



# Transnational communication practices of unaccompanied young Korean students in the United States

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## Abstract

Based on a study of unaccompanied Korean student migrants, this article investigates how transnational communication helped the students continue their transnational journey for educational success. Although suffering perennial loneliness, the students continued with their studies because they still believed acquiring education in the United States would be advantageous in securing their success. They became actively involved in transnational communication to cope with stresses and to gain emotional support. Transnational communication played an important role in mediating between their pursuit of education and desired cultural capital on the one hand, and the loneliness and isolation as migrants on their own on the other.

## Keywords

unaccompanied student migrants, transnational communication, flexible citizenship, neoliberal identity, educational migration

## Introduction

The phenomenon of unaccompanied South Korean (hereafter Korea/Korean) adolescents in the United States is one recent example of educational migration, which has been propelled by increasing competition in Korea. In the practice known as *jogi yuhaksaeng*, a neologism meaning “early study abroad students,” families send their children overseas as a strategy for

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accumulating socio-cultural capital in a competitive world (Ong, 1999). Korea is known for state-driven economic development in the latter 20th century and a recent economic restructuring that created a denationalized neoliberal system after the financial crisis in 1997 (e.g., Hart-Landsberg and Burkett, 2001). Rapid economic development has expanded the size of the middle class, who can afford to invest in their children's education. However, the increasing competition for prized and prestigious employment in Korea and the global labor market have exerted additional pressure on families to provide their children with a good education. The search for a good education has led families to consider international education not only when their children reach the tertiary level but also when the children are still in high school in order to give them an early start in international education. Since the late 1990s, the number of Korean precollege students abroad has increased, the social phenomenon that has been referred to as *educational exodus* (e.g., Abelmann et al., 2015). In the United States, the number of tertiary and precollege students from Korea increased 60.55 percent in the first decade of the 21st century: from 45,685 in 2000–2001 to 73,351 in 2010–2011 (IEE, 2014). The number of precollege students reached its peak at 21,000 in 2008. But even though the number has declined recently, Korea has the second largest group of international precollege students in the United States (Jang, 2013). Typically, precollege students migrate to pursue their high school studies overseas. Some may be accompanied by one or both parents while others migrate without their parents. In the latter case, they usually stay with a host family.

Findings from an earlier phase of a research project on unaccompanied Korean adolescents found that the young students faced multiple socio-cultural barriers in the United States (Kim, 2014). They felt socially isolated, and this isolation forced them to spend most of their time in their own rooms in the homes of their host families. Many participants openly complained about perennial loneliness and boredom, which contrasted sharply with how they described their daily lives in Korea, which were filled with various peer activities and intimate family relationships. Alone in their private rooms, the student migrants used the Internet heavily, mostly accessing web services based in Korea, consuming Korean mass media products available online, and maintaining peer networks back home. Although physically separated from their families and friends in Korea, they were deeply involved in their transnational communities. Their transnational communication activities enabled them to counter their lonely lives in the United States. As a follow-up to the earlier part of the research, this article analyzes and discusses how transnational communication helped the young migrants continue their transnational journey to educational success despite the everyday difficulties that often forced them to think of returning to their families in Korea.

## Literature review

### *Developmentalism and flexible citizenship*

At the peak of precollege student's migration to the United States in the late 2000s, major US news-media outlets reported the excessively competitive culture of Korean education by highlighting the importance of educational success and English skills in Korean society (e.g., Cho, 2007; Dillon, 2008).

Some studies trace Korea's competitive educational culture to its roots in Confucianism (e.g., Robinson, 1994) while later ones attribute such a culture to more recent experiences, such as the Japanese occupation, the United States's hegemonic domination, rapid economic development, and the recent turn to neoliberalization (e.g., Shin, 2012). Korea's modern educational system was formally set up under the first military regime that promoted state-led developmentalism in the 1960s (Kim and Lee, 2006). The ideology of the developmental state can be traced to the early years of the opening of the nation in the late 19th century and subsequent colonization by Japan in the early 20th century (Cummings, 1990; Kohli, 1994; Shin, 2003; Svarverud, 2001). The early modern elites in Korea subscribed to the idea of Social Darwinism. Influenced by the idea that human life (and social life) is survival of the fittest, they believed that human development through education was a way of following the path of successful modern countries, including Japan (Svarverud, 2001). Many Koreans continue to have notions of catching up with the rest of the world and competition among nations even after experiencing democratization and rapid economic development in the last several decades (Shin, 2003).

A strong hegemonic relationship with the United States, which was formed at a time of historical turmoil, has also greatly influenced the shaping of Korean elite education, privileging English skills as a prerequisite for obtaining symbolic capital and academic degrees from renowned American colleges (Kim, 2011; Park, 2010; Park and Abelmann, 2004; Shin, 2014).

In response to the financial crisis in 1997, the government enacted a series of educational reforms aimed at attaining global competitiveness (Jo, 2005). Stressing competitiveness, performance, and efficiency as means of quick economic recovery, the government prioritized "human resources for competitiveness in the global economy" (Yoon, 2014: 188). On the one hand, newly adopted policies accelerated the decentralization of education by increasing the curriculum and managerial autonomy of schools. On the other, students were valued as educational consumers who deserved to receive a more competitive and efficient education (Yoon, 2014). The ability to speak and write in English has been stressed even more strongly as essential human capital, along with global perspectives, which are believed to enable individuals to respond to rapid changes in the global political economy (Park, 2010). Research findings suggest that English proficiency is positively correlated with "occupational success and social mobility" in Korean society

(Koo, 2007: 13). To equip their children with the necessary human and cultural capital, Korean families send their children to study overseas, especially to English-speaking countries, to improve their life chances. In recent years, this practice has extended to sending young children to study overseas (early study abroad) to give them ample preparation (e.g., Shin, 2014).

Cultural capital, along with economic capital, is crucial in creating distinctions among individuals in late-industrial societies, and education is an avenue to build up this capital (Bourdieu, 1993). Flexible citizenship, on the other hand, is the cultural logic of individuals who travel to more advantageous locations in pursuing the accumulation of economic and cultural capital (Ong, 1999). The two notions are important theoretical frameworks for explaining the rise in international student migration in East Asia (Byun et al., 2012; Huang and Yeoh, 2011; Shin, 2013; Waters 2015; Yamamoto and Brinton, 2010). Chinese migrants in English-speaking countries have been the focus of studies on flexible citizenship. Believing that children's education is the most effective means for a family to acquire cultural capital, many Chinese families support the migration of their children to pursue studies overseas (Waters, 2009). Korea is also a significant source country of international student migration and, as mentioned earlier, the migration of unaccompanied precollege students to English-speaking countries has been on the rise. The belief that an early start in acquiring proficiency in the English language is helpful in gaining admission to renowned universities later explains efforts undertaken by families to accumulate cultural capital (Kang, 2013; Kim, 2014; Park and Lo, 2012; Shin, 2013, 2014).

### *Transnational communication*

Along with flexible citizenship, transnational communication practices carried out by contemporary migrants with ties to multiple locations make up another distinctive characteristic of the contemporary globalized world. Advanced communication technologies enable international migrants to routinely communicate with people in their countries of origin (Levitt and Jaworsky, 2007). Based on a review of academic studies on transnational communication, Kissau and Hunger (2010) stress several important points. First, the Internet has become the main platform on which migrants' socio-cultural and economic activities are performed. Transnational communication helps migrants become involved with communities at multiple sites. More importantly, it plays a significant role in bridging home and host countries for migrants (Kissau and Hunger, 2010). As more migrants have maintained strong transnational social networks with people across borders through various digital technologies, the socio-cultural adaptation of migrants in host societies has become less daunting than it was in the past (Portes et al., 1999).

Transnational interpersonal communication involves important practices that allow migrants to constantly connect with people in multiple locations, especially with those in their countries of origin (Bacigalupe and Camara, 2012; Collins, 2009; Metyková, 2010; Wilding, 2006). Filipina migrant women, for example, use the mobile phone as a means to continue parenting their left-behind children in the Philippines (Madianou and Miller, 2011). In particular, international students who are well accustomed to new technologies tend to use their home countries' social network sites to maintain peer networks in their home countries (e.g., Li and Chen, 2014).

An aspect of transnational communication practices is migrants' consumption of mass media products from their home countries (e.g., Christiansen, 2004; Elias and Lemish, 2011), online home-country media (Yin, 2013), or ethnic media in the host countries (e.g., Lin et al., 2010). Young migrants, in particular, tend to use online media based in their home countries (Yin, 2013).

According to Metyková (2010), young migrants who are accustomed to new technology before they migrate maintain their patterns of Internet use. Whereas behavioral studies on Internet use by migrants tend to focus more on the relationship between the pattern of Internet use and its cultural-psychological consequences (e.g., Chen, 2010; Park et al., 2014), the contextual approach to migrants' Internet use shifts to understanding migrants' living contexts as the starting point of a transnational communication study (Wilding, 2006). Wilding's (2006: 127) research sought to answer the questions, "When, under what circumstances, and why, do people decide to adopt the Internet as a communication technology?" and I also sought to understand the role of transnational communication within the broader contexts of the adolescent migrants' life experiences as precollege students in the United States.

Transnational media consumption and communication have been studied not only as communication practices but also as means to produce transnational space where migrants form communities across the border (e.g., Georgiou, 2006; Kearney, 1995). The finding that unaccompanied Korean adolescents built their own transnational spaces by constantly communicating with people across the border and consuming cultures in which they were grounded (Kim, 2015) led to this inquiry into how their transnational communication mediates the discrepancy between the ideal of educational migration and the reality the students face in the United States.

## **The research project on unaccompanied early study abroad participants**

### *Unsatisfactory life in the United States*

The present article is based on a study that forms part of my dissertation research project focusing on their life experiences (Kim, 2014), transnational

communication practices (Kim, 2015), and identities of unaccompanied Korean adolescents in the United States. This research project grew out of my personal experiences not only as an international graduate student in the United States but also as the uncle of two nieces who migrated to the United States for their precollege education. I was also an English tutor for five Korean high school students in Oklahoma City. The sharp contrast between the public image of well-to-do educational migrants and their isolated life experiences that I personally observed prompted me to start this research project in 2010.

The first theme that emerged from the study was that most participants were not satisfied with their lives in the United States (Kim, 2014). Their dissatisfaction stemmed from limited social relationships with people in the United States. At school, most participants did not have friends among their American classmates. Rather, they tended to cultivate relationships with fellow Koreans in their schools and communities. However, they had few Korean peers in their schools with whom they could share various activities. Many participants could not build relationships with members of their host families, partly because of the temporary nature of their stay and partly because of cultural and language barriers. Moreover, they did not have access to public transportation in the United States, which restricted their mobility and increased their social isolation. Even participants in Boston, who had various transportation options for reaching different communities, complained about the limited choice of activities and destinations. Due to these conditions, almost all participants in this research project spent a large amount of their time after school and during weekends alone in their private rooms.

Many participants complained about their monotonous lives that were so unlike their diverse life experiences in Korea, which were filled with many activities with friends and family members. Even if they had come to the United States to avoid the competition in Korea as well as to pursue educational success in the United States, the young migrant students often romanticized about their past experiences and people in Korea. These life experiences in the United States were key contexts for understanding their transnational communication practices.

### *Constant and instant transnational communication*

The second theme of the project suggested that the student migrants used the Internet heavily for transnational media consumption and building social networks across the border (Kim, 2015). The Internet was an important avenue for coping with boredom and loneliness for the adolescents who were stuck in their rooms. Based on their accounts, the students surfed web services based in Korea to consume Korean media content, to obtain information on things in

Korea, to maintain social networks with peers in Korea, and to constantly communicate with their family members in Korea. While they were physically located in the United States, their private rooms after school hours turned into transnational spaces filled with interactions with people and cultures in Korea.

Various Internet technologies, such as file sharing and Internet phone, helped them stay in touch with people and maintain years-long media practices. Thus, technological availability and literacy were important conditions of their transnational communication practices.

In addition, participants commonly identified cultural sensibilities and emotional attachments to Korea as important reasons for their transnational media consumption. They liked to watch Korean television shows starring familiar entertainers and featuring culturally understandable humor rather than American television shows that were still foreign to them. Also, they relied on their parents for emotional support. Their statements about their transnational communication reflected strong desires to be active members of peer communities in Korea. Distanced from their old friends in Korea as well as troubled about making new friends in the United States, the adolescents actively tried to build and to maintain their existing social networks in Korea by using the Internet.

Feeling foreign in relation to their American classmates and host families, the adolescents turned into active communicators interacting with familiar people and cultures. These two different pictures of their daily lives in the United States raised questions for me: Does their transnational communication with people and things in Korea become a means of lessening their daily difficulties in the United States? Does their transnational communication mediate between their goals to acquire education in the United States and their difficult lives in the United States?

## Methods

### *Participants*

Data for this project came from interviews with precollege Korean students in three cities in the United States: Oklahoma, Boston and Dallas. The initial interviews were conducted in Oklahoma City (OKC) in 2010, where I was a doctoral student and was familiar with the Korean community in the area. There were no available statistics on Korean students in OKC. According to some members of the Korean community, there were a number of Korean students enrolled in private schools in OKC. A series of interviews conducted in 2010 revealed that many participants in OKC complained about their monotonous daily life due to restricted mobility and limited places to go to in the city. Guided by those findings, I conducted the next phase of data collection in Boston, a bigger city as well as home to a bigger Korean community.



Although the Korean American population in Boston is smaller than in other major cities such as New York and Chicago, Boston is the most popular destination for early study abroad students. Unlike the students in OKC, those in Boston could easily reach other urban communities, including Korean business areas, because of convenient transportation. The final phase of data collection was conducted in Dallas in late 2010. While Dallas is larger than Boston in terms of population, it has fewer education-related institutions. Since Korean businesses in the Dallas metro area are spread throughout multiple suburban centers, like Carrollton and Allen, the living environment for unaccompanied minors was expected to be different from that in Boston.

In compliance with Institutional Review Board (IRB no. 12066) requirements, all participants were over 18 years old and were either juniors or seniors in high school. Since the first semester of an academic year begins in March in Korea, there are usually some technical problems when Korean students transfer to American high schools. Therefore, Korean high-school students usually lose a semester in order to be in line with the American academic calendar. Moreover, many Korean high-school students spend around a year practicing English before they transfer to American high schools. For this reason, Korean juniors and seniors are usually older than American juniors and seniors.

A total of 31 Korean adolescents participated in the study. They were recruited through purposive sampling. With the help of several key informants in each city, I purposefully recruited participants who were not accompanied by their parents, lived with host families, and had been in the United States over one year. A key informant, who was also a Korean high-school student in OKC and a friend of my niece, helped recruit participants in OKC. In Boston, a Korean teacher who taught English to Korean students at a private institute introduced eight students to me. A participant in Boston also helped me recruit another two students. In Dallas, a former student of mine introduced two participants, and those two students helped me recruit four additional participants. I conducted all interviews in Korean on a one-on-one basis.

### *Data analysis*

Based on a pilot study with three unaccompanied adolescents in 2008 (these participants were excluded from the present study), I developed 23 open-ended questions in three categories: general questions about the participants, questions regarding the use of communication technology and questions regarding everyday communication and interpersonal relationships. Following the methodological guidelines of the grounded theory method, I began data analysis as soon as the first data were collected (Charmaz, 2006). The first data analysis allowed me to add more questions and categories, such as questions regarding identity and the cultural consequences of the students' lives in the United States, to the interview protocol for the next phases of data



**Table 1.** Detailed demographic information.

Name	Gender	Age	Current City	Current Host	Years in the US
Bada	Female	18	Boston	American	5
Chang	Male	19	Boston	Korean	2
Dana	Female	18	OKC	Relative (Korean)	6
Doosik	Male	19	Dallas	American	3
Dowon	Female	18	Dallas	Acquaintance (Korean)	2
Giwook	Male	19	Dallas	American	3
Han	Male	19	OKC	Relative (Korean)	3
Hana	Female	18	Dallas	Korean	2
Heeseon	Female	19	OKC	American	2
Hyun	Female	19	Boston	American	2
Inpyo	Male	19	Boston	American	3
Jaeha	Male	19	OKC	American	3
Jimin	Female	19	OKC	American	3
Jin	Female	18	OKC	American	3
Jisuk	Male	18	OKC	Korean	2
Jongsoo	Male	18	OKC	Relative (Korean)	3
Jooho	Male	18	Dallas	Korean	2
Joon	Male	19	OKC	American	3
Lin	Female	18	OKC	American	3
Minkee	Male	18	OKC	American	2
Noah	Male	19	Dallas	Korean	2
Ryoo	Male	19	Boston	American	2
Saeho	Male	19	OKC	Korean	3
Seewon	Male	18	Boston	Korean	3
Sungil	Male	18	Boston	Korean	3
Song	Male	18	OKC	American	3
Soo	Female	19	OKC	Relative (Korean)	3
Taewon	Male	19	Boston	Korean	3
Wonsang	Male	19	Boston	Korean	3
Young	Female	19	OKC	American	3
Yuna	Female	19	Boston	Korean	3

Notes. 1. The listed names are pseudonyms.

2. In column 5, those designated as Korean or American hosts are neither relatives nor acquaintances of the students' families.

**Table 2.** Summary of demographic information.

Category	Number of Participants
Current city	
OKC	15 (Male: 8, Female: 7)
Boston	10 (Male: 7, Female: 3)
Dallas	6 (Male: 4, Female: 2)
Age	
18	17 (Male: 11, Female: 6)
19	14 (Male: 8, Female: 6)
Years in the USA	
1–2	10 (Male: 6, Female: 4)
2–3	19 (Male: 13, Female: 6)
4 or more	2 (Male: 0, Female: 2)

collection. Instead of changing the third category of questions, I added two more categories. Therefore, the next phases of data collection in the three cities were conducted with five categories and a total of 52 questions.

I transcribed interviews verbatim in Korean for data analysis and coded the data by repeatedly reading the fully transcribed interviews in order to compare interviews and find similarities and differences in the data, which eventually led to finding common themes. I selected and underlined important comments representing each theme. This process was conducted not only for refining the properties of each theme but also for describing the essential nature of the themes (Thorne, 2000). These underlined comments and their corresponding themes were reviewed by a colleague, a native of Korea, in order to ensure reliability. During the process of data analysis, each participant was assigned a pseudonym.

## Findings

### *Deciding to study abroad*

Throughout the interviews, most participants expressed their (and/or their parents') desires for their educational success, which often meant entering a renowned American university. Most participants said that their decision to study abroad was not voluntary but was that of their parents, who were worried about their children's future. However, they understood why their parents pushed them to go abroad for secondary education. Some participants who voluntarily decided to come to the United States were heavily influenced by the neoliberal social atmosphere in Korea and by their parents.

Regardless of their role in the decision-making process, all participants believed that English skills and obtaining a university degree in the United States are important for a successful life.

More than a half of the participants actively sought information about education in the United States before they migrated; five participants attended information sessions and the so-called study abroad fairs held by schools and private agencies. Most participants said they felt pressured by the fact that many of their classmates had already left for English-speaking countries. Growing up in a very competitive educational culture, many participants expressed their fear of being left behind by their classmates and friends, whom they considered and called their *competitors*. Fears and dreams combined to incline the young students and their parents to be apart to pursue their shared educational goals. For example, Noah (male, Dallas, 19 years old, two years in the United States) said:

I first didn't want to come to America. It was my dad's idea. He was so worried about my grades. He was always very enthusiastic to support my education. I had never stopped cram schools since 8 years old. I didn't want to come to America because I was afraid of English and making new friends. But I was also worried about my grades. I didn't think I could get in a good university in Korea. Impossible. So I agreed with Dad. I heard that it was much easier to get in a good university like some renowned state universities [in the United States].

While most participants considered entering reputable colleges to be the chief purpose of their journey, a few participants mentioned being competitive in the job market in the future. However, the road to educational success did not turn out to be smooth. They soon realized that their lives in the United States would be difficult without direct parental care, stable peer networks, and various daily activities. As mentioned earlier, the young student migrants spent a large amount of time alone in their own rooms, which led them to turn to familiar people and cultural products in Korea available through the Internet.

### *Transnational living and transnational communication*

Uprooted and away from their families, friends, and familiar environments and mostly on their own in the United States, the students intensively consumed Korean media products available online, communicated with their parents and family members, and maintained existing peer networks in Korea through various social networking technologies.

Many participants specifically stated that media consumption and interpersonal communication with people in Korea helped them avoid daily stresses and the lack of personal relationships and diverse socio-cultural activities.

Hyun (female, Boston, 19 years old, two years in the United States) specifically explained that her quieter life in the United States made her lonelier. She sought out Korean media content, through which she could watch familiar scenes and people. Similarly, Dana (female, OKC, 18 years old, six years in the United States) said, "Whenever I get depressed, I watch a Korean TV show. I can forget everything with that. It makes me relaxed and happy." Other than relieving daily stresses, watching Korean television shows also played an important role in building spaces where the participants felt more comfortable, as reflected in Soo's (female, OKC, 19 years old, three years in the United States) statement:

I have no problem with my English, but I still don't want to speak too much in English. I get exhausted. So after school, I want to relax with Korean language. I feel at home while watching Korean TV.

By accessing Korean television shows, they became more relaxed in their "home" space built across the border. The students' patterns of media use were not new to them. More than half of the participants said they used media as they had in Korea, which meant that they not only consumed the same kinds of media content but also continued the same way of consuming media. Those who participated in various private education programs after school in Korea said they did not have enough time to watch live television shows when they lived in Korea. Thus, they downloaded television shows or accessed online streaming sites late at night or on weekends to catch up on shows or episodes they had missed. Taewon's (male, Boston, 19 years old, three years in the United States) experience is a good example:

When I was in Korea, I didn't watch TV during weekdays because I didn't have much time to do so after school and *hakwon* (cram school). Every weekend, I watched a lot of Korean reality TV shows and dramas. I downloaded them. I am doing the same thing here. During weekends, I feel like I am at my home in Korea.

Transnational interpersonal communication with family members in Korea was also a very important after-school activity. Ryoo (male, Boston, 19 years old, two years in the United States) talked to his mother when he felt lonely. For him, his mother was the most appropriate person to encourage him to do his best. Through their conversations, he was reminded of his parents' endless efforts to support his expensive education in the United States.

For these adolescents, their own rooms in their hosts' homes became transnational spaces formed by transnational communications. As discussed above, through the Internet, they maintained their connections with their families, friends and cultural activities in Korea. Many participants did not regard

Korean Internet use as an activity they chose consciously but as simply a part of life in the United States. Moreover, their Internet use in the United States was a continuation of their Internet use in Korea.

Although participants in Boston had access to a relatively larger Korean community and good public transportation system, like the participants in the two other cities, they were dissatisfied with their peer communities. For the participants, their friends in Korea remained their reference point for their peer relationships. They spent a lot of time on the Internet consuming Korean media and engaging in transnational communication with people in Korea. These transnational relationships, made possible by communication technologies, filled the void of meaningful social ties and relationships in the United States.

### *Remaining in the United States*

Despite many complaints, the students said they would remain in the United States, except for one participant who wanted to go back home to Korea. They got used to their lives in the United States although they were dissatisfied with their day-to-day experiences. In this ironic situation, the adolescents adjusted to their transnational lives by considering the end goal of their educational migration, managing their dissatisfaction with life in the United States, and coping by way of transnational communication. This balancing act is suggested by Hana's (female, Dallas, 18 years old, two years in the United States) reflection:

Sometimes, I think that I want to go back to Korea right now. But, I usually get okay after chatting with friends (in Korea) and Mom. Then I think I have to do my best for entering a good college here. I always know I will be depressed again. But I also always know it will be okay. It is my life in America. So I just want to accomplish my mission soon.

Despite difficult experiences in the United States, the young student migrants' belief in the value of educational success and the importance of educational and cultural capital in a competitive world nudged them to strive to accomplish their goals. They became motivated through communication with their parents. Many participants were concerned about the high cost of their study abroad and their parents' as well as their own sacrifices of being separated from each other. They strongly believed that the best reward for themselves and their parents was to be successful in their studies. Giwook (male, Dallas, 19 years old, three years in the United States) expressed this sense of responsibility:

My mom has spent a lot of money since my 6th grade when I first came to Canada. Then, I moved to Dallas because my mom thought the US was better

than Canada for me to get into an American college. Actually, my mom doesn't talk about money at all while messaging on the Internet. She always asks me what I need. But I know I am spending more money here for my host's home and tuition. I always feel guilty. Now I have one-and-a-half more years to go to graduate from high school. I will do my best to get in a good college.

There were also those who tried to reduce the amount of time they used the Internet. Jin (female, OKC, 19 years old, three years in the United States) explained the reasons:

I sometimes try not to use the Internet because it's not good for my studies.

Because I am using Korean on the Internet all the time, I am afraid my English [will be affected]. And I also spend too much time with stupid things on the Internet.

I asked Jin, "So did you successfully manage Internet use?" and she answered, "Not really. I become more depressed without the Internet. It was a necessary evil."

Accustomed to using the Internet to consume media products in Korea, the adolescents regarded the Internet as a means for coping with stressors in the United States. At the same time, they believed excessive use of the Internet could undermine their goal of doing well in their studies. However, like Jin, all the participants were unsuccessful in reducing their use of the Internet. Dana's (female, OKC, 18 years old, six years in the United States) admission that she became lonelier and bored without the Internet was common among the participants:

I tried not to use the Internet when I first came here. And I concluded that I could not live without the Internet. I'd better go to bed one hour later after watching a one-hour TV show. That's much better for my life here.

Although they experienced difficulties and loneliness in the United States, many participants saw the advantages of early study abroad. They commonly pointed out a better chance to enter a renowned American college as the first reason for continuing their studies in the United States. Heeseon (female, OKC, 19 years old, two years in the United States) is an example of a participant who expressed a strong belief in educational success:

I want to get into a good college in the United States. Even if I go to just a so-so university, at least I can master English, which will be very important in this age. It will help me get a good job, like a highly paid job at a famous corporation like Samsung.

Interestingly, although they reported being unhappy in the United States, more than two-thirds of the participants said they wanted to remain in the country even after they finished college. Some participants mentioned that they wanted to succeed first in the United States and later live in Korea. Three participants had another plan: they wanted to transfer to a Korean college after two years at an American college. Those who wanted to return to Korea soon also acknowledged that they would have better chances for admission to a Korean college after a couple of years studying at an American college. Overall, the young student migrants still thought that studying in the United States was worth the sacrifices because they believed a US education would increase their chances of success educationally and professionally. Thus, they continued to live abroad despite homesickness, disconnectedness, and boredom. Caught between their desire to achieve their life goals and the difficulties of living on their own in the United States, the young students availed themselves of multiple online devices in order to be connected with their significant others and cultural products in Korea. Somehow, the transnational connections provided by the Internet helped the young student migrants in preparing themselves to be equipped with competencies in a competitive world.

Although the young migrants did not regard the United States as a desirable destination, they opted to stay in the United States, viewing it as a "land of opportunity" where they could increase their cultural capital by gaining English skills and earning a degree from an American college. The contextual approach to young student migrants' Internet use adopted in this study led to the finding that transnational communication was a necessary condition in the pursuit of flexible citizenship. Many participants attempted to reduce their use of the Internet because it might hinder them in improving their English skills and adapting to a new culture. However, they became more stressed and lonely when they had no access to the Internet (and by extension, access to people and things Korean). The Internet, as one participant described, was a necessary evil. The use of the Internet to connect with Korea enabled the young students to continue their studies in the United States while drawing support from people and communities across borders. The strategies employed by the young students call to mind the importance of transnational communities, as elaborated by Portes et al. (1999: 220):

Whereas, previously, economic success and social status depended exclusively on rapid acculturation and entrance into mainstream circles of the host society, at present they depend (at least for some) on cultivating strong social networks across national borders. For immigrants involved in transnational activities and their home country counterparts, success does not so much depend on abandoning their culture and language to embrace those of another society as on preserving their original cultural endowment, while adapting instrumentally to a second.



As seen in their life experiences and transnational communication practices, the unaccompanied adolescents were not active in communities and peer networks in the United States. Rather, they remained connected and actively involved in their home communities and maintained strong ties with family members and friends through borderless communication technologies. Through transnational communication, the young migrants maintained links to their families, peers, and culture back home, which helped them to pursue educational success away from home.

### **Concluding remarks**

Grounded in the national atmosphere of neoliberal socio-economic transformation, upper middle-class families in Korea took to educational migration in the hopes of advancing the educational and employment prospects of their children. Although physically separated, adolescent migrants and their parents engaged in transnational family communication, using every available technology to support the young migrants in their educational pursuits. Parents' continuous encouragement provided important motivational support for the young migrants, who were concerned about the amount of money their parents were spending for their overseas studies and were burdened with psychological issues. The young migrants' transnational communication with their peers allowed them to be active members in their familiar communities. Through constant and instant contacts, sharing media experiences, and building online communities with friends in Korea, they were able to cope with feelings of isolation, which might have led them to consider abandoning their studies in the United States. Also, their heavy consumption of Korean media products helped them to deal with stress. For many, Korean media consumption was the best way or even the only way of entertaining themselves.

Experiencing isolated and unstable lives in the United States, they were very active in building and maintaining their own transnational spaces where they felt protected from daily stresses and where they could recharge their energy. Such spaces filled young migrants' need for friendship, entertainment and parental support. Availing themselves of communication technologies and devoting their time to building and maintaining transnational communities, they were able to survive the lonely journey they believed was necessary to equip themselves with skills and capital to survive in this world. Transnational communication allows mobile people to consume familiar media products, to build social networks and to share daily experiences with significant others across borders. Transnational communication is no longer an optional communication practice but has become contextualized in the lives of globally mobile individuals. The young migrants who participated in this study did not make particular efforts to adjust to

their US setting. Instead, they created their own spaces, connecting with people in Korea in order to get through each day and to continue to pursue their studies. Transnational communication provided a means to help them cope with the difficulties of studying overseas that were part of their journey to success.

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