

Abstract

A Study on the Gender Awareness and Attitude of Youths through Peer Culture (Ⅱ): Focusing on Digital Contents and Online Culture

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1. Introduction

It is important to understand online culture in grasping the peer culture of youths in an era where online culture overwhelms offline one. In this situation, various types of discrimination and misogynistic abuse are in fact occurring online, part of which feeds back to the offline world. In this respect, analyzing adolescents'

online culture from a gender perspective is essential in propagating the perception of gender equality in our society and identifying related obstacles. In fact, as teenagers use PCs, tablets, and smartphones more often and for longer periods of time while social network services (SNS) are becoming important means of communication among peers, the risk of exposure to online hate crimes and digital sexual violence has been on the rise. With such circumstances as background and motivation, this study analyzed the phenomena and characteristics of youths' online culture, such as digital contents used by adolescents and interactions with those surrounding them from a gender perspective.

With the recognition of this problem, this study inquired about the following: what kind of activities adolescents do through the media and what are the meaning of them; what kind of gender perspective do those digital contents they enjoy watching include and how they are accepted by adolescents; how the ecosystem surrounding their online culture is working. To this end, this study attempted to ascertain as follows: analysis on the media usage of adolescents and the significance there of through using previously surveyed data; big data analysis of teenagers' Twitter posts from January 2019 to June 2021 to understand their everyday online lives from a gender perspective, as well as an FGI (26 people in 5 groups) to uncover adolescents' daily digital lives; investigation into most popular youth contents that range from YouTube to online games, and to webtoons among teenagers. In addition to the analysis of the contents itself, this study carried out FGIs in a bid to grasp the opinions and interactions of adolescents on those contents they use (36 people in 6 groups). In the case of online games, sexist language that occurs during playing is problematic, so online field study was conducted in tandem with it (2,300 minutes for 2 months). In addition, this study

regarded adolescents' online culture as the influence of the huge online production market and attempted to understand the online production and distribution of online contents market. To this end, an FGI was conducted for online content producers, such as game companies, webtoon authors, and YouTube creators, and the teachers who teach media to teenagers. Finally, based on the above, this study identified and derived policy suggestions for shaping an online culture conducive to gender equality.

2. State of media use among youths

With the growing availability of digital devices, not only has the online accessibility of teenagers become greater but also the time of their usage has increased. The closer the relationship between smartphones and adolescents' daily lives gets, the higher becomes the online dependence of adolescents on online. The percentage of respondents who said they had smartphones among mobile phones increased by 13.7%p from 80.3% in 2019 to 94.0% in 2020, and the usage time more than doubled from 73.3 minutes in 2105 to 157.6 minutes in 2020. Not only is this a matter of increasing media usage time, but online life is becoming completely commonplace for teenagers. Currently, teenagers are collecting information through YouTube or SNSs, forming public opinion, and further producing and delivering information directly.

Adolescents show gender differences in their attitude toward ways of enjoying digital contents. Male teenagers generally use online games, while female employ SNSs. In particular, sexist views are often found in game contents, Male teenagers are more tolerant of hate comments during games than female teenagers and have a stronger

discriminatory view on female game players. More than a few teenagers are experiencing hateful expressions online, and they are also becoming perpetrators themselves. Particularly, online games are becoming a key medium where in such unacceptable expressions are broadcast in real time.

According to a survey on video platforms used over the past week, 98.1% of respondents said they watched YouTube. This level of response firmly shows that it is deeply enmeshed in teenagers' lives and even functions as a network because they share real-time videos and replies with content producers and other sharers. However, in that 85.8% of teenagers said they viewed YouTube's recommended videos, there are risks that platform algorithms may limit users' subjectivity, and eliminate opportunities to access diverse issues provided from various perspectives, which may lead to prejudice or stereotypes.

On the other hand, as adolescents' online activities increase, instances of victimization such as cyberbullying, sexual harassment, gender discrimination, hate speech, and grooming are taking place. Cyberbullying has gradually become more common among female students as more of them are experiencing bullying, harassment, stalking, or sexual harassment more frequently than male adolescents are. In the case of elementary school students, the rate of response regarding bullying and harassment rose from 0.9% in 2016 to 1.8% in 2020. In addition, more than half, 52% to 57%, of adolescents are highly worried about online personal information infringement. The overall increase in adolescents' use of harmful media is another concern. 71.9% and 33.9% of teenagers are exposed to adult contents through webtoons and web novels, and more than a third of them said that they were not certified as adults, confirming that it is urgent to establish a safety net with which adolescents are kept from

access to harmful online contents.

3. Online youth culture and gender consciousness

Big data analysis was conducted by collecting Twitter posts of teenagers, and the results of the study designed to understand the online culture and the gender and gender-equal consciousness of adolescents are summarized as follows. First, overall, female adolescents are more active in Twitter posts than their male counterparts, and the change in the amount of mentions is somewhat large. Second, regarding the comments in relation to the interest in gender and gender equality, there tended to be a significance increase, among both males and females, amid the widespread publicization of gender issues in society. Third, Semantic Network Analysis found that criticism on gender-discriminatory acts, including boycotts on misogynistic corporations and criticisms of discriminatory online characters; corset-free movement designed as action plans for changing the gender-discriminatory society; issues related to feminism and sexual minorities; tensions and conflicts centering on feminism in school and peer relationships; hash tag movements calling for stricter punishment on sex crimes reported by media.

In order to examine the online culture and gender consciousness of teenagers, an FGI (26 people in 5 groups) was conducted on teenagers. As a result, we found that the online game culture of male adolescents is very essential for them to maintain friendships, and due to the characteristics of the game, teamwork and aggressiveness, the culture in which players swear while playing is not only widely accepted by them but also quite familiar to them. Second, it was

found that there was a difference in the perception of gender equality between male and female adolescents. Female adolescents still perceived the Korean society as being sexist; although there had been some improvements, they were still worried about violence. On the other hand, male adolescents felt that gender discrimination was a thing of the past; instead, they thought it was men who are currently discriminated against because of policies they saw as preferential to women. Third, we found that there was a gap in understanding feminism between male and female youths. Female adolescents generally thought favorably of feminism. They felt it was unfair to view feminism as hatred of men, and they had a critical stance regarding extreme femal supremacist views.

On the other hand, male adolescents perceived feminism as emotion-based aversion (misandry, female supremacy) and had a culture of deriding feminism. Fourth, this difference in perception of feminism among male and female youths seems to be the result of indiscriminate acquisition of such information that is anonymously created and shared in online spaces segregated by gender. Most teenagers get information about feminism from YouTube, and female teenagers are highly dependent on online information. Finally, we found that school education, which can provide an opportunity to establish equal and democratic relationships in such situations, was not functioning properly.

4. Gender analysis on popular contents among youths

Based on the results of the survey collected in the first year's study conducted in 2020, this study attempted to analyze gender perspectives on popular youth contents in the areas of YouTube, online games and webtoons.

For personal broadcasting, the details and format of contents, thumbnails, and comments were analyzed centering on popular YouTube contents within the past three years, and an FGI was conducted on a total of 12 adolescents, six males and six females, who subscribed to them. The result of this investigation is as follows: First, regardless of gender, the contents that teenagers watched frequently were online games and humor-related. Second, on the other hand, the characteristics of subscription contents by gender were also identified, with male adolescents being limited to online games, humors and exercise (sports), all of which involved channels operated by males. On the other hand, female teenagers were subscribing to various contents, including about pop-idols, playlists (music), TV dramas, entertainment, online games, and humor. In general, there are more male creators than female ones who accounted for about 30%. Third, peer cultures shaped in accordance with gender were in place and YouTube recommendation algorithms worked for the re-creation of peer culture, which motivated teenagers to watch specific contents. Fourth, subscribers viewed the element of 'lulz' in those personal broadcasting as a fun factor that maintains their subscription, and those languages, including of derogatory terms, profanity, and obscenity, informed different preferences depending on gender. Female adolescents preferred "clean contents" which are free of such language, but male ones tended to perceive "clean" as boring. Fifth, cases of hate

speech, sexual harassment, or disparaging remarks led to situations where several personal broadcasters made efforts not to repeat such bad words. In relation to this, male and female adolescents were different about how much they were willing to accept. Sixth, in particular, those contents perceived as 'fun' or 'play,' to which most male youths flock, were highly sadistic and discriminatory. In addition, they bore obscenity and the hidden camera format more than often. Seventh, judging by the viewing frequency rankings, the proportion of female creators was very low, and the scope of the roles taken on by women was also limited. Eighth, even in contents with high youth viewership (e.g. online games), sexual connotations were commonly employed as if it was 'no big deal'. Ninth, in contents frequently viewed by adolescents, heterosexual relationships were portrayed as the most important and interesting. According to our analysis, such settings could provide an environment that instilled views that normalized the perception of women as objects in sexual relationships.

Content analysis was carried out on related online games, mostly regarding League of Legends, PUBG, Overwatch, popular among both men and women. The characteristics of those games were analyzed, in addition to an FGI conducted on a total of 12 people, evenly comprising male and female teenagers. In addition, online participant observation was performed by two monitoring staff. The analysis results can be summarized as follows. First, while playing online games, both male and female teenagers underwent uncomfortable experiences, such as being cursed at without any reason or provoked for no reasons other than gaming skills. As they continued to be exposed to such situations, they later became desensitized to them or simply repeated what they had experienced to other people. Second, online gamers thought it natural to blame team members for

their poor gaming skills, who were strangers with whom they were randomly teamed up while playing. The concern was that such behaviors mostly involved abusive language, sexist comments, and verbal violence. Third, girl students were more blamed or cursed at not only for their poor skills but also for simply their gender. Faced with such abuse, they made corresponding responses to those who misbehaved, chose male characters to conceal their gender, gave up popular games, or played similar games where males did not represent the majority of the player base. In short, they are deprived of the right to play the online games of their choice.

Content analysis was done on six webtoons that were popular among both male and female youths, which showed gender issues or preference difference by gender. The FGI was carried out on 12 male and female students who had subscriptions to webtoons. The selected works are *Self-fighting Study*, *Lookism*, *Dating Revolution*, *Goddess Advent*, *Free Draw*, and *Guide for Proper Dating*, and the analysis on these showed the following results. First, male and female youths showed differences in how they enjoyed webtoons. While they had a common ground in that they enjoyed those works portraying school life, male teenagers preferred action, while females preferred romance. With regard to the medium of enjoyment, male students frequently opted to watch online games, be it on YouTube or other apps, and simply recommended webtoons to their friends; however, female students spent longer time on webtoons than their male counterparts and were more active in writing comments and sharing those web comic books. Second, characters of those webtoons displayed gender stereotypes and obscenity. In particular, all heroines of those six works were portrayed as being attractive, in good body shape, from better-off family backgrounds and devoted to relationships with the main male characters. Third, the objectification

and condescension toward women as portrayed in webtoons preferred by males were analyzed to easily lead to violence against women. Most participants to the FGI said that they were just cartoons and images meant for entertainment, so they did not mind. Fourth, gender differences were identified in those webtoons that dealt with school violence or school gangs. Boys seemed accustomed to school violence in webtoons and felt that there would be no problem so long as young students did not imitate what they saw.

They thought it natural that such materials bore violent elements. On the other hand, female students said that they witnessed some male students imitate in real life what webtoon characters did in such works, and thus expressed a sense of concern regarding the glorification of school gangs and bullies. Fifth, FGI results showed that adolescents tended to underestimate the impact of webtoons as they regarded them as part of "Snack culture," where teenagers reject webtoons they do not like in the first place and skip or quickly turn pages and scenes they find uncomfortable. Sixth, they left comments on webtoons as they think this is a critical way of interacting with authors and other readers. For their parts, the creators answered readers' questions and gave notes in their works, while adjusting their stories in consideration of such reactions.

5. Analysis of the production and distribution environment of digital contents for youths

Adolescents do not lead consumption in the online market because of their poor spending power; rather, they are influenced by mainstream online culture. In the recognition of the need to understand the production of digital contents and the provision of

platforms, this study conducted in-depth interviews with content creators, including game producers, YouTube creators, and webtoon authors and experts on the production and distribution process of digital contents for youths (20 people in 9 groups). Interview results are summarized as follows:

First, at least for online game companies, teenagers do not come factor significantly in terms of marketing as they cannot consume much, although they do partake in some gameplay. Instead, they serve as promoters themselves because they increase download counts. Thus, online game companies do not develop new games in consideration of teenagers but adults who can afford their creative works.

Second, regarding the reason why those creators frequently employ revealing images and excessively portray the breast and backside of female characters, all of which can be interpreted as an effort for the sexual objectification of women, those males in their 20s and 30s explicitly demand those kinds of details in online games they enjoy, and game companies meet such needs in the hopes of generating revenue. In particular, those elements are more easily found in male-preferred online games. Given that there are no online games created only for male youths, they can infuse them with distorted sexual values.

Third, widespread misogyny, gender discrimination, and sexual harassment occur in online culture, and they also affect production processes. These are commonly found in male-oriented contents, be it on YouTube, webtoons, and online games. In the case of YouTube, the gender bias of streamers and creators directly influences the sexist online culture. The biggest part of online misogyny is the censorship on producers' ideology. The game industry has already begun censoring voice actors and illustrators, establishing censorship

as a mechanism that works for the removal of censored producers from the market. Rather than protecting game creators' personal information and respecting their human rights, they are indiscriminately allow vetos by users to sway decisions.

Fourth, under such circumstances, there is inadequate recourse for the reporting of sexual harassment or hate speech. Since the reporting system within a platform is subject to corporate autonomy, the standards for handling reported issues vary from company to company. And even a single company has different ways to deal with claims, depending on the game. Also, feedback policies on reported issues are not the same; worse, many claims failed to get even a piece of feedback. As such, users do not feel that reporting is efficacious.

Fifth, those review boards, which represent the only tool that can properly control producers, are not working well. The Game Rating and Administration Committee, in charge of reviewing online game contents, does not take into account character's acts, lines, descriptions, and other contextual points but just check the level of revealing images of characters. Even worse, mobile games are not subject to the committee's review, so platform companies review them autonomously. This results in disparate review standards by company. Since there are no clear criteria or indicators for review, companies just operate based on their experiences and intuition. In addition, even if they found questionable content, they would not correct it at the expense of time and money. Instead, they change its rating so that adolescents cannot play.

Sixth, the AI-based platform operation acts as a mechanism that encourages the proliferation of hate in online culture and strengthens adolescents' gender discrimination. This phenomenon is particularly serious on YouTube, where content is provided to viewers on the

basis of their viewing records. So if you watched hateful contents once or twice, you would be directed to more content of similar nature. In particular, the fact that male youths get feminism-related information from Youtube is behind the strong backlash against feminism. The limitations of AI do not stop there. Even if such contents that underscore human rights and equality display violent elements or get "Dislike" hits from sexists, those contents will receive a "yellow card" and thus be pushed off the recommendation list generated by the AI.

Seventh, gender bias that can be identified in online contents and culture is not irrelevant to the organizational culture of platform companies. Game producers and platform companies, most of which have started as ventures, are where decision-makers have strong authority and their opinions are bound to be reflected into contents one after another. In companies of games and platforms, the proportion of female directors is extremely low, and most of their staff is men. Even if women are said to take up half of the total head counts in those companies, it is men who assume the positions of executives and programmers, while women participating in customer satisfaction or arts. Jobs in those work places are on gender segregation.

6. Policy regarding the youth media utilization environment and cases of measures

In relation to the analysis on the online environment of adolescents, this study reviewed domestic and overseas policies related to online activities of children and adolescents, measures taken in the public sector, cases in the educational field, and others. In particular, it explored the state of institutionalization of media

literacy education laws at home and abroad and countermeasures against cyber–violence and digital crimes.

Upon examining youth digital media literacy education in foreign countries, the implications can be summarized as follows. First, in many countries, media education is mandated to be included in regular curricula or operated as part of subjects. In the United States, Australia, Finland, and Germany, education departments and media departments are actively intervening in them. Second, many countries cite the changes in the digital media environment as the context of strengthening media literacy education. In particular, the issue of fake news has motivated the strengthening of media literacy in the United States and Finland since the mid–2010s, which therefore requests direct legislation or policy reinforcement. Third, the media education curriculum saw participation by various educational institutions and civic groups that have been monitoring and producing legacy media for years. Fourth, various tool kits related to media education were provided by civic groups and educational institutions. It seems more important to evaluate and utilize the context significance of each educational curriculum and program than to have a unified plan. Fifth, as plainly shown in the case of Australia, it is necessary to benchmark those cases where broadcasting companies actively work with media literacy education associations and steering committees not only to provide media education programs and content but also to enhance the effectiveness of literacy education through collaboration. Sixth, values such as diversity and gender equality in relation to digital media literacy may be emphasized in the context of the multicultural / multi–ethnic society, as found in Australia and the United States, and may be explained through comprehensive contexts, including digital democracy, as in Germany and Finland. Therefore, in terms of digital

media literacy, discussions will be necessary regarding how to engage issues of gender equality values, diversity, and inclusivity in civic-related approaches.

The following points can be noted in overseas cases of self-regulation. First, there is a strategic approach that actively promotes gender equality values, diversity, and inclusivity from the viewpoint of companies. In particular, given that only recently have Korean companies begun to show interest in value management, many businesses related to media platforms need to demand that the values of gender equality and diversity are to be included in online games. Second, the context for realizing gender equality and the value of diversity is reflected from the perspective of social structure, including the prohibition of discrimination. This can be said to have great implications for Korea, where anti-discrimination legislation is still pending. Third, a growing number of observers have commented Korea needs stronger measures to protect children and adolescents. Reinforcements to the legal system naturally occur when digital sex crimes and various harassment problems against children increase. In relation to this, it is particularly noteworthy to check the cases of the United States and Australia. Fourth, from the perspective of corporate responsibility, interest in effective and practical measures, rather than simple countermeasures against harmful contents, are occurring. This presents a task regarding how to address the current the situation where platform companies include harmful contents to benefit more, which is a question that goes beyond the simple removal or limiting access to certain harmful contents. Therefore, the above findings imply the need for discussions not only for international connection and cooperation for practical solution but also for determining whether or not to put simply treat them as matters for autonomous self-regulation.

7. Suggestions for improvement

Putting all these findings together, this study aims to come up with several policy implications for youths to enhance gender equality consciousness and gender sensitivity while they enjoy digital contents and online culture as well as to shape a gender–equal youth culture that encompasses the online realm.

First, it is necessary to expand media literacy education. To this end, it is worth bringing to attention the UNESCO's educational module that presents those values related to gender equality and to set up women and minority empowerment as active educational paradigms and specific educational contents. Based on this, this study emphasizes media literacy education in the curriculum as a way to strengthen this in school education, secure learning hours and prepare guidelines for it to be actively implemented, and strengthen digital media literacy training for teachers to deliver effective education. In addition, in the course of conducting media literacy education, there should be not only protective policies for teachers but also legal and institutional foundations for stable implementation of the material. It is necessary to emphasize this not only in school education but also in the areas of youth activities. Adolescents need to take the lead in monitoring and transforming their online culture. It will also be necessary to highlight or support media competency activities within various youth support programs.

Second, the system and support for the youth online environment should be strengthened. To this end, greater support for the production of gender–sensitive contents and of legal advice for creators should be provided. Also, other venues of support must be offered that can heighten the gender sensitivity of creators and systemize relevant education, so as to shape an environment where

gender-sensitive contents can be produced. Adding to that, talks about drafting an anti-discrimination act, as a tool for autonomous regulation and its foundation, need to be initiated so that online segregation and hatred are perceived as not individual irregularities but systematic discrimination, in consideration of the rapidly changing online environment. Legal and institutional devices should be prepared in a way that diversifies details of regulations, including including the prevention of children and youth creators from producing adult contents.

Third, there is a need to further activate the autonomous regulation among corporations and the monitoring role of civil society. Since regulations on digital content are closely intertwined with the freedom of expression, there are limitations in the details and method of regulation. Therefore, in order to create a gender-equal online culture, platform companies themselves must approach the issue with a greater degree of civic consciousness. It is therefore required that platform companies need to establish reviewing standards that follows higher ethical standards, and to disclose them to both producers and consumers. In addition, efforts should be made in order to ascertain how contents influence adolescents and other users, in addition to accepting technical accountability should the need arise. In particular, active technical intervention is required for algorithm-based recommendation and the rating / review of contents. Also, efforts are needed to realize a gender-equal organizational culture by companies themselves, such as removing discrimination against women's promotion in their organizations and actively tackling sexual harassment culture. However, the most important thing is that civil society should work with active vigilance in monitoring where or not a gender-equal online culture is in place. It will be a top priority to establish set in

motion a virtuous cycle where civic groups aggressively monitor media activities, which are in turn supplemented with corrective institutional measures.

Research areas: Education, Gender Equality Culture, Gender Equality
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