

Looking for Salvation beyond a Risk-laden Reality: *The Religious Nature of Korean Internet Culture*

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Abstract

This paper reviews the various phenomena arising from the rapid diffusion of the Internet in Korean society since the late 1990s, with the view that Korean Internet culture has some aspects that can be seen as “religious.” Here, I approach the religious nature of Korean Internet culture in two dimensions. Firstly, I regard Koreans’ enthusiasm for cyberspace itself as a religious phenomenon. For background on this, I argue that modern Koreans experiencing excessive anxiety due to the stress of complex risks seek relief by connecting to cyberspace as an alternative form of reality.

Secondly, I examine what might be regarded as religious phenomena among the events taking place in Korean cyberspace today. For this, I focus on some notable features of Korean cyberspace. Of special note is the spread of the myth that one can become a different person and enjoy a better life through online consumption, and the formation of a new consumer culture of impulse shopping. I also examine how the “myth of another reality” in cyberspace generates inner power through two dimensions of online rituals. I believe that analyzing the religious character of Korean Internet culture, along three axes—its background, myth, and rituals—will enable us to reflect on its present state.

Keywords: Korean Internet culture, cyber culture, cyber myth, cyber ritual, risk society, *jireumsin*, consumption myth, cyber pilgrimage

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Introduction: Growth and Accelerated Expansion of Cyberspace

The changing scenery of daily life due to the penetration of the Internet into our lives has become a common feature in modern society. Especially in Korean society, cyberspace has come to define a new condition of life at an amazingly rapid speed and is increasing its influence at a dramatic pace. The Internet first appeared in Korea in 1982 and was available to the public from 1994, but it became widespread among average citizens in 1999. In the mere several years since its introduction, it is spreading at an unprecedented speed and increasing its influence ever more rapidly.

What are the reasons for such a dramatic expansion of cyberspace in Korea? Government ministries’ obsession with the Internet plays a role in fostering the conditions for the expansion of cyberspace. The Korean government has spared no expense to make Internet service available in “more places” at a “higher speed” by pushing “informatization model complex” projects. For example, in 2006, the government provided super-speed Internet service to rural villages with 30 to 49 households in each, or a total of 50,000 households, making it available to virtually every village in the nation. More recently, with the introduction of broadband LAN, which is 50 to 100 times faster than the ADSL networks, broadband Internet use has shown a rapid increase in urban areas.¹

Yet the growth and accelerated expansion of cyberspace in Korean society cannot be fully explained by the establishment of a technological infrastructure and the active role played by the government.² We need to pay attention not just to the technical aspect of the Internet but also the dramatic rise of users and connection time. The number of Internet users aged six or older was estimated at 33

1. Choe (2006, 12-13).

2. Noting the problems of the conventional technology-deterministic explanation, Seo I-jong also argues that social factors underlying the increase of Internet users and the growth of Internet community along with the establishment of the technological foundation of the Internet after the mid-1990s must be explained. See Seo (2002, 46).

million in December 2005, which is a 250% increase from 9.4 million in 1999.³ Among the total population, 72.8% used the Internet in 2005, 50.4% up from 22.4% in 1999.⁴ According to a survey conducted in 2006, people in the 9 to 39 year age bracket who used the Internet at least once within a month's time from the survey period spent an average of 1.9 hours on the Internet on weekdays and 2.2 hours on weekends or holidays.⁵ Among people who used the Internet, 55.3% spent ten hours or more on the Internet.⁶ All this said, one may wonder what is happening inside and outside of cyberspace to cause so many Koreans to become voluntarily hooked, making them some of the most fervent Internet users in the world.

This paper reviews various phenomena arising from the rapid diffusion of the Internet in Korean society since the late 1990s, with the view that some aspects of Korean Internet culture can be said to be "religious." Here, I approach the religious nature of Internet culture in two dimensions. Firstly, I regard Koreans' ardent immersion in the Internet itself as a religious phenomenon. To background this, I argue in Section 2 that Korean society is facing multiple risks, and modern Koreans experiencing excessive anxiety due to the stress of complex risks seek relief by connecting to cyberspace as an alternative form of reality.

Secondly, I examine what might be regarded as religious phe-

3. Meanwhile, according to statistics on information and communications equipment supply, about 750,000 personal desktop computers were manufactured and shipped for each quarter of 2006, with a total sale of 3 million computers for the year. Household computer ownership in Korea was 79.4% in the first half of 2006.

4. The International Telecommunication Union announced at the 2005 World Summit on The Information Society that Korea ranked No. 1 in the world on the digital opportunity index (DOI). The DOI is a composite index of various indicators, including Internet availability, the ratio of communications cost to income, and Internet use. Taking into account population size, economic growth level, and other factors, Korea has a high rate of Internet use. NIDA (2006, 80).

5. KADO (2006, 23).

6. Eighty-seven percent of users reported that they used the Internet for e-mail, chatting, and searching for information, while 78.7% did so for leisure and 48.2% for homepages or blogs. NIDA (2006, 87-89).

nomena among the events taking place in Korean cyberspace today. For this, I focus on some notable features of Korean cyberspace in Section 3. Of special note is the spread of the myth that one can become a different person and enjoy a better life through online consumption, and the formation of a new consumer culture of impulse shopping, which is symbolized by the excuse that "the god made me do it." I also examine how the "myth of another reality" in cyberspace generates inner power through two dimensions of online rituals. I believe that analyzing the religious character of Korean Internet culture, which is spreading rapidly, along three axes—its background, myth, and rituals—will enable us to reflect on its present state.

Salvation through Connection

Korean Society at Risk and Heightened Anxiety

To explain the Internet fad in Korean society, we need to examine the basis for the social enthusiasm that propelled the explosive expansion of cyberspace by reviewing notable changes between the late 1990s and early 2000s, which was a period of rapid growth in Internet use. For this, I direct my attention to the fact that Korean society became an all-around risk society in the mid to late 1990s, and people experienced a heightened level of risks and felt a great deal of anxiety as a result. A lot of it might be attributed to the outbreaks of large-scale disasters and the economic crisis.

The 1990s were studded with various large-scale incidents, including the phenol pollution of the Nakdonggang river (April 1992), the collapse of the newly built Haengju bridge in Seoul (July 1992), a plane crash at Mokpo Airport (July 1993), a shipwreck in the West Sea (October 1993), the collapse of the Seongsu Bridge in Seoul (October 1994), a cruise ship fire in Chungjuho lake (October 1994), LPG explosions in Ahyeon-dong, Seoul (December 1994), destruction of a subway construction site in Daegu (April 1995), the

collapse of the Samping Department Store in Seoul (June 1995), a Korean Air flight crash in Guam (August 1997), collapse of a subway transfer station construction site in Seoul (May 1998), fire in a youth retreat center in Hwaseong (June 1999), fire in an underground bar in Incheon (October 1999), and the collapse of a subway station construction site in Namsan-dong, Daegu (January 2000).⁷ Most of those accidents were viewed as preventable and people charged the government to take appropriate safety measures. The government set up plausible institutional safety apparatuses and measures each time an accident occurred, but disasters kept breaking out in places no one could anticipate. Through the experience of these recurring large-scale disasters in which anti-accident measures were relatively well in place, such as in the Daegu subway fire (Feb 2003),⁸ Koreans felt the lurking dangers of disaster in their everyday lives and generally distrusted the actions taken by the government and experts.

Meanwhile, during the economic crisis of 1997, a sense of systemic social danger, as well as the large-scale fiascos resulting from building collapses, emerged as a major issue in Korean society. Mass layoffs and a steep 7% rate of unemployment in the aftermath of the economic crisis caused serious psychological panic in many people who lost jobs, pushing them into self-destructive or escapist behavior. This, in turn, produced family problems and community disintegration.⁹ Moreover, even people who did not feel the brunt of the mass layoffs directly felt that no one living in Korea could be exempt from the lurking danger of unemployment. The mass layoffs experienced by the economic crisis made people fear joblessness as a con-

7. Rho (2004, 212).

8. The Daegu subway fire sent shockwaves through Korean society, as 192 people lost their lives and 140 were injured in just 10 minutes in an urban transportation system that people used everyday. This large-scale disaster took place despite the fact that a comprehensive management scheme for accident prevention, containment, and recovery was in place with the enactment of the Special Law on the Safety Management of Facilities and the Disaster Containment Law and regulations for its implementation following the collapse of the Seongsu Bridge and Samping Department Store.

9. See Seong (1988).

stant risk factor lurking in daily life. The fear of losing one's job, the means of a livelihood, or of being unable to find one, is directly linked to the anxiety about individual and family survival. Therefore, the economic insecurity felt by many after the economic crisis was rather an existential, personal anxiety, compared to the feelings of danger people experienced regarding the sudden, massive disasters.

Amid the prevailing risks in daily life and excessive anxiety thereof, violent crimes are on the rise in Korea. A notable feature of recent crimes is the increase in rape and indiscriminate murder of people without a particular motive.¹⁰ The increase in indiscriminate crime against complete strangers is reflective of a social condition that is charged with economic insecurity, feelings of loss, and anger. The increase in crimes committed against the public amplifies the fear that one could be the target of crimes anytime, anywhere. The vicious circle continues as fears stemming from large-scale accidents produce indiscriminate crimes, which in turn amplify the anxiety that anyone could be victimized at a moment's notice.

Entering the 2000s, ever more diverse risks generated fears among Koreans. New risks from the acceleration of globalization and informatization, pollution-related hazards, and the danger of terrorism—the September 11 incident confirmed that terrorism is not an imaginary thing but can be quite real—are giving way to deeper risks, and societal responses are turning increasingly more sensitive.¹¹ Modern Koreans face diverse social risks in addition to personal worries about their health and livelihood; moreover, they are not free from macro-level risks such as global dangers and natural disasters. All these facts force them to live in a state of worry.

On top of this, experts in various fields ceaselessly produce knowledge about risks, with the mass media fervently transmitting

10. Crimes more than doubled between 1981 and 2003, rising from 362,042 to 857,488 cases. Of special note is that the five major crimes of violence (murder, rape, robbery, theft, physical assault) increased by more than 100,000 in just three years from 1997 and 2000. Social Development Research Institute (2005, 73).

11. Social Development Research Institute (2005, 83).

these messages across the airwaves. The general public is constantly surrounded by numerous images and words that keep them alert to such risks.¹² These days Koreans are not optimistic about their future, either. They think that risks have increased over time and will increase in the future as well.¹³

Like this, Korea became a full-scale, complex risk society since the mid-1990s. Koreans in general feel a very heavy psychological burden and often suffer from various anxieties to the extent that some find it hard to bear. When people constantly worry about risks that could strike at anytime, they find it hard to go on with life.¹⁴ In fact, according to statistics and research findings on suicide in Korea, the number of suicides has increased rapidly since the 1990s. The rise in the suicide rate reflects the degeneration of the quality of life when measured by any objective or subjective standard.¹⁵ It is noteworthy that suicide is a major cause of death among young people. Suicide has been the leading cause of death among people in their twenties and for those in their thirties since 2003. For teens, suicide has been the second leading cause of death since 2003.¹⁶ Korea has one of the highest suicide rates in the world, which may be connected to the increased anxieties and a sense of loss apparent in Korean society, especially regarding various risks such as loss of livelihood.

In a high-risk society, some people give up on life out of an enormous sense of anxiety and make the extreme choice to end their

12. Joffe (2002, 21).

13. Refer to the findings of a study on projecting change in the risk structure in five-year intervals from 1995 to 2015. Social Development Research Institute (2005, 73).

14. Joffe (2002, 213).

15. Social Development Research Institute (2005, 69). Especially interesting is that the suicide rate is closely related to economic instability. In 1998, right after the economic crisis in 1997, 19.9 people out of 100,000 died by suicide, and the number rose to 24 in 2003 and 25.2 in 2004. According to Eun, no relationship was found between the suicide rate and economic indicators until 1997, but from 1998 a strong relationship was observed for suicide and income distribution. By age group, this relationship was observed in all people except for those in the 10-19.

16. Social Development Research Institute (2005, 96-97).

lives, while many others search for a psychological defense mechanism to relieve the anxiety.¹⁷ The Internet serves as an effective form of anxiety relief for Koreans. A close look into the source of anxiety from the late 1990s may help us find a connection between the societal change into a high-risk society and amplification of anxiety thereof and the rapid expansion of cyberspace as a venue for psychological defense.

As a psychological defense mechanism or relief from anxiety, many seek escape from a dangerous reality to “another reality,” or “another world.” Cyberspace provides a very attractive environment

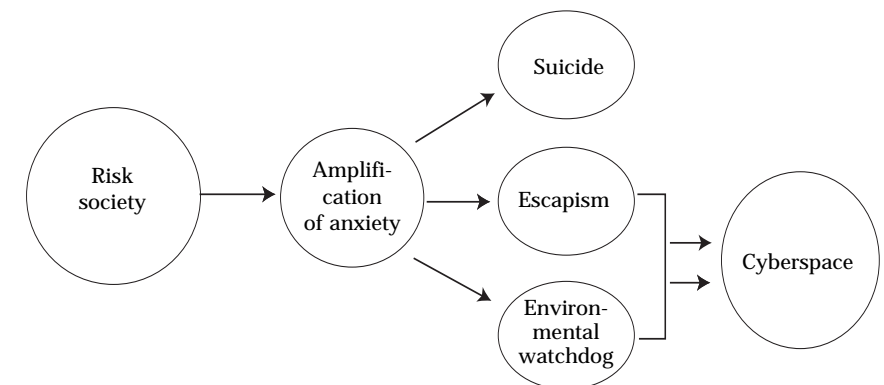


Fig. 1. The Risk Society and the Operation of Psychological Defense Mechanisms

17. Analyzing how people relieve anxiety and go on with their lives in risk society with focus on people's reaction to AIDS, Helene Joffe argues that individual shocks caused by popular risks make them take the path of defensive symbols. People have a tendency to maintain psychological stability by transferring the risks to the Other and feeling their position of being safe. When they are faced with risks, people create symbols in order to protect a positive identity of their groups. In Korea, however, I think that the facets of risks are too complex to be relieved by transferring them to a small number of Others. Joffe (2002, 29, 70).

in which this psychological defense mechanism can operate. Also, people may try to keep up with rapid changes in order to offset the fear of falling behind in a rapidly changing world. Unable to trust experts or the government, they may find the Internet useful as an environmental watchdog with ample available information. The well-developed ICT infrastructure in Korea encourages this. With the advent of Korea as a high-risk society in the late 1990s and the sudden peak in anxiety, cyberspace has become a very appealing and proper place for resorting to psychological defense mechanisms to relieve or reduce anxiety. I will examine this in greater detail in the next section.

An Alternative World: The Appeal of Cyberspace

By clicking on a mouse in front of a monitor screen, we “navigate” an immense sea of information. Strictly speaking, however, our bodies cannot join in the navigation. With the body fixed in front of a monitor, we slip into a cyberspace that unfolds before our eyes. Navigating through cyberspace, we forget about our bodies, the real, physical world where the body resides. The temptation to escape the body and the exhausting world of reality is probably the foremost attraction drawing people into cyberspace, arousing a myriad of imaginings on and around it.

The desire for an alternative reality, which has existed throughout human history, is often expressed through the name of religion. In Korea, the aspiration to escape from reality is reinforced even further with the rapid increase in risks, and technological infrastructure and policy directives have provided a “national” opportunity to find on the Internet a religious desire in search of another reality. Cyberspace appears as a kind of utopia where people can “transcend” their bodies and the burdens of reality. For this reason, as reality turns gloomier, more people become addicted to cyberspace (e.g., online games).¹⁸ Cyberspace provides them with a shelter from the harsh-

18. According to a report released in 2002, about 2% of Korean students were serious-

ness of reality and a kind of salvation. Weary of the real world, modern people create a new reality—a new “I,” not the given “I”—in cyberspace.

What many people experience today by connecting to cyberspace may be explained as a kind of “liminoid” experience, to borrow Victor Turner’s term. Turner applies van Gennep’s notion of the three stages of an individual’s rites of passage (separation, transition, and reincorporation) to social rites. Paying special attention to the middle stage, transition, in which the actors of rites go through a period and domain of ambiguity, he calls this anti-structural character in the second stage liminality. In the transition stage, the norms, order and status of the existing society are temporarily nullified. According to him, in traditional society, the stage of liminality—in which human cognition, affect, volition, and creativity are liberated from the constraints of common rules and order that maintains society—is experienced through social rituals that are collective and coercive in nature. In a complex modern society, which emphasizes individual choice, people have liminoid experiences individually in the domain of leisure, such as found in the watching of movies and television. Liminoid is more individualistic, more selective, and more play-oriented, compared to traditional liminality. While Turner cites movie watching as an example of a liminoid experience,¹⁹ these days people experience a temporary halt of the social customs, status, and norms that regulate individuals in their daily lives, that is, a liminoid state, by connecting to cyberspace

It may be that, nowadays in Korea, many people log on to the Internet when they feel a sense of emptiness without even being conscious of it, and gain a sense of comfort by doing so. Surfing websites for long hours, they find it more and more difficult to turn off the

ly addicted to the Internet, while 47% were in the early stage of addiction, i.e., in danger of addiction. Students who were more addicted tended to be more depressed, more impulsive, and had lower self-esteem, less parental guidance, and lower satisfaction in school life than their peers who were less addicted. Nam (2002, 200-203).

19. Turner (1996, 33-99).

computer and return to their normal life, and they experience a decrease in work efficiency. When they cannot connect to the Internet, they feel restless and agitated, which are symptoms of withdrawal. If this continues, people can even develop psychopathologic characteristics such as obsession, impulsive behavior, depression, and low self-esteem.²⁰ They gain a sense of satisfaction, fun and excitement from cyberspace, which is something they cannot achieve in the gloomy space of the real.

According to the 2006 Internet addiction survey conducted by Korea Agency for Digital Opportunity and Promotion (KADO) under the auspice of the Ministry of Information and Communication, 14% of youngsters and 8.5% of adults were found to be "at risk" for Internet addiction. Internet addiction refers to the state of having difficulty maintaining daily life due to withdrawal from Internet use. Korean Internet addicts are reported to be doubled that of the number in the United States.²¹ The main uses of the Internet (multiple answers were allowed) were searching for information (79.5%), playing games (43.9%), e-mail (33.9%), Internet shopping (24.1%), and messenger/chatting (23.3%).²² Appropriately 90% of general users and 84.8% of high-risk users reported playing online games.²³ And 42.5% of all online game players and 47.7% of young online game players reported that they felt an urge to play these games in the real world. Meanwhile, 42.5% of all online game players and 47.2% of young online game players responded that they felt like they belonged to the game world.²⁴ In particular, those who experience various forms of anxiety and stress are likely to become addicted to the Internet by playing online games:

The number of college students suffering from mental disorders

20. Kim (2001, 259-261).

21. "Digital Symptoms: Addicts Log on 24 Hours, Ever Faster." *Munhwa Ilbo*, April 7, 2007.

22. KADO (2006, 13).

23. KADO (2006, 18).

24. KADO (2006, 36).

such as depression and fantasies is rising rapidly due to difficulties in finding jobs, insecure futures, and stress from intense competition. . . . Yi, who is 21 years old, graduated from a high school in Daegu and currently attends a private university in Seoul. He is undergoing psychotherapy and medical treatment in a clinic for manic-depression. He told his doctor about his mental suffering, saying "In high school, I thought I was the best. But coming to Seoul, I realized that my English was bad and I felt like a 'worm.'" He was unable to make friends or develop relationships and became addicted to computer games like StarCraft. Once, he played games for five days straight without even bothering to get up and wash his face.²⁵

It is quite common to find people like Yi who are unable to deal with their enormous fears about the actual world and escape to the cyberspace only to find they cannot get out of it. Feeding on this, Internet cafes are everywhere, and online games have proliferated in large quantities.

However, Internet addiction are not just confined to online games, but takes many forms depending on the user, such as addiction to chatting, shopping, gambling, etc.²⁶ Many new words that have been coined to refer to excessive Internet use, such as "blogging" (*bloggeu jil*), "visiting Cyworld pages" (*ssaijil*), and "invalids" (*pyein*),²⁷ do

25. "Difficulty in landing a job . . . insecure future . . . the number of collegians suffering from mental disorder rises to a dangerous level." *Chosun Ilbo*, April 19, 2007.

26. There are some newly coined words to refer to relatively light Internet addiction. For instance, "ego-surfing" means preoccupation with searching on the Internet for information on one's own name, pseudonym, or screen name; "cyberchondria" refers to making incorrect self-diagnoses based on often erroneous medical information available on the Internet; "photolurking" is flicking through photo albums posted on blogs of other people whom one has never met; and "wikipediholism" denotes an excessive devotion to Wikipedia, an online collaborative encyclopedia. See Choe (2006, 52).

27. Although the Korean word *pyein* originally refers to disabled people or invalids, who have become so as a result of illness or poor lifestyle, it has been used widely in the context of cyberspace to refer to netizens who become addicted to a specific webpage.

not just refer to a small number of people, but are widely circulated in everyday life. In modern Korean society where daily life is steeped with risk, people escape to cyberspace to keep a safe distance.

What should be noted here is that in a risk society where violent crimes are committed indiscriminately against unspecified people, people tend to avoid face-to-face contact and communication with strangers because of this implicit fear.²⁸ While being reluctant to engage in direct contact and communication with strangers, they feel isolated within fragmented social relations and individualistic modern society and develop a need for a community to cope with loneliness.

Robert Nisbet argues that, in modern society, the quest for community springs from human needs, i.e. the need for membership, status, and continuity.²⁹ To modern Koreans who feel the need for communication and a sense of community while being fearful of direct face-to-face contact, cyberspace provides an attractive environment that enables communication without face-to-face confrontation. With the appearance of the Internet, the social catchword has changed from chatting to games to addiction to the dissemination of antisocial information, and finally to the cyber community. This is a manifestation of users' desire to find meaning in cyberspace as Internet use becomes a lifestyle.³⁰

Cyberspace communities share some characteristics of off-line

28. Even when people see someone doing something improper in public, they would rather take a picture on their mobile phone-camera and post it on the cyberspace later than speak to the person directly on the spot. This is what happened in the incidents of the "bean paste woman" and the "dog poop girl." There was another incident, referred to as the "Cheolsama incident," in which a student asked another student who was making noise in the Seoul National University library to be quiet and was assaulted instead. These incidents had the unintended effect of spreading anxiety about direct communication among people.

29. Nisbet (1969, 73); quoted from Lee (2001, 125).

30. According to a survey conducted in 2003, 97.9% of Korean youth use a computer and 99.1% of computer users use the Internet. Among Internet users, 89.1% are members of at least one cyber community and log on to cyber communities 7.2 times per week on average. These figures are expected to be even higher for 2004. Hong and Baek (2001, 75, 80).

communities in physical space, such as "continued and frequent interaction, shared norms, values and rituals, a fixed boundary, and a collective identity"³¹ while not requiring face-to-face contact, official membership, or a shared physical location. Of course, there are different types of cyber communities, ranging from completely open to closed. How communal they are and which form they take differ depending on the openness of cyber communities. However, members of cyber communities recognize the unique characteristics of their communities based on personal experiences, create "their own" arena, and use symbols to maintain their territory through slang, membership requirements, restricted access to bulletin boards, etc., in order to create a symbolic boundary for the community.³² That Koreans seek communication and community in various forms (e.g., cafes and clubs) in cyberspace reflects both their anxiety about having interpersonal relations in the real world, as well as their real desire for communication and community, despite their fear.

Even if it is not a form of cyber community activity, people visit certain websites regularly, read posted material, post their own opinions, post tips and helpful information for others, and chat with other visitors. By doing so, they may feel a temporary sense of belonging. A good example is the formation of relations through "mini-hompies"³³ and blogs, which are growing rapidly in cyberspace today. To use Turner's term, "communitas" is created in this setting. In cyberspace, many people transcend the identity given them by social norms and hierarchy and assume a new identity, communicating with other equal and unique cyber identities that are reconstructed and expressed. From this, they may feel a sense of homogeneity, solidarity, and intimacy, and experience a sense of community or communitas.

31. Jo (2003, 218).

32. Lee (2001, 130).

33. A smaller, pre-formatted version of a personal homepage, "mini-hompies" have gained explosive popularity among the younger generation in Korea. The prime example is Cyworld, which hosts "mini-hompies" on an online network that is expanded through members' personal relationships to other users.

Finally, people often connect to cyberspace, which is overflowing with information, to catch up with fast-moving changes happening in real life. Out of a sense of anxiety that they may be falling behind or losing the rat race if they do not keep pace with an ever-changing, unstable society, they make it a habit to connect to the Internet, collect new information, and keep a watchful eye on social change.

With the common use of laptop computers, wireless Internet and access to WiBro service (wireless portable Internet service that allows one to use broadband Internet while on the move), Korea's Internet technology has established a technical infrastructure in which people can easily get online no matter where they are.³⁴ This effectively enables people to experience cyberspace as a new life environment in an anxiety-ridden Korean society. Each time they log on, they have their own space waiting for them all the time where they can transcend the various constraints of the actual world (at least on the surface) and discover in cyberspace their own territory, one they cannot have in reality.

Religious Phenomena in Cyberspace

In Section 2, I discussed how modern Koreans afflicted with excessive anxiety in a complex risk society connect to cyberspace as a form of psychological defense. Then, what is happening in cyberspace? In this section, I am going to examine what may be seen as "religious" phenomena among the unique cultures being created online.

The "God of Impulse Shopping" and the Start of Temptation

The Net is changing our ideas of God. . . . It is . . . a place where faith can be shaped and defined by a collective spirit. Such a faith relies not on great external forces to change the world, but on what

34. It should not be overlooked that access to cyberspace is experienced differently depending on one's economic and political power in the real world.

ordinary people, working as one, can create on this World Wide Web that binds all of us, Christian and Jew, Muslim, and Buddhist, together. Interconnected, we may begin to find God in places we never imagined.³⁵

That is right! Koreans have found a new god in places we never imagined before—Internet shopping malls. They have also welcomed the appearance of a new god not just in shopping malls, but in places they had never imagined, such as personal blogs. People have given him a name, the "god of impulse shopping" (*jireumsin*), who comes to them in a softer and more powerful manner than any other god. This newly coined term is quite commonly used in cyberspace:

He can come to anyone. Once you're grabbed by him, you can hardly resist and you become addicted. Just like drinking and smoking, you go into withdrawal if you try to resist him. . . . His influence is increasing rapidly with the growth of home shopping channels and Internet shopping malls. Addicts are filled with regret when their credit card payments are due, but they don't change their spending and the cycle repeats itself the next month. The rich and poor are no different in this respect, and there emerge diverse variants.³⁶

As we can see in the passage above, the term *jireumsin* summarily represents the creation and amplification of the desire to spend impulsively, propelled by various images Koreans experience in cyberspace.³⁷ What is noteworthy is that it was not created by schol-

35. Ramo (1998, 186).

36. "Internet Shopping, God of Impulse Shopping Comes at Night." *Digital Times*, April 13, 2007.

37. According to a Samsungcard Co. survey asking its employees when god of impulse shopping comes to them (impulsive purchase) between April 24 and 30, 2006, over half of the respondents (54.0%) chose Internet shopping malls as their main channel of impulsive buying. When they were asked whether they regretted it after purchasing something on impulse, 44.5% responded positively. "Where 'God of Impulse Shopping' Comes, Internet Shopping Malls." *Data News*, May 17, 2006.

ars, but coined and put into wide use by Internet users or “netizens” in Korea.

The instant popularization and circulation of the term among Koreans shows that many share the experience of an uncontrollable, irresistible, impulsive desire to consume online. Both men and women, rich and poor, progressive and conservative, have experienced a strong impulse to buy things online, which can be difficult to control. By saying that the “god of impulse shopping has come to me,” Korean netizens try to rationalize or parody their overconsumption and impulse buying as something that cannot be helped because a god made them do it. Kang Jun-Man notes consumerist ideology under the control of the god of impulse shopping, saying that,



This is an image posted by a blogger who created it by slightly altering an image of Jesus Christ, shown in the comic, *Jisang choegang-ui namja ryu* (The Most Powerful Man on Earth, Ryu). See the entry on *jireumsin* (god of impulse shopping, edited on October 15, 2006) in Wikipedia (<http://ko.wikipedia.org/>).

Fig. 2. The Most Widely-Known Online Image of the *Jireumsin*

“The god of impulse shopping has been enthroned as the god of freedom.”³⁸

But why do Koreans feel this irresistible impulse to consume, as if possessed? To answer this question, let us return to the discussions offered in the previous section. There, I argued that Koreans connect to cyberspace to relieve anxiety in a risk society. Such “escapist” behavior and “environmental watchdog activities” are extended to spending in the quest for a “better life,” following the call of the god of impulse shopping after logging on. Cyber communities, in their myriad forms, work effectively to create, spread, and amplify desires, especially those related to consumption.

Investigating the significance of consumption in high-tech society, David Wright and Robert Snow argue that the experiences most widely shared by modern people are commercials.³⁹ In modern society, commercials bring together scattered individuals to form an enormous “consumption community.” Insinuating incessantly what is a “desirable life” and what should be done to achieve it, they implicitly promote the fantasy that individuals can improve themselves by spending money as well as the fear that their quality of life will degrade without new things.

As Korea enters the so-called era of individual media ownership, having the world’s highest ratio of high-speed Internet subscribers in the population, not only commercials but also individuals themselves play a commodity-promoting function, whether knowingly or not. In cyberspace, individuals are not just voracious consumers, but also enticers seducing other people to join their voracious spending, whether they are conscious of this or not. Individual blogs, mini homepages, cyber clubs and cafes overflow with images of delicious food, fashion items, travel photos, and state-of-the-art products, in the name of information sharing. The fabulous images people see on the blogs and mini homepages they often visit further arouse the desire to consume. In cyberspace, people tend to buy things they

38. Kang (2006, 163).

39. See Wright and Snow (1981).

would not have otherwise, rather than necessities, because of the images they see.

Naver cafes, Cyworld (a social networking site) clubs, Korean-style mini homepages, and blogs have become channels that sellers cannot ignore in their efforts to compel people to spend money. For example, Convex Korea, a producer of cooking gadgets such as small ovens, runs a cafe called Oven Enjoy,⁴⁰ where bloggers can exchange and share recipes using ovens produced by the company. The company gives away its products for free to popular bloggers who draw 5,000 or more visitors. This works on the assumption that when popular bloggers post images of food made in a Convex oven, the images will arouse the desire to purchase the oven amongst the tens of thousands of people coming to these blogs. Indeed, popular food bloggers receive queries and messages asking where they bought the items and ingredients, and companies give away products for free with this in mind. Restaurants compete to offer special events to gourmet Internet cafe members, or serve special free dishes to people who take pictures of the food they ordered, because they know that the images and notes posted online create and amplify consumer desires at the speed of light.⁴¹

A wide gamut of products, from electronic goods to fashion and accessories to tour packages, baby products to food displayed online incite and spread the desire to consume via fabricated images of a "wonderful life" and their chain effects. It is based on the myth that people can live better lives and improve themselves by buying things. In other words, in cyberspace the conventional meaning of a commodity evaporates, and instead, it is replaced by the desire to buy things for the hidden signification that one can become a perfect or better human being and live a better life through consumption.

40. <http://cafe.naver.com/delonghi.cafe>.

41. Keeping pace with this, the revenue of Internet shopping malls has grown huge with an estimated 13 trillion won in 2006. The year made a record as one that the online share of banking, stock trading, and shopping surpassed that of off-line in 10 years since the inception of e-commerce in 1996.

Simultaneously, people implicitly share the fear and anxiety that their quality of life might go down unless they consume. Also, they share the illusion that if they had more money, they, too, would lead an affluent, fabulous lives. In Korea, cyberspace and particularly cyber communities produce an environment that makes it easy to create, feed, and transmit the consumption myth that generates desire.

Why is it, then, so easy to create and drive desire in Korean cyberspace? It should be noted that while Korea is a relatively small country, the web operated in the Korean language is experienced as an even smaller world. In the cyber community of a small world, the images of ideal types (the ideal landscape, the ideal food, the ideal fashion, the ideal body, and even the ideal stroller) are transmitted at near-light speed, and this information produces new desires at the same speed. The desire that is created by clicking a mouse occurs equally for everyone in a cyberspace that is unbounded by space and time. The generation, promotion and movement of desires beyond the boundaries of regions, classes, and groups are done very easily in cyberspace. In fact, cyber communities formed around shared interests provide the backdrop for certain "fads" in Korean society, such as cosmetic surgery, dieting, and education fever. Wanting a life that is better (or different) than the mundane, people consume more information and more images on the one hand and click through more images more quickly so as not to lag behind the informatization of society on the other. The myth that a better life can be achieved through consumption is reinforced by connecting to cyberspace and performing various rituals within it.

Ritual of Cyberspace

It is through the ritual of cyberspace that the myth of cyberspace is transmitted and reinforced. Online ritual takes place in two dimensions. The first is ritualization through a physical body involved in the acts of repeated connection, and the second involves ritualization through cyclical repetition and formalized visitation in cyberspace. Yet the two dimensions are, in fact, inseparable and concurrent. They

share a common base, as the latter is grounded on the voluntary and repeated sacrifice of the body in the former.

Let us first examine the dimension of ritualization in repeated connection. When one says “cyberspace,” the image of “space” is associated with a certain reality that exists objectively or in separation from an organism. But in actuality, cyberspace is interconnected with the physical body sitting before a monitor and actual physical reality. It is not an independent space in which one can exist without the other. It is often thought of as a “mental” space devoid of the physical body, but in fact, it is a space that is created on the presupposition of a body sitting in front of a terminal and unfolds by repetitive, formalized and fixed acts of the body. This is the very foundation and limitation of cyberspace. In consequence, transcendence in cyberspace is not something that replaces or escapes reality entirely; rather, transcendence is possible because one can return to it.

The majority of Koreans log onto cyberspace habitually as part of their daily routines, performing monotonous eye and hand movements while staring at the terminal, typing on a keyboard, and clicking on a mouse. These gestures resemble a kind of ritualized action due to their repetitive nature. When something is made into a ritual, it gains power. In Korean society, cyberspace maintains and increases its attraction and vitality via habitual, ritualized acts. Ritualized acts generate new environments, which, in turn, produce ritualized beings. This cycle goes on and on.

What is noteworthy here is the sacrifice of the body, which is the premise of the ritual of logging on. While we are mesmerized by fantasies of transcending our bodies, the reality is that most people experience dry, red eyes, gaping jaws, and aching heads and shoulders from spending long hours in front of a computer monitor, navigating the Internet. But those physical pains must be ignored. The sacrifice of the body must be taken for granted in a cyberworld. While cyberspace is expanding at a dramatic speed, many Koreans are engaged in monotonous physical movements and experience constant bodily discomfort.⁴²

According to survey results on Internet addiction, Internet users

(both high-risk and otherwise) are aware that lengthy Internet use causes physical discomfort and pain.⁴³ Despite this, however, people continue to log on again and again, knowing that their bodies are being sacrificed.⁴⁴

Drifting restlessly through a scary, unstable world filled with sliding signifiers and signified and all sorts of alternatives but no real alternative to turn to, people perform the ritual of formalized, fixed, and repeated connections to cyberspace with the patterned clicking of a mouse and keyboard and a fixed posture. They absorb and internalize myths created in cyberspace, connecting and navigating within it. The ritual of cyber connection and the cyber myth have a parallel relationship. Connection is a necessary condition for the maintenance and promotion of the myth of cyberspace; the more often people connect and the more visits they make, the longer the myth is sustained.

Then, what kind of ritualization takes place in cyberspace after people log on, to the sacrifice of their bodies? First of all, we need to think of the primary function of cyberspace as an arena for sharing information. Cyberspace is a vast sea of information. Moreover, it offers infinite possibilities for meeting other people. In a word, it is a chaos of information. This has powerful appeal to people who desire another reality.

However, humans cannot endure chaos, or a meaningless ocean

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42. Ironically, while the expansion of cyberspace is based on the sacrifice and pain of the body and thus, ignores the body, the image of a healthy body has a strong appeal in the cyberspace, which is in part due to the characteristic feature of Internet culture which emphasizes the visual through recreated images.
43. Asked about the negative impacts of Internet use, 83.9% of high-risk users, 79.9% of implicit-risk users, and 85.7% of ordinary users reported physical anomaly such as lack of sleep and lowered vision as the most serious aftereffect of Internet use. KADO (2006, 18-19).
44. Internet connection has the nature of sacrificial ritual in which one dedicates one's body as an offering to enter into the cyberspace. The character of sacrificial ritual is most evident in an extreme form of indulgence such as online games. In 2005, seven online gamers died from blood clots or a heart attack in Korea. As the statistics show, deaths from playing online games are not uncommon, which involves an extreme sacrifice of the body for over-indulgence in the cyberspace.

of information. Because people cannot live without attaching meanings, they try to find meaning in encounters and transform passing moments into meaningful events. Being meaning-seeking organisms, we show a (consciously or unconsciously) familiar tendency—in a form—to build order in chaos and turn it into something meaningful in cyberspace as well.

An unknown space unfolds before us. As time passes, we manage to learn the landmarks and paths that link them. At last, the strange city and the unknown space become familiar places. The “abstract space” which had no meaning other than being strange becomes a “concrete place” full of meanings.⁴⁵

Yi-fu Tuan asserts that a space becomes a place as we come to know the space better and give meaning to it. Space is open and free but threatening, while place is safe and stable.⁴⁶ According to him, even if people are thrown into an unfamiliar space, they find (invent) a meaningful place within it as time passes and come to understand it as a familiar place full of meaning, i.e., a sense of place.

In cyberspace, too, people try to invent a familiar “place” in a strange “space.” An attempt to provide order to space begins with selecting specific sites, which is often represented by “favorite sites,” and is reinforced through ritualistic visits to those sites.

Repeated, discriminate visits to specific websites designated as “favorites” can be viewed as a kind of ritual behavior. With repeated visits to and interest in a specific site, it takes on meaning. People exhibiting symptoms of cyber addiction feel agitated if they do not visit a specific site several times a day. By frequently visiting those sites, they recognize new, minor changes to those sites and feel a sense of familiarity and intimacy.

When favorite sites accumulate and are made into a list, people make daily “pilgrimages” by visiting those sites each time they log

45. Tuan (1995, 318).

46. Tuan (1995, 19).

on. Of course, what I call a pilgrimage does not match Victor Turner's definition of the term. According to Turner, a pilgrimage is a journey to a center “over there.” According to him, a pilgrimage entails moving from a usual, “familiar” place to a holy, uncommon, often miraculous, and “distant place.”⁴⁷ Laying out the basic structure of the pilgrimage wherein one leaves one's usual world, passes through unfamiliar places to which one does not belong, and finally reaches a certain meaningful place and its resultant effect on the pilgrim who acquires a transformed identity upon returning from the experience, Turner's concept of the pilgrimage helps us understand the process of signification and visitation to certain sites on cyberspace.⁴⁸ The more time one spends in cyberspace, the more familiar places and the longer list of favorite sites one has.⁴⁹ Cyberspace becomes meaningful through ritualistic visits. Logging on, one feels that cyberspace is one's own territory—not extant in the real world—leading to the strong temptation to log on again the next time. The cyber pilgrimage functions as a mechanism that provides meaning—

47. Unlike religious pilgrimage, cyber pilgrimage is characterized by individualization because individuals find different places (homepages and websites) to be meaningful. However, conventional pilgrimage and cyber pilgrimage have a commonality in the sense that one attaches meaning to an unfamiliar space based on one's familiar place, whether it is concerned with moving a body or clicking a mouse.

48. Cyber pilgrimage shares some characteristics of conventional pilgrimage, as it is voluntary, devotional, play-oriented, anti-structural, and it reinforces individual autonomy and creates *communitas*. For the basic features of pilgrimage, see Turner and Turner (1978, 34-39).

49. In addition to making pilgrimage in which they attach meaning to certain sites and visit them regularly after establishing familiarity and order in cyberspace, they take a step further and create meaningful places of their own. Mini homepages and blogs are in explosive growth among youngsters these days. Companies are putting out diverse contents to let them have a sense of place on cyberspace. Notably, they offer various items to decorate and make access easy and systems which facilitate visiting other people's sites. Membership blogs come with a special system to manage meaningful sites as “neighbors” and mini homepages allow easy access to sites registered as kin interest. Mini homepage members of Cyworld call this “pilgrimage to kins.” Cyworld mini homepages and membership blogs are company-provided personal homepages having heightened safety devices, including real name subscription.

i.e. power—to cyberspace itself.

Thus, the cyber pilgrimage plays a key role in creating, promoting, and transmitting the desire to consume and in expanding the cyber myth by leaving people defenselessly exposed to images of goods posted on the sites they visit repeatedly. Not only Internet shopping malls, but also individuals who run their own blogs and mini homepages make a point of updating images that stimulate the desire to consume, creating “holy places” that draw ever more “pilgrims.”

Conclusion

Today, Korean society is changing rapidly, with the center of that change being cyberspace that is supported by technological development. This paper began with the questions of why cyberspace has expanded at such dramatic speed among Koreans and what is happening in cyberspace. The enthusiasm for cyberspace, which first appeared in Korea in the second half of the 1990s and has been making rapid growth since then, demonstrates not only Korea’s amazing technological basis for widespread Internet use but also Koreans’ strong desire to function within cyberspace. Indeed, a technological infrastructure does not mean much without people who are drawn into it and use it with enthusiasm.

There are certain facets that are deemed “religious” as to why Koreans desire to connect to cyberspace and what happens after logging on. Drawing attention to this aspect, this paper examined the connection between the Internet fad and change in Korean society and the characteristic features occurring in cyberspace, focusing on cyber myths and cyber ritual.

Since Korea became a risk society in the mid to late 1990s, many Koreans have been drawn to cyberspace in search of a psychological defense mechanism to reduce or relieve anxiety. Of course, since the appearance of cyberspace, it is quite common for people around the world to be enticed by the chance to enter another reality. In Korea,

with the level of anxiety heightening from the mid to late 1990s, the desire for another reality increased, and government policy promoting the technological infrastructure combined to create an opportunity to release such “religious” desire. In this sense, the Korean experience may perhaps be seen as a preview of what may happen in any Internet-using country in the world. The correlations between anxiety in a risk society and Internet connections, which I dealt with in just one section in this paper, should be followed up in subsequent research.

Although cyberspace seems to be a safe world that is different from the physical one, people make pilgrimages to various sites repeatedly and slip into the myth of consumption that they can have a better life by buying things. Koreans experience an amplified desire for consumption, which they jokingly call the “god of impulse shopping.” Swept up in the Internet fad, people sacrifice their bodies instead of transcending them, being habitually enticed to enter cyberspace. Since connecting to the Internet is now a ritual for the majority of Koreans, follow-up studies should also be conducted on the influence of this body-oppressing experience on the society and culture.

Although I did not address it in this paper, Koreans simultaneously experience both a very broad and very narrow worlds nowadays. As diverse technological tools such as powerful search engines become available, they find cyberspace becoming narrower, which is ironic. People have the illusion that cyberspace is infinitely broad and free, unbounded by time and space, but in fact they have a fixed arena because of the language barrier. In this fixed zone, powerful search engines place cyberspace under light and encroach on the shadow of anonymity. Although people connect to cyberspace looking for a different world in a scary risk society, cyberspace overlaps with reality more and more—especially, in the aspect of privacy—and even exhibits a trend of “compressing” the real world via representations.

Korean Internet culture has recently begun to take the direction of mixing real identity and cyber identity, whether involuntarily or

not. Koreans have accumulated direct and indirect experiences as real identities, which used to be hidden in the anonymity of cyberspace, are bared under the microscope.⁵⁰ From these experiences, some netizens strive to protect their privacy and their real identities, while others tend to voluntarily match their real identities to their cyber identities. The latter trend is gaining force as large portal companies adopt Web 2.0 and foster a web environment that promotes participation and openness.⁵¹ We need to continue to pay attention to how much the current trend of emphasizing participation, openness, and communication will grow in the future and what will develop out of it.

50. The Seoul National University Cheolsama incident and the arrest of people who posted malicious opinions to the media report on Im Su-gyeong, a social activist, show that it is possible to match one's cyber identity with real identity through police or netizen investigation.

51. According to the results of the 2006 In-depth Survey on Internet Issues released by the National Internet Development Agency, 9 out of 10 netizens in Korea wanted user participation, which is the key of Web2.0 service. Choe (2007, 46).

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