

# Mobile Phones, Young People, and South Korean Culture

By Kyongwon Yoon

Today, almost everyone in the streets of Seoul carries a mobile phone, and many people in the subway or on the bus are speaking on it or texting. The rapid proliferation of mobile phones offers a fascinating case for understanding the contemporary culture of South Korean young people (Korea hereafter). As of 2005, ninety percent of young Koreans between the ages of fourteen and nineteen had a mobile phone and 38.2 percent of young users sent more than one thousand text messages per month.<sup>1</sup> For young Koreans, the mobile phone has become metaphorically a part of the body, rather than a form of media technology to be used only when necessary.<sup>2</sup>

The fast spread of the mobile phone, not only as a device for communication, but also as a cultural artifact with various meanings among young Koreans, raises a number of questions about the role of “new” technology in Korean youth culture. Why are young Koreans so interested in mobile and technologically-mediated communication, and how do the new modes of mobile communication reorganize young people’s everyday lives? In addition, how are those young mobile phone users represented in the Korean media?

## THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

### From a ‘Land of Morning Calm’ to a ‘Fast Nation’

Given that Korea was described as a ‘land of the morning calm’ in travelogues in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, it would be interesting to explore why Korea has recently adopted mobile phones so quickly and why Korean youth today are so excited about speedy, technologically-mediated communication. Above all, the recent history of the country can be considered a factor that has transformed the ways Koreans communicate.

After the hardship of colonial rule in the first half of the twentieth century (1910–1945), and the Korean War (1950–1953) that ended with over four million casualties and the massive destruction of the industrial infrastructure, Korea relatively quickly became the thirteenth largest economy in the world. In the process, the “hurry, hurry (*bbali bbali*) syndrome” has become one of the representative characteristics of contemporary Korean culture. Indeed, according to a recent survey, 78.2 percent of Korean office workers said they did things in a hurry all the time and felt insecure when things were not done at top speed.<sup>3</sup> This “hurry, hurry syndrome” may have assisted the rapid growth of the new media.<sup>4</sup>



Entrance to a PC bang in Seoul, South Korea.  
Image source: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/timjoyfamily/2784291440/>.

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The democratization of society since the late 1980s can be considered another factor contributing to the rapid proliferation of mobile phones among Korean youth. The political transition from military regimes (1961–1987) to a semi-authoritarian regime in 1988 was followed by the liberal atmosphere of the first civilian government in 1993. In the process, young Koreans gained increased opportunities to receive and consume Western popular cultural products. Furthermore, the rapid development of digital and mobile technology in the mid-1990s influenced the way in which young Koreans communicated with each other. In comparison with family-oriented media such as TV and fixed-line telephones, the mobile phone was not necessarily used by the family, but often adopted by individuals. The relatively individual nature of mobile phones allowed young Koreans to choose whom they communicate with and what topics they discuss with others. Since their introduction, technologically-mediated communication tools have become an important part of young Koreans’ daily lives. Indeed, Korean teenagers tend to spend most of their leisure time in electronically saturated “cells” such as *PC bangs* (Internet cafes) and *norae bangs* (Karaoke rooms).

### Mobile Phones and Familial Norms

The introduction of a new form of technology often raises discussion about how to use it. While older generations use the mobile phone in a way similar to “older” media such as fixed-line phones, young people are more likely to learn and develop new ways of using mobile phones. For example, in comparison with adult users, young Koreans use the mobile phone not only as a telephone, but also as a symbol of their lifestyle and a tool for entertainment. Indeed, young people increasingly use the mobile phone to take photographs, download digital contents such as images and pop songs, and play games.

New forms of technology are adopted and used in everyday life. Mobile phone use by young Koreans is influenced by the economics and culture of the family—mostly because Korean teenagers cannot afford their mobile phone bills, and also because the residual norms of Confucianism emphasize the role and moral commitment of children to the family.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Confucian norms in Korea involve psychological and physical attachment between family members that sometimes hinder the development of open public relations.<sup>6</sup>

### **The mobile phone is a means of control for parents that allows them to keep track of their children by regularly calling or texting them.**

In their use of mobile phones, Korean teenagers today gradually learn how to manage individual freedom within the family. Parents usually give Korean youth their first mobile phone as a gift, in their early teens or even earlier, symbolizing parental recognition of the child’s youth and independence. Some young Koreans receive their first mobile phone as a birthday present or as a reward for attaining the score their parents set as a target in their mid-term or final exams. It has become increasingly common for young Koreans to own their first mobile phone during elementary school (between ages seven and twelve), especially among middle class families.

The mobile phone is a means of control for parents that allows them to keep track of their children by regularly calling or texting them. Parents also manage their children by exercising direct control of the mobile phone. For example, parents confiscate their children’s mobiles as a short-term punishment for misbehavior or low academic achievement. Some teenage children feel irritated by their parents’ control through their phone. However, it is also true that constant contact with their parents via the mobile phone provides young Koreans with a sense of safety.



2006 Samsung promotion for a cell phone that allows you to watch two television programs side-by-side. Image source: Gizmodo the Gadget Welog at <http://uk.gizmodo.com/2006/08/14/>.

The strong family bond through the mobile phone is often extended into peer relationships. For example, with mobile phones they try to construct emotional bonds between friends similar to their family bonds. Sharing messages and information through cell phones is considered an expression of friendship. The ritual of sharing remains so strong that ignoring calls or text messages (what young people call “chewing out,” *ssibki*) is considered the worst etiquette.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to the family, various family-like emotional relationships (*yŏnjul*) mainly based on familial, regional, or school affiliation play an important role in the private and public lives of Koreans.<sup>8</sup> Young Koreans commonly regard adoption and use of the mobile phone as essential for staying connected with their close acquaintances. This tendency also appears in cyberspace, where young Koreans maintain their virtual and family-like communities via technologically-mediated communications in order to avoid being bullied by peers.<sup>9</sup>

Teenagers in Korea are likely to define their inner circle by their use of mobile phones. In order to choose to whom they will reply, they use the function of caller identification. It is interesting that the Calling Number Identification service was introduced in Korea in 2001, much later than in any other country of similar telecommunication capacity (e.g., the 1980s in the US and 1998 in Japan). This implies that the individual choice to examine calls before responding to them had not previously been part of the Koreans’ traditional way of communication. Today, however, the calling number identification function is familiar to most users of all ages. This new tool now enables young Koreans to either accept or avoid calls and messages from anonymous others. By screening calls, young Koreans avoid communicating with an extensive range of others, while still relying on the family or family-like peer circle.

## **The media’s sensational coverage of young mobile phone users reflects social concerns about the negative consequences of new media on the traditional family-oriented lifestyle of Koreans.**

### **Mobile Youth and Media Panic**

Controversy over new media technology includes public concern about its influence on young people. Indeed, the mainstream media in Korea have reinforced social anxieties about the dysfunctional aspects of mobile phones, such as young people’s dislocation from family relations. Korean media coverage tends to describe teenagers’ consumption of mobile phone services as excessive or an addiction and therefore a “social problem” that needs to be controlled.<sup>10</sup> This was particularly the case after one sixteen-year-old schoolboy committed suicide in 2006, under the enormous pressure of a monthly mobile phone bill for 3.7 million Won (approximately \$400). The media demanded public and familial control over young mobile phone users and made the government and the industry introduce programs and regulations for the use of mobile phones by young people.

The media’s sensational coverage of young mobile phone users reflects social concerns about the negative consequences of new media on the traditional and family-oriented lifestyle of Koreans. In particular, the nature of mobile phones as an individualizing technology that cannot be entirely monitored by adults has raised social anxieties about the possibility of young people’s obsession with mobile phones. Government and non-government organizations have also been increasingly worried about the negative effects of mobile phones and the Internet on socialization of young Koreans. That is, the increase of mediated communications via new technology has been all too easily associated with social concerns about young people who become detached from reality and family.

### **The Mobile Phone Beyond the Family**

Mobile phones can be and have been used for encouraging young people to participate in public agendas. Howard Rheingold called mobile phones and Internet-connected networks of people “smart mobs” who do not have centralized control, but have autonomous small groups. The nonlinear structure of smart mobs also enables the members to influence and support each other without the hierarchy of power. The system of smart mobs allows members to more openly discuss political and social issues. However, the system can also fragment people into indifferent and disorganized individuals.<sup>11</sup>

The mobile phone was used to facilitate discussions about a few recent public events, such as the presidential election of 2002 and the candlelight vigils against the import of US beef in 2008. It seems evident from those collective actions that young people in their teens and twenties first engaged in intensive and

extensive networking via the Internet and mobile phones. Indeed, in the 2002 presidential election, some young people circulated messages encouraging others to vote for a liberal candidate. This action is estimated to have contributed to the success of the liberal candidate Roh Moo Hyun.<sup>12</sup> Mobile phones and the Internet are considered to have played a crucial role in the series of candlelight vigils in the summer of 2008. Reportedly, the majority of teenagers who participated in these public demonstrations were influenced by mobile phone messages. The candlelight vigils protested the government's decision to import US beef, which was considered to have a higher risk of mad cow disease. The media stated that many teenagers joined the demonstrations because of inviting messages on their mobile phones from acquaintances or anonymous others.<sup>13</sup>

However, such examples do not necessarily confirm that use of mobile phones will enhance young Koreans' social consciousness or facilitate liberal attitudes. Rather, surveys show that the political orientation of young people is not necessarily liberal or progressive compared with youth in the past.<sup>14</sup> It should also be noted that there are a number of young people who are not interested in participating in public events or discussions through this new media technology. A 2005 survey showed that only 18.7 percent of Korean teenagers between the ages of fourteen and nineteen would be willing to attend a private or public meeting if its information was sent by SMS (Short Message Service).<sup>15</sup> This finding implies that, in reality, technologically-mediated communication does not necessarily facilitate the network of smart mobs.

### Conclusion

Mobile phones have emerged as a crucial cultural tool for young Koreans. Of course, there are not only differences, but also similarities between young people across the globe. For example, sharing text messages between young people often occurs elsewhere.<sup>16</sup> Korea has been through exceptionally rapid technological development for the past several decades, and, as a result, its image as a 'land of morning calm' seems to have disappeared.

Mobile phones provide young Koreans with challenges and opportunities. On one hand, the remaining influence of Confucian values emphasizes bonding of family in Korean teenagers' use of mobile phones. On the other hand, however, young people have become increasingly capable of reorganizing their social boundaries and peer circles with mobile phones. For a better understanding of the mobile phone and youth culture in Korea, we should bear in mind that mobile phones neither transform young people's ways of communication nor are determined by the young users' capacity. In Korea, the mobile phone is adopted and adapted through structural strains such as Confucian cultural norms and at the same time through young people's competence about, and interests in, the new technology. ■

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### NOTES

1. Byung-mok Choi et al., *A Study on the Youth Mobile Phone Usage* (Seoul: Korea Agency for Digital Opportunity and Promotion, 2005).
2. Ibid, 36.9 percent of Korean teenagers feel anxious if they are not carrying their mobile phone and 39.5 percent habitually tend to check their mobile phone even if there is no signal to show a call or message.
3. Ji-sook Bae, "78% of Office Workers Suffer From 'Bbali Bbali' Syndrome," *The Korea Times*, November 15, 2007.
4. Jeffrey Jones, *I Am Fearful of Korea* (Seoul: Joongang M& B, 2000).
5. Choi et al., 79.4 percent of secondary school students in Korea say their mobile phone bills are paid by their parents.
6. For example, Kyongwon Yoon, "Retraditionalizing the Mobile: Young People's Sociality and Mobile Phone Use in Seoul, South Korea," *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 6(3): 2003, 327–343.
7. Ibid.
8. Seok-Choon Lew, "Social Capital in Korea: The Affective Linkage Group," *The Korea Journal*, 41(3): 2001, 216–233.
9. Florence Chee, "The Games We Play Online and Offline: Making Wang-tta in Korea," *Popular Communication*, 4(3): 2006, 225–239.
10. For example, Jaedong Yu "Young People Use Mobile Phones for More Than 2 hours per Day . . . Send More than 60 Text Messages," *Dong-A Ilbo*, May 3, 2006.
11. Howard Rheingold, *Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Perseus, 2002), 178–215.
12. Shin Dong Kim, "Mobile Media Mobilize Generations," *Frontier 13* (Vodafone Group, 2005).
13. Chunghyung Lee and Eunhwa Han, "60% of Protesters are Middle/High School Students . . . Why They?" *Joongang Ilbo*, May 4, 2008. See also Sang-Hun Choe, "Korea's New Generation of 'Web 2.0' protesters," *International Herald Tribune*, June 16, 2008.
14. Myungjin Lee, *The Social Identities of the 2030 New Generation in South Korea* (Seoul: Samsung Economic Research Institute, 2005).
15. Choi et al., 2005.
16. For example, Alex S. Taylor and Richard Harper, "The Gift of the Gab?: A Design Oriented Sociology of Young People's Use of Mobiles," *Computer Supported Cooperative Work* 12 (2003): 267–296.

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**DR. KYONGWON YOON** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Critical Studies, University of British Columbia, Okanagan, Canada. He gained a PhD in Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham, UK, with an ethnographic study of young people's use of mobile phones. His research into youth culture, visual culture, and new media has been published in such journals as *New Media & Society*, *Childhood: Global Journal of Child Research*, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, and *Asian Studies Review*.