

Online *ajumma*: Self-presentations of contemporary elderly women via digital media in Korea

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Introduction

Ajumma is a pronoun that refers to middle-aged and married women, but it is more likely to be used as a proper noun that only exists and is used as an everyday word in Korea. The cultural implications of being an *ajumma* cannot be defined in a word and is difficult to translate (Cho Han, 2002), but it can be situated in the Korean cultural and social context. In general, the common elements that consider whether a woman is an *ajumma* is determined by being a certain age range (mid-30s to early-70s), being married and having children, expressing specific behaviours (loud voices, being meddlesome), and adopting certain aesthetics of self-presentation (permed hair, gaudy fashion style). In most cases, *ajumma-rous* women are assigned this status primarily based on their outer appearance. These *ajumma-rous* elements are stereotypical and disdainful but prevalent in Korean society, and *ajummas* are often portrayed as clichés.

This chapter examines the economic and sociocultural history of *ajummas*, how they are represented in the Korean media and culture, and how they subsequently self-present via new media technologies to create their own forms of expression and creativity. In the mainstream media, *ajummas* were used to be represented as objects (Chung, 2008). However, they have become subjects of the media, specifically social media, and they now actively participate in creating their own media culture and communities through the usage of smartphones in their everyday practices. This research examines how the visual self-presentation of online *ajummas* is created on social media such as YouTube.

An economic history of *ajumma*

Women in Korea are subject to the vicissitudes of history. Ideologies surrounding notions of Korean women have gone through various transformations in accordance with general social and cultural shifts in society. Traditionally, Korea was a severely patriarchal society (Park, 2001; Yi Kim, 2001). After the Korean War in 1953, Korea achieved remarkable economic growth in manufacturing (Cho Han, 2000). Women in Korea have contributed to the country's economic development (Kim and Cha, 2003). During the 1950s to 1970s, large numbers of young female workers made a significant contribution to export-led industrialization. Those young girls worked in the factories instead of studying in schools because they had to earn money for their family. They stayed in the factory dormitories and worked all day and sent their income to their siblings, especially their brothers, so that they could be educated at university. Those young girls of the 1960s became the *ajummas* of the 2010s and are mostly in their late 50s to early 70s at present day.

During the 1970s to 1980s, the majority of middle-aged male workers led to the successful growth of the Korean economy (Cho Han, 2000). Back then, traditional gender roles saw a man as a breadwinner and a woman as a housewife. For this reason, it was common for women to retire from work and become full-time housewives after marriage (Yoon, 2001). In addition, the most important duty for married women in Korea was extending the paternal lineage through bearing children (Jang, 2005). Thus, the identities of women were recognized through their children in this patriarchal society (Yi Kim, 2001; Yoon, 1996), and being a 'wise mother and good wife' (Choi, 2009: 1) was the dream image for married women in Korea. For instance, 1988 saw the release of a famous TV commercial featuring Samsung's Video Tape Recorder (VTR). In this commercial, the wife recorded the football match with a Samsung VTR for her husband, who was late to arrive home due to work. When the husband came home, he was so happy to watch the recorded football match that he had missed. At the end of the commercial, the wife says: 'To get your husband's love, it's all up to what you do for him.' This widely circulated TV commercial encapsulated the image of Korean women as good wives who were very supportive of their husband.

From the 1950s through to the 1990s, gender roles in the family were clearly set; in particular, as middle-aged and married women, *ajummas* were mostly represented as holding a peripheral role that supported their husbands and

children rather than living their own lives. In other words, the media framed *ajummas* as ‘professional housewives’ (Yoon, 2001: 82) and ‘professional mothers’ (Kim, 2006: 137). However, alongside the emergence of feminism in the early 1990s, Korean society and Korean women had started to change their old-fashioned ideas about women’s role in society. Since the International Monetary Fund (IMF) bailout in 1997, political views about women have changed favourably towards equality. Former president Kim Dae-jung’s administration (1998–2003) enacted some female-friendly policies that could be viewed as a turning point for feminism in Korea during 1997 (Kim, 2008). Alongside these policies, the economic crisis led to the ‘reversal of traditional gender roles and endangered the stability of the patriarchal nuclear family system’ (Kim, 2008: 392). Due to the worsening economic conditions, women had to come out of the house to work rather than being wise mothers and good wives at home. The ultimate reason for being working mothers was to save the whole nation, as the state asserted that the improvement of each family’s economic condition could be a cornerstone of Korea’s economic growth.

The fallout from the IMF bailout in 1997 can be seen to contribute to the changed social atmosphere of women in Korea. This economic crisis brought not only ‘a challenge’ but also ‘an opportunity’ for women (Kim, 2008: 395). As Kim (2008: 395) explains, more women had become independent because of ‘economic power’, and they were more confident to ‘express their thoughts and desires’. Thus, the traditional Korean gender role of ‘women as homemakers’ (Kim, 2008: 395) had been radically altered with women becoming ‘super women’ who are trapped by ‘the double burden’ (work inside and outside the home) (Bratberg et al., 1998). Simultaneously, women no longer considered themselves as simply ‘stay-at-home mothers’ but rather were more conscious of the financial affairs of their home (Kim and Finch, 2002: 46).

‘Digital *ppal-let-ter*’ as *ajumma*’s communal spaces

Although there is research on the communication practices of middle-aged women in Korea (Kim and Cha, 2003; Kim and Ok, 2004), studies about their communal spaces are rare. These usually include hair salons, cafes, and public baths, where *ajummas* form bonds of sympathy through homosocial conversations. Such public baths are a version of the historic *ppal-let-ter*, a ‘wash place’ designated for doing the laundry pre-1960s, when Korea faced serious

water supply issues. Back then, the *ppal-let-ter* was one of the must-have facilities in every village. Although it was not legally been designated as a female-only space, socially it became adopted as a homosocial space for women in the village to communicate and socialize with each other outside of the surveillance of their homes and their families.

In essence, these *ppal-let-ter* were a sanctuary for women in the village to seek temporary escape from patrilocality and family affairs. Congregating and commiserating with others gave them an outlet to release their stress, share useful information, and foster a sense of community. The *ppal-let-ter* also doubled up as a 'playground' for accompanying children, who would swim, fish, or play around in the water while their mothers were busy with laundry. As such, it served as a communal space for leisure and interaction that generally excluded men by virtue of the domestic duties taking place in the space.

The *ppal-let-ter* of the pre-1960s is analogous to the Kakao Talk groupchat rooms of the present day. As argued by digital ethnographer Larissa Hjorth, text messaging via short message services (SMS) 're-enacts nineteenth-century letter writing traditions' (Hjorth, 2005, cited in Goggin and Hjorth, 2009: 27). SMS and letter writing traditions from the nineteenth century are entirely different ways of communication if compared through their technical aspects. However, when perceived as an extended version of the letter writing traditions, SMS is merely an extension of such communication practices through the use of new technology, such as mobile phones. In this context, Kakao Talk groupchat rooms, social media accounts, and the comments thread of social media posts that serve as homosocial congregational points for women to interact and exchange resources can be framed as an extended, upgraded, and digitalized version of *ppal-let-ter*.

Media portrayals of *ajumma*

In the late 1990s, images of women in various media reflected some changes in traditional Korean gender roles. The television series *Ajumma* (2000) was aired on television network Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) from 2000 to 2001 over fifty-four episodes. In this drama, the main character, Oh Sam-sook, is an *ajumma* who grew up in a family that held to the idea of men dominating over women. After she had married, she lived as a full-time housewife, who assisted her husband with household chores and childcare. But one day, Sam-

sook revolted against her snobbish husband by seeking a divorce and finally lived a life of independence by running a small restaurant. The plot line of this drama about an *ajumma* is very different from previous examples in Korean media – in the 1980s, the media emphasized traditional gender roles so women were usually portrayed as submissive and passive (Nam, 1984). In contrast, this milestone drama tried to change the stereotypical portrayal of *ajummas* through the character of Oh Sam-sook.

Since then, the Korean mainstream media has been marginally changing its portrayals of *ajummas* from the early 2000s. This drama was highlighted as a great stepping-stone for Korean women's rights and interests by the Korean Women's Associations United in 2002. It showed a new perspective about *ajummas* and introduced into the public sphere the possibility of organizing a woman's movement through mediated practices. However, to this day, the representation of *ajummas* in the media is still mostly associated with negative stereotypes. In another popular sitcom, *Old Miss Diary*, the three main characters refused to associate with *ajummas* in the gym because they were 'disordered, shameless and loud'. They degraded *ajummas* in this sitcom through jokes that reiterated negative stereotypes about the women, and the representation of *ajummas* was continuously distorted as stubborn and unchangeable (Chung, 2008).

The representation of *ajummas* in the entertainment media is mostly associated with negative connotations, and this has undoubtedly spilled over into society's impressions about these women (Choi et al., 1999: 57). The caricature of a 'Kim Yeo-sa' is one example of gender prejudice against *ajummas* – literally translating as 'Mrs Kim' in English, it is the derogatory term used to demean female drivers, and especially *ajumma* drivers, condemning them as unskilled and inexperienced regardless of their actual driving skills. Yet, no colloquial words exist for young female drivers or male drivers in general. Such prevailing caricatures do not account for the diversity and heterogeneity of *ajummas*. Even though the representation of *ajummas* in the media is associated with negative connotations, in reality, *ajummas* have been keeping with the times and using internet communities and tools to present their own diversity and lived experiences.

Online *ajummas*

As *ajummas* diversified in their community building, the internet became useful for enhancing the organization of such social groups in both online and offline

settings. Connecting on the internet 'allow[ed] for a greater range of behaviors, a greater number of choices, and a certain ability for creative self-expression that is not possible in other electronic media' (Winokur, 2004: 286). The internet was useful for enhancing the organization of social groups in both online and offline settings, and *ajummas* organized groups or communities for themselves to live their own lives rather than making sacrifices for their family.

Ajummas are now able to self-present themselves without relying on the media and press through the use of diverse online communities and social networks. For example, they use platforms made by *ajummas*, for *ajummas*, and run by *ajummas*, mostly to communicate with each other. In addition, they publish blogs to write their own stories, which allows *ajummas* to have the accessibility of self-presentation. Furthermore, these stories allow the public to witness the multiple voices from a diverse community of *ajummas* themselves, when they were previously confined to mainstream media and entertainment industries.

These practices have culminated in initiatives such as the celebration of an annual *ajumma's day* (31 May) and the launch of the website *azoomma.com* in 2000 for *ajummas* to congregate. Like the *ppal-let-ter*, this website was an online communal space for *ajummas* to seek out communities of interest and interact remotely with each other. Such networks enriched the social lives of *ajumma* as they could pursue a degree of independence outside of the domestic confines of being 'wise mothers and good wives' by engaging in sub-communities such as 'cyber writers', 'azit', and 'herstory'. In these various sub-communities in *azoomma.com*, *ajummas* enrich their personal networks by connecting with other *ajummas* according to their personal interests. Through these platforms, *ajummas* are able to congregate and work on their self-presentation as a group and to present themselves as a coherent but diverse community.

With the advent of new technology, such as smartphones, and thanks to the high penetration rate of smartphones in Korea (Statistia, 2018), *ajummas* are able to go to both online and offline spaces flexibly without the constraints of time and space. In particular, the ecosystem of smartphones is more user-centred than previous mobile phones. Smartphones provide a kind of DIY (Do-It-Yourself) product that allows people to take the lead to and build a user-centric platform. This 'decentralized' and 'user-drive' (cited in Goggin, 2011: 152) platform of smartphones has brought the emergence of diversified activities and movements of culture. At the same time, 'new forms of collaboration, qualitatively different from what they were in the past, are being developed in exciting new directions, with people undertaking new kinds of activities,

representations and instigating new kinds of value' (Goggin, 2011: 156). It is this 'participatory culture' (Jenkins, 2006: 3; Lee, 2010: 266) in particular that led *ajummas* to create new ways of self-presentation through using smartphones and to generate contents such as the 'one person media' broadcasts on YouTube.

Momjjang ajumma

In 2003, an internet celebrity, 'Momjjang ajumma', was ranked first on *Daum.net*, which is South Korea's second-largest web portal. In the Korean language, *mom* signifies a body and *jjang* means perfect or the best, and the moniker aptly described Momjjang ajumma, who was a middle-aged woman who had an impressive feminine figure. She sprung into online fame after having posted photographs of herself on the internet, and Korean netizens applauded her for challenging the stereotype of an *ajummarous* figure. She then started a project on one of the subsections of another popular website *ddanzi ilbo*, cataloguing her journey towards achieving her sensuous figure through a series of working-out videos and stories about her weight loss. The first batch of seven episodes had inspiring titles, such as 'I will bring your spring days again', which implied that Momjjang ajumma would role-model the routes for other *ajummas* to relive the days of their youth. The response to her initiatives was extremely celebratory, and comments and discussion threads about her posts evidenced groups of Korean and Japanese middle-aged women going on their own 'momjjang journeys' (Park, J. D., 2007).

One of the reasons for the success of momjjang ajumma's initiatives is the Korean notion of *uri*. Loosely translated as 'we-ness', *uri* is a form of 'in-group-ness [that is an] essentially relevant feature of Korean collectivism'. These relationships are largely based in one's social networks, especially 'the sophisticated genealogical system, the power of school connections, or regionalism' (Shim et al., 2008: 71). As such, feelings of empathy were a motivating force for encouraging other *ajummas* to repeat momjjang ajumma's feats.

This movement was also facilitated by the rising positive framing of *ajummas* in TV dramas, TV commercials, and films (Min, 2015). During this time, women were also starting to form feminist groups and organizing other movements for gender equality (Cho Han, 2002: 20). An example is the 'Missy' phenomenon – a neologism in Korea that came about in 1993 (Kim, 2008: 394). A 'Missy' generally refers to a young married woman who has a different lifestyle and philosophy than previous generations of conservative married

woman (Cho Han, 2000, 2002; Kim, 2008; Park, S. J., 2007; Yoon, 2001). Missy women have the self-confidence to argue for gender equality – such as the domestic division of labour – with their husbands. Moreover, they do not only take care of their children and husband but also develop interesting lives for themselves. In 1993, the presentation of women in commercials also gradually changed. In particular, one department store's use of the word 'missy' in their advertisement seemed to reclaim the word with their new slogan 'I'm Missy – Grace Department Store'. Following this advertisement, various other TV commercials continue to reframe the image of the Missy as a married woman who invests in effort to look younger through her forward-thinking skills. Such a social atmosphere spawned the formation of different communities for *ajummas*, especially by challenging ageism and notions of youth as beauty.

Park Mak-rye Hal-meo-nee

Park Mak-rye *Hal-meo-nee* is a 73-year-old YouTube star in Korea, who has been creating videos since 2017. The name of her channel on YouTube translates to 'Korea Grandma'; women in Korea who have grandchildren and are aged over 70 are generally referred to as *Hal-meo-nee* (할머니, grandmother). *Hal-meo-nee* are subcategory of older-aged *ajummas*. Park's channel is a good example to demonstrate how online *ajummas* present themselves through using social media, especially the method of using 'one person media' on YouTube. She has uploaded various genres of videos, including *mukbang* (binge eating), *cookbang* (cooking tips), *beautybang* (beauty tips), Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR), and vlogs about her everyday life. In particular, one of her videos, 'my makeup tips when I go to the dentist and then the market later', received more than 1 million views in the first week (Park, 2017a). Most of the YouTube channels in Korea are run by younger Broadcast Jockeys (BJs), especially the beauty channels. However, Park stands out for both her age and her unique content.

Firstly, Park makes public some of the vulnerability and risks associated with an aged person taking on new adventures and broadcasting about their personal lives. For example, in one *mukbang* video she filmed her first experience of eating pasta. Eating pasta is widely considered as more of a younger generation's practice in Korean media and so would be new challenge for someone in her age group. In this video, Park shared some of her thought processes rather transparently despite the risk that she might open herself up

to mean comments and backlash: 'I thought this kind of food is only for people in dramas' (Choi, 2017), she says, revealing that she had not yet 'caught up with the times'. Park explained that while these new adventures were fun in some way, she is also reminded of the hardship she faced in her younger decades that prevented her from living a 'fuller life':

My dream was to be a wise mother and good wife when I was young... But my husband had an affair and left [the] house when my children were young. So I had to bring up three children on my own. I had to work and work for a living everyday. (Park, 2017 cited in Ahn, 2017)

For Park, having her own leisurely time when she was younger was utterly out of the question because of her single-parent familial burdens. Like many other *ajummas*, she devoted herself to her family at the expense of her own self-determination. However, now that she is able to 'live her own life', she wanted to share the new experience with other people, even if these audiences were anonymous strangers on YouTube. While her granddaughter helps her with the technical aspect of producing videos, the content of the videos is Park's actual life as lived daily. In other videos, she takes on new adventures stereotypically associated with younger bodies, such as doing yoga and trying Korean celebrities' makeup tutorials. As she framed these experiences as 'personal challenges' for herself, Park gave people a glimpse into the extensive possibilities of alternative, hidden, or suppressed images of *ajummas*. The primary takeaway from her content is that *ajummas* are resilient and inspired the adage that 'what the young do, *ajummas* can also do'. Thus, Park is an emblem of the mobility and evolution of *ajummas* in Korea through the self-presentation of her daily life on social media. She says:

I hope other older people try to do something they never done before, like me. Just do it. And now, I also can understand younger people's mind[sets] through trying something that [they] like. (Park, 2017b cited in Choi, 2017)

Secondly, Park redefines the fashionable image of *ajummas* through her videos. Although in most cases *ajummas* are judged by their '*ajumma style*' of bad fashion sense, there is no exact definition for this apart from widespread notions that they are not trendy and out of fashion. For example, the use of a sun visor and having permed short hair is a stereotypical symbol of *ajummas*, even if not every *ajumma* wears a sun visor for all occasions. The problem is rooted in the media's over-simplification and over-generalization of *ajummas* as a group rather than as individuals with personal ties.

In one of Park's videos about her make-up tips, she spoke about how she was mistreated by a cosmetics shop assistant: Park had tried to buy a cosmetic pencil at the shop, but the assistant told her that the item was only for younger people. Park pointed out that many of the shop assistants usually recommend old-fashioned things to older people and carry a bias about how *ajummas* are outdated and unaware of changing trends. However, Park defied this stereotype and produced videos focused on applying trendy makeup using the so-called 'younger generation's' favourite cosmetics in her videos, in which she ends up looking beautiful. In the videos, she re-enacts and adapts the trendy makeup style for her age group and contributed to refining the image of *ajummas* as women who are also concerned with beauty and appearances. Moreover, they have the financial ability to beautify themselves, as according to a report by Kantar Worldpanel Korea (Shin, 2016), purchases of colour cosmetics by middle-aged married women is on the rise and their procurement behaviour is similar to that of younger women.

Lastly, Park portrays *jeong* in her videos. *Jeong* is 'an ambiguous and amorphous concept. However, it would be meaningful and invaluable as a psychiatrist to study how this concept came to take root as one of the most significant facets in the emotions and thoughts of Korean people and how it influenced social consciousness' (Chung and Cho, 2006: 47). *Jeong* is a culturally specific concept that is difficult to translate and define, but one of its most crucial elements is the apparent inseparable relation between Korean people and their society. For example, Park may speak in dialect and sometimes uses coarse words, but such a speaking style is not perceived as un-demure or offensive and instead makes the audiences feel *jeong*. This close relationship between Park and her audiences can be approximated with the concept of 'parasocial relations' (Horton and Wohl, 1956), where audiences feel drawn to, connected to, and intimate with her as a public figure.

However, Park's case differs slightly from traditional parasocial relations. Unlike other YouTubers, the viewers of Park's channel consider her as a close, familiar neighbour or relative – such as an aunt, mother, or grandmother – rather than a celebrity. Her content is not anchored in merely providing information such as beauty tips but is centred on the narrative of her personal life stories, where she is the protagonist. Audiences, especially Korean ones, want to be there to celebrate in her achievements and commiserate with her hardship. According to the comments from her videos, the audiences express

that Park reminds them to think about, commemorate, or appreciate their grandmothers. Park herself acknowledges these feelings, having said that: ‘One of the best comments that I love is that, “you remind me of my grandma”’ (cited in Choi, 2017). In this relationship, her audiences can feel *jeong* when Park is viewed as a digital stand-in for their own grandmothers, and sharing in her life stories has enabled her viewers to feel as if they are drawing closer to their own grandmothers.

Conclusion

Despite the historical contingencies that led to their confines within domestic spaces, and in spite of their economic contributions to society, *ajummas* have been unnoticed, overlooked, and overgeneralized in Korea. They have been stereotyped as loud, discourteous, disorderly, shameless, and technologically inept in Korean society, through previously harmful depictions in various mass media products. However, the advent of technology, such as smartphones and groupchats, and platforms, such as YouTube and Facebook, have facilitated the shift from the ‘presentation’ of *ajummas* by others to the ‘self-presentation’ of *ajummas* by themselves.

Although *ajummas* are still a minority consumer group of new digital technologies, they should be reconsidered as an integral and important group of people in Korea for having been the backbone of the family unit and quietly contributing to the country’s social stability and economic prosperity over the years (Kim and Cha, 2003). *Ajummas* may be ordinary middle-aged and married women in Korea, but the history of their resilience and economic contributions are extraordinary. The uptake of digital technology has enabled *ajummas* to once again demonstrate their hardiness, as they congregate in digital *ppal-letter* to seek solace and support outside of the confines of the home, and hone new networks to share resources and seek reprieve despite any geographical or mobility constraints. Further, the growth of positive self-presentations by *ajumma* internet celebrities and social groups online has role-modelled the expansive potential for *ajummas* to focus on their personal development and aspirations despite their late age, this time in front of a watchful audience who supports and celebrates their journey towards being wise mothers, good wives, and adventurous women.

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