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Beyond independence and with care: reimagining older adults' digital agency with a granfluencer

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Abstract

Promoting digital literacy in older adults has been discussed as key in counteracting social inequality and the exclusion of older adults. However, little has been discussed about what is presented as the desirable outcome of this approach, that is, older adults' ability to navigate the digital space *independently*. Is an older adult's agency limited when their digital usage or navigation is a shared experience? How do we frame and understand digital agency of older adults who are helped to engage with digital technology? Drawing on feminist ethics of care, this paper examines granfluencers – older online figures who gained significant following on social media platforms – to revisit the concept of digital agency beyond the constraints of independence. It provides a case study of Makrye Park, known as the "Korea Grandma," who runs her social media accounts with her granddaughter. Analysing Park's Instagram posts and YouTube vlogs, this paper illustrates the way Park pushes back against the traditional idea of digital agency by accepting and thriving through care. In particular, I take a close look at how Park's unapologetic expression of intersectionality as a lower-class, digitally "unskilled," older Asian woman establishes her

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as a powerful digital agent. By extending feminist ethics of care into the digital realm, this study thus offers a new perspective on digital agency for older adults – one that is born in co-creation and through care.

Keywords: feminist ethics of care, influencer, intergenerational, media literacy, old age

Introduction

Promoting digital literacy in older adults has been discussed as key in counteracting social inequality and exclusion of older adults (Ferreira et al. 2017; Lee & Kim 2019; Reuter et al. 2021; Tomczyk et al. 2023). While recent scholarship questions such a techno-deterministic view that presents digital technologies as the solution for the "problems" of ageing population (Kania-Lundholm & Manchester 2022), little has been discussed on what is presented as the desirable outcome of this approach, that is, older adult's ability to navigate the digital space independently.

Independence operates as a core ideological value that underlies the idea of "successful aging." Since Rowe and Kahn's classic model defined successful ageing as high physical, cognitive, and social functioning in old age (Rowe & Kahn 1997), success in old age has been measured by the trifactor of health, productivity, and independence. While listed together with health and productivity, independence is often, and implicitly, seen as the essential goal that health and productivity are meant to ensure (Fraser & Gordon 1994). Indeed, ageing-related policies are sometimes structured around promoting independence with health and productivity treated as pathways to avoid reliance in old age (Hudson 1997).

Thanks to critical gerontology and age studies over the last two decades, independence as a desirable trait in old age has gone under critical scrutiny. Scholars such as Sally Chivers, Thomas Cole, Stephen Katz, and Margaret Morganroth Gullette have interrogated the concept of "successful ageing" and identified neoliberal ideologies that place undue responsibility on individual decisions and control in the ageing process. These critiques reveal that the disproportionate focus on independence not only overshadows the importance of systemic inequalities that arise from ageing's intersection with gender, class, race, and disability (Calasanti & Slevin 2006) but also neglects other cultural values such as filial

piety and interdependence that do not reflect Western ideals of ageing (Lamb 2017). In other words, independence is so deeply ingrained as a marker of adulthood in Western cultures that it frames reliance as a threat to dignity.

The critical perspective towards independence has effectively shaped recent discussions of older adults' digital agency. Scholars working in socio-gerontechnology and Science and Technology Studies (STS) challenge the imperatives of independent agency by emphasising the socio-material and relational nature of older adult's engagement with technology (Gallistl et al. 2023). Rather than framing technology use as an individual achievement, they explore how technology use in later life emerges from diverse forms of entanglements of human and non-human actors. Concepts such as "co-evolution" of technology and ageing subjects (Peine et al. 2015), "infrastructuring" (Ertner 2022), and "entangled becoming" (Gallistl & Wanka 2023) underscore how the use and practice of older adults' digital technologies exist within complex networks of entities that urge us to move beyond the ideals of independence. Gallistl et al.'s work (2021), for example, shifts attention away from the binary of use versus non-use to explore diverse forms of engagement, such as shared or proxy use, where older adults may not directly use the technology but are nonetheless actively participating in digital life.

Yet, in many literacy education studies as well as technology use surveys used for policy making, older adults' digital literacy is still measured by assessing their ability to make decisions in navigating the digital landscape in an independent manner, that is, alone without help. Although there have been intergenerational approaches to foster older adults' digital literacy, such efforts have focused less on rethinking the concept of independence on older adults' part. Even in studies that highlight the need for more collaborative opportunities between generations and report on reciprocal learning that takes place in both generations, the shared synergetic digital experiences and capabilities are still largely framed as liminal, an in-between stage that ultimately must move towards individual skill-based competence without reliance (see e.g. Lee & Kim 2019; Tomczyk et al. 2023).

There is a group of older adults whose digital presence adds complexity to understanding digital literacy: the granfluencers. Granfluencer is a coined term that combines grandparent and influencer describing older online figures who gained significant following on social media

platforms (King 2023; Ng & Indran 2023). The media was quick to celebrate the seemingly digitally adept "trendy" older adults as the next generation of influencers (Berry 2023). Scholarship has also acknowledged the phenomenon with attention to the ways they actively utilise media platforms to resist ageist discourse (Antunes et al. 2022; Farinosi 2023; Ng & Indran 2022, 2023).

Taking a media studies and cultural studies approach, some scholars have interrogated the motivation behind the granfluencers' digital presence, seeking to uncover the sociocultural contexts that shape their practices. These scholars highlight that many of the granfluencer accounts are managed in collaboration with a younger family member such as a granddaughter or grandson, taking issue with the ways in which the older adults rely on and even are directed by their younger partners. For example, Gehrmann (2023) notes that Joe Allington, aka grandadjoe 1933, who has 7.9 million followers and a total of 259.7 million "likes" on his TikTok account (as of December 2024) had disclosed in an interview, half-jokingly, that "Wendy says: 'Dad, we're doing TikTok, we're doing this today'. Then I just do as I'm told. I'm very obedient, you know" (BBC 2020). Within the context of the neoliberal market force that motivates the granfluencers' digital presence to some extent, the question of autonomy and authorship in such partnerships becomes significant (Banerjee 2023). What these scholars problematise is these granfluencers' digital agency, although not explicitly termed as such: whether this group of older adults can be truly regarded as autonomous and literate digital agents – fully aware of and in control of their own digital activities.

In light of this, the implications of independence in understanding older adults' digital engagement merit deeper exploration. While valuable, the above critique tends to narrowly frame agency as exerting complete independence, control, and self-direction. Rather than seeing the granfluencers as complicit in the "production" of attractive old age in new media (Gehrmann 2023), this paper looks at them as an opportunity to revisit the concept of digital literacy and digital agency for older adults. How does digital agency operate beyond the norm of independence? Is it reduced or compromised when reliance is present? Can reframing digital agency challenge the stigma around dependency and open space for accepting help as a valid form of agential expression?

This paper will discuss these questions by taking a closer look at one granfluencer, Makrye Park,[1] aka Korea Grandma. Grounded in age studies, media studies, as well as scholarship on care and feminist ethics, I first provide an overview of key terms including digital literacy, media literacy, and digital agency to trace how their conceptual overlap obscures values of independence. Then, drawing on Fine and Glendding's (2005) work among others, I use feminist ethics of care as a lens through which to revisit the concept of digital agency for older adults. I present philosophical and ethical debates on autonomy and care in ageing, focusing on older adults who rely on others' help for digital navigation. Finally, I analyse Park's digital engagement by examining the power dynamic manifested through Park's Instagram posts, YouTube vlogs, and co-authored biography, highlighting how Park pushes back against the conventional ideas of digital literacy by embracing care and thriving through shared, collaborative digital experiences. In doing so, I argue that her unapologetic expression of intersectionality – as a lower-class, digitally "unskilled," older Asian woman – establishes her as a powerful digital agent. By extending the feminist ethics of care into the digital realm, this paper ultimately hopes to provide a new perspective on digital agency for older adults.

Digital Agency beyond Independence

Assumptions of Independence in Digital Literacy

The definition of digital literacy is complex and evolving. Traditionally understood as the ability to access and use information and communication technology, digital literacy centres on individual competencies to access, understand, and utilise digital devices, technologies, and information in a variety of contexts (Gilster 1997; Schreurs et al. 2017). The concept of digital literacy has evolved, adapting to technological advancements and its growing importance in modern societies (Rasi et al. 2021). The initial focus on assessing "basic" technical skills has broadened to encompass the social, cultural, and socio-emotional dimensions incorporating

[1]This paper uses the romanisation of Makrye Park as identified by her YouTube account, respecting her or her team's decision in its presentation.

how digital participation both shapes and is shaped by societal and interpersonal contexts (Hobbs 2010; Rasi et al. 2021; Schreurs et al. 2017).

This shift towards understanding digital literacy as a multidimensional concept with deeper implications in contemporary life is reflected in a related concept, media literacy. Building on the traditional definition of digital literacy, media literacy addresses the distinct networked nature of interactive, user-shared content (Belshaw 2012; Defining Digital Media Literacy 2022; Rasi et al. 2021; Schreurs et al. 2017). Although often treated as a subset of digital literacy for its specificity, media literacy is an arguably broader concept because it incorporates critical and systemic evaluations of media (Bawden 2001; Koltay 2011).

This expanded framework is meaningful because it recognises that competence in digital space isn't solely about technical proficiency but involves engagement with and contribution to sociocultural discourse. Scholars often refer to this dimension as *critical* to underscore the societal impact of individual digital interactions with an awareness of the broader power dynamics. For instance, Cho et al. (2024) emphasise contribution as a key social media competency to reflect the importance of engaging with the larger culture as an active participant. Similarly, Mihailidis (2018) focuses on contribution in socio-political contexts highlights citizenship and participation in democracy as one of the key areas of media literacy. Buckingham (2007), Festl (2021), and Turner (2019) expand this view by recognising the ethical dimensions of digital activity, further underscoring the ability for moral behaviours, responsibility, and reflection as crucial elements of literacy in operating in the digital space.

To this extent, the growth of the concept of digital literacy has become infused with expectations of certain ideals of agency. Although the term "agency" may not always be invoked explicitly, discussions about the critical dimensions of digital literacy often rest on implicit assumptions of self-governing autonomy (Wuyckens et al. 2022). Hobbs's (2010) positioning of accountability and independent decision-making as core elements of digital literacy illustrates this point well. Such a perspective assumes an ideal digital participant as one who is solely in control of their decisions and actions and, consequently, responsible. While scholars do recognise that the environment of digital space is interpersonal and contextual, they

often overlook the possibility that individual engagement itself may not always come from complete autonomy. Failing to interrogate these underlying ideals of independence in the broader discussion of digital literacy risks reinforcing a narrow and exclusionary view of what it means to be an agent and have agency in digital space, as in the case of older adults who rely on others for technical assistance or navigating the broader digital systems.

Digital Agency

Often described as the "new kid on the block" (Siddiq et al. 2024), digital agency is a concept that describes "the individual's ability to control and adapt to a digital world" with competence, confidence, and accountability (Passey et al. 2018: 426). While it shares conceptual similarities with more established terms such as digital literacy or digital competence, the shift to agency is crucial. Compared to *literacy* which focuses on the acquisition and application of skills, *agency* – "a person or thing through which power is exerted or an end is achieved" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.) – foregrounds an entity who can act upon those skills within a given context, implying empowerment and adaptability.

Moreover, its semantic distinction equips it to address emerging challenges that demand a more nuanced discussion of agency. Siddiq et al. (2024) argue that digital agency has "explanatory power" in theorising and explaining recent issues such as those posed by algorithmic platforms and generative artificial intelligence (AI), where digital tools are increasingly being "integrated as partners in problem-solving, hypothesizing, and creative activities" (p. 5725). This shift enables a deeper examination of what we actually mean by agency and how it may be distinguished from the idealised notion of autonomy rooted in complete self-control and self-sufficiency. In other words, it allows us to consider how a user interacts with forces and entities beyond the individual self in their exertion of agency.

The concept of *distributed agency*, a notion developed by Bruno Latour and later expanded by Mustafa Emibrayer and Ann Mische as well as STS scholars and new materialists, is particularly useful in exploring agency as that which is shared between humans and digital systems (Shaffer

& Clinton 2006). While revealing how digital tools can influence – and even override – human decisions (Ågerfalk 2020; Lund & Aagaard 2020), this line of scholarship marks a crucial distinction between agency and autonomy, suggesting that agency resides in the individual, even when it involves collaboration with digital intelligence and is shaped by limited autonomy in a conventional sense. Building on this, Stenalt's revised concept of digital agency (2021) calls attention to the increasingly blurry boundaries between human and non-human agency, a phenomenon noted by earlier scholars (Fenwick & Landri 2012; Leonardi 2010). For Stenalt, agency emerges from the dynamic interplay between users and digital technologies, where agentic possibility is shaped by both human intention and, importantly, the inherent affordances and limitations of the digital systems.

For certain populations such as older adults, this could mean that their limited digital literacy does not equal diminished digital agency. Rather, their different engagement style represents another form of agentic possibility – one that adapts to the affordances and limitations of digital systems. This revised concept of digital agency is particularly useful when considering interactions not just between humans and digital tools but also between two human collaborators. Here, digital agency need not align with ideals of independence, sole decision-making, or full control, instead emphasising the context of two actors in navigating the complex digital landscape.

The next section introduces feminist ethics of care as a lens through which to further challenge assumptions of independence and reimagine digital agency. This framework helps us better understand modes of digital engagement that certain groups show – not as isolated individuals, but as interdependent agents within networks of caring relationships.

Digital Agency through Feminist Ethics of Care

Feminist ethics of care debunks the illusion of independence. Feminist ethicists generally view the traditional notion of autonomy with suspicion for its presupposition of an idealised, self-contained personhood (Stoljar 2024). Rooted in Western philosophical lineage, particularly Kantian ethics, traditional agency is envisioned as an individual operating in a vacuum, in full control over his values and decisions, and without reliance on

others (Held 2005; Kittay 1999). Feminist ethics of care counters this view and argue that dependence is integral to all human experience, advocating for a framework of *relational autonomy* where reliance and interdependence are not a weakness or a loss of agency. Originally conceived to validate domains of life traditionally associated with women such as mothering, caregiving, and emotional labour, this perspective reclaims the "feminine" valuation of relations and emotion in understanding autonomy (Friedman 2003; MacKenzie & Stoljar 2000).

Fine and Glendinning (2005) apply the framework of relational autonomy to caregiving with reference to old age. Building on Kittay (1999), they argue that caregiving relationships are more complex than traditional notions of agency can encompass. A key insight they offer is the distinction between inequality of power and the exercise of domination. Whereas the exercise of domination is inherently unjust, they argue, inequality of power is a natural feature in caregiving contexts, and in fact, in human relationships (p. 613). Examining various practical contexts, they further elaborate that the power inequalities that exist in caregiving are not always as one-sided as they might seem. For example, a caregiver may appear to hold disproportionate power over a physically dependent care recipient, but that recipient may possess greater economic or socio-legal power (p. 614). Both caregivers and recipients exert agency but in ways that resist the traditional binary between independence and dependence. Their agency is relational, networked, and situational, where both actors exert influence, contribute to decisions, and shape outcomes in ways that recognise and respect each other's respective capacities and roles.

To further emphasise the reciprocal dynamics in care relationships, Shakespeare (2000) suggests a new terminology, *help*. According to Shakespeare, care has historically been associated with negative connotations, often implying obligation and burden, whereas help conveys a sense of choice and a genuine, active personal commitment. Although this term has not replaced care, it highlights the actual support that is given and received without diminishing the realities of dependence or glossing over the challenges of interdependence inherent in caregiving relationships.

This nuanced discussion on ethics of care offers valuable insight for understanding digital agency, particularly for older adults who are not

viewed as independent in a traditional sense. While not all feminist ethicists agree on what it means to balance inter/dependence with autonomy,[2] they share that both actors of caregiving are agential even when independence is limited. For older adults relying on others for the provision of technical support or systemic navigation, this would suggest that they can be agents with and through help. Some of the granfluencers' partnerships with the younger family members, for instance, would not diminish their digital agency but manifest it as relational.

Older Adults as Digital Agents in Collaboration with Care

The collaborative aspects underpinning older adults' digital agency remain largely underexplored. Existing research on collaboration primarily focuses on their roles as co-designers in technology who provide feedback to make it more "age-friendly" (Kania-Lundholm & Manchester 2022; Trentham et al. 2015). Scholars in socio-gerontechnology have pointed out that even these participatory approaches often inscribe ageing as an issue to intervene (Peine & Neven 2021), urging for a new framework that approach ageing and technology as mutually constitutive (Peine & Neven 2021) and promote forms of participation in which older adults are more than passive testers and helpers, but creative and adoptive agents who actively shape the design process (Cozza et al. 2016; Peine et al. 2016). Despite these arguments for reconceptualising older users as active contributors – or as Peine et al. (2014) put it, "innosumers," a blend of innovator and consumer – older adults continue to be largely depicted as consumers of digital technology and information, rather than creators.

Lavenir's (2022) study of older video gamers offers a valuable counterexample that highlights how older adults engage with technology not just for practical purposes of improving technology design or as an end-user but as a form of identity expression and social interaction.

[2]Feminist ethicists vary in their view on relational autonomy's compatibility with practices of systemic oppression. For example, Westlund (2003) has studied the case of gendered self-abnegation of the "deferential wife" who would willfully (even when unconsciously) act to the wishes of others and whether she can be considered autonomous or as acts of internalised oppression. In the context of caregiving, such tension may be observed in a situation where a caregiver who excessively prioritises the needs of the care recipient would be considered autonomous remains to be debated. See Stoljar (2004) for a detailed discussion.

Lavenir observes that older female gamers navigate the gaming culture with remarkable creativity and playfulness. Resisting expectations of violence and competition, these "silver gamers" experience games with "a lot of zen, [appreciating] beauty, aesthetics" (Lavenir 2022: 175). Importantly, they value collective play over individual mastery, even playing single-player games together by sharing the controller back and forth, collaborating on the gaming experience. The way these older adults engage with digital technology not only complicates the utilitarian focus of collaboration that frames older adults' contribution as merely for problem-solving; it also shows that we must move beyond simplistic binaries of dependent or independent, competent or incompetent. Collaboration is a part of their expression of agency and social engagement, and even a source of pride (Kania-Lundholm & Manchester 2022: 175).

Older adults' content creation on social media exemplifies collaboration as integral to their digital agency. However, current research on granfluencers rarely addresses the co-creative dynamic underlying their digital engagement. A growing body of research on granfluencers primarily focuses on analysing the themes and presentation styles of their content (Antunes et al. 2022; McGrath 2018; Miranda et al. 2022). For example, Ng and Indran (2023) explore how TikTok granfluencers engage with ageing discourses through specific self-portrayal strategies, while Antunes et al. (2022) examine Instagram granfluencers' communication practices, including content themes, posting frequency, and follower engagement style. These studies align with earlier findings that granfluencers use social media platforms as a medium to challenge negative stereotypes related to ageing and offer an alternative vision of ageing identities such as active, social, sexual, and vocal – though some scholars debate whether such portrayals reinforce or subvert ageism (Banerjee 2023).

A key limitation of this body of research is that it examines granfluencers as single actors and their digital presence as individual achievements. Some studies examine user and audience interaction as their motivation for digital engagement (Harley & Fitzpatrick 2009), and others explore how the influencer economy influences granfluencers' digital content through sponsorships and brand endorsements, positioning them as individuals within neoliberal context (Antunes et al. 2022; Banerjee 2023). But the intergenerational or collaborative dynamic that often shapes many of the granfluencers' presence itself is rarely examined. Media studies

scholars have begun questioning the promise of social media to "autonomously and strategically manage their own images, controlling how they want their identities and cultures to be received" (Kim 2020: 19), and investigate how such practices can undermine older adults' autonomy as mentioned above. Scholars such as Banerjee contend that the performative aspects of micro-celebrity culture also apply to older adults despite perceptions of their greater authenticity, focusing on how the involvement of younger collaborators behind the scenes contribute to the careful "staging" older adults, raising questions about older adults' autonomy.

In this respect, existing scholarship on granfluencers overlooks the relational processes behind their digital presence. To address this gap, it is useful to turn to adjacent fields such as feminist STS and socio-gerontechnology, where collaboration and entanglement are central to understanding older adults' engagement with technology. Michela Cozza's (2021) feminist analysis of ageing and assistive technologies offers a valuable framework for rethinking agency within networks of care and interaction. Cozza argues that material living conditions and practices of ageing are inherently entangled with technologies and objects where both human and non-human entities exist in interrelation, and thus inseparably. Drawing on Karen Barad's agential realism, Cozza contends that agency does not precede interaction but is distributed across relational configurations – among human and non-human actors alike – in a digitised world. This includes older adults, smart monitoring devices, care workers, and policy infrastructures that are all entangled in a practice of care. While Cozza forefront the relation between technology (non-human) and human from a post-humanist perspective, her work helps illuminate how granfluencers' digital engagements are similarly shaped by the entanglement of care relationship between two human agents and situated dependence in their engagement with digital technology.

Building on this critical departure from individualistic models of agency, I turn to the case of granfluencer Park Makrye to examine how digital practices among older adults are often relational and co-produced. As Kania-Lundholm and Manchester suggest, agency in later life emerges through the "messiness of practice," indeed shaped by questions of subjectivity, digital (dis)engagement, and even non-use (p. 11). Park's digital presence demonstrates that such "messiness" helps us see collaboration as integral to some older adults' engagement with

the digital space. I argue that her digital agency is realised and exercised through co-creation, made possible by care and help.

Relational Digital Agency in Action: Korea Grandma

Park's Digital Agency: Relational and Collaborative

Park Makrye, known as "Korea Grandma," exemplifies how digital agency can emerge from relational autonomy based on dependence and interdependence. Her digital agency, co-created with and dependent on her granddaughter Kim, challenges traditional views of individual digital agency.

Park is one of the most prominent granfluencers in South Korea with over 1.1 million YouTube subscribers and 520 million views (as of March 2026). Sassy, down-to-earth, and bold, this 79-year-old vlogger has gained immense popularity for the brash way she embraces aging. Park's content is "all about showing off her wrinkles and her elderly life in the raw" (Lee 2017). She scoffs at cosmetic products that promise to make women younger and prettier commenting that "you would just have to be born again" and would suggest that eyeliners be applied along their crow's feet (Lee 2017). Collaborating with big-name brands such as Samsung and Netflix, she has also been featured in *Vogue Korea* and *BBC Main*, invited to Google, and received several awards including a Special Prize for Korean Content Award. In 2019, the Seoul Government launched the "Finding the Next Grandma" project where participants undergo 2 months of training in filming, editing, subtitling, and all-in-all management of running YouTube channels (Lee 2019). Such initiatives showcase that Park has effectively changed the role of older adults in the digital space redefining them as creators and even trendsetters.

However, it is crucial to note that Park is not a solo content creator. While her social media accounts almost exclusively feature her, they are co-created with her granddaughter Yura Kim, who identifies herself as the producer (Park & Kim 2019). Kim originally encouraged Park to start vlogging as a way to fight Alzheimer's Disease back in 2017 when older adults' presence on digital media was rare. Their YouTube channel has grown since then exponentially, going from 18 subscribers to 180,000 in 2 days (Park & Kim 2019), and now covers a wide range of topics including travel, beauty, cooking, Mukbang, reviews, parody, and grocery shopping

(박막례 [Park Makrye] 2024). It is not a stretch to say that YouTube would be difficult for Park without Kim's help. Whatever the content is, that Kim is behind the camera overseeing the technical side is obvious. Park is usually presented as conversing, talking to the camera, and frequently interacting with her granddaughter who is not shown on the scene. Their channel makes no effort to conceal that Kim handles the technical and logistical aspects from filming and editing to trend analysis and strategic planning.

Here, Park is often seen presented with "young people's things" such as an erotic show on Netflix (Park 2024b) or asked to engage with new trends such as "what's in my bag" (Park 2024a) or aesthetic planner/diary decoration (Park 2022) without knowing exactly what the tropes are. These are framed as a type of reaction or exposure videos, a sub-genre that typically involves individuals, often coded as "uncultured" or outside dominant taste cultures, responding to unfamiliar, elite culture.[3] While the audience is overwhelmingly positive about such content, the channel is not immune to criticism for profiting from ageist stereotypes. Despite their claims to authentic, "unfiltered grandma responses," Park's curiosity and bewilderment of the youth culture are presented as a source of entertainment, with her persona staged – or at least mediated and edited – by her producer, Kim.

Yet, this performance both draws on and destabilises ageist tropes. Her limited digital literacy – both in terms of the skills and understanding of the digital culture – is not simply a comedic device but a site of liberation. By foregrounding her lower digital literacy as the channel's quintessential charm, it challenges dominant notions of digital expertise and independence. Park's digital agency here exists because of her limited digital literacy and with – and only with – Kim's help.

Under the framework of relational autonomy, agency is not defined by complete independence but by the ability to act within and through relationships in specific contexts. In their unique relationship of care, Park's digital agency is not diminished by her reliance on Kim; instead,

[3]Reaction videos, in general, are any videos that involve "an audience watching someone's emotional reaction to some other piece of content" (Therieau 2022). See Bliss and Nansen (2022) for the history of this genre.

it is shaped by their interdependence. As a prime example of relational autonomy in practice, Park's digital agency is not always exercised in the same manner. She varies the nature of her dependence and digital engagement style across the two platforms, YouTube and Instagram, adapting to each platform's affordances and limitations. On YouTube, Park's content reflects polished co-creation, with professional editing and strategic planning, with clear fingerprints of Kim's production. By contrast, her Instagram posts showcase a more personal and independent engagement.

These differences stem from the distinct characteristics of each platform. As a video-sharing platform, YouTube arguably requires a higher technical knowledge and editing skills, making it less accessible for Park without Yura's help. Meanwhile, Instagram's simpler interface, centred on photos and brief text (Boulianne et al. 2024; Timmi et al. 2024), allows Park to be a part of the technical aspect of the production in a more direct manner. Although the duo has not spoken in detail about it, it seems that Park's Instagram posts take on a different collaborative effort, with Kim (or their team) selecting the photo or clip and Park writing the text portion. This is evident in the way the visual element reflects professional-level editing skills (usually recycled material from her YouTube video content) while the text portion is marked by notable briefness, misspellings, broken hashtags, and no spaces – a distinct language style of Park that her fans affectionally call "Makrye font" (Lee 2017) (See Figure 1).[4] None of the text introductions of her YouTube videos reflect Park's personal text style. It is clearly written by Kim explaining what Park does in the respective videos in a highly conversational tone that incorporates trendy languages, followed by heavily marketed, copy-pasted blurbs that

[4]Not all of Park's YouTube videos and Instagram posts are provided with English translation. In the case of her YouTube channel, many popular videos are translated in English, often with an additional indicator (e.g., (Eng), [Eng], [EngSub]) but the majority of the videos are offered only in Korea. In comparison, the majority of Park's recent Instagram posts cater to a global audience featuring English subtitles in the video content itself. These English translations, however, do not reflect "Makrye font" and its distinctive use of language. Even when the original Korean text contains typos and grammatical errors, the English version is without such. It seems there is no identifiable pattern of consistency in term of which posts offer translation, as some of her recent posts do not have English translation attached to Park's seemingly original Korean text portion.

Figure 1. A screenshot of Park's Instagram post featuring Park scrolling through a KakaoTalk message on her smartphone in large-font size that details increased prices of various vegetables. The Instagram caption reads "GeeCucumbersSoSteepChivesTooStabbingtheSky" (2023). Translated by the author.

promote her channel (e.g. "♥If you'd like to watch Grandma Makrye's delightful daily life, subscribe! ♥If you enjoyed watching the grandma, hit the like button! ♥If you'd like to introduce the grandma to your friends, share!").

Stenalt's theory of digital agency emphasises that user engagement is shaped by the interplay between human intention and platform affordances. For Park, the inherent limitation of platforms such as YouTube is its technical demands, and her acceptance of Yura's help are a form of her agency in exertion. Park's ability to embrace the opportunities of different digital systems and adapt her digital engagement style hence demonstrates how relational digital agency operates in practice for those with limited digital literacy.

Park's Intersectionality: Digitally Unskilled, Lower-Class, Older, Asian Woman

Compared to the more tech-savvy granfluencers, as in the case of Lynn Slater, known as Accidental Icon, or Helen Elam Van Winkle, known as Baddie Winkle, who suavely navigate the digital world, the media sensation surrounding Park arises from her limited digital literacy, particularly in the often-ungraceful way she engages with digital technology. Far from being a hindrance, Park's limited digital literacy becomes a defining feature of her digital agency, offering a powerful counterpoint to competence-focused frameworks.

Park speaks openly about the complexities of her intersectionality, addressing her experiences with sexism and limited education along with new acknowledgments of her race and sexuality. For Park, her limited literacy manifests best the cultural and systemic inequalities rooted in intersectional forms of oppression. As she writes, her life story can't be heard without tears. In her biography *Park Makrye, Will Not Die As This* (2019),[5] co-authored with Kim, Park recounts her struggles with such inequalities. The book opens with an episode where she asks to learn letters and gets hit on the forehead. Born the youngest in a large family, Park was denied education because she was a girl, and later survived an alcoholic, abusive husband who constantly left her in debt with three children. Poverty haunted her throughout her adult life and even prevented her from the education that she wished for her children. Although literacy is rarely emphasised as a core axis of intersectionality, Park foregrounds it as a manifestation of systemic inequalities shaped by intersectional matters. Her lifelong trauma surrounding education reflects deeply embedded sexism and institutional barriers that denied women opportunities in Korea in the past. For Park, literacy remains both a personal longing and a site of defiance.

Her approach towards digital culture and technology reflects this attitude. For example, her makeup tutorial videos, which sparked her rise to fame, highlight both her limited competence in technical skills and understanding of digital infrastructure but also her playful defiance against them. Rather than masking her inexperience, Park shows it off,

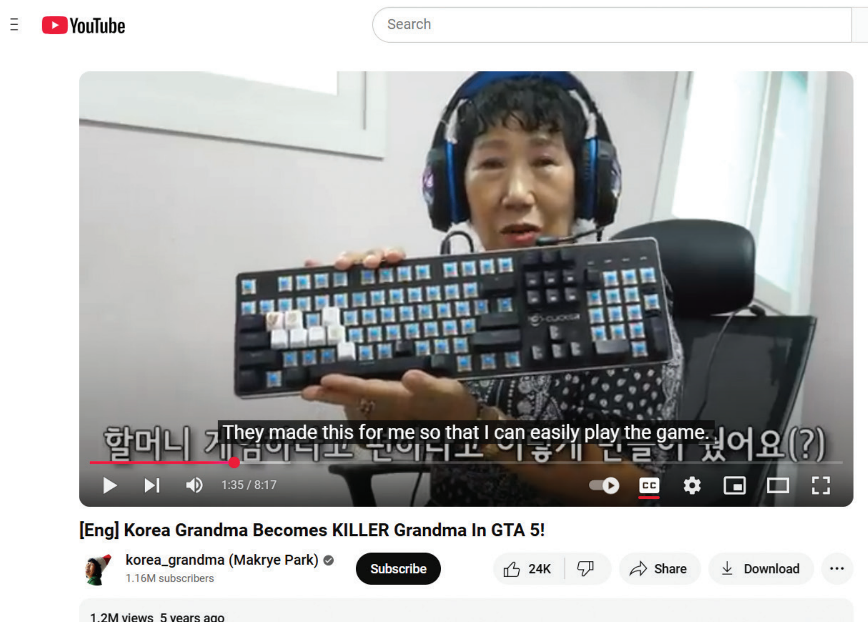
[5]There is no English translation of this text. All translations are the author's own.

transforming moments of struggle into a refreshing moment of digital engagement. In her early video titled "Makeup tutorial Park Makrye Daily Makeup Going to the Local Market After Dropping in at the Dentist Ver.," (Park 2017). Park appears bemused by the whole YouTube culture. When instructed to show and share what kind of items she was using in front of the camera, Park holds out her hand, inadvertently blocking the view from the viewer and only seeing the product herself. From time to time, she questions the purpose of such videos, exclaiming in her endearingly irreverent local dialect, "Who would watch this? Do young people really want to see people putting on makeup and stuff? They're random people, strangers – that's weird." Her lack of understanding of the norms of makeup tutorials and the YouTube ecosystem brings to the fore the assumed knowledge embedded in digital culture, subverting expectations and thereby marking her own place in the digital realm. This self-aware digital unskillfulness resonates with audiences who see in her an alternative model of digital agency, one rooted not in mastery but in curiosity and improvisation.

Although Park's unfamiliarity with YouTube culture and technology has since been diluted, it yet remains a core part of her digital identity and a manifestation of her digital agency. Even after hundreds of YouTube vlogs later, Park still wonders at the YouTube culture, having a blast about her audience watching her accessorize a big-letter calendar with stickers, cursing at it as she tries to navigate the clutter (Park 2022). Her playful approach to digital culture and unapologetically lower digital literacy extend to her engagement with gaming culture, where she subverts the norms of competent gamer narratives. Park plays GTA (Grand Theft Auto), a game that is defined by all kinds of freedoms for criminal activities including hijacking cars, beating up people, and firing guns (See Figure 2). Even before starting the game, Park is seen having to navigate the registration and struggling. Guided by Kim who is at a loss where to begin when Park asks if her email address is her home address, Park wonders why she would create a "nickname" and when she can actually play the game.

There is no question that Park depends on Kim for both technical and systemic navigation of the digital realm. Park features a custom-made keyboard that Yura provided, stripped down to only the essential keys for gaming. Instead of trying to master the skills and play through the

Figure 2. A screenshot of Korea Grandma's GTA gaming vlog with Park featuring the custom-made keyboard (2019b). GTA: Grand Theft Auto



missions, Park fixates on questions such as why the character is homeless and why she dressed the way she did – questions that a YouTuber gamer deeply invested in gaming culture would never ask. The video itself is titled "Killer Grandma has come online. GTA5, the sorrow of being homeless" (2019a) underscoring the dissonance that Park creates as the essence of the video.

The vlog further highlights Park's botched vocabularies and frustrations with technology in colourful, bold captions, embracing and amplifying her limited literacy as Park's hallmark digital agency. Her limited digital literacy is not a shortcoming or a barrier, instead, it is the foundation of Park's distinctive digital presence and a key expression of her agency. Park's engagement in digital culture – despite and because of her

limited digital literacy – becomes an act of defiance against conventional ideals of expertise, mastery, and significantly, independence. Her agency does not emerge from individual proficiency or critical understanding of digital structures such as YouTube or GTA. It arises through her frustration, struggles, and moments of wonder with technology. Park's granddaughter, Kim, enables this agency, not by erasing Park's limitations but by foregrounding them through their collaborative navigation of digital spaces.

From her broken texts to a chaotic makeup tutorial video, Park thrives in her unpardoning frustrations, fascinations, and struggles over new technology and digital culture. These moments, at work with her granddaughter's help, affirm Park's digital agency as relational.

Interdependence within the Power Dynamic

Kim's digital engagement is also shaped by her relationship with Park. Without Park and their own power dynamics, the nature of Kim's digital agency would change. Although they now have a management agency, Kim continues to take on multiple roles. She is not only Park's producer, editor, and manager, but also her caretaker, attending to Park's physical, emotional, and personal needs while fulfilling her own professional desires for content production. This blending of roles shows the complex dynamics of caregiving in their unique relationship, challenging simplistic notions of power and dependence.

One example of this complexity is Kim's prioritisation of travel sponsorships, despite the challenges they pose. Travel has a special meaning for Park because the opportunities to explore the world have long been restricted by poverty. Recognising this, Kim prioritises travel sponsorships to better serve Park, even when it risks the channel looking overly commercial, thereby undermining its claim to authenticity. These sponsorships also create additional pressure for Kim on a personal level. Kim has to take care of Park and her schedule considering Park's health conditions during such travels, while ensuring the success of the content in order to secure future partnerships (Park & Kim 2019). This dual responsibility as a producer and a caretaker demonstrates how her emotional and professional labour resists assumptions about caregiving as an inherently

one-sided power dynamic with the caretaker possessing disproportionate power over the care recipient.

In the actual content production processes too, Park sometimes exerts unexpected power that disrupts Kim's producer role. Even when Kim seeks to more actively direct the channel's content, Park's limited literacy or ability often overrides these efforts. Kim recalls planning a meticulous script for traveling to Japan that ultimately failed. Kim writes, I "planned it out too perfectly that my grandma didn't come through! The charm of our video is just Park Makrye, this human, the candid, quirky, and unpredictable, but my scenario had erased that" (p. 181). Other times, Park's trouble with memorising lines and lack of knowledge for current technology such as AI or smartphones frustrated Kim's attempt to have Park perform the way she wanted: Park simply goes, "Leave it. I'll do it my way!" (p. 310). Unlike media scholars' suspicion that older adults are passively staged by their younger family partners on social media, Park and Kim's relationship shows that interdependence shapes digital agency in more fluid ways for both actors.

Their YouTube channel information reads, "The only reason for this channel's existence is Park Makrye's happiness" (Park & Kim 2019: 106). But the channel cannot exist solely for Park. Kim writes that her goal with social media is two-fold: as a granddaughter, her grandmother's happiness, but as a producer, it is to have the YouTube channel recognised for its merit and spread that value (Park & Kim 2019: 313). This form of digital agency is neither fully independent nor entirely passive on either side. As Kim writes, "YouTube changed my grandma's life, but I realise that my life transformed just as much" (p. 315). Together, their dynamic demonstrates how relational autonomy operates in practice.

Conclusion

Park's digital presence shows what it means to be a digital agent with care. By embracing her limitations and relying on help, she challenges traditional ideals of technological mastery and individual autonomy. Park and Kim's co-created digital achievements show that older adults can claim agency not despite their reliance on care but with and because of it. Their collaborative partnership expands our understanding of digital agency as relational and interdependent, ultimately offering a more

inclusive framework for understanding diverse forms of participation in the digital landscape.

The question of authorship may remain. Who then is the author of the channel of Korea Grandma? For practical purposes of this paper too, how to cite Korea Grandma's vlogs? Banerjee and Velten's (2020) study of coauthored centenarian biographies examines the dilemma of identifying whose voice truly shapes a story when collaboration is involved. They argue that disentangling the voices involved in the writing process – the centenarian who narrates the story and the co-author who put those words into a deliverable form of a literary genre – is impossible because their contributions are so deeply intertwined. Instead, they turn the question to us and ask why we need to separate the two in the first place: "It may be our desperate need to have the centenarian speak in their own words … it is our own fantasies of successful aging" (p. 5). Our insistence for "authentic" voice may reflect deeper anxieties about authority and control. As they suggest, the issue may lie in our desire for an idealised, autonomous agency – a fantasy of "successful ageing" grounded in self-sufficiency.

As in the case of feminist ethics of care, there may be no clear consensus as to what really constitutes digital agency and what aspects of autonomy contribute to a "full" agency. Will Park's agency change, even within this framework of relational digital agency, if her disabilities increase and affect how she engages online? Can Kim's reliance on Park's digital presence escape the critique of the influencer economy that commodifies personal relationships? Does reframing Kim's multifaceted caregiving roles risk romanticising gendered labour and reinforce burdens placed disproportionately on women, especially in Korean culture? These unsolved questions, however, do not undermine the value of interdependence as a legitimate and empowering form and expression of digital agency. Thriving through care, Park offers an opportunity for us to imagine an evolving model of agency that embraces and celebrates limitations.

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