

“Gangnam Mom”: A Qualitative Study on the Information Behaviors of Korean Helicopter Mothers

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Abstract

This study investigates information seeking, sharing, and managing behaviors of “Gangnam mothers,” a group of dedicated Korean mothers who invest significant time and effort to micro-manage their child’s academic needs. These mothers’ vibrant and sophisticated information seeking and managing loads of education-related information sources is worthy of attention from information behavior research. To learn about their information behavior, field observations and interviews with mothers of school-aged children in Gangnam, the southern part of Seoul, have been conducted. The findings show that Gangnam mothers are personal information experts who heavily utilize human channels of information and employ local, group and personal filtering strategies. The fascinating information ecology of mothers in their diverse strategies for navigating and filtering information, coupled with the unique information environment in Gangnam, makes the flood of education-related information surprisingly manageable.

Keywords: Information Behavior, Information Overload, Information Sharing, Filtering Strategy, Parenting

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1 Introduction

Enter a café in *Daechi*, an affluent neighborhood in Seoul, and one will find mothers in deep conversation. They are the go-to people for any desperate parent seeking academic advice for her child. This group of mothers, symbolically referred to as “Gangnam moms,” are usually found in the metropolitan south of Seoul, and are known to engage in dynamic and vigorous pursuit of education-related information that will help their child excel in academics. Just like the Western “helicopter moms” and “tiger moms” (Hunt, 2008; Chua, 2011), the oversolicitous Gangnam mothers, in terms of micro-managing their child’s academic achievement, have been featured in various media such as soap operas on TV (e.g. Hong, 2007; Kim, 2007; Yoo, 2010; Lee, 2013).

This study studies the information behavior of Gangnam mothers, whose parenting is more “information-driven” (S-H. Kim, 2006; 2013). While many investigated the rigor and intensity of Korean mothers’ involvement in the child’s academic success (e.g. Sorensen, 1994; Lee and Brinton, 1996; Seth, 2002; Park and Abelman, 2004; H. Lee, 2010; Kim and Lee, 2010), few have taken an information behavior perspective. This paper reports Gangnam mothers’ strategies to seek, share and manage education-related information while avoiding an information overload. The filtering strategies of Gangnam mothers in managing a deluge of information and the use of their personal networks in information seeking, in contrast to the surrounding tech-savvy culture, offer a pleasant opportunity to revisit key concepts in information behavior research in the advent IT era.

2 Background

Gangnam, the most developed metropolitan area of Seoul, is where the competitive spirit in academics runs most high. The over-heated-ness of Gangnam education feeds a myriad of academic resources for both parents and students, which in turn poses a burden on mothers to choose the right information to guide their child to academic success.

2.1 The Gangnam Fever

In South Korea, high school seniors take a life-and-death exam¹ that will determine the future career of their lives—ultimate goal being to get into one among the “big three” universities in the country. Acceptance to one of them is considered a record accomplishment in life. Not only will successful students have the best academic pedigree in the country, but they will also have a strong alumni network that tends to be biased in hiring and mentoring graduates from their alma mater (Card, 2005). Parents urge their children on the educational track early on for academic achievements in a range of after-school programs that will help their children excel at school.

The fever runs highest in *Gangnam*, which literally refers to southern Seoul. The Greater Gangnam area is commonly known for its heavily concentrated wealth and a high standard of living. Thanks to such, mothers in Gangnam are able to invest and support their children’s academic achievement with private tutoring, academic counseling, etc. (E-S. Kim, 2004; Noh, 2012; Mundy, 2014). Kim (2014) recently found that there is a positive correlation between parents’ socioeconomic status and the admission rate to Seoul National University (SNU), the most prestigious academic institution in the country. Others have also figured that there are more admitted students to SNU from Gangnam (J-S. Lee, 2010; Park, 2010).

The Gangnam educational fever has been exaggerated and dramatized, for example, in the popular television series called *Catching Up with Gangnam Mothers* (Hong, 2007). A number of books have been written, mostly on coaching mothers to well-strategize their children’s academic career (e.g. Chang and Choo, 2013; Hwang, 2006; E-S. Kim, 2004; 2005; Kim and Oh, 2013; S-C. Park, 2011; J-S. Shim, 2014; Kim, 2006; 2013). In particular, Kim (2006), in her *Information Power of Gangnam Mothers*, summoned mothers to be an information expert in tailoring and personalizing educational care and support for their child by learning to utilize both online and offline educational resources. This has stirred much public attention and triggered many discussions among parent communities.

2.2 A Resource Overload

The educational fever in Gangnam gives way to a number of private tutoring resources and services. According to Hahn et al. (2013), Gangnam, the wealthiest region in Korea, has benefitted from the legalization of private tutoring. Private tutoring has expanded opportunities for wealthier households, which in turn boost the supply of more and more private educational aids and therefore the inflow of students and parents into Gangnam. Both parents and students need to browse extra options for studying in addition to academic curricula required in public schools.

In addition, the advances in the information and communication technologies have caused an increase of online academic aids. The wide penetration of wireless broadband network, in fact more than 100% rate (Yoo, 2013; N-Y. Shim, 2014), has lowered the barriers of reaching various academic support systems, as many offline resources are translated and uploaded. For example, there are many online lecture providers, and it is conventional for many Korean students to voluntarily sign up for the online courses at home (Ministry of Knowledge Economy and National IT Promotion Agency, 2011). Hence it has also become a responsibility of a parent to consider many online educational materials that may help her child.

¹ College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT) is an SAT-like exam in the United States that is held nationwide in every November for all high school seniors and graduates to enter college. The national obsession that revolves around higher is focused on getting a nearly perfect score on the CSAT, along with having top grades in school. From “Life and death exams in South Korea,” J. Card, 2005, *Asia Times*. << <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Korea/GK30Dg01.html>>>

The advances in the Internet technologies have diversified communication channels (S-R. Park, 2011; E-H. Kim, 2013). It is now incredibly easier for mothers to connect with other parents to discuss any parenting issues via online chats, communities, and portal websites. The rapid increase in mobile phone penetration (Fox, 2013) has also aided the ease of information exchange, for one can talk about anything at anytime in anywhere. The communications process reproduces information about the information that is already available offline. For instance, a mother can exchange opinions with other mothers about the new college admission policy. What mothers discuss becomes another source of information for mothers to collect and comprehend.

The abundance of educational resources and the over-abundance of information about the abundant resources have posed a choice dilemma. There is an increased burden for mothers to learn about all of the educational resources in order to utilize them for the best possible interest. How to do so depends on the “information” that they get about the quality of the sources available around them. Such information revolves around the subjective opinions and personal feedback, which would help them make the right choices. Indeed, our findings in the fifth section suggest that Gangnam mothers swing between external sources of academic aids and internal information about them to promote the child’s academic achievement, which becomes the ground for decision-making to act upon.

3 Research Questions

This study investigates the way in which Gangnam mothers navigate the educational resources and make uses of their information for the child’s best academic outcome. Some assumptions follow: 1) the “big three” fever in Gangnam and its socioeconomic standing would cause Gangnam mothers to actively seek information as much as possible; 2) considering the work of S-H. Kim (2006; 2013), they would form competitive relationships with other mothers in acquiring such information; and 3) given the amount and range of availability, Gangnam mothers would experience information overload. Based on the assumptions above, we came up with the research questions below.

RQ 1. What sources of information do Gangnam mothers use?

T. D. Wilson (1999) once defined information seeking behavior as “the purposive seeking for information as a consequence of a need to satisfy some goal.” Indeed, Gangnam mothers follow this definition closely in that they have a determined goal to support and help their child go up the ladder of academic success. They are passionate to achieve this goal; therefore their need to gather to find out “how” is evident. Then, what kind of information sources would they choose? What kind of process would they go through in seeking the information they need? What factors would be involved in such process? The interview data have been collected and categorized to identify the sources.

RQ 2. How is information shared among Gangnam mothers?

Once information is sought for a certain purpose, it would then be sifted, organized, and understood for due use. This information is then considered as *knowledge* (Case, 2007). The blurred boundary between information and knowledge appears in face-to-face communications or other social interactions, where a certain type of learning happens as a result of exchanging information. Kim (2009) interprets this process as “social exchange,” and posits that the social exchange theory can be a major theoretical perspective in predicting individual attitude toward knowledge sharing behavior (Bock et al., 2005; Kim, 2009). The interviews were conducted by individuals and by groups in order to investigate the dynamics of information exchange.

RQ 3. What strategies do Gangnam mothers use to manage information overload?

Once information is sought and shared, mothers would filter it for optimal storage, retrieval, and dissemination (Borko, 1968). How would they determine the usefulness of the information they obtained? What would be their yardstick in evaluating the information? What factors would be at play when they make feedback? Delving into these questions would give insight in understanding the reality of information overload in our day and how to facilitate strategies, alternatives, or solutions for the better management of information.

Investigating information behavior accompanies an in-depth research process, and this research aims to focus on the three research questions discussed above to picture the overall information world of Gangnam mothers who are in a feverish pursuit of supporting their children's academic performance. The following sections will discuss the research method, settings and findings, followed by discussion and conclusion that wrap up the lessons learned from the information behaviors of Gangnam mothers.



Figure 1. Daechi Neighborhood of Gangnam District in Seoul.

<1> shows Daechi subway station, where a number of private tutoring schools are located; <2> is another subdistrict of Daechi that is also packed with private tutoring schools and students; <3> is a typical building in Gangnam where cafés are usually located on the first floor for mother to stay and wait for their child, while private tutoring schools are located on higher levels; and <4> shows a group of mothers in such a café, where this study has taken place.

4 Settings and Methodology

This research has taken a qualitative approach to study the attitudes and behavioral patterns of Gangnam mothers when approaching and handling education-related information. The interviews were conducted in *Daechi*, a neighborhood in Gangnam that is considered the mecca of academic success and *Banpo*, another affluent neighborhood in Gangnam. The two neighborhoods were selected based on their physical proximity to us researchers. Prior to the interviews, we took field observations to sketch the atmosphere <Figure 1>. We shadowed some mothers and asked short questions about their information seeking behavior in terms of educating their children.

The preliminary research helped form interview questions in the research process. A total of twenty-two mothers who currently reside in the area were contacted, and eighteen of them (avg. age = 43.6, avg. number of children = 2.3) gave consent for an audio-recorded interview. The participants received a gift card (\$10) for their participation. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim in Korean (Aira et al., 2003), and reported in English in this paper. We paid heed to the guidelines in translating the interviews as advised in Burnard (1991), and made a conscious effort in keeping them as true as originally stated. For their anonymity, the mothers were coded using numbers, and their testimonials are reported using pseudonyms.

All participants were asked to fill out a brief 1-page survey on the kinds of sources that they use in gathering education-related information to facilitate further conversation. They were later categorized in subsets of online and offline sources. A semi-structured interview, for about 20-30 minutes per each participant, immediately followed the survey. The interviews opened up for free responses and often participants came up with their own enlightenment about their information seeking and sharing behaviors. During the interpretation phase, two researchers cross-verified the precision of the transcription. Main themes and findings were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

5 Findings

Gangnam mothers work individually or as a group to seek the best education-related information so that they can fetch their child the best-fitting teachers, schools, private tutors, and other academic support. Our findings show that they navigate the plethora of information by incorporating local, group and personal filtering strategies, thereby effectively managing information overload.

5.1 Local Filtering: *Gangnam* and *Gangnam* Mothers

All participants showed confidence and trust in the quality of information that they get in Gangnam. A mother of a recent high school graduate and a resident of *Daechi*, the most competitive district of Gangnam, Bae, said determinedly, “all teachers and private tutors that you may fetch in Gangnam are well-qualified. There’s no doubt about that.” A friend of Bae, Choi, added the same: “Any *hagwon* [private institution] in Gangnam can make a good choice. The hard part is scheduling [my child’s] time for all of them.” Later, Dong confessed that she has moved to Gangnam for the quality of education that she can provide her child only in this neighborhood. Eun nodded while saying that “there’s no denying to the fact that there are good, I mean, high-scoring, students in Gangnam. And you know what? All of them, *hagwon*’s and schools alike, they teach well. That’s why.” From the conversations, a good deal of confidence, or blind-faith, in Gangnam could be identified. For them, Gangnam is a geographical filter of education-related information, providing the notion that what you find and what you learn about academic resources in Gangnam is reliable and trustworthy.

While Gangnam may provide the best academic environment, mothers engage in an active information seeking process to review their options carefully. The sources of information that participants frequently referred to were offline ones, especially their personal networks. <Table 1> lists the sources of information that participants reported, classified under offline and online categories. The offline and online sources of information have an important difference between them. Most of the information that mothers can reach online are mostly facts and figures, data and materials. However, the offline sources of information are mostly subjective ones, usually from experiences and expertise. That mothers tend to prefer offline sources of information indicates that what mothers want to know in seeking information is how to use the facts and figures for their own interest, not what they are. Interviewed participants sought networking with other mothers to find information about, for example, *where* to find the best Math tutor and *how* to get into the best medical school in the country. It is more the subjective opinions, feedback, reviews, or, what we call “know-how’s” from the experiences with different educational resources that Gangnam mothers actually consider “information.” For example, Goo testified, “I would go ask the fellow mothers that I usually hang out with about what they do with

their child's studying." Others such as Choi, Hong, Ji and Kim reported their frequent making of calls to their colleagues and friends to find out what others are doing in order to boost the Science grade, what online lecture may actually be worthy of time and effort, or how midterm exams are like in local schools. The information channels usually come from acquaintances from work, fitness centers, and neighborhood; friends from college and high school; and distant family members and relatives.

Sources of Information and Their Contents			
Offline		Online	
Sources of Information	Contents of Information	Sources of Information	Contents of Information
Parent Meetings/ Small Groups (Frequency: High)	Opinions/feedback/personal evaluations on: - private tutoring lessons - local schools and their exams - college admissions - public/private school teachers	Online Instant Messengers (e.g. Whatsapp, Kakao Talk, etc.)	Personal individual/group contacts to share: - what extracurricular lessons to take - what they are like - schooling children - offline meet-up arrangements
Books and Magazines	"Know-how's" on: - parenting - education - college admission success - adolescent issues	Online Communities	Blogs and webpages featuring: - reviews of different private tutoring services - parenting schoolchildren - local academic standards - academic competitions - exam strategies - interviews of education experts
Info Sessions	Informed Strategies on: - how to get into the "big three" and other prestigious colleges in the country	Portal Websites	Official websites and bulletin boards on: - publicizing extracurricular lessons - publicly released college admission guidelines - general college admission sure-fire strategies
Commercial Flyers (in delivered newspapers)	Promotions on private tutoring services - teaching subjects - teacher introductions	Government-Supported Web Databases	Official collections of: - junior-high and high school policies - junior-high and high school subject teaching/learning materials - college admission policies - released college admission timelines and FAQ's
Professional Counseling	"Personalized" strategies on the college admission success - tailoring the child's academic resume and career		
Class Meetings	Counsel sessions with homeroom teachers to share the child's school life		

Table 1. Table of Sources and Contents of Information that Gangnam Mothers Share.

Based on the data collected from the interviews with eighteen Gangnam mothers, we have classified the kinds and sources of information that Gangnam mothers utilize when they promote their child's academic achievement. Two key observations are that: (a) the advances in information and communication technologies have expanded opportunities to search for various educational materials delivered by different media sources online in addition to existing offline ones; and (b) this has triggered an increased need for mothers to find more information, such as advice, opinions, strategies, feedback, and evaluation about those to make the best decision, as shown in boldfaces in the table above.

Gangnam mothers try to exhaust all information available in their neighborhood via their contacts and acquaintances, which is in fact an efficient strategy in storing and distributing useful information. Wegner (1987) has pointed out that one individual alone cannot store all information available; she would choose the division of cognitive labor with others to reduce the amount of information that she is responsible to handle. This study extends Wegner's theory in that a Gangnam mother would choose to utilize the external memory of other mothers because it can also successfully "filter" the information that may not prove so useful, without her time and effort to verify so. Not only did participants feel it was easier to dial up a number, but also they valued the experiences of others in trying different private tutors, online lectures, etc. This explains why she would not refer to other anonymous parents on the Internet, though they may be larger in number. They can access filtered and tested information with certain confidence from having established acquaintances, thereby minimizing risks of trying anonymous sources of information.

5.2 Group Filtering: *Quid Pro Quo*

Information gets filtered out locally, and then filtered again for level of fit among mothers. Participants reported that they stick to mothers whose children receive good grades at school. Lee said that once mothers gather in meetings, a slow rearrangement of seats, or small cliques, are made, with much attention and focus on the mother of the top student, should she decide to attend. This behavior indicates an assessment of information coming from different “grades” of mothers. The grades are granted to mothers according to their child’s academic achievement at school. Naturally, Moon, Park, and Hong agreed that they would want to ask the top student’s mother what she does for her child and how she takes care of her child. Goo complained that those top students’ mothers may not choose to attend every meeting, or tend not to tell anything about their parenting: “Of course I do ask! But she [the top student’s mother] never tells anything to anyone.” To this, Suh added that if the child is considered of the same academic “level,” it is easier to mingle with those mothers. The mingling and networking of mothers of the similar “grade,” in this manner, triggers a sharing of information that may benefit all members of the group, as they bring different sources of information that are closely related to everyone’s interest. There is a vibrant discussion over the information on the coffee table, which refines and filtrates the information tailored for the group members. Moon added that the information from this group is often considered “quintessential,” which keeps mothers “wanting to join” such groups.

Studying this process, we found an exchange of information among mothers contingent upon what is given and taken. The level of fit can mobilize mothers to flock together, but also repel one another. Participants reported having small mother groups for the purpose of taking private lessons or extracurricular activities. They usually share the same interest, such as that their children would later plan to pursue a medical track, or that their children aim for the same college. An interesting finding here is that mothers actively choose what information to share and what not to share. Choi illustrated a descriptive strategy of hers: “Let’s say I have four key information pieces. With the mothers in the group, I would choose to share only three of them, and keep the most important information that I’d like to know for myself. Why? I don’t want them to know. In a sense, they’re all competitors.” This statement illustrates the frustration and dilemma of Gangnam mothers. While having the same interest enables them to share information, revealing such to others may be risky. In the end, mothers choose to “hide and seek” information in different circumstances.

The unequal and rather biased sharing, or exchange, of information reflects different stakes that a piece of information may bear for different individuals. This relates to the central ideas of social exchange theory: self-interest and interdependence (Lawler and Thye, 1999). Understanding the information that other Gangnam mothers use can potentially benefit one mother in that she can find out what sources of information are frequently preferred by the most. In return, she would reveal what she has learned and experienced. However, this information sharing is a risky behavior that might lead to the loss of superiority, costs time and effort, and bares no guaranteed reward or return, so mothers are naturally inclined to hoard their own (Hsu, Ju, Yen and Chang, 2007). This reflects a “quid pro quo” matrix in sharing information as a social exchange. And as a result, the information among mothers goes through a redistribution process, which successfully filters out information at a more personal level in the same interest group.

5.3 Personal Filtering: Child-Centeredness

The filtered information faces an ultimate pass-or-fail as the mother tests it to her child. Even though mothers actively involve themselves in various channels in order to filter out information to find the best educational resource for their child, not all can go into use. Moreover, the sheer number of untouched online and offline resources may still feel overwhelming, and the information that they get from other mothers can also pose another concern in comparison to their own knowledge. Ryu said that there is “too much” information that mothers need to take care of in order to advise their children academically. Yoo also added that the information that the mothers handle is “enormous”: “I think there is more than enough, yes, perhaps enormous.”

However, Dong, a middle-aged woman of two children, both facing the College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT) in November, said that “more is rather better than less,” and how she got to “learn that any tutor and class that she may find in Gangnam may be highly qualified, but whether [her] child is qualified for such is a whole lot different matter.” As the child grows up, mothers also grow in their experience in parenting, and their information navigating skills sharpen as well, adapting to the tendencies and academic preferences of their child. Hence the ultimate gauge of information a mother may get from others is what the child wants, and what they child needs. Moon, an education psychology major as an undergraduate herself, pondered: “I think mothers surrender to their children. ... They do not fanatically change private tutors and *hagwon*’s every now and then, as long as the child is happy and doing okay.”

Indeed, other participants, when asked to describe their stress in managing all information as opposed to recognizing the large volume of information they gathered, said it was “okay,” “doable,” or “manageable” because they can pick and choose “what fits their children” best. They were confident that they were the experts when it came to their children and that they were capable of distinguishing what information would really work for the child’s best academic interest. In this way, a lot of information gets filtered out, and what would “best-serve” the child only remains. This relates to “child-centrism,” the psychological mind-set in which parents are willing to prioritize the allocation of their emotional, temporal, financial, and attentional resources to their children rather than themselves (Ashton-James et al., 2013). Thus a majority of participants reported in a contradictory manner that there is an overflow of information that they can handle alone, while it is manageable to identify and extract the only information that they can utilize for their child. The final “cherry-picking” stage is the personal strategy of Gangnam mothers that prevents both physical and cognitive information overload.

6 Discussion

This research has illustrated a group of mothers going through an intense load of information seeking, sharing and managing process to provide information to enhance the child’s academic achievement. The information behavior of parents in terms of educating a child has received more attention in health and clinical discussions (e.g. Chodoff, Friedman and Hamburg, 1964; Hamburg and Adams, 1967; Bernhardt and Felter, 2004; Khoo et al., 2008; Zhao, 2009). However, once the child enters school, much of the parental care shifts its focus to her academic achievement, which requires far more education-related information for the child’s academic success. Thus we have reaffirmed the major role of information behavior in parental involvement via this study.

The research findings highlight two important lessons. First of all, they provide a fresh look into the existing models of information seeking (e.g. Krikelas, 1983; Wilson, 1999; Savolainen, 2005). While the information space and interaction of the Gangnam mothers are characterized by a heavy local influence, their information behaviors confirm the longstanding use of human channels in information seeking. Still, the interesting competition and duality present in the information sharing process suggests the idea of conflicting motives, which has so far received little attention. This descriptive study of Gangnam mothers can therefore contribute a possible reconceptualization of information need in developing future information seeking models.

Furthermore, this study provides yet again a worthwhile opportunity to reexamine the concept of information overload. Shirky (2008) argues that overload is caused not by the mere quantity, but by “filter failure.” The findings align with his argument in that Gangnam mothers utilize different levels of filtering strategies to “cherry-pick” information for the best academic outcome of their child. First, the local Gangnam area filters out information at above par level. Then mothers form groups and networks to classify information for specific academic needs. Finally comes the child, the ultimate ruler of the classified information. These work as effective filtering strategies, allowing mothers to reduce cognitive overload. Based on this finding, we propose to look at overload at micro-level, such as by groups, by culture, and by interests, rather than at macro-level.

Lastly, this study provides a ground for further research opportunities. In terms of technological systems, conflicting motives in mothers’ information behaviors can enlighten new ideas in developing tools for private networking and messaging services. In terms of information communities, future work can examine other parent groups from various ethnicities, which can augment the findings of this study. In terms of parenting, the education-related information can be categorized and analyzed for producing better resources, guidelines and education policies. While this paper is not exhaustible, it expects to stir fruitful discussions from the information scholars community for future work.

7 Conclusion

This study has examined the education-related information behavior of *Gangnam* mothers, a group of Korean mothers in Gangnam area who involve themselves heavily in the academic career of their child. While previous work has focused on the excessive parental involvement in the child’s academic performance, this research investigated the information behaviors of mothers who try to get as much information as possible to help and inform their children toward academic excellence. We have conducted field observations and semi-structured interviews with eighteen mothers residing in the southern Seoul area, Gangnam, and reported the results in this paper.

This research gives a rich description of distinct behavioral patterns of a vibrant information-seeking group of Gangnam mothers. It proposes “information-oriented-ness” as a contributing factor of much academic investment in Seoul, and highlights their navigating and filtering strategies in making information overload manageable. Lessons learned from this study will help identify information behaviors of other unique communities, and suggest new ways to characterize the concept of information overload. We expect the findings fill the gap in academic literature, not only of information behavior but also of parenting, cultural studies and sociology.

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