Living in *Cyworld*: Contextualising Cy-Ties in South Korea

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S outh Korea has been receiving increasing attention from various spheres of international media in recent years, particularly for the nation's exponential growth in the domains of technology and popular culture. As well as leading the broadband world with the highest penetration rate of over 75%, the "Korean Wave" is also taking various cultural penetration modes, from technological consumables, such as mobile phones and mp3 players, to more traditional forms of films and TV dramas, which make significant contributions to the nation's reported US$650 million cultural export in 2003.[1] However, there is another realm in which South Korea has been strongly expanding: blogging. According to *The Blog Herald*[2], South Korea is the home ground for three of the world's ten most predominant blog hosts: *Daum Planet Weblog*, *Yahoo Blog*, and *Cyworld*. Considering that *Yahoo Blog*, the first of its kind launched by the Yahoo Group, alone currently accommodates over three million bloggers, it does not come as a surprise that a small country whose population exceeds just over 48 million boasts the second largest number of bloggers in the world, surpassed only by the Unites States of America. *Cyworld*, whose number of members equates approximately to one quarter of the nation's entire population, clearly leads the blog league within South Korea, while also expanding internationally, as seen in the recent launching of *Cyworld* in China and Japan. This chapter provides contextualisation of *Cyworld* in today's South Korean society by introducing *Cyworld* in general, discussing the design of *Cyworld*, and examining some of the major aspects of using, or the user development of, *Cyworld* as an online community.

The Cultural Context of *Cyworld*

While the increasing popularity of blogging made the word itself a relatively common term world-wide, a different term has been introduced to Koreans to describe a similar, if not identical, concept. In 1999, *Cyworld* launched a service providing an individual online space in which functions similar to those common in blogs were made available to the user. This particular service was named Mini-hompy, a term which was quickly adopted by Korean netizens and used to delineate what would otherwise be commonly referred to as a blog in many countries. Accordingly, it would not be an exaggeration to suggest that the blog culture in Korea was initiated by *Cyworld*. Particularly since 2003, when *Cyworld* became affiliated with SK Communications, itself a subsidiary of SK Telecom Co. Ltd., a predominant wireless services provider with over 52% market share in South Korea[3], *Cyworld* has successfully attracted the Korean youth; according to Hyun-oh Yoo, the President of SK Telecommunication, over 90% of Korean Internet users in their 20s are members of *Cyworld*.[4]

Upon acquiring membership, users are given free unlimited access to their own ready-made online space, called "Mini-hompy." "Hompy" is a common term among Koreans for "homepage" or "Website," therefore the name "Mini-hompy" conveys the notion of an individual's own small online space, rather than a mere journal. This is also visually represented in the fact that the Mini-hompy appears as a smaller pop-up window (920 x 570 pixels) containing 11 default subsections: *Home, Profile, Diary, Mini-room, Jukebox, Photo Album, Gallery, Message Board, Guestbook, Favourites,* and *Administration.* The user can selectively disclose and customise subsections and upload any content that is in accordance with Korean law. Moreover, there is no limit in the total size of the content that each Mini-hompy can contain, although each post can only include files to a maximum of 2MB in size, excluding the actual text content of the post.

> **Mini-hompy:**
>
> the free, ready-made homepage available to *Cyworld* users which combines features of a personal blog and an interactive multimedia Website.

South Korea, like many of its neighbouring Asian countries, can be classified as a collectivist, interdependent, and high context culture.[5] Such a culture substantially values the concept of harmony particularly within one's cohesive and long lasting in-groups, as the self is not defined solely as an individual entity, but rather in relation to the significant others within one's in-groups, such as one's family, friends, neighbours, and co-workers. Consequently, each individual must maintain their heightened awareness of their significant others in order to sustain the duration of and the harmony within one's in-groups, and to thus sustain the individual's own social existence in turn. Furthermore, because communicative norms are high-contextual, such awareness is communi-

cated in an implicit, non-verbalised manner via social cues exchange. This means that one is expected to implicitly present social cues to indicate how they are socially situated in a given context, and concurrently evaluate the significant others' reciprocal efforts in the same vein.

Design and Features

Such Korean cultural tendencies within the virtual realm became even more prominent in the late 1990s. The National Internet Development Agency of Korea reports that the annual growth in the number of Internet users varied from 90% to 250%, while .kr domains flourished with a record growth of nearly 1000% at the peak of this period.[6] Major portals were launched one after another, offering services that showed innate references to collectivist social qualities. The epitome of this trend was *Iloveschool.co.kr*, which became an instant sensation as it provided various means to its members to search for, and communicate with, long-lost friends from school, thereby creating a form of "net nostalgia" for Koreans. *Cyworld* takes a similar approach as it provides a search function with which the user can search for a particular person by either the combination of name, date of birth and gender, or by email address. However, the uniqueness of *Cyworld* is found in its embracing not only the collectivistic social traditions, but also the increasing individualistic traits of contemporary Korean culture. While *Iloveschool.co.kr* is largely based on the in-group mentality of specific groups (graduates) and limits the online user activities in the "community" space provided for its particular group of users, *Cyworld* is an individual network-based system, giving the user the freedom to establish and manage their own personal space in which their online network activities occur.

Several distinct features become evident after a close examination of the design of *Cyworld*. Amongst those, the features of registration, access methods, *1-chon* relations, and content scraps are particularly notable:

Registration

The registration for *Cyworld* requires input of information similar to that of many Korean online portals. The user is required to provide their name in "real life," in addition to their Korean resident identification number, which is then validated online in cooperation with Seoul Credit Rating and Information (SCI) Inc., even before the first phase of the registration process is initiated. Compared with the standard registration procedures of many of the world's leading blog portals, including *Blogger* and *Xanga* which simply involve the input of a preferred username and a valid email address, the registration process of *Cyworld*, along with many other Korean online portals, appears to be

in counterflow against the cyber-utopian vision of "collective intelligence" on the grounds of anonymity as a process of contextual freedom.[7] However, the results of an online poll conducted by *Cyworld* in 2001 reveal that this particular inclination towards offline identity confirmation is not a factor of uni-directional enforcement by the host operator (SK Communications), but a bi-directional agreement between the host and the users: according to the poll results, 36% of the participants agreed that their offline identity *should* be disclosed online, while only 12% disagreed. Considering that 25% of the participants agreed to a partial identity disclosure on certain Websites, including those of government and public services, a total of 61% consented to partial or complete identity disclosure, which is over five times the percentage of the opposing opinion. In addition, a considerable number of the participants (26%) felt that the issue should be left to the individual to decide, clearly indicating that Koreans, by and large, understand and appreciate the independent and liberating potential of the Internet. [8]

Access Methods

Cyworld currently provides various access methods to the user. Other than access from personal computers, there are two additional methods available for accessing *Cyworld*:

1. *NateOn (N@teOn)*: a messenger program with similar features to those of MSN Messenger. In addition to conventional messaging functions (chat, email, and SMS) and file sharing, NateOn also features generic functionalities such as the alert service notifying the user of any new posts at their or their *1-chons*' Mini-hompies, links to commercial gaming and shopping services, as well as mobile phone decoration services (including the ring tone and color-ring, a personalized call connection tone heard by the caller, services).

2. *Mobile Cyworld (mCyworld)*: reflecting the recent popularity of moblogging, *Cyworld* introduced the *Phone Photo* function in 2003, a function that is essentially identical to moblogging. A designated folder was added as an option to exclusively store and display such images in the *Photo Album* section. Within a few months, a new downloadable program named *mobile Cyworld VM (Virtual Machine)* was launched, incorporating the alert function similar to that of *NateOn*, subsequently followed by a new WAP service. With a mobile phone acting as a simplified version of an Internet browser, WAP enables ubiquitous access to *Cyworld*.

1-chon Relation

In Korean society, the term *chon* refers to the level of relatedness within blood-relations. For example, between a legally united couple, there is no *chon* (or *0-chon*), while parents and children have *1-chon* relation. *Chon*-relations are established in a hierarchical manner: a *2-chon* relation is established between grandparents and their grandchildren, while one's aunt/uncle/niece/ nephew would have *3-chon*, with cousins referred to as *4-chons*. Within *Cyworld*, however, a virtual *1-chon* relation can be created on an "invite and accept" basis. This is similar to the procedure employed in MSN Messenger, in that the user can invite and/or be invited to become a *1-chon*, which the invitee can either accept or reject. If the invitation is accepted, the user and the invitee become "virtual *1-chons*" even though they may not necessarily be *1-chons* in real life. Koreans have traditionally valued cultural homogeneity[9], and have a proclivity towards strong family ties and values.[10] Consequently, use of the term *1-chon* in *Cyworld* conveys a strong, close bond, and even a sense of responsibility and commitment to the user, despite the fact that the *1-chon* relation is established virtually rather than through traditional, non-virtual familial relationships. This is even further enforced by the statistical data provided in the Administration section, analysing the frequency of interaction between each *1-chon* and the user. In manifestation of such commitment, a new phenomenon has been resulted; *1-chon soonhwe*, or "*1-chon* round (tour)" in English, has become a common practice amongst many *Cyworld* users, who visit *1-chons* on the list one by one to leave a message in the Guestbook section until they have visited every *1-chon*, mainly as a gesture of courtesy.

> **(Virtual)** *1-chon*:
> the buddy system used within *Cyworld*; *1-chon* relation is established on an invite/accept basis similar to the buddy system of MSN Messenger.

Content Scrap

One of *Cyworld*'s unique features is the Scrap function, which allows the user to literally "scrap" selected content from a Mini-hompy into their own, excluding comments made about the content in the original site. Technically, this feature shares the characteristics of a deep link, "a publicly accessible HTML 'anchor' tag that points to an off-site web page that is not the home page of the site being pointed to."[11] *Cyworld* takes the middle ground between the positive and negative standpoints of deep-linking by allowing the user to "scrap" content without necessarily obtaining the original author's permission, but simultaneously inserting undeletable hyperlinks to the original site as a form of "reference" or "watermark."

> **Content Scrapping:**
> a *Cyworld* function which allows users to embed content from another Mini-hompy into their own.

The colloquial expression for Scrap in *Cyworld* is *peogada*, which can be roughly translated as "to draw/ladle/scoop something from a reservoir." This conveys the analogy of drawing water from a well, an abundant source; in this case, making a copy of information that is infinitely duplicable. However, unlike the former analogy in which the act of "taking" does not leave obvious traces regardless of its number of occurrences, in *Cyworld* each content item displays a number that refers to the number of times that the particular content has been Scrapped by other users. A downside, on the other hand, still remains in the fact that there is no option provided for the original author to track which aspects of their content have been Scrapped, creating potentially significant privacy issues.

Decorating the Mini-hompy

Analogous to various blog portals, *Cyworld* users have an option to purchase decorative items for their Mini-hompies, such as skins (background images), background music, and avatars. It is now a common practice for many Web portals to integrate the use of avatars by appealing to the user as possessing and processing a "visual self," in which they should invest to achieve a better sense of being, similar to the way the self is conceived and constructed offline. On the other hand, the fundamental difference in the use of avatars in *Cyworld* (named "Mini-me"), compared to other portals, is that Mini-me is not merely an image displayed in an empty square area, but that it "resides" in a Mini-room, a semi-3D space for which countless number of items can be purchased for decorative purposes. For the user, this feature creates an improved sense of ownership, hence an increased attachment to their Mini-hompy; for SK Communications, it generates enormous revenue. According to *Hankyoreh 21*, a weekly magazine covering current affairs in Korea, the daily sale of digital acorns, the currency of *Cyworld*, amounts to 150 million won (approximately US$143,000).[12] *Cyworld* provides various methods of payment for purchasing acorns, including credit card, OK Cashbag, and payment as part of phone bill. OK Cashbag, SK Corporation claims, is Korea's "first and the largest business network forged through business ties with online/offline retailers and mobile service providers."[13] Currently numbered at 20 million, OK Cashbag subscribers can earn points in proportion to their spending at the designated retailers. The accumulated points may then be used as part payment at any of the integrated online and offline business networks.
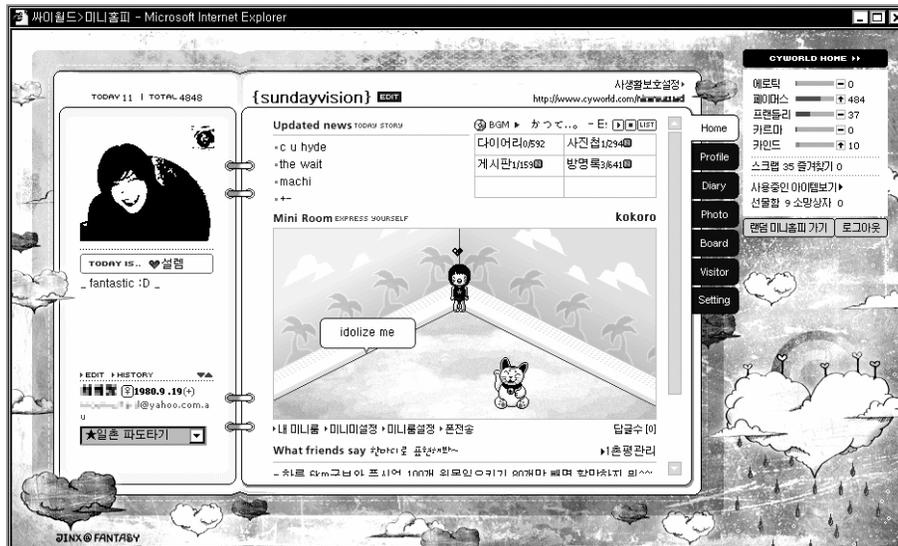
> **Avatar:** a graphical personification of the user in virtual environments such as computer games and online communities.

Figure 17.1: A typical Mini-hompy in *Cyworld*

Another notable feature of *Cyworld* is the user's ability to set the privacy level of the Mini-hompy by disclosing the selected content to the public, *1-chons*, or only to the user themselves. This suggests that the utilisation of a Mini-hompy can occur on three different social domains of *global*, *local*, and *individual*. Moreover, fluid access from each of these social domains can only be achieved with the same level of access bandwidth as that of the available information. For example, multimedia content such as an animation can only communicate its intended purpose when the minimum technical requirements are met on both ends of the host and the user before the information itself is communicated. This communication then becomes reciprocal through reflective and reflexive feedback. The design of *Cyworld*, therefore, clearly demonstrates intrinsic considerations towards both socio-cultural and technological parameters of Korean society, which is attributable to the wide appeal of *Cyworld* to the Korean public as a communication system.

Use and Development

The main body of data presented here derives from my previous explorative case study conducted in 2004 on the use of *Cyworld* by Korean youth.[14] One hundred Mini-hompies were randomly selected, to which 15 analytical questions were applied to obtain quantitative, non-private data. In addition, hybrid email questionnaires were used to acquire more in-depth and individualised information, which resulted in 20 valid responses. Because of the limited space available, this chapter provides insights to some of the more salient

and interesting results on users' approaches to the main design elements of *Cyworld*.

Motivation for Registration

According to the questionnaire results, the majority (80%) of users ascribe "friends-related issues" for their initial acquisition of Cyworld membership, while some consider "data storage and sharing" as their main purposes. Accordingly, the motivational aspect is discussed from social (friends-related issues) and technological (data storage and sharing) perspectives:

1. *Social motivation*: Korea has the world's highest broadband Internet penetration rate of 73% of the total population, combined with the third largest Internet population in the world.[15] Given that the level of technocapital of a particular society is directly associated with the level of an individual's disposition toward technology, the former (techno-capital) and the latter (individual's disposition) inter-influence each other in the course of the collective development of the society.[16] As such, the social and cultural influences on the general Korean public with regard to the use of technology are highly positive, which then results in the public's positive attitude towards new technologies and technological processes, including blogging. Furthermore, as noted previously, long-term human network maintenance is seen as highly important in the collectivistic and interdependent Korean society. Consequently, *Cyworld* immediately appeals to young computer-literate Koreans in a similar manner—not to feel excluded from one's social circles and to keep in contact with them in the virtual realm.

2. *Informational motivation*: Results indicate that a digital camera was the most popular choice of additional technology amongst the participants, with an ownership rate of 60%. In fact, taking digital photos of oneself and uploading such images has become a common routine for many young Koreans in recent years, particularly as a result of the wide dispersion of digital imaging technologies in cameras, camcorders and camera phones. One notable example of this phenomenon is the *jjang* (the best) syndrome, which involves online voting by netizens on the uploaded self-photos as a "gateway towards stardom."[17] Different types of *jjangs*, such as *uljjang* (person with the best face) and *momjjang* (person with the best physique) have become "catchphrases in society, entertainment business and other areas" in contemporary Korea.[18] This represents public acknowledgement of techno-social transformations becoming a conventional part of modernization.

Socialisation in *Cyworld*

In accordance with the design of *Cyworld*, the user's approach is also profoundly interrelated with their offline social networks. A simple reconfirmation of this aspect can be found in the participants' response to a question on their reason for using *Cyworld*. Eighty-five percent of the participants listed the maintenance and reinforcement of pre-existing social networks as their main motives for *Cyworld* use. New online relations formed in *Cyworld*, however, have rather divergent consequences. Without a single exception, of the 55% of questionnaire participants who had formed new social relations via *Cyworld*, all indicated that the relationship was strictly kept online, with one particular participant even labelling the relationship "perfunctory." These findings resonate with Matei and Ball-Rockeach's study on the differential social tie formations of seven ethnic groups in Los Angeles, in which Koreans proved to have more inclination to have associates online, yet simultaneously displayed more cautiousness towards online interaction. The study attributes the in-group cultural orientation of Koreans as the main factor, resulting in their belief that "online relationships outside one's in-group are shallow."[19]

User content development in *Cyworld* shows similar propensity. A personal blog, in a global sense, may be viewed as a link filter through which personalised information or links to such information are presented, according to the blogger's preferences. Therefore, in order for a blog to enhance its status in the blogosphere, the filtered information it contains must appeal to a large number of audiences to result in a greater number of visitors and potential "secondary authors," compared to countless number of other blogs available on the Internet. In the case of *Cyworld*, however, the filtered information remains essentially private, as the scale of the potential audience is relatively limited to the members of the user's existing social networks. The questionnaire results provide evidence for this view, with the majority of the participants indicating that their Photo albums and Message boards, two most frequently used subsections, contain mostly personal data, such as photos of themselves, friends and family, as well as personal notes and diaries. Therefore, filtering in *Cyworld* remains more social in its nature, rather than informational, as compared to other "mainstream" blogs. Furthermore, precisely because of this social nature of the content in an environment with a dense audience base, the level of Content Scraps remains comparatively high. According to the Mini-hompies analysis, an average of 271 Content Scraps occurred in each Mini-hompy, confirming a high level of information sharing amongst Cyworld users.

Usage of decorative items in Mini-hompy is highly conventional (skin: 70%; background music: 93%; Mini-room decoration: 90%), especially through gift-exchange. For an object to be considered a "gift," it should naturally retain a certain value from both the giver's and the receiver's perspectives.

Any item purchase transaction in *Cyworld* requires the exchange of currency from Korean Won to the *Cyworld* currency "acorns," as explained earlier. Therefore, there is a definite financial commitment in gift giving—so, what is the "conceptual value" of such virtual gift-exchange? Amongst the reasons behind Mini-hompy decoration, recurring motives included "provision of a more pleasant environment for the visitors", "expression of self and change of mood", and "entertainment factors." These responses suggest that there are certain values associated with Mini-hompy decoration, and particularly those of entertainment. Mini-hompies are perceived by the users as, firstly, a "space" of their own; and secondly, as an "augmented self." Thus, decoration of the user's Mini-hompy is understood as an extended form of self-presentation, combining aspects of interdependence (social cues-provision) and independence (self-expression) within their online and offline social networks.

Attitudes towards *Cyworld*

From the participant responses, it was evident that users find approximately the same amount of advantages and disadvantages in their use of *Cyworld*.

1. *Positive attitudes:* One of the most common beneficial aspects suggested by the participants was the facility to enrich their existing social networks. This aspect of social maintenance is further extended to the redemption of social ties that are potentially at the risk of being diminished, lost, or even have previously been lost, particularly because of physical distance. The effortless transcendence of distance via Internet technologies, and its implications in human societies, have been a subject of extensive discussion, particularly in the CMC literature to date. This is also an aspect that has been proven to have an immense appeal to global Internet users, regardless of their ethnic or cultural backgrounds.[20] However, combined with the "user search" function as one of the principal design components, *Cyworld* presents a more convenient way of reconnecting distant and/or long-lost associates. Consequently, it can be argued that this aspect has naturally enhanced *Cyworld*'s appeal because of the collectivistic and interdependent quality of the Korean culture.

   Another significant point to emerge from participant responses was the opportunity for better understanding of the self and significant others via self-expression. Self-expression, or speaking one's mind, is not a traditionally encouraged concept in collectivistic Korean society, as such openness may potentially create individualistic deviance, ultimately resulting in disruption to the group-harmony. However, the

participants not only expressed their appreciation for the opportunities for self-expression *Cyworld* offers, but one respondent even considered such an experience "therapeutic." These responses clearly signify that there is an evident cultural conversion amongst Korean youth, a shift towards individualism from the traditional collectivistic conventions. Ito and Okabe's theory of power geometry can be applied in this context[21], in that *Cyworld* provides an easily accessible digital layer of reality for Korean youth where interactions can occur regardless of the traditional cultural and social implications. To put it simply, this particular set of results indicates that *Cyworld* is perceived as both a personal space and as an extended self, through which communication occurs under the user's own control.

2. *Negative Attitudes:* Participants expressed concerns with three main types of implied pressures experienced as part of the social adaptation of *Cyworld*. Firstly, the participants commented on being compelled to constantly sign-in and utilise *Cyworld* by means of uploading content and monitoring Mini-hompies of their own and their associates. Such utilisation of *Cyworld* can be an arduous and time-consuming task, particularly when the user maintains a large number of active *1-chons*. Secondly, in contrast to their expressed optimism towards *Cyworld*'s basis of offline social ties, participants were also found to experience limitations in terms of the span of their social network. *Cyworld* is used to facilitate the maintenance and enhancement of existing social ties rather than to establish new social connections. For this reason, some participants expressed their concerns about the implications of high social concentration on a limited number of social networks. Thirdly, some participants also commented on the "superficiality" of the self represented in Mini-hompy. Although Mini-hompy functions as a private space and extended-self, through which a new "free" reality is constructed, the concurrent reality is that the user's awareness of the audience conversely influences the presentation of the user's self in their Mini-hompy. In a way, the self projected in one's Mini-hompy can be viewed not necessarily as a self to *be*, but rather a self to *share*.

Examining interaction within *Cyworld* reveals some emerging patterns analogous to the characteristics of the offline communication culture of Korean society, yet also imbued with unique technological aspects. The extent of *Cyworld* use in Korean youth culture is so exceptional in its frequency and application that it appears to have become one of the standard modes if communication for youth. In support of this, 40% of the questionnaire participants indicated that they consider *Cyworld* to be an integral part of con-

temporary Korean society. The responses of those 40% indicated that the main reason behind this view was its extended support for their social endeavours, in addition to the entertainment and therapeutic factors we discussed above.

Overall, then, communication in *Cyworld* takes account of both social and technological contexts of Korean society, with neither of these aspects having communicative hegemony over the other. *Cyworld* is now, without a doubt, one of the conventional modes of communication in contemporary Korean society, placing on the user a social obligation to stay constantly signed-in; at the same time, it exists not as a completely new or alternative communication system, but as an extension of pre-existing modalities of communication in to-day's Korean youth culture.

NOTES

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