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**Sunny Jeong**

Department of Leisure Studies

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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### **Sharing information and cultivating knowledge in virtual setting: Increasing social capital in virtual community of tourism**

This research notes that the dramatic growth of digital connections carry social capital in a new way in terms of accumulating information and cultivating knowledge in virtual setting. Relational ties and information communication technology (ICT) jointly exploit benefits of social capital by incorporating both strong and weak ties and extend the capacity of social capital by activating dormant social ties which are not yet networked but possibly connected. Gilbut tourism virtual community is introduced as an example of enjoying maximized benefits of social capital mediated by ICTs. Strategies adopted in Gilbut network to help increase social capital are analyzed under the three dimensions of social capital (structural, cognitive and relational dimension). Perhaps in addition to questions about marketing, promotion and development in tourism, we need to ask about the formation of social capital, cooperation, and social connectedness as well. Doing so could reduce the isolation of tourism research in social science and at the same time contribute to practical action in tourism field enhancing the formation of public good.

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By Sunny Jeong

Department of Leisure Studies

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Address: 104 Huff Hall, 1206 S. Fourth Street  
Champaign, IL 61820

Phone: (217) 333-4410

Fax: (217) 244-1935

Email: [shjeong@uiuc.edu](mailto:shjeong@uiuc.edu)

**Sunny (Seonhee) Jeong** is Doctoral Candidate in Leisure Studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (Champaign IL 61820, USA. Email <[shjeong@uiuc.edu](mailto:shjeong@uiuc.edu)>). Her main research areas are community empowerment, social capital, and social network. Other research interests include knowledge distribution and community informatics.

## **Digital World and Social Capital**

If we consider prodigious growth in the quantity, influence, and interests of virtual space, it takes no great insight to realize that a virtual community is one of those institutions where people are involved in accumulating and sharing diverse forms of information and resources. Society is changing with the advancement of technology and the growing digital world, thus older forms of social capital are changed. Through there is no single agreed definition of social capital, two themes appear to define it: relationship and its function as a resource. In comparison to other types of capital, social capital resides in the structure of their relationships and is characterized as instrumental and fungible. Most literature on social capital focuses on its advantage as a resource or value extracted from social relationships. Benefits of social capital to communities is summarized as: 1) a flow of information (Burt, 1992; Coleman, 1990; Laumann & Knoke, 1987; Laumann & Marsden, 1982); 2) the control of others and one's own autonomy (Seron & Ferris, 1995); and 3) the potential it provides for social solidarity (Laumann & Pappi, 1976; Portes & Sensenbrenner, 1993; Suttles & Street, 1970; Wellman & Wortly, 1990). One of the defect of social capital (Portes, 1998; Adler & Kwon, 2000) is that it requires considerable investment in establishing and maintaining relationships. If synchronizing interactions among people is only counted in social capital, social capital may not be cost effective. Along with this, if social capital is left unused without being well maintained, it decreases and essentially dies. However, technological innovations recast social capital in a new way where social interaction can be mediated, maintained and generated through online community, forum, newsgroups or personal homepages easily. Hence, socio capital mediated by digital culture refers to productive combinations of social relations and information and communication technology.

## **Gilbut: Virtual Community of Tourism**

This research notes the questions of how virtual communities may increase social capital and also what mechanisms allow virtual institution's sustainability by looking at the case of a tourism virtual community, Gilbut, Korea. Virtual community is one of the most popular digital cultural institutions in Korea nowadays to bring people together to produce digital resources especially under the considerations of following facts. Korea has 'the world's most comprehensive Internet network' (Belson & Richtel, 2003, May 5, p. C1) with 10 million broadband Internet subscribers (Yang, 2002, November 30) in addition to 32 million wireless phone users are utilizing a variety of voice and mobile Internet services (Korea leads OECD in broadband penetration, 2002, December 6). Preece's (2000) operational elements of virtual communities as people, with a shared purpose, policies, and computer systems used as a frame to introduce this community briefly. The founders of this community are two men in their early 30s who wanted a way to share their experiences, information, and knowledge gained through their travels. They opened Gilbut virtual community with the help of one patron (both have jobs in computer science) who was willing to provide a free 'home' for this community, Gilbut network ([www.gilbut.net](http://www.gilbut.net)) which means 'friends on the road (of travel)' on March, 2001. User groups of Gilbut are around early 30s for men and late 20s for women and their marital status is mostly single except 3% of married people. As far as occupations, more than half are working (65%) others are studying (35% of students members) according to one of interviewee, Yun, core member of Gilbut in Seoul (Yun, personal communication, April 9, 2003). The purpose of this community is sharing travel information, finding a travel party, and providing and seeking free travel resources. When it comes to policy to direct people's behavior, the only requirements for joining the community is providing personal information such as a SSN, home/work addresses

and phone numbers while optional items are their willingness to join ‘free provider of accommodation,’ travel motto (philosophy) and places they want to travel in future. Privacy and security policy do not seem to be very strict; speculating mutual agreement of ‘a sense of community.’ As a final element, computer systems are provided and operated as a mutual responsibility of 6 moderators. Members who major in web design, computer programming, and information science in this community provide help if needed.

### **Strategies Used in Gilbut Virtual Community to Increase Social Capital**

The structural diagnostics of social capital in the Gilbut network extend the framework of social capital developed by Nahapiet & Ghoshal (2000) who distinguished three dimensions of social capital: structural, cognitive, and relational dimensions. In the case of Gilbut, advantages of ICTs embedded in a virtual community such as email, instant messaging, web boards, and etc. were considered a great asset to increase social capital partly due to the anonymity given and network ties (structural dimension). Interestingly, members of electronic groups inflate their perceptions of their partners, and group members even report that their partners are more attractive over Computer Mediated Communications (CMC) than they are in face to face or telephone interactions (Blanchard & Horan, 1998). In Gilbut, the lack of physical cues of interactions induces people to agree to be a travel partner imagining he or she might be the right one to travel with. Another aspect of structural dimension is that members improve their trust and subsequent impressions by thoughtfully composing and editing their comments under the various web boards (Rheingold, 1993). Chatting room and availability to write an email to the person who posts on web-boards in Gilbut also contribute to strong ties. Functions to foster high interactions out of a virtual community reinforce norms of reciprocity (Blanchard & Horan, 1998)

However, because of anonymity and lack of physical interactions of CMC, it is still limited to building trust, which is a critical component of exchanging information. To resolve this issue of trust, several aspects and strategies to enhance intimacies and personal interactions within virtual communities are examined in Gilbut (relational dimension). To prevent deceptions, Gilbut community does not allow anonymous communication and tries to keep participants honest about their identities. In addition, Gilbut expanded its virtual form to physical forms of communities by way of several travel and social events. The Gilbut community exists online, and offline back and forth, which may cause a general increase in trusting and norms of reciprocity than do communities existing just on line (Blanchard and Horan, 1998). Deceptions are less likely because of probability of being ‘caught’ through information passed in face-to-face networks.

At the same time, small acts of helping in Gilbut create the perception of strong norms of reciprocity and result in a sense of community (cognitive dimension). Thus, a few group members’ helpful actions will reinforce the group’s concept of itself as being helpful to its members. Further, by virtue of visibility of contributions made by one member to everybody, knowledge of obligations and expectations developed through multiple relations Gilbut allows people to build are transferable to others and other relations. Social capital in this sense is both cumulative and transferable. The more social capital a person possesses in one role, relation, or structure, the more social capital is available in others (Hemingway, 1999). As such, what conditions facilitate and increase capacity of social capital will no doubt develop more rich and subtle understandings of how virtual world works.

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