of whether the im/migration process leads to these

women's empowerment or not, this study implies that the active emotional support and enormous information sharing on this site have the effect of homo-social empowerment. Clear outcomes discussed on the site in relation to their migration and enhanced gender equality is being relatively free from the social constraints of in-laws and relatives, the creation of companionship in these im/migrant couples, and the extended role as cultural educator at home and in the local community. Although it is unclear whether this further leads to greater gender equality for these women, for some users this online space opens up possibilities for personal growth, critical thinking, and enhanced gender status. While many women on this site try to restore self-esteem as a professional housewife based on the *Missy* image, there are still conflicting issues between housewifidization and the pursuit of a career, and in their attitude toward consumer culture, patriarchy, and elitism. Also, the issue of an egalitarian gender relationship relies on many other critical factors such as participation in the paid labor force, dependency visa status, and the impact of gender norms from their home and host cultures.

Implications for community on the Internet

The findings in this study suggest some implications on the notion of "community" in online interaction. Most of my interview respondents in this study are reluctant to use the term "community" in describing their interactions on the MissyUSA site because their standard of community involves meaningful commitment and expansion of their personal networks based on sustained interactions. This might be seen as supporting the weak community perception on the Internet space and further for the view that dismisses the cyber community and its lack of community functions (e.g. social trust) vis-à-vis offline counterparts, as in early debates about online communities (e.g.

Doney-Farina, 1999; Miller, 1996). However, my interviewees did not give one overarching reason for their perception of the nature of cyber space. It is rather because of the size of the community, their personal engagement level, and the anonymity of the two popular boards. They believe that the individual's level of engagement and way of using the site affects people's perception of community no matter how online interactions are different from the ones in real life. Thus, the implication is that even though these women engage in certain aspects of community such as exchanging advice and information, other aspects such as sustained interaction, meaningful commitment, and personal connections (lack of anonymity) are more important definers of community for them.

Interestingly, some of them are not actually interested in the community concept or in defining it as such; they just utilize and appropriate this specialized online social space, which is different from their home and host countries' websites. In other words, their online interactions do not necessarily entail them having a different community concept; regardless of that, they share information, exchange advice, and have discussions on this extensive online network for im/migrant women. In this sense, it can relate to Wellman (2002)'s "glocalized" networks, where networked individuals are linked thinly and unmindful of spatial boundaries. This conceptual framework is useful in explaining online social relationships because it does not require an a priori assumption of traditional community. Nevertheless, the framework does not explain their culturally relevant collective spirit as a preliminary condition for creating these women's online space and their in-group communal feelings underpinning the expansion and discursive group activism among many active users.

Thus, it is notable to consider Fernback (2007)'s claim that "symbolic communities of interest" is a more useful concept than the spatial metaphor in conceptualizing the online community. According to the claim, community is a "mutable construct," determined by social actors who create meaning about it (Fernback, 2007). While supporting the claim, this study also asks that if such construction is not always happening, then when are the moments for the community construction and how do they occur? MissyUSA, as a weak-tie community, has various groups of users who have different engagement levels. Moments when there was a community perception found in this study are when they are aware of out-group members' intrusions, when they exchange information and interact with other users who are connected at the same time, and also when there arise social issues and specific agendas related to their shared condition of being women im/migrants. These conditions trigger a clearer community perception among the users. They also become the conditions for these women to transform from a negative mob that is segregated and producing unproductive gossip and discussion to a "smart mob" (Rheingold, 2003)⁴¹. Along this line, a stricter in-group community model implemented by Mizville.org and the creation of a specialized functional community model (e.g., MissyCoupons.com⁴²) can have further implications in these regards.

Implications on ethnic media and integration

⁴¹ The active and effective participation by these female users during the controversy surrounding the import of U.S. beef in Korea was often described as one example of a "smart mob" by media scholars in South Korea.

⁴² This site is specialized for shopping information including coupons, shopping strategies, product reviews, etc. among female Korean im/migrants. www.missycoupons.com

Considering the finding that the site becomes an effective informational and resourceful network to solve various issues and troubles in their im/migrant lives, there is also an implication on the role of electronic ethnic media. MissyUSA works as an ethnic medium in which these women's experiences are accessed and shared. Thus, the usefulness and responsiveness of such information and advice becomes the foremost reason for these women to use the site. In addition, it functions as a platform for sharing media from home and host country as well as other regions of the world. In other words, this online community facilitates transnationalism. Transnational media culture has also been created through these women's active participation on the site.

Being a virtual dwelling place of the MissyUSA site has implications for im/migrant people's creation of "imagined community" reflecting their physical and socio-cultural conditions to compliment the traditional im/migrant local networks. The online community is an "imagined community" among these Korean female im/migrants, in which they can dwell and manage their diasporic lives and transnational connections. In addition to the physical conditions that cause the need to overcome geographical distances, socio-cultural conditions are also related to imagining a virtual community. The sense of "placelessness" (Pieterse, 2000) becomes one of the socio-cultural reasons for the formation of a community among the diasporic people. While many mechanisms have been used to cope with the tensions produced by migration and to combat the sense of loss, the Internet and online communities have come to play a role in helping people manage these tensions and isolated feelings. Thus, this online community, as Mitra (2006) argues, provides a safe and stable place for diasporic people to stay together. According to him, this safety and stability can be constructed around cultural attributes

(Mitra, 2006). MissyUSA is utilized by these im/migrant women for the performance of preferred practices related to specific people and their places of origin. Cultural mourning, commiserating with homo-social online friends, and sharing the meaning of their home and host cultures are such practices that lead them to segmented assimilation. Thus, on this site female Korean im/migrants can congregate safely to perform their cultural practices without being in conflict with mainstream American culture.

However, it is notable that there are also constant discussions on the site about what mainstream American culture is and how such culture should be delineated and understood. The segmented integration thesis thus should be approached as a strategy for their diasporic ontological conditions rather than one part of a linear process of assimilation. In this sense, the MissyUSA site among female Korean im/migrants has an implication for Laguerre (2010)'s "digital diaspora" models. According to Laguerre (2010), the notion of diaspora has evolved to that of "digital diaspora," which reflects the "engagement of its members in activities related to information technology (IT)" (p.49) and the engendering of the digital diaspora phenomenon can be explicated into five modalities: digital marginality, empowerment, displacement, technopolization, and globalization. "Digital marginality" refers to the process in which marginal diasporic groups have suffered from both exclusions online and off-line; "empowerment" means individuals access the Net by government or grassroots organizations to restructure their economic and social circumstances; "displacement" refers to certain groups' displacement due to higher costs of living and house prices; "technopolization" refers to the process that transforms ethnic areas into techonopolis as in Indian high-tech im/migrants' community; "globalization" model means the penetration of ethnic enclaves

by online marketers and the use of the web by individuals to expand their local conditions (Laguerre, 2010).

Among those five models, these Korean female im/migrants group, who might have been belong to the “digital marginal” model, can have some possibilities to fit “empowerment” model through the informational power of this online community. Also, the site’s history of commercialization and the active transnational media culture created by the users imply a modality of “globalization” in the sense that the model refers to both the penetration of ethnic enclaves by online marketers and the use of the web space by individuals to expand their local conditions (Laguerre, 2010).

CHAPTER 10 CONCLUSION

This concluding chapter provides a summary of the conceptual discussions and findings of the study. It also describes limitations of the study and directions for future study.

Summary of the Study

The goal of this study was to explore the online community that has formed among female Korean im/migrants in the U.S. in order to understand the online diasporic community's role in the digital media age. To this end, this study adopted the research methods of in-depth interviews, textual analysis, and grounded theory to examine: 1) how these women's gender and ethnic identities are negotiated on this online community; 2) how these women perceive this online community, focusing on their awareness of communal feelings and the community functions of the site; 3) how these women's media usage and related characteristics of their transnational media culture are presented; 4) the ways which this online community can affect these women's integration into the host society.

The findings show that MissyUSA is an ethnic gender online community, with the users' shared identity (i.e. being married Korean women living in the U.S.) as an important element for the community's formation and development. From their shared identity grows a need and desire to have their own space on the Internet where these women can get together, thereby transcending local boundaries and traditional im/migrant networks. Based on this shared identity, the extensive reach of virtual space,

and the enriched information network, these women created a candid talking space on the site. *Sokpuri* is a distinct and unique talking space on the site, where these women vent their innermost feelings about themselves, their lives in the U.S., and their difficulties. This shows these women's need for an alternative homo-social outlet outside of their offline ethnic community and family networks, including their spouse and their family in their home country. As a venue for venting frustrations and sharing concerns, the *sokpuri* board takes advantage of the liberating aspect of the online format and functions as a friend for most of these women who do not have much chance to make friends in a new country. Thus, this online community becomes a talking space where these women get emotional and practical support, which most of them lack due to the isolation from their family and friends in their home country.

Missy and *Ajuma*, the two gender identities found on MissyUSA, are images of married woman from contemporary popular culture in South Korea. *Missy*, which identifies a woman who is young looking and maintains modern cultural tastes and a self-assertive lifestyle, is the main image that these women adopt as their implicit/explicit image (e.g. title of the site, *missy* lifestyle). The concept can serve as a benchmark when they complain about their downward social mobility and the quality of their im/migrant lives. Due to individualistic and consumerist aspects of the *Missy* concept, the identity of *ajuma* comes into play among these women on the site. In Korea, *ajuma* refers to a middle-aged woman who is usually poor, unsophisticated, and ordinary, which distinguishes her from the *missy* in many ways (e.g. in terms of young lifestyle, cultural tastes, and buying power). It is found that women on the MissyUSA site do not see the two identities as opposites, but rather they use the terms selectively: While they

appreciate the spirited qualities of the *ajuma* (less individualistic, more open, more active) and identify their online community as a place where this empowering *ajuma* spirit is alive, they still adopt the *missy* image of a young, independent, and modern woman for their individual identities.

As for ethnic identity, it is notable that these women display various attitudes and perceptions toward their ethnic identity depending on whether they are newcomers or old-timers, and on their immigration status. MissyUSA becomes for all cases a space for an imagined community that suits their feelings and attachment toward the home country accordingly.

The study found that these women experience an identity negotiation process. As im/migrants to a new society, identity negotiation is a constant process for them, yet it is particularly when they are disappointed by their home country or when they find themselves adjusted to the host country that this process occurs. While some women maintain strong ethnic ties to the home country and some try to take advantage of both home and host cultures, many women carry very critical perspectives of the home culture and prefer to live in America and to practice the American way. At any rate, this online space facilitates their discussion of these experiences and of their changing perceptions of ethnic identity.

It is also notable that discourses on negative ethnic stereotypes are often presented and may reinforce racism, especially among newcomers. However, race talk in many ways offers a chance for critical discussion and the opportunity for these views to be challenged. Therefore this online diaspora facilitated them to acknowledge less essentialist aspect of ethnicity and this also helped them to realize the on-going nature of

identity construction. This is also increased as more of these women maintain transnational ties in the age of rapid globalization and new information technologies. Hence, many other factors such as economic ability, cultural preference, or generational differences increasingly affect this negotiation process. Thus, the site becomes a space to talk about what it means to be a Korean living in the U.S. and a Korean-American while revealing the complicated and contradictory nature of ethnic identity based on transnational ties.

This study also found weak perceptions of community among the interview participants. This shows that certain characteristics of online interactions (e.g. anonymity, discontinuity, generation gaps, and differences in economic and class status) prevent them from having a community spirit. It thus implies that online presence does not alter some traditional markers of community boundaries, such as class, age, etc. although at certain times these differences can be temporarily transgressed by shared factors such as nationality, immigrant status, and gender identity. Nevertheless, there are many moments that these women on the site acknowledge a communal feeling while participating in MissyUSA. They are mostly based on shared social and political views, national and gender identity, or similar im/migration (living) conditions and experiences. These women also acknowledge a few community functions of the site, such as its role as a resourceful network, the fact that it serves as a virtual dwelling place, and the aid it provides for assimilation.

Access to information of such high volume and high quality is the main reason that most interview respondents pointed out as their reason for using MissyUSA. There are three notable characteristics in relation to information access on this site: 1) use of the

site to get instant help in some urgent situations (e.g., child sickness, small accidents) especially on the two popular boards, *sokpuri* and *yeone*; 2) the safe, tested, and customized information, most of which comes from these women's real experiences; 3) these women's view of the information as an indispensable and significant element for their survival and success in im/migrant life. Thus they often adopt a "live or die" attitude that reinforces the spirit of the *ajuma* in many ways; it shows their eagerness to help each other and create a resourceful network for themselves on their own.

The notable pattern and trend of media use among these groups is that the Internet is an important source for both home and host media access. MissyUSA also provides access for sharing links through the video board. However, the *yeone* board becomes an arena for more active discussions and activities related to media sharing, media reviews, and various discussions. On the *yeone* board, which is the busiest and most fun place on the MissyUSA site, these women not only talk about popular media but also bring various kinds of news from their home and host countries (usually from other Internet news sites). The board becomes a converging platform of transnational media, where these women maintain their transnational lifestyle by catching up with top news and information about their home and host societies. Their active sharing of what they see and hear through various sources oftentimes creates a "reverse flow" of news from MissyUSA to South Korean entertainment news reporters. Active users on the *yeone* board can also be seen as part of the group of people described as "wi-tizens." They are both "wives" and "netizens," a group of active female Internet users since the late 90s who have married and came to the U.S. They are the women on the web, who are empowered by their active online presence and activities and ultimately created

MissyUSA and made it their own virtual social space where they could talk about the problems in their im/migrant lives, reveal identity negotiations, share resourceful information and media, and maintain a transnational lifestyle. This space shows the potential of being a diasporic media space to ultimately construct the female Korean im/migrants' digital diaspora.

Limitations

While many previous studies have tended to treat some key concepts of diaspora and digital media as separate entities to be analyzed, this study has explored the concepts of identity, community, and media in a comprehensive framework for the analysis of an online diasporic community. In particular, this study has focused on the ways in which such concepts have become the conditions for the formation of the female Korean online community and the roles it played in their im/migrants lives. However, this study does not capture the full picture of the relationships and dynamics among those conceptual frameworks. On one hand, it delineates the scope of this study; on the other hand, it reveals some limitations of the study.

First, this study did not try to clarify the correlated or causal relationships between and among the concepts. Although the extent to which the site is used (how many times it is visited in a day/week and how long it has been used), the generational characteristics, and the period of residence or immigrant status were considered as some important factors, specific relationships to diasporic identity, community perception, media use, and assimilation were not examined in this study. In particular, an investigation of such a

relationship on the individual level was not incorporated into the research design, part of which relied on the textual analysis focusing on two anonymous web boards.

Second, this study did not examine how MissyUSA interacts with other im/migrant networks and organizations on- and off-line. Thus, it did not provide a big picture of this diasporic gender group's new media environment or a contour of an ethnic media network in terms of the relationship with co-ethnic and other ethnic groups. In particular, how traditional communities for business networks, religious activities, or social work organizations utilize and link to MissyUSA was not considered in this study.

Third, how the change in business models and how technological changes such as the implementation of links to an online shopping mall, the loosening of the membership process, or the addition of web blogs affected this online community were not examined. Although some of them were considered as underlying factors in this study, they were not examined in terms of community perception, transnational activities, and the expansion of digital diaspora.

Future Research

For future research, the following directions may be considered. First a comparative study with other online communities of female Korean im/migrants such as Mizville.org and missyCoupons.com will further illuminate the functions of the digital diaspora in their im/migrant lives. In particular, a study to compare MissyUSA and Mizville will further explain online community building among this female diasporic group. In addition, comparisons between this online community and the online

communities of other ethnic gender groups may provide meaningful information about female diasporas on the Internet.

Second, as a follow-up study, how these women's post-migration lives are facilitated by online communities and other Internet technologies, especially in terms of empowerment in their social/domestic role, can be analyzed. In particular, by focusing on gendered migration patterns among Korean immigrants, the research will examine the ways in which changes in the post-migration stage, such as participation in paid labor (Park, 2008), affect their gender relationship (i.e. whether it creates a more egalitarian gender relationship, how they challenge patriarchal norms of traditional Korean culture, etc.). This will also tell us in what ways im/migration is a "mixed blessing" (Kurien, 1999) and how the digital diaspora helps them manage such ambivalence.

Third, in order to examine how adaptation to new information and media technologies, including Web 2.0⁴³, social network media, and smart phones, affects the digital diaspora, additional research on the younger second generation of this diasporic group can be performed. The second generation includes persons who were either born in the host country or arrived there at preschool age. They display in general considerable differences with the first generation in many aspects (i.e. in socialization processes and schooling experience, in their treatment in society at large, as well as in their orientation toward their homeland). Since MissyUSA has been used by predominantly first generation im/migrants, research on new media and a different generation will expand our understanding about the creation and development of digital diasporas.

⁴³ The term is associated with the web applications that facilitate participatory information sharing, user-centered design, and collaboration on the World Wide Web.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

1. Briefly introduce yourself and why and when you came to the United States.
2. How long have you used the online community? How did you find out about the online community?
3. How often do you usually use this website in your daily life? Why do you use this website? Is there any specific section or column that you visit often on this web site? Could you explain in detail why you use this online community?
4. Is there any other media you are using in your daily life? What do those experiences have in common and what is different?
5. In terms of cultural practices, habits, and senses, do you think you have changed after being in the United States for a while?
6. Has the online community influenced you in terms of your gender and ethnic identity? If so, could you explain in detail?
7. Do you think that your definitions of Korean, Korean culture, and Korean people have changed after coming to the United States?
8. To what degree do you regard yourself as a member of the Korean community in your area? Could you explain your experiences with ethnic communities in real life and cyberspace?
9. Do you think the online community has dealt with the issues of gender and ethnic identity among migratory people? Could you tell me about your experiences, if any, participating in these discussions in the online community?
10. How do you often consume Korean media including the Internet? How is this experience different with your media consumption before coming to the United States? Do you think use of ethnic media helps you to manage your life in the United States?

Appendix B

Consent Form

The School of Communication, Information and Library Studies at Rutgers University supports the practice of protection for human subjects participating in research. The following information is provided for you to decide whether you wish to participate in the present study. You should be aware that even if you agree to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without penalty. However, by consenting to the interview, you acknowledge the receipt of this consent form and are stating your willingness to take part in this research study.

EunKyung Lee, the Principal Investigator of this study, is interested in studying the use of online communities and their influence on your everyday life in the United States. There are no correct answers to these interview questions. The answers will merely reflect your personal use of these communities and conception of your identity. The interview should take approximately 30 – 60 minutes. Your participation in this study is solicited, but participation is entirely voluntary.

Though no discomfort is anticipated while participating in this study, you are free to stop your participation by not answering the questions if any of them make you feel uncomfortable at any time. Your name will not be associated in any way with the research findings. In order to participate, you have to be at least 18 years of age and a member of the online community of www.MissyUSA.com on a daily basis.

There are no foreseeable risks to participation in this study. Although you may not benefit directly, the knowledge gained from your participation and that of other volunteers will help me understand online activity. If you would like additional information regarding this study, including results, before or after its completion, please feel free to contact EunKyung Lee by e-mail or phone.

You will be one of about 6 to 8 participants in this study. The confidentiality of your responses will be protected at all times when the results are reported in a published paper or an unpublished paper. The results of the interview will be reported anonymously.

No name will be attached to the completed questionnaire. Unless you explicitly agree to allow further use of this data, it will be destroyed on completion of this study.

I, _____(Name) have read and understood this description of the study and agree to participate in the study.

(Date)_____ (mm/dd/yyyy)

Signature of the Principal Investigator, EunKyung Lee

Sincerely,

EunKyung Lee,
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If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact the
Sponsored Programs Administrator at Rutgers University
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인터뷰 동의서 (Korean)

본 연구는 미국 뉴저지 주립대 Rutgers 대학의 Communication, Information and Library studies 학부가 지원하는 바에 따라, 인터뷰에 참여하는 개인들을 보호할 책임을 지고 있습니다. 이 동의서는 여러분이 인터뷰에 참여하기로 동의함을 밝힘과 동시에 인터뷰 참여자에 대한 보호 규정과 그에 대한 정보를 제공하기 위해 마련되었습니다.

본 연구는 저의 책임하에 진행되며, 미국 생활에서 온라인 커뮤니티의 이용과 그 영향에 관한 내용을 다룹니다 (예, 미씨유에스에이, 미즈빌 등). 각 인터뷰 질문에 해당하는 정답은 없습니다. 인터뷰 참여자께서는 자신의 경험과 생각에 비추어 자유롭게 답하시면 됩니다.

인터뷰 소요시간은 30-60 분을 예상합니다. 인터뷰 참여는 자발적으로 이루어지게 되며 인터뷰 도중 의문사항이 있거나 더 이상의 인터뷰 진행에 곤란함을 가지게 되면 연구자에게 요청하여 인터뷰를 중단하실 수 있습니다. 이 인터뷰에 응하시기 위해서는 만 18 세 이상이 되어야 하며 미주여성 온라인 커뮤니티의 회원이며, 이용 경험이 있으셔야함을 유념하시기 바랍니다.

인터뷰 이후 본 연구의 결과를 알고 싶다면 아래 연락처로 연락해주시기 바랍니다. 인터뷰 참여자는 연구자에게 연구 결과의 공유를 요청하실 수 있습니다. 본 연구가 인터뷰 참여자들에게 직접적 이익을 주지는 못하더라도 장기적인 관점에서 사람들의 상호 행위를 이해하는데 보탬이 됨으로써 사회적 기여에 이바지할 수 있을 것입니다.

본 연구를 위해 총 6-8 명이 인터뷰에 참여합니다. 인터뷰와 관련된 개인신상정보는 어떤 경우에도 공개되지 않을 것입니다. 인터뷰 결과는 익명으로 처리되어 연구에 이용되며, 연구가 완료된 이후에는 자료가 완전히 폐기되며, 참여자의 동의없이 향후 연구에 사용되지 못합니다.

이상, 본 동의서의 내용을 읽고 본 연구의 목적을 이해하였으며 인터뷰 참여에 동의하신다면, 아래 서명란에 서명해주시면 감사하겠습니다.

나는 _____(이름) 위의 내용을 읽고 해당 연구의 의도를 이해하였으며 인터뷰 참여에 동의합니다.

_____ (서명) _____ (월/ 일/ 년도)

귀한 시간 내어주셔서 감사합니다.
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연구 참여자로서 여러분의 권리에 관한 기타 질문사항이 생기면 Rutgers 대학의 아래
연락처로 연락하시면 됩니다.

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