

Developing identities: *Gossip Girl*, fan activities, and online fan community in Korea

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Abstract:

Since the introduction of the Internet, young people's exposure to international media has increased dramatically. While the precise impact of this media consumption is subject to debate, it is apparent that the media contribute to young people's evolving sense of identity. This article focuses on non-Western young people's engagement with online fan culture of American media, including digital practices, communities, and identities they are building, to understand the shift in engagement from television to online screens that are more participatory and collaborative. Through an ethnographic analysis of the Korean online fan community of *Gossip Girl*, this study shows that the community provides young Koreans with opportunities to construct powerful identities as sophisticated learners and knowledgeable participants in the global culture.

Keywords: Online fandom, Media globalization, American media, Korean fan culture, Identity, Fansubbing, Hybridity, Language, Cultural Capital

Introduction

Today, young people grow up in a world saturated with media that impact various aspects of their lives more so than any other outside influence in history. Particularly, their exposure to global media has increased dramatically since the introduction of the Internet that has literally no boundary of a country (Black, 2008, 2009; Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013; Kraidy, 2003; Leaver, 2008; Lee, 2011; Vellar, 2011). While the precise impact of this media consumption and engagement is subject to debate, it is apparent that media is one of the most influential agents of socialization that contributes to young people's evolving sense of identity, and knowledge of, the wider world (Goodman, 2003; Mazzarella, 2005). The influence of global media may be particularly salient in young people (Jensen, 2003),

because they are generally at the cutting edge of technology use and more open to diverse cultural beliefs and worldviews (Black, 2008).

Media use by young people is worth a deeper look, since young people use their relationship with various media to test and develop ideas of self and to understand the world (e.g., Buckingham, 2000; Fisherkeller, 2002; Goodman, 2003; Turkle, 1984). Media fan activities, in particular, provide a variety of opportunities in informal learning experiences, including learning about young people's selves, as they express and explore their identities through various fan productions and discussions. For instance, young people use online fan communities to share ideas and creativity with like-minded people, to participate in networks, and to explore issues around gender, ethnicity, and sexuality. These activities enable them to construct and negotiate their identities by offering a number of opportunities to write about, discuss, and creatively express themselves. However, investigations of young people's participation in fandom to create a sense of self in the context of globalization are still sparse and rarely focus on the importance of global media on young people's lives from non-Western contexts.

In South Korea, American media, specifically American television dramas, have strongly appealed to audiences since the late 1990s, and this has led to the emergence of a new culture in the late 2000s (Yoon, 2007; S. Park, 2007; J. Park, 2007). The members of this sub-culture are called 'Mid-Jok,' a compound word that consists of 'American drama' and 'clan' in Korean and describes American-Drama-Fans. These subculture members, predominantly young people in their teens or twenties, play an active part in the online space where they distribute videos, collectively interpret and evaluate dramas, teach each other American culture and English, and create their own culture (Jung & Han, 2010). To explore this unique online subculture of young Koreans, I conducted an online ethnography of the fan community of *Gossip Girl*, an American teen television drama that has enjoyed popularity among Korean youth. In particular, looking through the lenses of reception studies, fan studies, and global media studies, I examine how Korean young people in this particular fan community make sense of, evaluate, and criticize *Gossip Girl*, and use the series and the community to develop their sense of self within the context of globalization. I also consider the process of their development of linguistic and technical skills through fansubbing activity, a fan practice that involves a team of translators and editors in the production of subtitles for foreign TV series, and its role in the development of powerful cultural identities as contemporary Korean. My analysis, thus, examines the practices and discussions of Korean fans who participate in the online fan community of *Gossip Girl* to expand their fandom and is not representative of those of all Korean viewers of *Gossip Girl* in any way. I begin with a review of the scholarship that framed my analysis.

Media globalization and reception

Within the context of media convergence and globalization, media studies scholars have underscored the need to explain and theorize the global media flows and impact of the interconnectedness of cultures brought about by the global flow of images and commodities

(Bielby & Harrington, 2008). Critical scholars in the 1960s to 1980s focused on the unequal media flows and structural issues of ownership, distribution, and other economic factors, embracing the cultural imperialism thesis that suggests the world's cultures have become, or will become, homogeneous, and that culture is absorbed into a global norm (Chopra & Gajjala, 2011) and the dependency theories that see 'the major industrialized countries as dominant and Third World countries as dependent' (Straubhaar, 2006: 682).

However, these approaches have been widely critiqued for their overly simplistic view of media industry, production, genre, and audience reception. Audience scholars, in particular, have problematized their singular focus on structural issues that assumes 'effects in the realm of 'everyday' without actually studying how people make meanings out of media messages' (Kraidy & Murphy, 2003: 301). Resisting the assumption that audiences in different countries are monolithic, passive, and vulnerable victims of global media that simply enter a country and hypodermically inject their meanings into them, international communication and audience scholars have underscored the importance of examining the complex ways people experience, understand, use, and take part in global media in their local contexts (Bielby & Harrington, 2008; Chopra & Gajjala, 2011; Darling-Wolf, 2000, 2004a; Ferguson, 1992; Gillespie, 1995; Gray, 2007; Harrington & Bielby, 2007; Jenkins et al., 2013; Katz & Liebes, 1985; Kraidy, 2005; McMillin, 2005; Parameswaran, 1999; Straubhaar, 1991, 2006, 2007; Tomlinson, 1991). Transnational audience research demonstrates that audiences play an active role in selecting media and producing the textual meanings that connect with viewers' own social experiences, and that the active role taken by audiences results in the different impacts of transnational media across various categories of people and localities (e.g., Kraidy, 2003; Liebes & Katz, 1993; Mankekar, 2002; McMillin, 2005, 2007; Strelitz, 2003; Wheeler, 2000). Audience scholarship has also emphasized the role of audiences' cultural and historical contexts in which they make meanings (McMillin, 2007; O'Conner, 2012; Parameswaran, 1999), and the importance of cultural familiarity and difference (Adriaens & Biltereyst, 2012; Iwabuchi, 2004; Napier, 2007) and linguistic familiarity and competency (Bore, 2011; Tan, 2011) in the consumption of global media texts, because 'when a text is exported into a different cultural environment composed of a different pool of cultural resources, it might not produce the expected interpretations' (Darling-Wolf, 2000: 137).

Contesting the notions of cultural imperialism that equate media penetration with cultural domination (Garcia-Canclini, 1995; Parameswaran, 1999) and the dependency theories that understand globalization as one-directional processes in terms of existing center-periphery models, Appadurai (2006) argues that the global media culture is 'a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order' (588) that cannot be understood in terms of early models of globalization. Thus, more recently, media scholars have attempted to examine media globalization as a 'complicated, ambiguous, and multilateral process' (Noh, 2007: 1) that produces 'increasingly hybrid and deterritorialized cultural forms' (Darling-Wolf, 2000: 138), recognizing the complexity in transnational power inequities as well as audience engagement. Hybridization refers to diverse intercultural mixtures, the adaptation of global

forces and changes into local cultures, which are 'not predicated on the end of domination and on more equal intercultural relations' (Kraidy, 2004: 256). Straubhaar (2007) also points out that cultures change not only in hybrid but also in sedimentary ways, as multiple layers of cultural identity and culture form as new elements are incorporated. Thus, to explore mediated cross-cultural hybridization, it is important to examine how 'older cultural elements survive in somewhat coherent layers while new ones are imposed or adopted over them in new layers' (Straubhaar, 2007: 12). As Pieterse suggests (2006), hybridization can be understood as a continuum from assimilationist and hegemonic to subversive and counter hegemonic, depending on the conditions of mixing and the active mediations of people who produce meanings, cultures, and identities. Research thus suggests that media globalization should not be seen as universal assimilation into one homogeneous 'Americanized' culture but as a much more complex process of many-sided translation (Gillespie, 1995), and it is much more important to examine the real differences that may hide in each similarity (Appadurai, 1996). Scholars have emphasized the role new media plays in the process of media globalization and global media reception and the impact online cross-cultural fan activities can have on fans' identity constructing. Given that identity construction through cross-cultural media consumption and fandom is an integral part of my research, it is crucial to address scholarship on global media fandom and identity within the new media context. Thus, in what follows, I review literature on global media fandom to discuss the importance of online, cross-cultural media fan activities on fans' construction of identities and worldviews.

New media, global media fandom, and identity

By eliminating the barriers of time and space, the Internet has enabled more rapid and widespread dissemination of the cultural materials from different countries otherwise not easily accessible. As a growing number of people today consume global media and participate in online fandom surrounding them using the Internet, scholars have highlighted that the Internet has become an integral tool for intercultural fan activity (Black, 2008; Darling-Wolf, 2004a; Jenkins et al., 2013). Black (2008) further underscores the role new technologies play in the construction of environments in which viewers play a more active role in selecting, circulating, interpreting, reworking, and recontextualizing global media. In addition, as they enable fans to access one another 'with greater regularity and frequency' (Baym, 2000: 201), new technologies have intensified collaboration and interaction between fans (Bury, 2005; Murray, 2007; Jenkins, 2006), enabling fans to influence the transnational flow of cultural materials in various ways (see Baym & Barnett, 2009; Jenkins et al., 2013; Lee, 2011; Théberge, 2005).

Scholarship on online fan cultures that develop around American popular cultural texts in the U.S. has suggested that people use their relationships with media to form their sense of self and understand the world around them (e.g., Bury, 2005; Goodman, 2003; Jenkins, 2006). Studies have emphasized that collaborative fan activities and productions, in particular, offer fans opportunities to negotiate personal issues and explore various

dimensions of their identity (Baym, 2000; Hills, 2002; Jenkins, 2006; Mazzarella, 2005; Seiter, 2005). As online communities encourage a form of daily interaction between fans, which makes fandom a part of their everyday life, online fan activities and discussions may be a significant factor that impacts fans' identity work by offering opportunities of exploring their sense of who they are. Hall (2006) suggests that, as people have multiple identities in relation to race, gender, class, nationality, and others, which are changing constantly due to the shift in contexts, it may also be that media, as one of the most important socialization institutions in the life of young people, just add to their senses of selves and evolution of who they are.

Building on research on identity and online fandom of cultural texts in the U.S., much scholarly discussion of global media fandom has also paid attention to cross-cultural fan activities online and their impact on fans' identity formation. For example, Black's (2008, 2009) ethnographic study of Japanese manga fan fiction community reveals that Asian immigrant fans in Canada engage in writing online fan fiction as a way to understand and embrace their mixed cultural heritage. Through fan fiction writing, fan writers display their existing linguistic and cultural competencies, grow new linguistic and compositional skills through their experiments with languages and composition genres, and actively collaborate with fans from different cultural backgrounds. Black argues that cross-cultural fan activities and online interactions with fans from different environments can have a powerful influence fans' cultural identities as they are indirectly exposed to diverse cultural and linguistic perspectives (see also Jensen, 2003). In a similar study about Japanese anime/manga fandom in Canada, Han (2007) similarly asserts that cross-cultural fandom is a rich site for identity exploration and underscores that learning a new language through anime/manga, in particular, can be a significant part of the construction of multi-layered identities. Daring-Wolf's (2004a) ethnographic analysis of a transnational online fan community of a Japanese celebrity, Kimura Takuya, also shows how fans collaboratively negotiated their fan-based, gendered, and cross-cultural identities through their involvement with each other and their favorite Japanese star. These fans constructed hybrid identities by highlighting the 'virtual Asian-ness' that served as a common bond not only between fans who live in different cultures but also between fans and Kimura and by using English language as a way to express their cultural capital and middle-class identities. These studies highlight the importance of cultural knowledge and language skills developed through online cross-cultural fan activities in fans' development and negotiation of identity.

Focusing more exclusively on fansubbing activity, scholars have emphasized that the collective process of creating and distributing fan subtitles, or fansubs, contributes to fans' evolving senses of self by offering opportunities to develop and practice new forms of cultural and technical competencies, defined as *pop cosmopolitanism* (Jenkins, 2006b). Vellar's (2011) study about Italian fansubbers of the U.S. television series, *Lost*, reveals that their fansubbing activities enabled them to accumulate linguistic capital (i.e., English and Portuguese skills), social capital (i.e., friendships with fans from different cultural backgrounds and other fansubbing communities and acquaintances with national

professionals), and cultural capital (i.e., knowledge about specific genres and cultures depicted in a series). Her analysis demonstrates that these young fans used online spaces to create their own symbolic environments, as a way to differentiate themselves from the older Italian generation, in which they constructed a hybrid identity by actively collaborating as amateur subbers to expand their cultural views, and fusing aspects of two cultures – American and Italian. Hu's (2010) study of the fan translating activity in the fan communities of Korean TV serials in the English-language diaspora similarly highlights the need to consider the collective efforts to produce subtitles that help produce collective identities and the affective pleasures that derive from such collaboration. Such studies demonstrate the value of studying fans' identity development through intercultural fan activities (Darling-Wolf, 2004a) and signal that online fan communities may be particularly rich sites for young people's identity work within the context of globalization and new media.

Scholarship that examines media globalization and global media fandom has made indisputably useful and important contributions; however, still relatively few analyses have focused on the importance of Western media on identity formation in non-Western contexts. Even fewer have attempted to understand specifically how Eastern young people's active engagement in online fan cultures of Western media might influence their self-perceptions, identities, worldviews, and linguistic and technical competencies. For instance, what people in South Korea, especially young people in their teens and early twenties, do with American media online and implications of such engagement still need critical scholarly investigations (e.g., Kim, 2005; Lee, 2006), within the context of significantly increased exposure to American media via the Internet.

The present study endeavors to begin to fill the gap in the media and audience studies literature on global media fandom studies with an exploration of the Korean online fan culture of American television drama, *Gossip Girl*, a series that garnered a huge following among Korean youth, focusing on fans' construction and development of identities. Thus, there are two broad aims of this study. The first is to understand the ways Korean online fans make sense of the American drama, *Gossip Girl*, through their participation in a *Gossip Girl* online fan community. The second aim is to delve into fans' online discussions to see how *Gossip Girl* talk and informal learning in the community help Korean participants develop their identities and understand their local and global cultures. Analysis of fans' online productions and activities shows that the online *Gossip Girl* fan community offers a space where Korean young people can help each other openly as producers to gain new linguistic and technical competencies and to develop a sense of self.

Before discussing the ways young Korean fans of *Gossip Girl* participate in the online fan community, it is useful to briefly discuss the phenomenon of the American drama boom that took place in the late 2000s in Korea. American television dramas have been around in Korea for a long time, with shows like *Airwolf*, *The Six Million Dollar Man*, and *McGuyver* that aired in the 1980s (Kim, 2007). But the late 2000s marked the beginning of an intense period of American media importation when the Internet began providing Korean viewers with easier and faster access to American shows. In a 2007 survey of 1,027 respondents,

polling firm M-Brain found that sixty eight percent of them who were ages ten to thirty regularly watched American dramas through the Internet (Yoon, 2007). The survey also revealed that many Koreans viewed American dramas primarily through local cable or satellite channels such as DongaTV, OCN, Onstyle, and The Fox Korea, but for people ages thirteen to twenty four, who seemed more accepting of American dramas, the Internet was the most frequently used means to watch them (Yoon, 2007).

The formation of Korean fan communities on the Internet is worth noting due to their role in the spread of American dramas across Korea and their influence on related industries. Many of these online fan communities, or 'fan clubs' as Koreans call them, had over a hundred thousand members; in 2007, for example, the 24 drama club had almost 120,000 members and there were approximately sixty *Prison Break* fan clubs that had over 200,000 members (Yoon, 2007). Because there were no online streaming sites that offered foreign shows yet in Korea in the time of study, it was within these fan clubs that the 'Mid-Jok,' American-Drama-Fans, watched, discussed, and interpreted American dramas and actively created their own cultural products based on the drama they enjoyed. The massive 'online buzz' created by the 'Mid-Jok' led several Korean television and cable networks to import American shows and put them on the air (Nam, 2007); the number of imported American shows increased dramatically from early to late 2000s ('Report', 2012), and on January 1st, 2009, a cable channel that is devoted solely to American television dramas, OCN Series, was launched to provide American drama all day and every day for American drama fans (Kim, 2008).

It is also important to note that Korean families and the larger society may encourage, to some extent, or at least do not disagree with, young people's consumption of American media due to the belief that American media may help them improve their English skills perceived as an essential means for succeeding in Korea. Thus, young Korean fans actively use the online fan sites to learn English language with and from other fans through American drama. Especially for those who are frustrated by the primary focus of Korean formal education on English reading and grammar instead of spoken English, American drama has been appreciated as useful English learning material (Park, 2007), since it provides various opportunities to learn American culture, the understanding of which is necessary for language acquisition (Tyner, 1998). As a result, a growing number of English academies in Korea have started to use American dramas as textbooks (Song, 2007), and recently, the book industry has published books such as *I Too Want to Study English Through Mid* (American drama), *Screen Mid Spoken English*, *Enjoy Mid Without Subtitles*, and *Escape From English Jail Through Prison Break*. Online fan communities of American dramas have been very active in endorsing American dramas as good tools for learning English language, as fans have shared their experience of improving English skills, listening and speaking proficiencies in particular, by watching and discussing American dramas online.

The number of imported U.S. shows has been gradually decreased more recently, while the number of online posts, sites, and communities related to American drama has

increased consistently. American dramas have become a part of many Korean young people's lives, not only due to their prevalence on various platforms, but also due to the interest of young people in learning English language and American culture and in participating in the global culture. Thus, an understanding of Korea's cultural and social context helps contextualize Koreans' growing experience with American media. It is within this context that I explore how Korean fans of *Gossip Girl* participate in the online community to make sense of the show and to construct identities as knowledgeable audience members and vibrant participants in the global culture. In what follows, I first describe the method of my study in detail.

Method

Gossip Girl is an American teen television drama that is based on the *New York Times* bestselling novel series written by Cecily von Ziegesar. Since its premiere on the CW in 2007, the series has become so popular that it received a number of award nominations, winning 18 Teen Choice Awards ('Teen Choice Awards,' 2012), and a tour of *Gossip Girl* sites has been created in New York City. Narrated by the omniscient yet unseen blogger 'Gossip Girl,' the series revolves around the lives of privileged teenagers attending an elite private school in New York City's Upper East Side. Because of its focus on teenagers' lives, including their friendship, love, school life, and family affairs, *Gossip Girl* is particularly popular among teenagers and young adults around the world. Although *Gossip Girl* did not receive critical acclaim and good ratings throughout its run considering the online buzz it created, its six seasons have aired on different channels around the world, including Malaysia, New Zealand, Norway, India, South Korea, and the U.K. ('International distribution of Gossip Girl', n.d., para. 2). In response to the growth of popularity of the series in South Korea, two of the series' protagonists, who had been almost unknown to many Korean audiences before their roles in the series, shot a commercial for a Korean fashion brand that targets teenagers and young adults (Park, 2009). In addition, Blake Lively, the heroine of the series, appeared in *Style Magazine 2009* on Korean cable channel, OnStyle, to communicate with her Korean fans for the first time (Kim, 2009) as well as on the cover of *Vogue Korea* magazine with Korean actress, Ha-Neul Kim (Woo, 2009).

Based upon continuous requests by fans, Gossip Girl Gallery was founded in early 2009 in one of the biggest user review sites in Korea to provide Korean fans a space where they can express and exchange their thoughts and feelings about the show, post questions, and share their ideas and productions. It is a Korean-based site that is publicly available, and as of March 2016, there are more than 16,000 topics/posts. It consists of one linear message board where all topics and posts are in one big thread with no segregation. The fact that formal registration or log in process is only optional has led to a good level of self-disclosure and more casual communication between participants. However, as participants can communicate anonymously by creating a one-time nickname each time they post, it is not hard to see insulting and/or abusive posts and comments on the board despite the administrator's constant monitoring of defamatory, abusive, slander, and obscene materials

and advertisements. Participants in Gossip Girl Gallery ranged in age, class, gender, and geographical locations, but based on their writings and language, it seemed that most of them are in their teens or early twenties.

To approach this research from the perspective of the participants, ethnographic methods were employed, as they allow a more contextualized approach to the examination of how fans 'experience the global in their local life' (Kraidy & Murphy, 2003: 299). As audiences and fan groups moved online, a number of media scholars have utilized ethnographic methods in the online setting to explore the ways audiences use the Internet to make meanings, engage in creative and collaborative activities, and create a sense of identity and community (Baym & Burnett, 2009; Baym, 2000; Bird, 2003; boyd, 2008; Bury, 2005; Darling-Wolf, 2004a, 2004b; Jenkins, 1992, 2006b). These scholars have argued that online ethnography should be seen as 'a way of applying in a new context the various [traditional ethnographic] methods' (Bird & Barber, 2007: 140). Accordingly, they have employed ethnographic methods such as participant observation, interviews, open-ended surveys, and textual analysis of posts or websites to investigate online audience cultures and activities. Building on various ethnographic studies on online audience groups, this study involves two ethnographic techniques in the online context— participant observation and discourse analysis of message content— to thoroughly describe fans' online culture and activities that are text-based and to enhance its validity (Baym, 2000; Gaskins, Miller, & Corsaro, 1992). The use of online ethnography is to capture Korean online fans' everyday experiences of *Gossip Girl* in their natural setting, since it is the online space that they watch the series, play with it, talk about it, and engage in various fan activities with other fans (Hine, 2000).

My participation in Gossip Girl Gallery began in January of 2009, seven months before this study commenced, and it continued through 2009 when *Gossip Girl* aired its third season. My participant observation provided the background to interpret the language and social meanings fans create and further 'facilitate[d] certain understandings and forms of access impossible through other positioning' (Jenkins, 1992: 6). To provide a detailed account of this subculture, I visited and participated in the forum at least three times a week. This included hanging out with the participants and observing their activities, reading their posts, and taking extensive notes while visiting (e.g., boyd, 2008; Hine, 2000). Following the way Korean fans watched the series, I watched *Gossip Girl* episodes with subtitles that fans produced, to fully understand their viewing experiences, and went online after I saw the episodes to take part in and observe fan discussions. Throughout the project, I kept detailed field notes by recording all accounts and observations to develop a nuanced understanding of what it means to be a participant in the forum. Yet, I also tried to remain sensitive to the flow of communication to reduce 'the observer effect' (Black, 2008).

In addition to participant observation, I also collected and analyzed online messages and interactions that reflect my research questions, given that online communication exists mostly in written form. Thus, the analysis below is based upon a three-month period of participant observation, from August to November in 2009 and a systematic analysis of

online posts fans posted from September 19, 2007 to November 10, 2009 when eight episodes of *Gossip Girl* Season Three aired in the United States. The number of topics in that time span was 780. I subjected the messages to a textual analysis, trying to find patterns or themes in the fans' interactions and communications about the drama and American culture using Creswell's (2007) constant comparative method. As all the participants communicated with each other in Korean, all of the observed events and analysis were conducted in Korean, so as not to lose any meanings in and around their texts. Translation was done after the analysis to cite participants' writings in this article, and all screen nicknames have been changed to protect the participants' identities. In my discussion below, I highlight the most salient themes that emerged regarding Korean fans' understanding of *Gossip Girl* and online fandom and identity construction.

Watching *Gossip Girl* and developing identities

Korean *Gossip Girl* fans' comments and participant observation suggest that almost all regular community members watched the third season by illegally downloading it via peer-to-peer file-sharing networks. For some fans, this was the main reason to come to this online community—to find and share information about where to find recordings of new *Gossip Girl* episodes. Fans were impatient to wait for broadcast on Korean cable channel OnStyle, which would air the series only after the whole season finished airing on CW in the U.S. Also, the official CW *Gossip Girl* site that offered its latest six episodes was only available to those viewing within the U.S., thus, many Korean fans decided to actively find recordings of the third season's new episodes on the Internet instead of waiting until the local television network would air the show for them months later. Watching new episodes of their favorite television show almost in real time also seemed to stand for their loyalty for the series and grant them special status within the group.

Participant observation also revealed that after downloading recordings of new episodes, fans tended to watch them independently, mostly using their computers. This is not to suggest that their viewing-experiences of *Gossip Girl* were somehow *asocial*; on the contrary, the viewing experience was never complete until fans had a chance to go online to discuss it with others. Many fans posted a thread on the forum right after they watched a new episode to share their thoughts and to interpret the meanings of it with other fans. *Gossip Girl* viewing was, then, an individual but also collective activity in that fans understand the program in large part through participating in online discussions (see also Baym, 2000; Jenkins, 1992, 2002; Murray, 2007). This indicates that the Internet has changed television viewing experience of many fans who possess the skills to actively use it to find, watch, and discuss television; For many young audiences, television viewing activity has become an online activity that is more participatory and collaborative. Online discussions with other fans seemed to be valued more than individual experiences of *Gossip Girl*, because of their role in facilitating new interpretations and providing a sense of belonging. One participant, for example, posted that she thinks she makes sense of the show 'in a new light, sometimes in a totally different way, when [she] talk[s] about it with

[other fans].’ As a result, in line with Liebes and Katz’s (1995) finding that mutual aid occurred in the decoding of a global media text, *Dallas*, among local audiences, *Gossip Girl* Gallery served as an interpretive community through which fans understood the series. *Gossip Girl* fans’ viewing experiences, as members of the Korean online fan community, may not be the same as viewing it as regular television viewers, since the community includes knowledge of the interpretive conventions and collaborative ‘meta-text’ used to read it (e.g., Jenkins, 1992). The fact that most of them watched the show with subtitles that fans had created adds the importance of this interaction and mutual aid, as subtitles were not always flawless, which will be discussed later.

The first episode of the third season of *Gossip Girl* premiered after almost a four-month break from the second season. Korean audiences, who were not yet accustomed to the American season system, were less familiar and patient with this break. Thus, in the beginning of the new season, they actively used the forum to make sense of the previous seasons in relation to the newly airing episodes. Frequent questions about old storylines or the histories of the characters, which fans often forgot, filled up the forum as the new season began to air. Some fans, who had a strong desire to know how the stories would unfold, provided reports from American websites that offer spoilers or summaries of interviews with the *Gossip Girl* cast, to share with other fans. Others also posted lists of previous appearances of the cast members, reviews of *Gossip Girl*, and audience reactions to new characters in America. Also, unlike some fans in the U.S. who use the characters or the setting of the show to create a new story (i.e. fanfiction), *Gossip Girl* fans in Korea produced hypothetical casts of Korean *Gossip Girl* to develop a Korean version of the series. Interestingly, in a number of hypothetical casts that fans offered, they tried not to deviate from the original cast of American *Gossip Girl* and found Korean actors who had similar images or personas. Yet, the transformation of cast extended further into the transposing of space and the creation of a new story, which reflects Korean fans’ desire to make the story more relevant to their lives. For example, while taking the same format, Korean *Gossip Girl* fans created takes place in Gangnam District in Seoul, a Korean approximation of NYC’s Upper East Side, and usually focused more on the school life of the characters. Although their transcultural remaking of the original text was only for their enjoyment, it also facilitated a level of re-interpretation of the original plot and characters and broadened fans’ understanding of the series.

This fan community focused around the ‘collective’ production, debate, and circulation of meanings (e.g., Jenkins, 2006b); the site provided an environment in which fans could discuss the series with like-minded people to get a better understanding of it and to express their thoughts and ideas. Also, despite their clear awareness and discussion of the consequences of illegal video downloading and sharing, Korean fans often used the site to share the recordings or information about where to find the newly aired episodes to watch them almost in real time. Lastly, the site opened up a hybrid space where these young fans could fuse aspects of Korean and American media cultures to create their own texts based on the series.

Although Korean *Gossip Girl* fans emphasized in their posts that they felt close to the characters, they also expressed a strong interest in the American culture depicted in the series, possibly due to its perceived difference from Korean culture. Some fans, who had no first-hand knowledge of the U.S. culture, perceived *Gossip Girl*'s representation of American culture as 'real' and posted questions like 'I'm in Season Three, and I'm wondering if American people always cheat on their partners? From Season One to Two, [the characters] constantly switch their partners, so I'm curious,' and 'Dan said that B doesn't look good in hairbands. Do Americans have like a stereotype or negative image of hairbands?' Consequently, many of their discussions revolved around the accuracy of TV representations and differences and similarities between media representation and reality, which can be seen in the exchanges below.

KK: Are American people so cool just like that? I understand that they can be cool 'individuals', but I really CAN'T understand Dan seeing Georgina again who screwed up Serena's SAT exam and Serena being so cool about it. And Lilly is dating Rufus again right after her husband's death.

No name: You know it's just a drama. It's not real America, and some American GG viewers also criticize it for misrepresentation. We never say all Korean girls are going to be Cinderellas even though there are so many Cinderella love stories in Korean dramas, right?

wwlf: How come American middle and high schoolers are so mature physically and mentally? Koreans won't be able to compete with them.

S: But an important thing is that not all 'real' Americans are as mature as *Gossip Girl* characters!

Frequently, fans' discussions went beyond representation/reality and revolved around the differences between their local and American/Western cultures. For example, as beauty is an integral part of Korean culture which 'occupies a level of unprecedented social significance in Korea' (Kim, 2003: 104), many fans were interested in different beauty standards in American/Western and Korean cultures.

123: I don't understand why Chuck who is chubby took off his clothes in the episode! No biceps at all, only swollen belly -- who wants to see his body then?

Yep: It is wrong to think that one can expose his or her body only if he or she has a perfect figure (even though [Koreans] are kinda obsessed with that way of thinking!) In fact, when you go to the beach in the States, you would see that

almost everybody's wearing bikinis regardless of their shape. American people seem to care less about how other people look at their figure than Koreans do.

It was precisely this recognized difference between American and Korean cultures that often provoked much of fans' thinking and instigated intense discussions about Korean values and identity. Fans, for instance, repeatedly compared the teenagers' lives, cultural norms and customs, popular cultures, media systems, and histories of two different countries to understand the meanings of the aired materials and American culture. Thus, Nounou posted, 'I've become more keenly aware of the cultural differences between America and Korea as I began watching *Gossip Girl*.' As a result, *Gossip Girl* and discussion surrounding it provided Korean fans with 'access to cultural difference' (Strelitz, 2003: 249), helping them to think more critically about their own lives and cultures.

One lively discussion about Korean culture and identity took place when a middle-aged Korean woman made a short appearance as a manicurist in the sixth episode of Season Three ('Enough About Eve'). At first, the discussions revolved around the surprise of the appearance of a Korean woman in the episode. Soon after, people began to express frustration over the poor representation and even criticized *Gossip Girl* for not providing a positive representation of minority groups in the U.S. Comparing the positive portrayal of Japanese culture (i.e., food, fashion, technology, etc) in *Gossip Girl* as trendy, stylish, and rich to that of Koreans as weak, poor, and working-class made Korean audiences even more frustrated due to the ongoing rivalry between Japan and South Korea since its independence from Japan. For example, Me Dude posted, 'It's kind of sad to see that Koreans are, for the most part, poor on American television,' and fdf also echoed this sentiment, 'Japan is high class and Korea is foot massage? So sad.' Z shared that he or she wanted to see 'smarter and more successful Koreans, not those manicurists' on American TV. As the discussion intensified, however, Korean fans began to discuss how American television generally depicts Korean culture and how it might reflect the reality of Korean people's lives and social status in the U.S. Through ongoing discussions on the depiction of Korean culture on American television, fans explored the relationship between the representation of Koreans' lives in media and Korean's social status and real lives in Western countries. In the end, many tried to, or wanted to, view the Korean representation in a positive light, concluding that in fact the representation of a Korean person as manicurist was based, at least in part, on reality and it was better than no representation at all, since they enjoyed seeing some Korean things in their favorite television show. Thus, fans had to remain somewhat ambivalent about the ways Korean people and culture are portrayed in the U.S. media:

Umi: I think Blair said 'nagaseyo (get out)' to a Korean manicurist in this episode, am I right? Of all people, why does the manicurist have to be Korean??????????

Mr. Rat: Because Koreans are kind of popular in the manicure business...maybe??

Macro: My cousin who had immigrated to the States opened a nail salon in New York a few years ago. She said it's to some extent common for Koreans to work as manicurists in the US. ... Hmm. So I guess the representation of Koreans who live in the U.S. is not all wrong here.

Blah: No need to feel depressed over it. Nail art is NOT a bad or poor job, right? I heard that some immigrants work as janitors or housekeepers, some work as delivery guys, and Koreans work as manicurists because they are good at nail art! Isn't it better than just being cleaners or delivery guys?

Helenna: *Gossip Girl* producers seem to be interested in Korean culture quite a lot. ... You could consider it an interest in Korean culture, I guess.

This ambivalence was heightened when fans, despite their frustration over poor representation of Korean people in *Gossip Girl*, expressed their enthusiasm for the appearance of Korean brands and manufactured goods in the show. The frequent appearances of cell phones made by Samsung and LG, Korean companies famous for their electronic goods, enabled Korean fans to see their local companies' success in the world market and through such appearances they were able to imagine themselves as powerful as Korean products and brands participating in the global culture.

Participant observation also revealed that when it comes to beauty, there was a preference for Blair (played by Leighton Meester) over Serena (played by Blake Lively) among Korean fans in the online community. Even though the storyline of the show mostly revolves around Serena, who is popular in America for her free and rambunctious personality with a beautifully long blond hair and a glamorous body, Blair's big eyes, brown long hair, and girly fashion style, which are perceived as 'beautiful' in the Korean cultural context, captivated Korean fans. In other words, considering Blair's selfish and snobbish personality, the preference for Blair over Serena can be attributed to the fact that Blair resembles the Korean beauty standards more than Serena does. Blair was so popular among Korean fans that she even shot a print ad for ASK, a Korean clothing company. Blair's popularity in Korea points to the importance of local values and beauty standards in understanding the Korean fandom of *Gossip Girl*.

In line with Black's (2008, 2009) assertion that cross-cultural media consumption and online fan communities can have important positive identity consequences for youth, the Korean *Gossip Girl* fans' comments and discussions reveal that *Gossip Girl* and the online *Gossip Girl* talk exerted a powerful influence on the development and negotiation of their identities. Through discussing American culture and a Korean character depicted in the show with others in the online community, fans were able to consider the ways American

culture and media represent Korean culture, which offered them with opportunities to look at their local culture from a different perspective in ways that local media may not. Thus, it can be said that Koreans' consumption of American media promoted a process of self-realization and a deeper understanding of their own culture by allowing them to take some distance from it vicariously and compare it to mediated representations of other cultures (e.g., Thompson, 1995; Strelitz, 2003). As a result, the *Gossip Girl* online fan community can be seen as a hybrid space where young people construct identities by comparing their local with American cultural values, adopting some aspects of American culture, and strengthening some aspects of their own culture. In the next section, I explore how fans engaged in fansubbing activity and developed linguistic and technical competencies, another factor I believe contributes to identity development among Korean young fans of *Gossip Girl*.

Language, voluntary learning, and fansubbing

Among Korean fans, *Gossip Girl* was appreciated as a good English learning tool to overcome frustration about the current English education in Korea that focuses mostly on reading and grammar. Frequent discussions on the community about issues of English language and American culture demonstrated that they used the series to learn conversational English that is usually not addressed in their classrooms. The voluntary and collaborative English learning in the fan community made the learning process more pleasurable, since it afforded a great deal of agency as they could more actively display and develop their linguistic and cultural competencies. Although most fans watched the series with Korean subtitles and communicated with each other in Korean on the forum, they grew their English skills in various ways not only by discussing English words and idioms and American culture depicted in the series but also by re-watching the series with English subtitles, or without them, reading and sharing English articles about it from American popular sources, and/or participating in the production of subtitles, which will be discussed in detail.

Participant observation suggests that many fans used *Gossip Girl* and the community to learn American English pronunciation and accent, because they believed, as Ne Pros insisted, '*Gossip Girl* especially does a good job of showing the beauty of American accent.' However, it was often difficult for them to help each other with pronunciation or accent, because of the limitations of their communication on the message board. Not being able to listen or speak aloud in the forum occasionally prevented successful or satisfactory teaching and learning than in a face-to-face environment. Nevertheless, Korean fans enjoyed practicing and improving their spoken English skills, as they perceived the fan community as a place where they could be vulnerable and wrong, unlike in the formal school settings. In addition, they were greatly interested in learning and teaching each other urban words or idioms that are used mostly by young people in the U.S. An example of such learning is apparent in the following exchanges.

DD: I heard 'Bama, bama'. What does it mean? Maybe I didn't hear it correctly.

Bkt: You mean, Obama?

Me Dude: I've been thinking about this for two days. Perhaps, I think you're talking about 'bummer,' right? Like, 'that's a bummer, what a bummer' or just 'bummer!' It's used when you feel sorry or like a sense of frustration?

Me Bro: What does 'train wreck' mean?

PurpleNom: I think it is used when there is a miscommunication. Literal meaning of it is a type of disaster involving one or more trains, but it can mean something really intense. Used when you blame something... According to Wiki, train wrecks often occur as a result of miscommunication, as when a moving train meets another train on the same track; or an accident, such as when a train wheel jumps off a track in a derailment; or when a boiler explosion occurs.

Baym (2000) argues that while in theory all participants in the fan community are equal, '... group values make some forms of cultural capital more valuable than others and, hence, lend those with such capital greater status' (159). Providing information about the series' events can serve as a form of such capital among fans (Baym, 2000; Hobson, 1989); thus, some fans, who constantly provided information about the show's latest twists, ratings, and interviews of actors and directors from American media, were granted special status within the group. Cultural capital in *Gossip Girl* Gallery is also closely related to English skills, because one needs to be fluent in English to supply updates from American media. It was this group of participants, who were able to give answers to questions about English language and Western or American culture, that gained increased recognition and admiration, especially in the Korean context where English skills are regarded as essential. They played an important role in facilitating an environment in which fans could help each other improve their English skills as English learners.

Korean fans, to some extent, appeared to be aware that the language and conversations in *Gossip Girl* are scripted talk produced by the media industry, and not necessarily consistent with natural conversation, as expressed in their discussion of *Gossip Girl*'s ratings, storyline development, target audience, and representation of American culture. Despite their awareness of the scripted nature of *Gossip Girl*, fans tended to ignore this because of the affective pleasure of learning English through the series in the community. After all, *Gossip Girl* English was seen as more 'real' for them than English taught in the formal education settings in Korea. The emotional pleasure, as well as knowledge, resulting from the process of learning English language through the show has also played an important role in sustaining their interest in the series and learning spoken English.

Unlike watching foreign programming on local channels, when people watch American drama on the Internet, subtitles are usually not automatically provided; this is certainly the case for programs not yet aired on Korean television. Thus, to understand the new episodes, many Korean fans of *Gossip Girl* had to wait until Korean subtitles are produced for them. Some challenged themselves to improve their English skills by watching the episodes without subtitles; while a few, who possessed the English and computer skills good enough to make subtitles, teamed up to produce subtitles every week, right after each episode aired in the U.S. These Korean subtitles were, then, distributed and spread through the Internet with an acknowledgement of the collective efforts of the subtitle producers.

During my participant observation, it became clear to me that the production of subtitles, or fansubbing, for the show they liked derived in large part from the desire to view the show almost in real time and contribute to the community. The *Gossip Girl* subtitle team consisted of six to eight members who played different roles, such as translation, editing, synchronizing, and spelling check, and it typically took about two to three days to complete their work and provide the subtitles for other fans to share. However, it should be noted that these subtitles were never flawless; as amateur subbers, the team frequently made mistakes, and some subtitles did not synchronize well with the sound and action. Thus, a number of other fans also contributed to the fansubbing process by commenting on the newly produced subtitles and sending editing requests. For instance, Sugarr posted an editing suggestion, 'Can you make subtitles in .smi form instead of .srt form? Some portable devices cannot read .srt files... if you could make subs in .smi form, more Korean fans would be able to watch the series with your subtitles!' The imperfection of fansubs seemed to intensify fans' discussion of issues involved with fansubbing practices, English, American culture, and the series, which not only encouraged them to learn about various dimensions of translation and fansubbing but also offered opportunities to develop new linguistic and cultural competencies.

The discussions about subtitles in *Gossip Girl* Gallery also point to fansubbers' strong desires to learn English through fansubbing. As some fans posted, it was perceived as the most active and useful way for learning English. Fansubbers' English skills were strong enough to understand most of the episodes without subtitles; however, translating English into Korean was never an easy task even for them because they had to possess not only good English skills but also Korean skills and a clear understanding of cultural differences to be able to adequately translate the series. Thus, fans often suggested fansubbers 'check rules of Korean language when you make subtitles.' The importance of Korean language skills and cultural knowledge in fansubbing is expressed in the exchange below:

Me Dude: To understand English and to translate it into another language is totally different. Sometimes, I don't know how to make a good translation even though I know its meaning. Because some expressions are not easy to translate, it is likely that translating one 10-minute part of the episode will take twenty to

thirty minutes.... You need to be really good at both English AND Korean and see the connections between those languages. It's definitely not an easy job.

Mef Losi: I totally agree with you, Me Dude. I don't translate drama because of its length, but given my experience of translating pop music lyrics, I can totally understand that it takes a LONG time to sub a drama. There are so many new words, new slang and Internet words, which are difficult to translate.

RingaDinga: I know! It is only easy in theory... You know, sometimes, I struggle with ONE expression for, like, thirty minutes.

Consequently, fansubbing offered opportunities for fans to develop and practice not only their English skills but also their existing Korean skills, which helped them construct powerful identities as knowledgeable translators who are proficient in both languages and cultures and active agents who produce their own works based on the provided texts. Although the ways fans practiced their English language skills by watching and creating subtitles for *Gossip Girl* can be understood as a 'very conscious' hybridization process (Pieterse, 2002: 688), because they actively mixed global and local cultural specifics together, improving their Korean language competences through fansubbing was a less conscious process. Thus, interestingly, the Korean language development should be understood as a by-product of the local/global dynamics and of participation in American media fandom, which can have a significant influence on their cultural identities. Writing about her ethnographic study in India, Parameswaran (1999) argues that Western romance reading in English in India 'automatically places [readers] in the realm of middle- and upper-class popular culture because in India's postcolonial situation, fluency in English and the ability to read [English-language media] are privileges associated with the urban upper and middle classes' (86). In the context of Korea where English proficiency is valued as an important skill, English learning by *Gossip Girl* fans and fansubbers, who also practiced and expressed their English skills by watching the show in English and producing subtitles for it, thus, can be argued to be connected to the process of their identity formation as urban, modern, and cosmopolitan Korean.

Korean *Gossip Girl* fans' comments and discussions on American culture and English reveal that they use the community as a means of developing their English language abilities. In line with findings of previous research that young fans of global media construct positive identities through growing new forms of linguistic and cultural abilities in online communities (see Black, 2008; Darling-Wolf, 2004a), Korean fans of *Gossip Girl* demonstrate that they took active roles, as English learners and teachers, in improving their English skills, particularly conversational English skills that are not the focus of Korean formal education, and in collaborating for producing subtitles for untranslated episodes of *Gossip Girl*. The participants' comments further illustrate that such activities have indeed impacted their

learning of Korean language and culture, encouraging some level of rediscovery and reinterpretation of the elements of Korean culture and their identity.

Discussion

Through analysis of the Korean *Gossip Girl* fan community online, I have explored the ways the community provides a variety of opportunities for informal learning. Most importantly, I observed that the participants learned about themselves through discussions with other fans, through their own writings on the forum, through developing English language abilities, and through collaborating to produce subtitles for newly aired episodes, all of which impacted the course of the formation of their identities as active participants in the global culture with useful knowledge and skills. In particular, these young fans were able to construct powerful identities by using the community as an alternative space where they took an active role in learning American culture and developing conversational English skills, which are highly valued in Korean society but still not stressed in most formal educational settings. Their ongoing formation of identities was also influenced by the development of technical skills and knowledge from participating in various fan activities including fansubbing. This online fan community, where, unlike the Confucian Korean cultural contexts, young Korean fans' voices mattered and were heard regardless of their age, class, gender, and education level (e.g., Jenkins, 2006a; Murray, 2007), was seen not only as a *knowledge community* (Jenkins, 2002), where their knowledge is aggregated and used to produce, but also as a pleasurable and engaging place where they can openly discuss the series they like as fans, critics, and producers and explore and develop their sense of self.

In line with Straubhaar's (2007) assertion that the cultural impacts and uses of global media can be understood in terms of 'a twin process of hybridization and formation of multiple layers of identity among audiences' (5), the analysis demonstrates that Korean *Gossip Girl* fans acquired 'new layers of identity that are transnational, or global' (221) while simultaneously maintaining and reinforcing aspects of identity that are local through their cross-cultural media consumption and fan activities. That is, although television drama and the online community were employed as an effective means to improve English language skills and gain a good understanding of American/Western culture, it is evident that they also encouraged the development of Korean language skills and a deeper, or fresh, understanding of their local cultural environment and identity, thus strengthening the layer of the local. As American culture depicted in *Gossip Girl* appeared rather different from Korean culture, the series and fan discussions surrounding it helped fans recognize and discuss such differences and heightened their understanding of the local culture. Fan discussions of American culture depicted in *Gossip Girl* provided a critical frame with which to view their own local culture and fan interactions and online activities such as fansubbing promoted a process of deeper levels of realization and understanding of the Korean language and culture, an unexpected by-product of participation in global media fandom.

As a result, the analysis suggests that global media fans' ongoing process of identity exploration and formation was the result of a much more complex relationship between the

global and the local, and further highlights the role of language development in such a process. Bourdieu (1990) defined linguistic capital as 'the mastery of and relation to language' (114), a form of embodied cultural capital representing a means of communication and self-presentation gained from one's surrounding culture. Language spoken by the *Gossip Girl* characters was seen as more 'real' or 'correct' English, a form of cultural capital that could enable fans to gain social power and prestige in Korea. Thus, online Korean fans of *Gossip Girl* saw the series as a tool to learn English and took part in various fan activities that are participatory, collaborative, and informative. The use of *Gossip Girl* to develop English language skills was rational, conscious, and intentional. Strengthening Korean language competencies through participating in *Gossip Girl* fandom, however, was not always consciously recognized and might not be intended; yet, it helped them form an important part of their sense of who they are as urban, modern, and pop cosmopolitan Korean. The present study, thus, demonstrates the need for critically investigating language learning through global media consumption as an integral component of identity formation, and more importantly how such process does not only entail the appropriation, reinterpretation, and adaption of new language and cultural concepts; it also entails the development of local language skills and the rediscovery and/or reinterpretation of the elements of local culture, which can promote a process of self-realization and negotiation. In other words, although previous research focuses on the development of new cultural and linguistic skills through cross-cultural fan activities, this study argues that what may be equally, or more, important about global media fandom is its ability to provide opportunities to develop existing linguistic and cultural skills which can necessarily have significant impact on the construction of fans' identity. The impact of media globalization cannot be seen simply as a cultural homogenization, but more accurately as a complex interaction between the global and local (Kraidy, 2003, 2004), and it is crucial to examine the role of linguistic and cultural capital in the process of identity formation.

Despite these findings and contributions, there remain two basic limitations inherent in this study. First, it is based on participant observation and discourse analysis with no other methods supplemented. Another limitation of the present study is its reliance on a short period of participant observation, potentially weakening its validity. A longitudinal ethnographic study of the *Gossip Girl* fan community with interviews and surveys would provide a more in-depth account of Korean fans of *Gossip Girl*. The complex ways that young Korean fans of *Gossip Girl* constructed cultural identities contribute to the relatively small body of work on non-Western fans of global media, and the impact of voluntary learning of new language and culture through popular media on the understanding of local language and culture suggests yet again that there is much work to be done in this understudied area. Future research must begin to develop a framework for understanding how audiences' and fans' experience with global media and participation in cross-cultural online fandom impact the process of identity development. As new media continues to provide them with greater opportunities to access and participate in global media fandom

(Baym & Burnett, 2009; Jenkins et al., 2013), it becomes more essential that we discover various kinds of identity constructing and cultural learning process.

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