

Cying for Me, Cying for Us: Relational Dialectics in a Korean Social Network Site

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This study employs a relational dialectics approach to gain insights into the nature of relational communication via Cyworld, a Korean social network site. Qualitative analysis of in-depth interview data from 49 users suggests that Cyworld users routinely negotiate multiple dialectical tensions that are created within the online world, transferred from face-to-face contexts, or imposed by interpersonal principles that relate to Korea's collectivistic culture. The interviewees experienced a new relational dialectic of interpersonal relations versus self-relation, analogous to Baxter and Montgomery's (1996) connection-autonomy contradiction. Their responses suggest that Cyworld's design features and functions encourage users to transcend the high-context communication of Korean culture by offering an alternative channel for elaborate and emotional communication, which fosters the reframing of relational issues offline. Cy-Ilchons (online buddies) virtually extend the Korean cultural concept of blood ties, called yons, in ways that intensify the openness-closedness contradiction at early stages of relationship formation.

doi:10.1111/j.1083-6101.2007.00397.x

Introduction

Participation in social network sites (SNSs) has grown rapidly in recent years and is a highly popular, global phenomenon. Sites such as MySpace and Facebook “allow individuals to present themselves, articulate their social networks, and establish or maintain connections with others” (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007, n.p.). Some of this new breed of online tools support public displays of mutual links among users, as well as profile sections that resemble blog-type interfaces in which the latest postings or photos appear on top; social network sites allow users to regularly

update their personal profiles (boyd & Heer, 2006). It has been 10 years since the first SNS, SixDegree.com, launched in 1997 (boyd & Ellison, this issue). Subsequent SNSs, such as LiveJournal, Friendster, LinkedIn, Tribe.net, MySpace, and Facebook, burgeoned in the U.S., and some of them grew popular worldwide. Meanwhile, new regional SNSs serving non-English populations—such as *Cyworld* in Korea, QQ in China, and Mixi in Japan—consolidated their domestic market shares.

Most empirical research on SNSs has focused on U.S.-based sites such as MySpace, Friendster, and Facebook; new research about SNSs that is non-U.S.-based is necessary to culturally balance understandings of the SNS phenomenon from a global perspective. This article, therefore, reports on a qualitative investigation of *Cyworld*, a SNS based in South Korea. *Cyworld* was launched in 1999 and reconfigured as a full-scale SNS in 2001, pre-dating many of the leading U.S.-based SNSs, including MySpace and Facebook. A recent article characterized *Cyworld* as “a relaxed hangout that stresses existing friendships” in comparison to MySpace, which was described as “a hip party where users vie for popularity and attention” (Woyke, 2006, n.p.). Although the absolute size of *Cyworld* membership (approximately 20 million users as of 2007) (Kim & Chang, 2007) is much smaller than that of MySpace, the social impact of *Cyworld* among South Korean users is considered to be greater than the social impact of MySpace among American users, because *Cyworld* serves nearly 50% of the South Korean population (Kim & Chang, 2002) and nearly 90% of those ages 24–29 (SK Communications [SKC], 2006).

Social network sites provide venues for communicating online with people who are already in one's offline social circles. This characteristic, especially noticeable in *Cyworld*, offers researchers fresh insights into computer-mediated communication (CMC). While scholarly interest in the interplay between online and offline social circles is not new, the advent of SNSs has altered the direction of the relational flux, so that SNSs now foster offline to online flow in ways that differ from the earlier online to offline flow that was observed in first-generation virtual communities and CMC interactions (Ellison et al., 2007).

Empirical evidence has repeatedly indicated that communication technologies are used to maintain pre-existing relationships (Hampton & Wellman, 2003), but most models have focused on relational dynamics within newly formed online dyads and groups (Walther & Parks, 2002). This research is exemplified by the Social Information Processing (SIP) model and hyperpersonal perspective (Walther, 1996) and Social Identity-Deindividuation Effects (SIDE) theory (Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 1998). These theories are typically applied to online relationships that are newly created. In one of the few studies that has recognized mixed modal relationships that burgeoned from offline relationships, Ellison et al. (2007) applied a social capital approach to an investigation of Facebook. We offer yet another research direction by employing Baxter and Montgomery's (1996) relational dialectics approach in order to understand the SNS-mediated relationships of South Korea's *Cyworld*.

Literature Review

Relational Ideals Versus Relational Dialectics

Baxter and Montgomery's (1996) dialectical approach to personal relationships emphasizes that relationships are ever-changing processes through which contradicting relational motivations clash and are managed by relational partners. Tensions are inherent in any relationship, and dialectics or contradictions are the natural state of relationships that fluctuate over time. The playing out of relational tensions defines the nature of relationships at any given point. Dialectical tensions are not what relational partners are supposed to resolve. Rather, the relational dialectics approach assumes no ideal end-state in relational management. Contradictions between opposing motivations are viewed as healthy signs rather than schizophrenic symptoms, since they bring about opportunities for dialogue between relational partners, and these contradictions themselves undergo constant change over time (Montgomery, 1993).

Baxter and Montgomery (1996) opposed the dominant research paradigm in the personal relationship literature as represented by such theories as Social Penetration, its parent theory Social Exchange, and Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT). These theories hold a relational ideals perspective, whereby all relationships develop toward intimacy and predictability, and individuals strive to achieve ideal goals by gradually increasing the breadth and depth of self-disclosure according to stages of relational development. Information exchange and relational intimacy are in a complementary spiral, so that as one increases, the other increases. At the outset, URT, in particular, was applied to the study of initial relationship formation and development at early stages of relational life, while subsequent research has applied URT to pre-existing relationships, such as romantic relationships (Parks & Adelman, 1983). According to URT, the chief motivating factor for communication or communicative action lies in reducing uncertainty about the relational partner. This URT-described motivation differs markedly from the motivation that is described in the relational dialectic perspective, where the main purpose of communication or communicative action is to manage oppositions within a given relationship (Baxter, 1988).

Relational Dialectics and Strategies

A 'dialectic' is defined as the simultaneous presence of two relational forces that are interdependent and mutually negating (Baxter, 1988). Among numerous pairs of oppositional forces that relational communication researchers have identified, the connection-autonomy dialectic is considered to be primary (Montgomery, 1993). Connection and autonomy are viewed as essential for individuals to construct their own identities, as well as to develop relationships. As Baxter (1988) wrote,

No relationship can exist by definition unless the parties sacrifice some individual autonomy. However, too much connection paradoxically destroys the relationship because the individual identities become lost. Simultaneously, an individual's autonomy can be conceptualized only in terms of separation

from others. But too much autonomy paradoxically destroys the individual's identity, because connections with others are the 'stuff' of which identity is made. (p. 259)

Baxter and Montgomery (1996) suggested two secondary dialectics in relationship development: the novelty-predictability dialectic and the openness-closedness dialectic. The novelty-predictability dialectic challenges the view held by URT researchers that interpersonal relationships develop when relational partners are able to predict and explain each other's behavior; rather, it acknowledges that excessive certainty often leads to relational deadening if the role of novelty is ignored (Baxter, 1988). The third dialectic posited by Baxter is openness-closedness. According to Social Penetration Theory, self-disclosure both increases intimacy between relational partners and makes partners vulnerable to each other due to the information revealed (Baxter, 1988). The intensity of experienced dialectics varies according to stages of relationship development. In romantic relationships, the openness-closedness dialectic tends to dominate during initial stages of relationship development, whereas, by contrast, romantic partners are more likely to report the connection-autonomy and predictability-novelty dialectics in later maintenance phases (Baxter, 1990).² Meanwhile, dialectical researchers have identified several other relational tensions, including affection-instrumentality, judgment-acceptance, and expressiveness-protectiveness (Altman, Vinsel, & Brown, 1981; Baxter, 1988; Rawlins, 1992).

Within the context of relationships, Baxter and Montgomery (1996) argued that partners cope with or adapt to contradictions, consciously and subconsciously, through the employment of three adaptation patterns or strategies: selection, separation, and integration. Selection refers to a strategy where individuals repeatedly select actions consistent with one polarity of the contradiction. Separation refers to one of the two polarities in a given contradiction that is selected alternately over time (called "cyclic alternation" or "cyclic oscillation") or to a scenario in which one polarity characterizes a certain domain or topic and the other characterizes another (called "segmentation"). Integration refers to the attempt to respond simultaneously to both polarities by neutralizing responses that favor neither polarity (called "moderation"), by utilizing ambiguous or indirect communication (called "disqualification"), or by redefining the contradiction so that the two polarities no longer appear to be opposing (called "reframing") (Montgomery, 1993). Cyclic alternation and segmentation are the two most prevalent strategies, with the former related to the connection-autonomy dialectic and the latter to the openness-closedness and the predictability-novelty dialects (Baxter, 1990).

In recent years, the relational ideals perspective has led to research on relational communication online. SIP, the hyperpersonal perspective, and SIDE all assume that relational closedness or intimacy is what communication partners pursue, yet these theoretical perspectives disagree about the role of bandwidth restrictions and anonymity in CMC channels and the role of individuating information in relational formation online (Yun, 2006). O'Sullivan's (2000) Impression Management model is

one of the few that has applied the dialectical approach to mediated communication, pointing out that users employ the ambiguity-clarity dialectic to achieve self-presentational goals. This dialectic is conceptually similar to the openness-closedness dialectic proposed by Baxter and Montgomery (1996), with the important distinction that O'Sullivan emphasized a continuum between discrete polarities rather than the polarities themselves. The ability to strategically use mediated and non-mediated channels is considered to be as important in the effective management of contradictions as is the ability to construct messages, while the constriction of mediated channels is perceived to be advantageous when users sense that the impression of themselves or their partners is being threatened.

In light of the above, we propose the following research question:

RQ1: What kinds of relational dialectics do *Cyworld* users experience, and what strategies do users employ to manage these dialectics?

Online Social Network Sites through Cultural Lenses

Markus and Kitayama (1991) proposed that the influence of culture on individuals' cognition, emotion, motivation, and communication is mediated by self-construal. Western individualistic cultures promote highly autonomous social practices and foster independent self-construal, in which the individual's uniqueness and separateness from social contexts are highly valued. As a result, the preferred communication styles of Western cultures are low context, in that meanings are conveyed in straightforward, direct, and explicit ways. By contrast, Eastern collectivist cultures emphasize "we-ness" and connectedness among in-group members, so that people with interdependent self-construal are perceived as functioning well (Hall, 1989). As a result, individuals in Eastern collectivist cultures tend to engage in highly context-dependent communication that is abstract, indirect, and implicit (Singlis & Brown, 1995).

Even though the validity of scales for measuring self-construal has been debated (Gudykunst, 2002; Levine et al., 2003), discussions about the construct of self-construal have opened the way to large cross-cultural research programs in communication. The concept of self-construal has been criticized as overly simplified (Levine et al., 2003) with similar concerns raised with regard to the individualistic-collectivist dichotomy (Triandis, 1989). As an alternative, researchers have suggested a culture-specific approach that attends to within-culture variations, such as how Korean collectivism differs from Chinese or Japanese collectivism (Gudykunst, 2002).

With regard to the specific collectivist culture of South Korea, one of the interpersonal principles that distinguishes the Korean culture is the concept of *yon* (Yum & Canary, 1994). The literal meaning of *yon* is a bond or tie between two people; it is used when Koreans describe a special bond or tie that is predestined by uncontrollable external forces. The concept of *yon* represents Koreans' passive attitudes toward relationship processes that occur as a relationship is formed,

maintained, and terminated—attitudes that are based on predeterminations that prevail, no matter what strategies or tactics individuals may employ to exert their own will (Yum & Canary, 1994).

Usually, relationships with significant others, such as a parent, spouse, sibling, and those who greatly influence one's life, are called "*yons*." At the societal level, the concept of *yon* provides Koreans with a way to describe meaningful ties that involve other non-intimate relationships based on kinship, regionalism, and school ties. Kinship ties protect solidarity among those who share the same family roots, while regional connections are based on the province where family roots originated, and school links are formed among people who graduated from the same high school or university. In the Korean culture, the various categories of *yon* are considered to be valuable resources to which individuals can turn in time of need.

What are the implications of the Korean interpersonal principle of *yon* with regard to the dialectical approach to SNSs? The principle of *yon* addresses issues for management of pre-existing relationships in ways that intensify the system of relational dialectics that already exists with regard to offline relationships in the Korean culture. In light of the above, our second research question is thus:

RQ2: To what degree and how are Korean cultural principles about interpersonal relationship realized in the use of *Cyworld*?

Methods

Research Site

The prefix "*cy*" in the term *Cyworld* has a double meaning: "cyber" in English and "relationship" in Korean. Even among Korea's non-*Cyworld* public, colloquial expressions such as *cying* and *cyholic* began to be widely used in 2004, when *Cyworld* approached a critical mass of 10 million accounts. Nearly 90% of 24-29 year old Koreans have accounts on *Cyworld* (SKC, 2006). *Cyworld* is reported to have more video uploads than YouTube and is second to iTunes in the number of songs sold (Ewers, 2006). Although *Cyworld* does not explicitly claim to be a place-based online community, its service cannot help but incorporate that element, since South Korea is a relatively small nation where the distance between any two locations is only a half-day trip.

Cyworld was created in 1999 as a personal information management system, a web-based PDA-like service that was later revitalized in 2001 as a full-blown social network site with the launch of its template-based homepage service, called *minihompy* (SKC, 2006). A *minihompy* (pronounced "mini-home-p," where "p" stands for "page") consists of SNS features such as "*ilchon padotagi*," links for surfing the *minihompies* of buddies, and "random *padotagi*," links for surfing the *minihompies* of strangers; self-presentational features such as a *miniroom* (virtual room), *minime* (an avatar), background music and *skin* (ready-made background images for *minihompies*); and several blogging features, including a photo gallery, guestbook, topical bulletin boards, and video clips.

Several technical and social configurations that distinguish *Cyworld* from other SNSs include an identity verification process, access through IM and mobile phone, a kinship metaphor for special cy-buddies, and for-purchase decorating items (Choi, 2006). Like other major portals in Korea, *Cyworld* requires identity verification as part of the registration procedure. The identify verification process requires listing the user's actual name along with the user's Korean identification number issued by the government to all Korean citizens. After a prospective user verifies his or her identity, an alias or made-up name may be chosen for *Cyworld*. As a result of the identity verification requirement, *Cyworld's* atmosphere differs markedly from that of the U.S.-based MySpace, where users input only a preferred username and email address. Since *Cyworld* membership is based on users' legal identities, the site's search functions are able to validate the name, date of birth, and gender of other users.

Additional services offered on *Cyworld* include the site's association with "NateOn," an instant messaging system, and its own moblogging system, called "Mobile *Cyworld*." *NateOn* is a sister company of *Cyworld* and has the nation's largest membership base, greater even than MSN Messenger in Korea. *Cyworld's* parent company, SK Telecom Co. Ltd, is the nation's dominant wireless services provider, with more than 50% market share. Working together, *NateOn* and SKT offer an alert function that notifies users when new posts have been uploaded to their or their special buddies' *minihompies*.

In *Cyworld*, special onsite buddies are called *ilchons*. In the Korean language and culture, where special attention is given to hierarchies of relationships, the term *ilchon* (1-*chon*) refers to the single unit of kinship that exists between parents and children, while 2-*chon* refers to the relationship between grandparents and children, and 3-*chon*, to the relationship between aunts/uncles and nephews/nieces. Husbands and wives have no *chon*. In everyday life, *chon* relationships are fixed familial links that cannot be altered. In *Cyworld*, in contrast, users are at liberty to create made-up *ilchon* relationships that occur when one user accepts an invitation sent by another user.

The *ilchon* kinship metaphor plays a significant role in promoting online social networking in Korea. This is facilitated by a special *Cyworld* function called "*ilchon* surfing," which allows users to participate in "*ilchon* tours" to visit all of their *ilchons'* *minihompies* and to leave courtesy messages in others' guestbooks. Another *ilchon*-related function is the privacy settings, whereby users can choose to disclose a posting to one *ilchon* or to the public-at-large, or they may choose to keep it completely private.

The commercial aspect of *Cyworld* includes an exchange system that uses a cyber-currency, called *dotori*, a Korean word that means "acorn" (USD \$0.10 per *dotori*). With *dotori*, users can buy decorations for their *minirooms* and *minimes*, such as a skin or background music; they can also send virtual gift cards to others. As of 2007, *Cyworld's* highly successful business model resulted in daily sales of USD \$300,000 (Kim & Chang, 2007).

Data Collection and Analysis

As Baxter and Montgomery (1996) argued, qualitative approaches are conducive to capturing the dialectical nature of relational communication. The present study, therefore, employs qualitative methods to make sense of *Cyworld* users' experiences. Based on the two general research questions derived from a review of relevant literature, we developed an interview protocol that included 24 open-ended questions on four topics: general usage patterns, *minihompy* perceptions and uses, meeting people through *minihompies*, and meanings of *ilchon* (see Appendix A). In protocol-guided, semi-structured interviews, all interviewees were asked the same questions, while they were also given ample opportunities to comment freely.

In contrast with quantitative methods that seek a representative sample, the sampling strategies employed in qualitative research strive for information richness (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). Sampling occurs in an iterative process that contributes to an emerging pattern of theoretical categories by sometimes picking similar cases to gain sensitivity to differences and by sometimes choosing different cases to magnify similarities, until saturation is reached (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Specifically, the current study employed typical case sampling (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). The majority of our sample was selected from average *Cyworld* users who updated their *minihompies* at least once a day, were on the site an average of four hours per week (National Internet Development Agency of Korea [NIDA], 2006), and/or were in their 20s or 30s (Kim & Chang, 2007).

The researchers collected a pool of prospective interview participants by asking undergraduate students enrolled in advanced communications courses to recruit candidate interviewees. The first wave of interviews was conducted in April 2006 with 13 participants. Based on preliminary analysis of the interview data, additional sampling was carried out, taking care to ensure that the mix of participants varied by key demographics in terms of gender, age, membership tenure, and current residential district. An additional 36 interviews were completed by November 2006.

The gender and age composition of the sample generally reflected the user population of *Cyworld*. Fifty-five percent of the participants were female, with over 90% in their twenties (53%) or thirties (38%). In terms of other demographics, 43% lived in Seoul, the capital of South Korea, and the rest resided in mid-sized cities. Eighty percent had been users for more than two years, and all had attained an educational level beyond some college (see Appendix B). Chat interviews were conducted with pre-arranged interview schedules, and each interview lasted between 90 and 150 minutes.

We chose chat interviews primarily for their relevance to the research context. This approach was chosen to encourage interviewees to share potentially embarrassing experiences with fewer concerns about apparent negative evaluation. Synchronicity embedded in the medium helped build rapport and stimulate interactions. Additionally, all *Cyworld* users interviewed for this study preferred to be interviewed online rather than via telephone or face-to-face. Interviews were conducted in Korean, and direct quotes used in this article were translated into English.

Data analysis followed iterative cycles that ranged from sorting, coding, and recoding the interview data (“organizing”) to identifying emerging themes and making theoretical linkages among coded data (“connecting”) to reviewing initial and subsequent analyses to search for alternative explanations to confirming/disconfirming evidence (“corroborating”) (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). All transcribed data were segmented by identifying phrases and sentences that stood out as potentially significant for answering the research questions. The thematic categories that developed as patterns emerged were catalogued into sub-themes. The authors exchanged critical dialogue and made joint decisions on every aspect of the data analysis.

Findings

Interpersonal Relations versus Self-Relation

I like *Cyworld* because it is where so many people flock together. I can always talk to someone I know whenever I want. Another favorite part is that I can upload my pictures with no limit. The *Photo Album* contains my dreams and my thoughts. It is dear to me. (User 2, Female, 19)

Minihompy is good when I want to keep in touch with acquaintances because it can be awkward to make an unexpected call or email them. I can just leave a short comment on their guestbook. And they can also do the same on my guestbook. But, I am a little concerned that strangers can also access my *minihompy*. My privacy is not fully protected. (User 7, Female, 21)

In my *minihompy*, I express personal thoughts and feelings that I couldn't offline. ... I am an introvert, so feel uneasy when expressing what I really think in person. It is a lot easier to be honest with others as well as myself in my *minihompy*. While *cying*, I discover my true self bit by bit. (User 39, Male, 30)

Cyworld users have dual motivations for *cying* (a colloquial expression for managing one's own and visiting others' *minihompies*): first, to maintain their social networks and, second, to reflect on themselves. These motivations parallel Baxter and Montgomery's (1996) connection-autonomy dialectics. A majority of the interviewees reported that *Cyworld's minihompies* were places where they satisfied a desire to be connected, so that interpersonal relations became their primary reason for managing *minihompies*. *Cyworld* records the number of times “Today's Visitors” access an individual's *Minihompy*; the number of visits implies the owner's popularity or how many people care about the owner. The number of visits sometimes influences an owner's mood—the higher the number, the better one feels—while lower numbers can lead to feelings of disappointment (User 32, User 36, User 2, User 5, User 7, User 8).

Although some participants used *Cyworld* as a venue to meet new people who shared similar interests (User 3, User 4, User 33, User 38), the majority reported that

the primary reason for *cying* was to maintain pre-existing offline relationships with relatives, friends, and colleagues. Sharing everyday events increased intimacy levels of relationships with family members by allowing participants to keep track of how other owners live their lives (User 2, User 7, User 25), discover new dimensions of friendship (User 1, User 4, User 20), and build casual relationships with colleagues away from the workplace (User 17, User 18, User 23, User 24, User 45). Shared experiences generated comfortable dialogue among those who were rarely able to meet in person (User 5, User 16, User 18, User 22, User 36, User 42).

Another important aspect of *minihompies* for participants was the development of self-relations. Self-relations refer to viewing and relating to oneself in the third person by objectifying one's own thoughts, feelings, and personal *minihompy* content.³ Self-relations begin with *minihompy* diary-keeping activities (User 8, User 22, User 28, User 23, User 32). Once uploaded, juxtaposing one's own posts with those of visitors creates an illusion that one's own posts came from another visitor. Technically, *minihompies* store personal memories piece-by-piece so that users are able to chronicle details of personally significant moments. Through the chronicling mechanism, *cying* allowed users to document their own inner thoughts, so that "time for *cying*" became "time for self-reflection." Participants often reported that what they were able to express in *minihompies* could not be said offline; *minihompies* offer freedom from distressing social contexts (User 36, User 39, User 47, User 26). Many participants reported pouring out personal thoughts and feelings in their *minihompies* (User 2, User 4, User 15, User 16, User 26), describing themselves in frank and straightforward ways (User 15, User 16, User 44), and elaborating on complicated and delicate matters in great detail (User 23, User 26, User 32).

After posting their own thoughts, participants said they were better able to sympathize with themselves from a third-person perspective and comfort their own hurt feelings (User 3, User 30, User 18); they also felt comfortable reflecting on their own possible wrongdoings (User 39). The individuals we interviewed spoke of design features that contributed to the development of self-relations, such as the self-directed use of self-presentational tools like the *miniroom*, *minime*, and *skin*. Some said they spent money to buy decorations, including music, for their *minihompies*. Time and money invested to make *minihompies* representative of the users themselves resulted in "another me" (User 6), "the mirror image of myself" (User 5), "my best friend" (User 26), and "my sweet home" (User 32, User 48).

The tension between interpersonal relations and self-relation was manifested in participant awareness of prospective visitors and concerns about privacy invasion. Interviewees acknowledged that some unintended visitors were able to access their *minihompies*; for that reason, owners cautiously selected what to upload, sometimes emphasizing potentially desirable and attractive aspects while downplaying less attractive aspects (User 3, User 4, User 7, User 47). The tension that they reported resembles Baxter and Montgomery's openness-closedness dialectic, by which dual strategies were used to resolve such contradictions. First, interviewees employed the segmentation strategy by using the Secret Folder function (User 3, User 5, User 11,

User 15, User 16, User 23, User 24, User 29), which allowed them to select content that they wanted to hide from visitors, including *ilchons*. Second, the participants opted to use vague words and phrases, leaving out background information and stating only fragmented ideas when revealing themselves at deep levels in open folders (User 5, User 18, User 25, User 26, User 29). In other words, the owners secured information in ways that unauthorized visitors could not decipher, thereby employing a strategy that Baxter and Montgomery called “integrative disqualification” (Montgomery, 1993, p. 211).

Strategic Management of Offline Relational Dialectics

Koreans, as members of a collectivist culture, prefer indirect ways of communication that involve an important communicative competence called *noonchi* or the ability to “read between the lines.” People with “*noonchi*” are sensitive to contextual cues and quickly understand how to convey information in any given situation. In ideal interactions, communication partners do not have to fully express their inner thoughts and feelings in explicit and detailed ways, because Koreans believe that sincere intention is eventually conveyed by “*e-sim-jeon-sim*,” a term that means “from one mind to another.” These cultural values have contributed to the rapid popularization of *minihompies*, which provide an alternative channel for exchanging elaborate and emotional communication, which is lacking in offline communication among Koreans. For example, participants often reported that *minihompies* served as their only channel to openly communicate their feelings in disputes with friends and lovers (User 3, User 4, User 23, User 45). Almost all the participants recalled episodes when they had been able to resolve relational crises through their *minihompies*.

I had a quarrel with my friend. We didn’t talk for a few days. I wrote in her *minihompy* my feelings and thoughts that I couldn’t do face-to-face, and she replied to me in my *minihompy*. We were able to resolve the conflict. (User 20, Female, 34)

It requires real courage for me to acknowledge my faults and to say ‘Sorry’ face-to-face or by phone. In my *minihompy*, I find it easier to do that. I have been able to save many relationships thanks to my *minihompy*. (User 4, Female, 21)

The participants perceived asynchronicity in their communication to be advantageous, in that it allowed them reviewability. Asynchronicity helped them to take another’s perspective (User 3), to articulate what they wanted to say through control over time (User 16), and to deliberate on issues at hand (User 2, User 3, User 4, User 16, User 25). As a result, they were able to explore subtle differences in meanings that sometimes played a key role in resolving relational conflicts (User 3, User 20, User 23).

When the word is out, it belongs to another. It is not always easy to articulate my thoughts in spoken words, and I often make mistakes in speaking. In writing, I can review and revise my words as many times as I want before they get to another person. That is the best part of *cyng*. (User 2, Female, 21)

As high-context communicators, Koreans hesitate to express positive emotions, such as how much they care for their family members, friends, and lovers, so that *minihompies* were particularly useful when users want to convey those emotions to relational partners (User 40, User 45). Various audio-visual functions in *Cyworld* appeared to encourage emotional communication. Users interviewed for this study made the most of background music to express their emotions, as well as to refresh themselves when exhausted (User 8, User 26). The participants said they installed an assortment of background music whenever they could afford to do so. The users willingly paid five “acorns” for one streaming piece of music, even though they could not download it (User 5, User 6, User 8). One male interviewee boasted that he had 80 music pieces (User 45). One female interviewee reported that her selection of background music depended on the tastes of visitors rather than on her own taste, so that, in some ways, she felt like a radio station disc jockey (User 7). Additionally, some participants liked to convey their emotions by the skin of their *minihompies* (five to ten acorns per skin) (User 3, User 5, User 6). Participants valued the photo feature, noting that images are worth a thousand words in terms of sharing memories and experiences; photos were considered helpful in resolving offline conflicts, especially by reminding owners of their happiest moments (User 2, User 3, User 7, User 29, User 32, User 33).

The main reason that participants said they employed audio-visual cues was to alert visitors to their own emotional nuances in ways that allowed visitors to know how to approach or respond to them. As a visitor, one female participant made decisions about whether to meet friends in person by checking out the mood of their friends’ *minihompies* (User 18). Other participants visited friends’ *minihompies* to see how they had interpreted earlier face-to-face interactions (User 11, User 13). In other words, the participants used *minihompies* to express their own moods or check others’ moods, just as they observe the facial expressions of others in offline communication. Personal photos, skins, and background music were also used by participants to animate textual communication and foster empathic understanding, thereby laying the groundwork for eventually resolving relational conflicts. Empathic understanding manifested itself in the sharing of joys and sorrows through messages of congratulations or comfort that visitors left on others’ *minihompies* (User 2, User 3, User 13, User 20, User 39, User 40).

From a dialectical perspective, elaborate and emotional communication through *minihompies* seemed to provide users with opportunities to reframe their communication and thereby transcend relational contradictions that had arisen in offline communication. The reframing strategy is actually rather complex, in that it requires a transformation of meaning such that the contrasting elements of a given contradiction cease to be regarded as opposites (Baxter, 1990). Elaborating one’s own position can be conducive to streamlining complex justifications in order to reframe relational issues and find common ground between parties. Emotional communication helps release relational contradictions by promoting perspective-taking. Although reframing is the most mature among the six strategies that Baxter and

Montgomery (1996) suggested, and the most positively associated with relational satisfaction, reframing often tends to be under-utilized in face-to-face communication (Baxter, 1990). Yet participants in this study indicated that they employed their *minihompies* rather extensively in order to reframe during conflict resolution.

Relational Dialectics in *Ilchon* Relationships

As mentioned earlier, *Cy-ilchon* metaphorically extends the Korean cultural concept of blood ties to virtual interpersonal relations. In “real” life, where people cannot choose to form or terminate kinship ties, individuals are required to accede to the requests of others, regardless of how annoying the individual relatives may be or how burdensome their requests are. In *Cyworld*, by contrast, users have the option to start and stop *Cy-ilchon* relationships at will. However, as long as those relationships exist, *Cy-ilchon* buddies are socially obligated to participate in mutually reciprocal relationships and meet their partners’ requests.

Interviews with our participants revealed that the relational dialectic that users experienced most in forming *ilchon* relationships was the openness-closedness contradiction. By granting others *ilchon* status, grantors opened their private worlds to grantees, acts that operated as cornerstones for developing meaningful interpersonal relations. Because openness creates vulnerabilities for self even in close relationships, individuals often desire privacy or information closedness from others to safeguard boundaries for self-protection. In *Cyworld*, when our interviewees faced such tensions, the first strategy they chose was selection. Those who said that they were sensitive to the literal meaning of *ilchon* tended to be guarded when receiving *ilchon* invitations, because special *ilchon* buddies were usually given access to all postings and photos in each others’ *minihompies* (User 2, User 30, User 46). In most cases, those participants refused invitations from strangers (User 38, User 46) or waited until they established reciprocal trust with *ilchon* candidates (User 32). Repeatedly, the more sensitive participants reported choosing to exercise safeguards to protect their privacy.

For less-sensitive participants, openness prevailed over closedness, and they did not report specific rules for forming *ilchon* relationships (User 10, User 26, User 31, User 38, User 45, User 48). Many of those participants granted *ilchon* status to anyone making a request, commenting that they knew from their own personal experience how painful rejection felt (User 10, User 43, User 45). While establishing *cy-ilchons* with nearly everyone who sent invitations or requests, those participants who favored openness chose to classify requests according to the nature of their offline relationships. Typical categories included family, work, and school or level of intimacy, such as just friends, close friends, and real friends (User 7, User 17). Based on these categories, users then decided which groups would be allowed access to certain content. This allowed participants to employ a combination of selection and segmentation.

In terms of maintaining and terminating *ilchon* relationships, the *Cyworld* users that we interviewed relied on reciprocity and thus experienced connection-autonomy

tension. Some participants reported that they visited their *ilchons'* *minihompies* on a regular basis and left comments to show how much they cared about the other people, a convention called *ilchon soonhwe* or “*ilchon* tour” (User 4, User 9, User 20, User 31). Others sent each other “acorns” on special occasions (User 5, User 8, User 28, User 45, User 49), in the same way that people exchange gift cards offline. *Cy-ilchons* felt obliged to visit others’ *minihompies* at least once a month (User 46) and to pay return visits to *ilchons* who left comments on their *minihompies* (User 37). A special function of *Cyworld* called “Surfing My *Ilchons*” or “Today’s *Ilchon*” offers a convenient way for users to routinize random visits to some of their *ilchons*. As members of the *Cyworld* community, participants said they were aware of norms of the virtual world and tried to conform, believing that mutually reciprocal behaviors enhanced the sense of being connected to others for the purpose of growing *jeong*, bit by bit, among *ilchons*.

Jeong is another strong Korean cultural value; it describes a state of mind that develops from relationships based on togetherness and interdependence (Choi, Kim, & Kim, 2000). In Western cultures, the emotional quality that comes closest to that of *jeong* is affection or affinity. What distinguishes the concept of *jeong*, however, is the way in which it accumulates over a long history of being together. *Jeong* is based not only on warm and caring feelings, but also on bitter feelings that sometimes grow solely as the result of unpleasant relational experiences. Whether the relationship is a voluntary sweet *jeong* or an obligatory bitter *jeong* is not as important as the length of time over which *jeong* accumulates. This concept is best described by a Korean proverb, “*Jeong* eventually soaks someone like sporadic rain drops.”

In the virtual world, *Cy-ilchons* became as committed to each other as offline mutual *jeong* (User 38, User 49). A lack of return visits—in violation of the *ilchon* norm—connoted impoliteness and neglect and sometimes created relational problems (User 45). Participants sometimes reported that the norm of reciprocity spawned relational burdens and made some users quit *cying* for a while (User 15, User 37, User 43), in order to be free of *jeong* burdens and to seek independence. One male participant confessed that he refilled his own cyber “wallet” rather than waiting to receive “acorns” from his *ilchons*, because he did not want to be trapped by the reciprocity norm (User 33). The *Cyworld*, participants rarely dropped others from their *ilchon* lists, because termination of an *ilchon* relationship was viewed as a shock to relational partners. To avoid that problem, some users deliberately violated the norm of reciprocity by not rewarding *ilchon* site visits (User 11, User 45) or by closing their own *minihompies* for a short time (User 43). These situations were said to have arisen, for example, after the end of a romantic relationship (User 28, User 35, User 38, User 45).

Overall, our data suggest that the *ilchon* metaphor created varying levels of relational tensions, depending on the degree of intimacy that the word *ilchon* connoted to users. The process of *cying* allowed users to experience, in the virtual world, many of the same relational tensions that *yon* creates in the real world, tensions that are specific to the Korean culture.

Discussion

Theoretical Implications

Our findings suggest that *Cyworld* users routinely engage in the negotiation of dialectical tensions that are created within the online world, transferred from offline to online, or imposed by interpersonal principles specific to Korea's collectivistic culture. Our data analysis revealed that the desire to manage pre-existing interpersonal relationships and reflect on oneself generated a new relational dialectic that was specific to *Cyworld*—namely, the interpersonal relations versus self-relation dialectic. This new relational dialectic is analogous to Baxter and Montgomery's (1996) primary contradiction of connection-autonomy and also encapsulates the openness-closedness tension regarding privacy invasion. To resolve privacy issues, users utilized the dialectical strategies of segmentation and disqualification. *Cyworld*'s various design features and functions encouraged users to transcend Korea's high-context style of communication by offering an alternate channel for elaborate and emotional communication that fostered the reframing of relational issues. *Cy-Ilchons* (online buddies) virtually extended the Korean cultural concept of blood ties, called *yons*, in ways that intensified the openness-closedness contradiction at early stages of relationship formation and the connection-autonomy contradiction at maintenance stages, through employment of a reciprocity norm.

The rapid diffusion of social network sites awaits more theoretically-based, analytical investigations employing new theoretical perspectives and paradigms to broaden researchers' current understanding about the SNS phenomenon. This article contributes to this discourse by applying the relational dialectics approach to online relationships in an analysis of user experiences on *Cyworld*, a system that was created to help manage pre-existing relationships. The relational dialectics approach helps explain how Korean cultural principles that govern interpersonal relationships, such as *yon*, *jeong*, and *noonchi*, are realized through the mediated communication technology of SNS.

The self-relation aspect of *Cyworld*, reported by most interviewees, demonstrates the uniqueness of the Korean site as an online community that embraces not only the collectivistic social traditions of that culture but also the increasingly individualistic traits that are being introduced into contemporary Korean society (Choi, 2006). *Cyworld* shares some features of blogs that Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, and Swartz (2004) noted, including allowing users to update postings frequently by placing the latest item on top and offering almost unlimited archival and hyperlink functions. These features nurture a strong sense of "me-ness" (Sundar, 2006). A majority of *Cyworld* users are young Koreans in their 20s and 30s who already are more oriented toward individualism than their elders. Increased individualism in these users paradoxically intensifies the dialectical tensions that they experience, because any pair of dialectical forces is interdependent, with increases in one accompanying increases in the other. A unique contribution of this study, therefore, is a demonstration of how this dynamic interplay occurs, veiled by the increasingly individualization of social technology.

The findings of this study are in line with O'Sullivan's (2000) strategic use of CMC channels, whereby communication partners form different channel preferences. *Cyworld* exists not just as an independent cyber-world but also as a "world" that buffers or transforms conflicting relational issues, facilitated by technology. Interviewees in this study listed photo sharing as the most useful feature, because pictures enhance the richness of social context cues for a playback of their everyday lives. Uploading personal photos contributes to building what Habuchi (2005), in his study of mobile communication in Japan, calls a "telecocoon." The term refers to a virtual networked space created by young friends and lovers out of a constant, steady stream of conversation that allows them to stay in touch even when they are apart.

Moreover, as illustrated by the rise in YouTube's popularity, Internet users stretch their self-presentational capabilities to include video clips, in addition to photos and music. In the early stages of CMC, the ability to verbalize social context cues may have operated as a key measure of communicative competence; nowadays, users' relational competency is determined by multi-modal proficiency in skills that range from writing to video editing. Future research may serve to identify additional dialectical tensions engendered by technological advancements, along with the adaptive strategies that users employ to alleviate them.

Practical Implications

Through their *minihompies*, *Cyworld* users try to satisfy what Baxter and Montgomery (1996) suggest are contradictory needs: being connected to others and being left alone. A key to the success of SNSs, therefore, may be designs or features that address those tensions. For instance, a new feature in *Cyworld*'s guestbook called "It's between us" offers privacy protection without interfering with an owner's self-presentational needs. From the owner's standpoint, long lists of comments by guests signal the owner's relational popularity in ways that may unintentionally divulge facts about the owners' private lives to unwanted visitors. Increased secrecy protection in the testimonial section is, therefore, an example of a feature that supports relational dialectics.

SNS designers may want to craft new methods for self-expression, since sophisticated self-presentational tools could provide an abundance of social context cues for relationship bonding. This study suggests that relational bonding via SNSs grows as users manage relational conflicts or drifts that originate in offline settings. Already, in the case of *Cyworld*, music and user-friendly digital photo editing expands users' abilities to share their emotions, while other self-presentational tools such as skin and *miniroom* decorations serve to embellish *minihompies* in ways that reflect the owners' tastes.

Limitations

It is important to acknowledge several methodological and sampling limitations of this study. The findings could have been richer if the data had included testimonies

from both relational parties and focused on manifestations at the relational level. It is not impossible, however, to examine relational dialectics based on only one party's perceptions (Baxter, 1990), and relational dialectics manifest in individual cognitive dilemmas (Montgomery, 1993; VanLear, 1998). Although the demographic distribution of the sample matched that of the *Cyworld* population in terms of age and gender, all interview participants had some college education, a factor that may have over-represented dialectical tensions, in that these educated interviewees may have been more aware that their privacy was vulnerable in online interactions. Additionally, interviewees were selected using a convenience sample, in as much as subjects volunteered to participate in this study. Volunteerism may have resulted in a sample that had positively biased experiences in and attitudes toward *Cyworld*. To counterbalance this tendency, future research should include people who stopped using *Cyworld* after a period of active participation, as well as those who came to hold negative attitudes toward *Cyworld* after initially valuing it. More comparative studies are also needed, as several successful large SNSs, including MySpace and *Cyworld*, have started to vie for global markets. Future studies may shed light on cultural dynamics with respect to interpersonal interactions via SNSs.

Conclusions

Cyworld's minihompies create strategic spaces where personal relationships are consolidated through the management of offline relational dialectics. These spaces are tightly linked to the counter-world of unmediated interactions. For *Cyworld* users, the system represents an aspect of reality itself, inseparable from their "real" lives, because it is within those spaces that users search for and construct their true identities. The era of new communication technologies appears to have introduced a new dialectical dilemma: a tension between the offline world and its online counterpart. Communication technologies seem to create a new space that represents neither, but rather exists somewhere in-between. The nature of this liminal space changes constantly, shaped by social uses of communication technologies (including SNSs). This study applied the theoretical lens of relational dialectics to this synthesized space, in an effort to elucidate the processes by which social interactions and Internet technologies mutually shape one another.

Notes

- 1 Please address correspondence to the second author.
- 2 Baxter and Montgomery (1996) also posit three external dialectics that couples face in relation to their community: inclusion-seclusion, conventionality-uniqueness, and revelation-concealment. They suggest that the three internal and three external dialectics that they identified are but the start of a much longer list of dialects.

- 3 The term “self-relation” is used interchangeably with self-perception (Pörn, 1993) or self-reflection (Seidel, 2006). In this study, the authors added the notion of taking a third-person perspective in order to make the concept more pertinent to the context of *minihompy* uses.

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Appendix A. Interview Questions

Meeting People through *Minihompies*

- a. With whom do you usually communicate through *minihompies*?
 - b. Have you ever made friends with strangers through *minihompies*? What would you like to say about such experiences?
 - c. What difference, if any, does “*cying*” make in your communication routines with friends, family members, and lovers?
 - d. How frankly do you express your thoughts and feelings with your friends, family members, lovers, or others you meet on *Cyworld*? Why?
 - e. Would you please share any episodes, if any, that indicate how your *minihompy* may have saved or jeopardized your relationships?
 - f. Have you have ever stopped or considered stopping to *cy*—and, if so, why?
-

Meanings of *Ilchon*

- a. How many *cy-ilchons* do you have? What kinds of personal relationships are included in your *ilchon* list? What are your criteria for creating *ilchon* relationships?
 - b. What do you think about the metaphor of “*ilchon*” in relation to Korean communication styles and to interpersonal principles such as *yon* and *jeong*?
 - c. Is there any difference in your communications with *ilchons* as distinguished from *non-ilchons*? What characterizes your *ilchon* relationships?
 - d. How often do you meet your *cy-ilchons* off-line? Do you find any differences in topics or communication styles when you meet them in person and on *Cyworld*?
 - e. When and how often do you visit your *ilchons*’ *minihompies*? Would you please describe your usual patterns of visitation to your *ilchons*’ *minihompies*?
 - f. Have you ever discontinued *ilchon* relationships? If so, why?
-

Note: Interview questions for “General Usage Pattern” and “Minihompy Perceptions and Uses” are not listed. The entire interview protocol is available from the corresponding author.

Appendix B. Key Demographics of Interviewees

User ID	Gender	Age	Occupation	User ID	Gender	Age	Occupation
#1	F	19	Undergrad	#26	F	46	Office worker
#2	F	21	Undergrad	#27	F	Late 50's	Essayist
#3	F	21	Undergrad	#28	M	21	Undergrad
#4	F	21	Undergrad	#29	M	21	Undergrad
#5	F	21	Undergrad	#30	M	23	Undergrad
#6	F	21	Undergrad	#31	M	24	Undergrad
#7	F	21	Undergrad	#32	M	24	Undergrad
#8	F	22	Undergrad	#33	M	Early 30's	Korean classical musician
#9	F	24	Undergrad	#34	M	30	Computer programmer
#10	F	24	Undergrad	#35	M	30	Schoolteacher
#11	F	25	Fashion Model	#36	M	30	Engineer
#12	F	25	Webmaster	#37	M	30	Graduate Student
#13	F	26	Office worker	#38	M	30	Musician
#14	F	30	Office worker	#39	M	30	Art therapist
#15	F	30	Office worker	#40	M	31	Web Designer
#16	F	31	Housewife	#41	M	31	Office worker
#17	F	31	Housewife	#42	M	31	Office worker
#18	F	31	Schoolteacher	#43	M	32	Office worker
#19	F	33	Editorial designer	#44	M	32	Office worker
#20	F	34	Lecturer	#45	M	32	Office worker
#21	F	36	Housewife	#46	M	34	Policeman
#22	F	38	Schoolteacher	#47	M	36	Anchorman
#23	F	39	Public official	#48	M	37	Rehabilitation therapist
#24	F	39	Piano teacher	#49	M	40	Craftsman
#25	F	46	Self-employed				

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