Micro-celebrities from the North: Young North Korean defectors’ vlogging on YouTube
by Kyong Yoon

Abstract
By analyzing YouTube channels of young North Korean defectors, this article examines the cultural meanings of social media in these marginalized young people’s resettled lives. The article focuses on four YouTube channels managed by four young North Korean defectors living in South Korea. The four channels show how defectors, a majority of whom remain almost invisible in the South Korean public sphere, use digital platforms to display their identity as real people. Moreover, these channels involve digital storytelling of how the defectors negotiate their inter-Korean identities and interact with South Korean viewers. Furthermore, the four YouTube channels reveal how creative labor is professionalized and incorporated into the digital attention economy. This article suggests that, with some restrictions, such as restrictive technological affordances and profit-seeking algorithm, digital platforms allow defector youth to engage with social media storytelling and question the dominant representation of defectors.

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Introduction
“YouTube is a great teacher!” said Nara Kang in a news interview (BBC World Service, 2020). Kang, a young YouTuber who defected from North Korea and resettled in South Korea in 2014, did not know what social media was before her arrival in the receiving country, but today, she is a social media influencer there. As of 20 June 2021, her YouTube channel, Nolsae Nara, has over 290,000 subscribers, and her Instagram account has over 122,000 followers. She also appears in several broadcast TV programs. As implied by the
YouTube channel title Nolsae Nara, which translates to “Party Girl Nara,” this YouTube channel does not fit the stereotypes and assumptions about North Korean defectors (talbukja) \[1\] in South Korea; North Koreans in general and North Korean defectors in particular have been portrayed by South Korean media as inferior subjects who lack economic and cultural resources and who need to be assimilated to South Korean cultural norms (Kwon, 2018; Won, 2020; Yoon, 2019). The Party Girl Nara channel shows a young, fashionable image of its creator, Nara Kang, who is from a middle-class family background in North Korea and who wants to become an actress. Kang seemed to learn about the world through YouTube during her post-migration period and then became a creator on the platform where she was initially an audience member.

As exemplified by Kang, social media platforms affect how young North Korean defectors are resocialized and engage with the receiving country, South Korea. In the 2010s, over 1,000 North Korean defectors arrived in South Korea annually, mostly through China and other countries such as Thailand, and at the end of 2020, it was estimated that 33,718 defectors live in South Korea (Ministry of Unification of the Republic of Korea, 2020). While defectors are offered South Korean citizenship after a period of investigation, their resettlement in the south and their transition to the southern lifestyle are often challenging (Won, 2020). The poverty rate measured by the number of recipients of the Basic Livelihood Security benefits indicates that in any given year after their resettlement in the south, over 20 percent of North Korean defectors receive these benefits, which contrasts sharply with the South Korean average rate of three percent (Korea Hana Foundation, 2019; Ministry of Health and Welfare of the Republic of Korea, 2021; Ministry of Unification of the Republic of Korea, 2020). In addition to economic difficulties, defectors encounter sociocultural challenges, such as stereotyping, discrimination, and personal trauma, which may severely affect their post-migration lives and well-being (Choi, 2016; Jung, 2018; W.H. Oh, 2015; Won, 2020).

North Koreans have been considered by South Koreans as members of the same Korean ethnicity on the one hand and as members of the politically threatening enemy state on the other hand (Chun, 2020). While acknowledging the ethnic commonality between two Koreas, the mainstream South Korean media has portrayed North Koreans as the distant Other struggling from extreme poverty and the repressive regime. Such representation is extended to North Korean defectors, who are often portrayed as mysterious and potentially dangerous subjects (Chun, 2020; Kwon, 2018; Won, 2020). According to Chun \[2\], in response to the ambivalence and mysteriousness of North Korean defectors, South Korean media tends to “define the North Korean lifestyle as behind that of South Korea by a couple of decades”. That is, by positioning the defectors in a different time frame (a few decades behind South Koreans), the southern media has constructed the defectors from North Korea as new residents who have to be modernized to catch up with the norms and living standards of South Korea.

During the post-migration period, defector youth tend to be relatively open to and quickly access social media to obtain information, figure out their new environments, and generate their own content, compared with the older defector cohort (Choi, 2016). As of 2020, young people under the age of 29 at the time of their arrival in the south constitute 43.6 percent of North Korean defectors (Ministry of Unification of the Republic of Korea, 2020). These young defectors, who are often referred to as the Jangmadang (black market) generation by North Koreans and the South Korean news media, grew up with increasing exposure to South Korean and international media and commodities that were circulated on the black market (Baek, 2016; Zhang and Lee, 2019) \[3\]. While young North Koreans’ “unprecedented access to foreign information” \[4\] is enabled through pirated materials that are stored on USB (Universal Serial Bus) flash drives, CDs (compact discs), and DVDs (digital video discs) (Zhang and Lee, 2019), the public’s use of the Internet is highly restricted. Reportedly, North Korea is the only country that officially bans the Internet (We Are Social, 2020). In North Korea, the Internet is available only to a few thousand people who are in highly prestigious positions (Abt, 2016). Instead of the Internet, the government has allowed a limited number of institutions and individuals to access the national intranet titled Kwangmyong (meaning “bright light” in Korean) (Gerschewski and Dukalskis, 2018); the Kwangmyong net was introduced in 2000 but has been available for a small number of users in urban areas; it was estimated in the mid-2010s that less than 10 percent of the national population accessed the Kwangmyong net, which includes a few thousands Web sites and propaganda content (Abt, 2016; Grothaus, 2014).

Given this context, it is timely to examine how young North Korean defectors engage with social media,
which was never available in their homeland but is pervasively used in their place of resettlement, South Korea. South and North Korea represent two extremes in regard to Internet and social media use. While the Internet is not available for the general population in the north, South Korea has enjoyed exceptionally fast and extensive telecommunication systems. In the broadband era, the country was early to introduce nationwide high-speed Internet, after which smartphone technology and services rapidly developed due in part to the government’s supportive telecommunication policies (Jin, 2017; K.S. Lee, 2011). As of 2018, South Korea had the world’s highest smartphone ownership rate — 95 percent of South Koreans aged 18 or older owned a smartphone, as did 99 percent of those aged between 18 and 34 (Silver, 2019). The country has also been known for its exceptionally active Internet users, who generate, and respond quickly to, digital cultural trends, as evidenced by the early development and nationwide use of the domestic social media platform Cyworld, which was introduced in 1999 — before its global counterparts, such as Facebook (2005) and Twitter (2006). Since the late 2010s, YouTube has become the most popular app among South Koreans; 83 percent of South Koreans use it for an average of 30 hours per month (L. Oh, 2020). YouTube’s rapid popularity is shifting South Korea’s digital ecosystem, which has been dominated by domestic service providers, such as the social media platform Kakao (Crichton, 2020). An increasing number of young people are seeking to become YouTubers instead of considering conventional career paths (C. Kim, 2019). In a recent survey, online creator was the third most preferred career choice (after professional athlete and teacher) among South Korean elementary school students (Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea, 2019).

Given the emerging popularity of YouTube among young people in South Korea, it is not surprising that North Korean defector youth who resettled south of the border consider YouTube their “teacher” that enables them to learn about the new world and to disseminate their voices. Young North Korean defectors learn about the new southern lifestyle through information that is available on YouTube (Choi, 2016). They also create their own content, aiming to become influencers (Kim and Yoon, 2019). Young defector-generated YouTube videos show how social media may affect and be appropriated for the identity work of marginalized youth who were not familiar with social media but are increasingly using it to negotiate their sociocultural environments. In this regard, drawing on an analysis of the YouTube channels and videos created by popular young defectors in South Korea, this study examines how refugee youth negotiate and engage with the social media-saturated environment of the receiving country.

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**From defectors to micro-celebrities**

To examine young North Korean defectors’ social media practices, this study focuses on the YouTube channels and videos created by four popular young YouTubers who have resettled in South Korea within the past 15 years. The examined YouTube channels were chosen because of their recognizable audience base; if a channel has over 100,000 subscribers, the YouTuber is categorized by YouTube as a Silver Award Creator or “influencer.”

There is no such thematic category as “North Korean defectors’ videos” *per se* on YouTube; thus, for this research, popular defectors’ video channels were identified through an extensive search and recent news coverage of defector influencers (*e.g.*, H. Kim, 2020; J. Kim, 2016; Kim and Yoon, 2019; J. Park, 2020a, 2020b). Among those identified as defector-themed channels created by young people, the following four channels that have more than 100k subscribers were selected for this analysis.

- **Nolsae Nara TV**
  - Address: [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCDL6b9TfuQ6V4QjSP79gxQ](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCDL6b9TfuQ6V4QjSP79gxQ)
  - 290k subscribers (a total of over 33.4 million views) as of 20 June 2021
  - Topics: North Korea-related issues and lifestyle
  - Created by Nara Kang, female in her mid-twenties
  - Active since April 2018
Despite the differences in the format and content of their YouTube channels, these four young defectors can be considered “lifestyle vloggers” (Duffy, 2016). According to the social media analytics site Socialblade.com, these four YouTube channels are categorized under “entertainment” or “people.” Videos in the four channels were analyzed through a qualitative examination of their text and context rather than a quantitative examination. Due to a large number of videos available in each channel — between 100 and 400 videos per channel, except for Humans of North Korea channel that includes 48 videos, the study focused on most popular videos in each channel as of December 2020, while analyzing overall themes and playlists. Textual analysis served to examine narrative patterns, content, and interactions with viewers. Moreover, the videos and channels were analyzed in context by examining viewers’ comments and creators’ media interviews.

While the study focuses on YouTube as an example of social media, this does not mean that the young defectors utilize the YouTube platform exclusively. They often engage with other platforms, including traditional broadcast media and other Internet platforms, which can contribute to increasing YouTube viewership. Among the available media platforms, AfreecaTV [5] is especially noteworthy, as some defector influencers initially developed their audience base on the AfreecaTV platform before moving to YouTube (e.g., the aforementioned Nara Kang), whereas others still run livestreaming channels on Afreeca TV.

The defector YouTubers under examination in this article tend to take advantage of various media outlets. These include their own YouTube channels; other YouTubers’ channels and vlogs; broadcast TV channels; and other social media platforms, such as AfreecaTV and Instagram. For the influencers who appeared on broadcast media outlets at least a few times before, social media platforms, especially YouTube, are considered to allow flexibility and freedom of content and format compared to conventional old media. YouTuber Yusung Park stated, “I started my YouTube channel because I wanted to tell stories that I cannot freely when I am on broadcast media” (J. Park, 2020b). Kang moved from one social media platform to
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Another (from the AfreecaTV livestreaming platform to YouTube) to gain more flexibility and avoid the pressure of meeting livestreaming schedules (J. Park, 2020a). Against this background, this article focuses on South Korea-based defectors and their YouTube videos in relation to South Korean viewers who have been immersed in the country’s highly advanced information technology environments yet not been familiar with North Koreans.

Researching young refugees and their social media practices

While young refugees have remained an underexamined demographic in media studies, some recent studies have addressed the role of social media in young refugees’ social integration and/or identity formation (Ahmed and Veronis, 2017; Kutscher and Kress, 2018; Miconi, 2020; Neag and Supa, 2020; Veronis, et al., 2018).

First, social media has been examined as an instrument for refugee youth’s social integration. It has been found that social media serves to facilitate young refugees’ reproduction of existing networks, exploration of new networks, and/or access to new information and resources (Ahmed and Veronis, 2017; Kutscher and Kress, 2018; Miconi, 2020). Of course, social media is not the only major tool to advance refugees’ social integration and its use is influenced by the availability of other available resources (Ahmed and Veronis, 2017; Miconi, 2020). Moreover, the studies examining refugees’ social integration via social media do not simply assume an assimilationist perspective whereby refugees are encouraged to absorb the dominant values and cultures of the receiving countries. Rather, they are critical of the dominant perspective that naturalizes migrants’ rapid assimilation into host societies (even at the cost of unlearning the knowledge and language of their homelands) as an ideal migration process (e.g., Miconi, 2020). In this regard, studies by Ahmed and Veronis (2017) and Veronis, et al. (2018) have offered an insightful framework in which refugee youth’s social media practices are defined as contact and translation between different cultures.

Second, the existing studies address the role of social media in young refugees’ self-presentation and identity work. Neag and Supa (2020) found that young refugees mediated various emotional practices via social media while negotiating their sense of losses/gains, presence/absence, and positive/negative emotions. In the study, the young refugees curated old, existing, and new visual materials on Facebook while exploring new networks and a new sense of belonging. Moreover, Gifford and Wilding (2013) found that social media functions as a tool for refugee youth to negotiate their settlement contexts and to perform identities. However, these studies of refugee youth and their social media practices do not simply celebrate the empowering nature of digital media. They suggest that the media plays an important role in refugee youth’s identity formation but is not the sole determining tool (e.g., Miconi, 2020).

Although studies of young refugees’ social media practices are relatively nascent, they offer important insights for further research. They question how social media-driven refugee youth connect with others, engage with public space (i.e., social integration), and negotiate identity (i.e., identity formation). To advance the existing studies, some further considerations can be suggested. It is important to empirically explore how young refugees challenge the dominant representation of them as victims and generate an alternative representation (O’Mara and Harris, 2016). The existing literature has rarely explored how refugee youth become social influencers who can affect young people in receiving countries. Given the rise of micro-celebrities of refugee backgrounds, we need to further examine the ways in which social media-driven celebrity culture coincides with refugee youth’s storytelling and identity work. Of course, an increasing number of studies address the role of social media in the emerging culture of micro-celebrities (Abidin, 2018; Duffy, 2016; Marwick, 2015). However, they pay insufficient attention to the process by which refugee youth are recognized as influencers in the digital attention economy.

Critics have recently made an effort to theorize about young people’s social media-driven participation in the celebrity or influencer culture (Abidin, 2018). Social media-driven celebrities and influencers, who are often referred to as micro-celebrities (Marwick, 2015), are contrasted with traditional celebrities in the pre-Internet
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In particular, micro-celebrities are often regular people who adopt particular presentation techniques to maximize ordinariness, intimacy, and interactivity, while traditional celebrities present themselves as “perfect” individuals who are distant from ordinariness (Abidin, 2018; Duffy, 2016; Marwick, 2015). Marwick’s (2015) study of micro-celebrities in social media environments shows that particular technological affordances of social media may affect how ordinary people are encouraged to participate in attention economy and to become a star. Micro-celebrity who emerges in digital attention economy is not simply about fixed attributes but, rather, about embodying celebrity subjectivity. Furthermore, it involves the particular technique of self-presentation customized for digital platforms. Thus, as Marwick (2015) stated, “The ability to view oneself as a celebrity, attract attention, and manage an audience, regardless of the potential downsides, may become a necessary skill” in the contemporary digital economy.

Given the absence of research on refugees as social media celebrities, it is critical to explore how marginalized youth, such as North Korean defectors, gain popularity through their digital media practices and how this phenomenon can be interpreted in relation to the emerging “celebritization of society,” through which ordinary individuals are not only influenced by but also transformed into celebrities (Driessens, 2013).

Reality making: Eat, play, like

The four channels examined in this article commonly serve to tell viewers real stories from North Korean defectors. These real stories are primarily presented in two different yet overlapping formats. First, the defectors tell their stories of everyday life, which include their reactions to foods; merchandise; locations; and, rather infrequently, social issues. Second, they share their memories of North Korea. These two types of real stories are reconstructed and told from a current perspective. The reality is constructed and delivered in several different formats. Two YouTubers (Nara Kang and Yusung Park) focus more on monologue videos (5–10 minutes). In comparison, Jun Heo’s Humans of North Korea channel includes more professionally designed reality show type documentary videos. Meanwhile, Songi Han’s SsongTube channel concentrates on interactive, livestreaming-type videos, some of which were shot originally during her livestreaming on AfreecaTV.

By sharing their everyday life experiences from the perspective of North Korea-born people who are learning about South Korean lifestyles and cultural norms, these four YouTubers build intimate relationships with their viewers. The four YouTubers addressed in this article are young and “good-looking” (according to many viewers’ comments). As they speak without a North Korean accent and display highly sociable attitudes, their video presentations are engaging and they come across as personable. They often brand and promote their TV personality-like looks. For example, Nara Kang and Yusung Park promote themselves as a good-looking woman and man, respectively, from North Korea. Kang includes several beauty-related videos, in which she compares South and North Korean makeup styles and fashion. In comparison, another female YouTuber, Songi Han, often presents her South Korean countryside life. She moved to the countryside and shows the lifestyle, which has been romanticized by many urban residents in South Korea. Han seems especially responsive to her viewers’ desire to gaze at micro-celebrities’ lives. By presenting herself as a cute, ordinary young woman who lives in the countryside, she often shows her daily routines, such as eating, chatting, playing with her pet, and traveling.

Meokbang (also romanized as mŏkpang, meaning “eating shows”) is common content in all four YouTubers’ videos. This format is especially popular on AfreecaTV but is also pervasive in South Korean media culture. Han’s SsongTube channel has a section called Meokbang across the Eight Provinces of South Korea. In the videos archived in this section, the creator, Han, tries famous foods and restaurants in different provinces. Some of her meokbang videos show her cooking, eating, and chatting with her audiences. Others combine travel and meokbang, presenting Han’s journey to restaurants where she will have special local foods, rather than simply showing her eating throughout an entire video. In Han’s meokbang, she often continues to talk while cooking and eating in close-ups. Critics argue that the social media practice of eating and chatting may grant viewers the pleasure of imaginary food consumption without them actually eating and getting fat, as in
South Korean society, a great deal of emphasis is placed on individuals’ looks (H. Kim, 2015). More importantly, by watching their favorite Internet creator eating, viewers feel a sense of community and imagine them in a pleasurable shared space (Bruno and Chung, 2017). As shown in Han’s series of eating and chatting videos, the creator and viewers appear to construct intimate relationships in a sense, and they feel realness through the *meokbang* practice.

The defectors’ YouTube videos reveal how interactive and intimate video culture is closely incorporated into the attention economy. Their lifestyle vlogs (including *meokbang*) seem to contribute to dismantling the otherness of North Koreans that is pervasive in the South Korean mediascape. The young, “good-looking” defectors tell the stories of North Korea and of North Koreans experiencing southern life, which may not differ considerably from the lives led by their viewers. While North Koreanness and inter-Korean comparison are the attractions of these YouTube channels, they are delivered in a pleasant, entertaining manner rather than in a solemn, lugubrious way. Intimate and cheerful atmospheres are presented clearly in three of the four YouTube channels examined in the study: *Nolsae Nara*, *A North Korean Man Like a Feather*, and *SsongTube*. In particular, the two female YouTubers are often acclaimed by their fans because of their *aegyo* — cuteness or eroticized “childishness” (Puzar and Hong, 2018). The overall cheerful and likable atmospheres of the young defectors’ videos can be contrasted with the common representation of North Korean defectors as either victims or survivors (Martínez García, 2020). These YouTubers can be compared with the YouTube videos of the internationally influential young defector/activist Yeonmi Park, whose videos strongly evoke emotions such as sadness, compassion, or even anger (Martínez García, 2020) [7].

Overall, by reappropriating the stereotypes and dominant discourse about North Korea, the young defectors (three of them in particular) discussed in this article strategically promote themselves as playful, likable characters. Rather than telling stories of victimhood to enhance public awareness about North Korean issues, such as poverty and human rights violations, the young YouTubers in this study tend to present how playfully they engage with everyday life; this ordinariness and realness appear to increasingly attract viewers.

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**Social integration in contact zones**

Of course, the young defectors’ videos are not only playful. The young YouTubers explicitly or implicitly engage with their inter-Korean identity and their integration into South Korean society. In fact, all the YouTubers in this study identify inter-Korean reunification as one of the main aims of their channels. In several media interviews and their own videos, the two male vloggers (Heo and Park) have expressed their hope to advance inter-Korean understanding (J. Park, 2020b). In particular, Heo’s *Humans of North Korea* channel explicitly addresses inter-Korean understanding. The channel does not inject direct activist messages in the way that the aforementioned activist Yeonmi Park’s channel (*Voice of North Korea*) often does. Rather, Heo’s channel uploads experimental videos, along with short, semi-documentary-type vlogs, which potentially offer room for critical rethinking regarding pervasive discrimination against North Korean defectors.

In an interview with a South Korean newspaper, Heo stated, “People are only interested in North Korea’s political issues, but are ignorant of **people** living in North Korea. I wanted to tell stories about the people. (...) While born in the north, I now live in the south. Although born in different places, we are all Koreans” [8]. Heo’s hope for inter-Korean understanding and for avoiding the stigmatization of North Koreans is effectively presented in a series of “free hug” videos, which have attracted international media attention (Kim and Yoon, 2019) and substantially increased Heo’s viewers and subscribers. In the “free hug” videos (since 2017), Heo, blindfolded and silently standing on busy streets with his arms outstretched, presents the sign “My name is Jun Heo. I am from North Korea” and asks strangers to hug him. These videos were shot in many different places, including famous overseas locations (*e.g.*, the Berlin Wall and the Eiffel Tower).

Heo’s “social experiment” video series, which includes the aforementioned “free hug” videos, questions the stereotypes of North Koreans and other minorities (such as gay people) and constitutes the channel’s most
Some of Heo’s videos are skillfully edited to deliver clear social messages. For example, a short “free hug” campaign video titled “I didn’t choose where I was born: Trust experiment in Seoul, South Korea” (2 August 2019) presents subtitles (in both Korean and English) of the public’s negative comments posted about Heo’s previous videos — such as “those defectors who once betrayed their homeland will betray again” — while the second half of the video presents positive comments, such as “Jun, please ignore the hate[ful] comments. You have so many supporters in South Korea.” Another “free hug” video ends with the message “Hug first and then love will come to you.” On the Humans of North Korea channel, certain visual messages are implied even in several long “free hug” campaign videos that do not seem to have been professionally edited. For example, a one-hour video titled “How S. Korean kids react to a North Korean defector?” (7 July 2019), which has no sound effects nor conversations, shows various pedestrians’ responses to blindfolded Heo standing on a busy street in Seoul, and in so doing, it reveals the public’s ignorance and othering of North Koreans. In the video, several pedestrians take pictures of Heo (rather than hugging him), while some people free-hug him merely to take pictures of themselves (selfies) doing so.

Unlike the three other YouTube channels examined in this article, Humans of North Korea is estimated to have a large international audience. The channel’s creator, Heo, appears to target international audiences, as some videos are shot outside South Korea, and many videos, as well as the channel’s introductory statement, include creator-made English translations. The international scope of the channel seems to make it more engaging and attractive to international viewers; thus, the videos have far more English-written comments than Korean ones.

The increasing attention that is being paid to the Humans of North Korea channel illustrates how defector youth gain cultural recognition through digital media platforms not only locally but also globally. Moreover, the channel appears to effectively combine engaging videos (titled “social experiments”) with activist causes (i.e., overcoming social prejudice). In so doing, the channel contributes to enhancing transcultural awareness while helping defectors “negotiate and even construct a sense of belonging to two (or more) cultures and places simultaneously” [9]. The channel is thus an example of how social media can operate as a contact zone between different identities.

Overall, the four YouTubers in the study show that YouTube operates as a virtual space for transcultural coming-together, bridging cultural differences, and/or exploring new social networks for refugee youth [10]. These young defectors’ lifestyle vlogs are a go-to place for their primarily South Korean subscribers and viewers. Given the comments, many of the regular viewers may be young people; they call the YouTubers older brother (hyeong or oppa in Korean) or older sister (eonni or nuna in Korean). By calling a defector YouTuber whom they are following by a kinship term, the South Korean viewers may challenge the typical South-North Korean relation as “we” (the south) vs. “unknown, threatening other” (the north) (Kwon, 2018; Yoon, 2019). The defector YouTubers’ channels seem to facilitate quasi-familial ties between a young defector influencer and their South Korean followers.

This quasi-familial atmosphere is evident in the Party Girl Nara channel by Nara Kang, the most popular influencer among the four YouTubers addressed in this article. Many comments seem to be posted by younger followers who admire Kang — especially her looks, personality, and lifestyle. Most comments compliment and support Kang, while also sharing the viewers’ own feelings and thoughts. For example, in a self-confession style video entitled “I have something to say” (27 October 2020), Kang stated that she decided to
drop out of the university she attended. In response to this video, many viewers have posted their messages; for example, “That’s OK”, “I respect your decision”, “Cheer up!”, “I love you”, “Take care!”, and “You are going your own way moving beyond first the oppressive North Korean society and now the overly credential-oriented South Korean society!” Kang has responded to viewers’ comments by posting a heart icon to comments and/or writing a short reply to express her gratitude and share her thoughts further. These friendly and family-like interactions humanize North Koreans and, in so doing, challenge the dominant stereotype of North Koreans as the enigmatic and potentially dangerous other (Kwon, 2018).

The virtual contact zone may not be always welcoming as the YouTubers in this study sometimes encounter trolls who express hate, make disrespectful comments, and use slurs. Kang, the youngest and most popular of the four defectors discussed in this article, admitted that she was devastated by online trolls (H. Lee, 2018). As evidenced by the negative comments and verbal attacks that are visible in the YouTube comments section, trolls do not seem to accept these micro-celebrity defectors, who are significantly different from the pervasive stereotype of North Koreans as being deprived of sociocultural and economic capital. YouTube’s restriction of the young defectors’ communication with others is also observed in the nature of creative labor, as discussed in the next section. Yet, despite the limitations embedded in social media platforms, the defector YouTube channels show how once-marginalized and othered young defectors emerge as micro-celebrities, and in so doing, the signifier of North Korea is incorporated into South Korea’s media landscape and public sphere.

The professionalization of creative labor

The four YouTubers under examination are committed almost full-time to their channels. When asked about his future career path, Heo, the creator of the Humans of North Korea channel and a final-year student at the prestigious Seoul National University, stated in his interview with the Wall Street Journal, “Why would I work for a company when I can make enough money off my YouTube channel?” (Kim and Yoon, 2019).

The young people’s creation and management of YouTube video content reveal particular aspects of creative labor in the era of digital platforms (Duffy, 2016). First, the YouTubers consider the generation and management of social media content to be highly creative and flexible labor. The young defectors examined in this study appear to have a high regard for their creative labor, especially in comparison with the conventional career paths that many other young people pursue. In one video episode, titled “Why a defector girl was shocked while working as a salaried worker” (19 May 2020), Kang defines herself as a creator while also identifying as a person with six jobs — TV personality, actress, public speaker, YouTuber, model, and influencer. She compares her flexible work as a creator with that of wage earners.

In her understanding, creative labor offers more freedom and flexibility. With the pervasive ideology of flexible creative labor, creative industries have attracted an increasing number of participants who provide user-generated content to digital platforms for free (Duffy, 2016). Moreover, creativity has been considered positively in relation to values such as freedom, autonomy, self-development, and self-expression in the neoliberal economy (Florida, 2002). However, as shown in the young people’s continued effort to attract viewers’ attention through their YouTube channels, the platform economy, in conjunction with the celebrity ideology of creativity (Mould, 2018), incites the user-creator to relentlessly be on and engage with the platform. The platform economy offers user-creators the promise of becoming famous and influential while encouraging them to increasingly engage with “aspirational labour” (Duffy, 2016).

Second, the user-generated content appears to be increasingly professionalized to seek and manage attention (J. Kim, 2012). For an effective increase of viewership and revenue, micro-celebrity YouTubers tend to be affiliated with cultural intermediaries, such as talent agencies. Some of the defector YouTubers examined in this study professionally manage their careers as influencers. As of December 2020, Yusung Park is affiliated with an entertainment agency, and Nara Kang is associated with a multichannel network agency. The production of Heo’s “free hug” video series is funded primarily by major organizations, including the Asian-Nanum Foundation (founded by the South Korean corporation Hyundai) and the local government-affiliated
Gyeonggi Content Agency. Thus, it is not surprising that the series appears to be not only shot in many overseas locations but also professionally edited, with background music and subtitles delivering Heo’s messages. Even before being affiliated with an agency, Kang, who did not have sufficient IT skills to edit her videos, hired technical support from the beginning, costing her 400,000 KRW (equivalent to 360 US$) per month (J. Park, 2020b). In this manner, defector YouTubers engage with the professionalization of user-generated content (Kim, 2012) and self-branding to emerge in the attention economy (Duffy, 2016).

YouTube influencers are known for competing feverishly with each other for attention (Duffy, 2016). Indeed, Kang, who may be the most popular defector YouTuber in the twenties age range in South Korea, does not shy away from calling herself a kwanjong, which is a negative slang that can be translated as “attention seeker.” All the YouTubers in this study continually and desperately ask for viewer subscriptions and likes in every video. However, these defector influencers are not simply in competition with each other; in fact, they often collaborate synergistically. Three of the four YouTubers addressed in this article — Nara Kang, Yusung Park, and Jun Heo — mutually contribute to each other’s channels. Moreover, they, along with other young defectors, contribute to a popular YouTube channel, the Creative Lab (CLAB), which has 333k subscribers (https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC9nLq3rvvi_6J3teWiGCD1A) as of June 2021. The young defectors on this channel tell their stories or interview young foreigners living in South Korea. As evidenced by their collaboration on the CLAB channel, at least three of the defector YouTubers addressed in this article seem to seek a synergic increase in viewership and attention to the defector YouTube genre, which remains marginal among the various video themes on the platform.

While defectors’ storytelling has effectively contributed to enhancing international awareness of the poverty and human rights violations in North Korea (Martínez García, 2020), it has also been incorporated into profit-seeking media industries. Both broadcast media and social media have increasingly introduced North Korea-themed content as a new genre. The commodification of defector stories is evident in the broadcast media’s defector-themed talk shows and defector-generated social media content (Green and Epstein, 2013) [11]. The broadcast media’s commodification of defector stories and experiences has often involved sensational and stereotypical characterizations of defectors, which are easy for mainstream viewers to decode and consume, rather than presenting the complexity that is involved in the defectors’ stories. In comparison, defectors’ stories circulated on social media have facilitated defectors’ self-representation and self-recognition through defectors’ own content making; however, YouTube videos have also their own genre conventions for viewer attention — such as the management and reproduction of ordinariness and authenticity (Bishop, 2018; Duffy, 2016).

The defector YouTubers, explicitly or inexplicitly, reveal how they are keen to make profits by sharing their daily lives on the Internet. For example, in the aforementioned video clip, titled “I have something to say”, Nara Kang emphasizes the importance of money in a capitalist society: “Because we live in a capitalist society, if we don’t have money, we can’t do anything, given my experience. Every step is money. Whatever we do, money [is required]. Money! Money! I have learned that so much [in South Korea] (...)” Then, Kang adds she wants to earn money to do her filial duty to her mother, who is also a defector residing in South Korea. Furthermore, in the conclusion of the video, she expresses her willingness to keep successfully running her YouTube channel to meet her fans’ expectation. This video is an interesting example that shows how capitalism may accelerate the commodification of everyday life and emotions in the digital era and how digital capitalism does not simply determine the user’s behaviors but rather is articulated with local and familial norms (such as familial piety and familial relations with audiences).

Despite YouTube’s initial mantra, “Broadcast yourself,” critics suggest that digital platforms’ technological affordances and revenue structure are severely affecting user behavior and the textual nature of user-generated content (Gillespie, 2010; van Dijck, 2013). It is true that social media platforms encourage the user-creator to engage with particular forms of storytelling for attracting viewers’ attention and making profits. However, it should also be acknowledged that social media’s technological affordances and the user’s agency may be articulated with each other and the articulation potentially offers a contact zone for people who otherwise would not have frequently encountered each other (e.g., North Koreans and South Koreans).
Conclusion

The decades-long hostility between two Koreas has reproduced discrimination against North Korean defectors resettling in the south of the border. The defectors struggle not only because of their lack of social and economic capital but also due to the pervasive prejudice that exists against North Koreans (Choi, 2016; Kwon, 2018; Yoon, 2019). The social media platform may provide defector youth with possible moments of self-presentation and self-empowerment. Social media storytelling may be a practice signifying the defector youth’s own “politics of refusal” (Risam, 2018; See also O’Mara and Harris, 2016) — that is, the refusal to be incorporated into the dominant narratives of defectors as victims.

Against the tendency of silence about North Koreans and North Korean defectors as the other in South Korean society, the young defector YouTubers disseminate their stories through digital platforms and become micro-celebrities whom an increasing number of young South Koreans follow. These YouTubers openly engage with the topic of North Korea, which has been marginalized among numerous mundane topics circulating on social media in South Korea. The YouTubers bring their North Korean experiences to the table not necessarily in serious political discourse but often in the form of intimate and entertaining small talk. In so doing, they increase their followers and comments, thereby gaining micro-celebrity status. In their regularly updated short vlogs or video monologues, the defector youth tell their viewers of their experiences before/during/after defection in the manner of a “girl next door” or “boy next door.” This social media storytelling, often delivered in close-ups or selfie-style shots, has the effect of reducing the emotional distance between South and North Koreans while challenging the old-fashioned stereotypes of the north as the other of South Korea (Yoon, 2019). As evidenced by comments under the defectors’ videos, fans of these YouTubers, most of whom are young, emotionally engage with these YouTubers and reflect on the existing stigma and prejudice against North Koreans. Indeed, the YouTubers addressed in this article present themselves as positive, sociable media personalities — micro-celebrities — whom many young South Koreans follow and admire. The young defectors’ YouTube practices attract the attention of many South Korean youth who would otherwise be indifferent to North Koreans. The interactions between defector micro-celebrities and South Korean viewers may challenge the dominant narrative of North Korean defectors as the enigmatic Other who are inferior to their southern counterparts.

The defectors’ social media practices do not only affect South Korean youth, but also affect the defector YouTubers’ own identity work. According to W.H. Oh (2015), defector youth have limited opportunities to interact with South Koreans and are highly influenced by South Korean broadcast media especially during the early post-defection period. As a result, they are often frustrated by the gap between the mediated images and lived experiences (W.H. Oh, 2015). The defector YouTubers in the present study participated actively in their own vlogging, which involves continued interaction with South Korean youth online and off-line. In so doing, they appear to redefine themselves as creators rather than passive and silent audiences. The four YouTubers in the study also show how defectors, who usually lack human networks and other resources in the receiving country (Won, 2020), can explore diverse social networks through digital media. They created and have expanded their virtual communities including South Korean audiences who view, subscribe to, and comment on their mediated daily lives. The defectors’ vlogging practices do not only allow them to interact with their fans but also to cope with trolls. Moreover, the YouTubers sometimes collaborate with other creators for attracting a larger audience by generating more diverse and synergetic forms of storytelling. Digital and social media allow the young people of minority backgrounds to engage with different networks.

For refugee youth, social media storytelling can be a transformative practice of recreating their identities and engaging with society (Alexandra, 2008). Indeed, by using the popular YouTube platform to tell their own stories as inter-Korean youth, the North Korean defectors create content and recreate their identity in their new homeland. In so doing, they redefine themselves as the social media-driven creator who is a highly popular type of subjectivity among young people in South Korea. As one such YouTuber, Nara Kang proudly identifies herself as a creator, in comparison to regular wage earners. Creating their own content provides the young defectors with a sense of self-empowerment, as well as financial benefits that allow them to commit full-time to content creation. The young YouTubers’ negotiation of inter-Korean identities through digital
storytelling and interaction with viewers and fans may show how social media may serve as a “contact zone” that allows for cultural sharing and translation between different cultures (Vernonis, et al., 2018).

However, the young defectors in the study are not free of the ongoing pressure of the digital attention economy, in which user-generated content is continuously monetized and commodified. Furthermore, cultural intermediaries, such as talent agencies, with which some of the defector YouTubers are affiliated, may influence the format and content of storytelling for higher viewer rating. Given these structural restrictions, it is questionable if the defector vlogging practices can be considered “critical making” that entails socially transformative activities and invites “reflection on the relationship of the maker to the things produced” [12]. As Ratto and Boler (2014) warned, self-creation is not always a positive activity, as it can involve hegemonic acceptance of the dominant social order. As the critics of digital culture argue, digital platforms, in which the dominant form of creativity is celebrated at the expense of others (Duffy, 2016; Mould, 2018; Ratto and Boler, 2014), increasingly take advantage of ordinary users’ participation and encourage dedicated digital labor (Duffy, 2016).

Of course, as shown in the examples of the four YouTubers, digital platform affordances do not simply dictate the ways in which the defectors tell their stories and interact with their viewers. For example, while working in the individualized, competitive attention economy, the defector YouTubers sometimes collaborated with each other and incorporated local norms shared between South and North Koreans, such as filial piety. Such practices may serve to re-orient YouTube’s technological affordances, in which the You is assumed to refer to the individuated users who are competing with each other (Abidin, 2018).

Young defector YouTubers oscillates social media’s empowering potential and exploitive forces. On the one hand, digital platforms allow the defector youth to engage with social media storytelling and, in so doing, potentially facilitate their participatory power in a mediated contact zone involving inter-Korean identities. On the other hand, the young defectors engage with, and are professionalized according to, social media’s technological affordances that monetize user behaviors and idolize entrepreneurial subjects continually creating user content in the attention economy. As cited at the beginning of this article, “YouTube is a great teacher” for the young defector “party girl” Nara Kang. It may be a teacher who teaches defector youth how to tell their stories, become micro-celebrities in the attention economy, and thereby engage with the capitalist digital economy.

About the author

Kyong Yoon is an associate professor of cultural studies at the University of British Columbia’s Okanagan campus in Canada. His research focuses on digital media, migration, and Korean youth culture. He is the author of Digital mediascapes of transnational Korean youth culture (Routledge, 2020) and a co-author of Transnational Hallyu: The globalization of Korean digital and popular culture (Rowman & Littlefield, 2021). E-mail: kyong [dot] yoon [at] ubc [dot] ca

Notes

1. Those who arrive and resettle in South Korea after defection from North Korea are usually referred to in South Korea as “North Korean defectors.” There have been debates about the terminology that should be used to address North Korean arrivals in South Korea (S.K. Kim, 2012). While “refugee” might be an appropriate term based on the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, the term (nanmin) in South Korea was used by right-wing parties and groups to distance and stereotype North Korea, especially in the 1990s (S.K. Kim, 2012). In the twenty-first century, amid ongoing debate, the term “North Korean defector” is relatively widely used in South Korea. Alternatively, other terms such as migrants, newcomers, and border crossers have also been used (Chung, 2008; Won, 2020). Among these terms, “defector” will be primarily used in this article, as it is widely used in South Korea’s public spaces and, more importantly, the young YouTubers addressed in the article tend to call themselves defectors rather than refugees, migrants,
new settlers, or border crossers.


4. While Jangmadang is literally translated as “marketplaces”, it in reality refers to the black markets that sell a wide range of necessities and smuggled commodities, including South Korean TV show DVDs. Jangmadang expanded nationwide during and after the great famine period in the 1990s, during which North Koreans could not depend on government rations. North Koreans, who were born in or after the 1980s and grew up with flourishing black markets, in response to the poorly functioning, state-controlled economy, are called the Jangmadang generation (Baek, 2016; Ko, 2020).

5. AfreecaTV, which stands for “any free broadcasting TV,” is a South Korean peer-to-peer video-streaming platform. This domestic platform, which is especially popular among young people, allows users to watch broadcasting jockeys’ (BJs) videos and interact with BJs via live chats. Users pay a digital currency called “star balloons” to endorse their preferred BJs during their livestreaming interactions, and as a result, some BJs attain celebrity status and financial gain. Compared with YouTube, which is a platform that is primarily used for uploading videos, AfreecaTV centers on livestreaming chats and immediate interactions between BJs and their audiences (See Song, 2018).


7. Despite this article’s focus on North Korean defector YouTubers in South Korea, U.S.-based YouTuber Yeonmi Park is worth mentioning, as she is probably one of the most famous young defectors in the world. She has been effectively utilizing various social media platforms. Yeonmi Park, who escaped from North Korea at the age of 14 in 2007 and initially settled in South Korea, gained global attention after her speech at the One Young World 2014 Summit in Dublin became viral. Since then, she has targeted global audiences through her speeches and social media activities. Park has actively engaged with diverse media platforms — conventional media (e.g., a bestselling English language book In order to live: A North Korean girl’s journey to freedom (Penguin Press, 2015), which was later translated to Korean), new media platforms (e.g., Ted.com), and various social media outlets, including Facebook and Twitter. As Martínez García (2020) analyses, Park skillfully uses different social media with a different emphasis — for example, her tweets are relatively straightforward, while her presentation on Facebook is more professional and public; by contrast, Park’s later created Instagram account presents her as a lifestyle vlogger, sometimes collaborating with several brands. Park’s active and customized use of social media platforms may have contributed to her global reputation as a public figure who represents North Korean youth and young defectors in the global media landscape (See Martínez García, 2020).


11. Since the 2010s, South Korea’s broadcasting network TV has launched several defector-themed programs, including talk shows in which a dozens of defectors appear as regular guests to talk about North Korea-related themes such as daily life in North Korea. These shows have been referred to as the “defector TV genre” (Y. Kim, 2019). In particular, Now on my way to meet you (Channel-A, 2011 present) and Moranbong Club by TV Chosun, 2015 present) have been popular and made several defector guests popular figures. However, despite their announced aim to facilitate inter-Korean understanding, these shows have been criticized for their stereotypical representation of North Koreans. For example, in its early episodes, the talk show Now on my way to meet you invited the guests of young women defectors, along with a panel of South Korean male celebrities, and insistently reminded viewers of enormous differences between South and North Korea, which was often presented in a stereotyped and gendered way — the masculine, progressive south vs. the feminine, regressive north (Cho, 2018; Green and Epstein, 2013). Three of the defectors addressed in this article (Nara
Kang, Songi Han, and Yusung Park) had their initial public exposure through their appearance in the defector TV shows.

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Micro-celebrities from the North: Young North Korean defectors' vlogging on YouTube


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