



Published by the Communication Technology Division
of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication

Peer review: This article has been subject to a double-blind peer review process



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Kakao Talk and Facebook [Book Review]

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Kakao Talk and Facebook: Korean American Youth Constructing Hybrid Identities by Jiwoo Park and Dafna Lemish is a vital addition to the literature that deals with identity development in the digital age. We live in an epoch when the technological devices we use afford us immense opportunities to form identities in virtual spaces. However, the most critical aspect of Park and Lemish's book is that it delineates the process of creating hybrid identities—that links identity formation in virtual spaces to that of offline—of an immigrant youth group, namely the Korean American community. Throughout the book, the authors tackle the nuances of adolescent immigrant identity creation, such as the struggle of ethnic identity development, the practice of photo-sharing through smartphones, and bilingualism. By looking at the subject matter through the lens of segmented assimilation theory, this book's findings help make sense of the process by which immigrant children in the United States use digital media technologies, often creatively, to preserve and redefine ethnic identities while dealing with the local assimilative forces. Both authors identify as immigrants, which helps them develop a solid immersive methodology as they interview the Korean American youth who participated in the study.

The first chapter of the book, "Immigration and Identity Formation," provides readers the necessary theoretical background to understand the contribution of digital media in immigrant identity formation. The authors start by discussing the limitations of classical assimilation theory – which delineates that over time all immigrants and their descendants will forsake their original culture and learn the dominant cultural ways – and they state that traditionally the theory has ignored explaining the assimilation process of non-White ethnic

groups. The authors then discuss segmented assimilation theory that takes the social context into account and helps distill unique characteristics of different immigrant communities' assimilations. The authors then talk about the identity formation of the youth through digital media practices through the process of reformulation that allows the youth to oscillate between assimilation and resistance. The reformulation is a critical lens through which we can look at how the Korean American youth, or any ethnic group for that matter, can not only push back against the obstacles of the dominant culture but also creatively add the rich and layered aspects of their identities.

The second chapter, "Studying Korean American Youth," provides a rich description of the unique ethnic values that shape the Korean American identities in the United States. The discussion of the Korean Wave, a circulation of Korean popular music, drama, fashion show and music, informs the reader of a national triumph that serves as a valuable tool in terms of Korean ethnic identity formation. This chapter also details the methodology of the study which is grounded in naturalistic inquiries such as photo elicitation interviews that offered the authors an opportunity to conduct semi-structured interviews with visual elicitation. As evidenced by the findings of the study, these interview techniques helped the authors elucidate on the digital media practices of the Korean American youth with data that is rich in depth and breadth. The third chapter "Digital practices of Korean American Youth," illustrates the kind of digital technologies and devices that are being used by youth, their adoption of Kakao Talk, and their photo sharing practices. The authors found no significant difference between how Korean American youths use digital media practices and other immigrant or non-immigrant youths use them. However, the authors suggest that there is a difference in terms of what platforms the Korean American youth choose to engage in, namely the mobile instant messaging platform Kakao Talk. They choose this specific platform to maintain relationships with co-ethnic family and friends both in the United States and in Korea, which speaks of the intensity and intimacy of their relationship with their friends and family.

Chapter four, "Digital Media and the Construction of Korean Identity," is all about measuring ethnic identities. The authors discuss the survey they administered to measure multigroup ethnic identity using the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure-Revised (MEIM-R) tool (detailed description in chapter one). This chapter is rich with quantitative data such as the frequency of watching Korean drama, movies, variety shows by the youth and topics they explored on the internet. The authors find that both first-and-a-half and second-

generation immigrant youths use digital media to negotiate their culture and the culture in the United States. The authors claim this finding, in comparison with studies that investigated identity formation prior the digital age, suggest that the digital media landscape helps shape a different immigrant experience and help youth maintain a strong ethnic identity as well. Chapter five, “Navigating Korean and American Identities,” describes the struggles of identity conflicts of the first-and-a-half generation and second generation Korean American youth. This chapter is filled with quotes from the interviewees as they describe the process of ethnic identity development through their social interactions. There is tension between claiming the American identity and the fear of losing touch with their own culture that is evidenced by the findings of this chapter.

Chapter six, “Digital Media Bilingualism”—a personal favorite of mine—exemplifies the role of bilingualism in identity formation in the digital world. As the authors find out through their surveys and interviews, the participants saw learning Korean as a vehicle of immersing themselves in Korean culture. Their levels of proficiency varied but they all emphasized the importance of knowing Korean and using the language to express their personal thoughts and feelings. It turns out that digital media technologies also helped them learn and maintain proficiency of the language.

This important book by Park and Lemish fills gaps in existing literature in more ways than one. First and foremost, the book addresses the assimilation of an ethnic community that has not been the focus of studies, namely the Korean American community. Secondly, the book’s findings allow us to draw comparisons between how mainstream American youth use digital technologies and how ethnic youth do the same. On this topic, the adoption of Kakao talk by the two generations of Korean American youth is an important aspect to notice. Their adoption of Kakao talk not only allowed them to keep in touch with their local co-ethnic friends but also their families and friends in Korea. By allowing these practices to emerge side by side, they allowed themselves to form an identity that is more layered, which has more nuanced implications on how they would contribute to the US mainstream culture. I also found the discussion of “critical moment” fascinating. A critical moment, as described by Park and Lemish, is the moment when the ethnic youth found their own interest in an aspect of their own culture that they had formerly overlooked. This has a substantive implication on the classical assimilation theory as the non-dominant culture shows the potential of influencing the dominant culture. The authors do an excellent job discussing the implications of their findings in terms of assimilation theory while challenging the assumption of early assimilationist scholars. This book will serve as an inspiration for scholars to take on

future projects that will investigate the nuances of other ethnic identities through the lens of identity formation through digital media technologies in virtual spaces.

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To cite this article:

Nasrin, S. (2022). Kakao Talk and Facebook [Book Review]. *Journal of Communication Technology*, 5(1), 104-108. DOI: 10.51548/joctec-2022-005.