



A Sociological Study on the Disgust of the Young Generation toward the Elderly in Korean Society: Social Causes

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to identify the social causes of the younger generation's growing disgust toward the elderly in Korean society. Generational conflict is likely to occur in any society, but it becomes a serious social problem if that conflict turns into disgust, as is the case in Korean society today. Though the elderly as a group are diverse, the younger generation tends to see them as homogenous and expresses disgust by generalizing negative perceptions of particular seniors to the group as a whole. The first social cause of the young generation's hatred toward the elderly is the negative perception of physical aging. Physical aging causes slowness in judgment and action. Physical aging leads to atrophy of the appearance, and a strong trend has emerged in Korean society of rejecting the atrophy of appearance due to aging. As a result, the elderly are likely to have a negative image due to their appearance. Another social cause is found in the language use, attitude, and behavior caused by the embodiment of historical values and experiences of the elderly. The language, attitude, and behavior of the elderly, who are familiar with traditional hierarchical order and Confucian culture, but who have had little opportunity to learn civic consciousness, prompt disgust from the younger generation, which has been socialized by notions of democratic relations, horizontal culture, and civic consciousness. In addition, as negative images of the elderly are rapidly shared through social media, a common tool of the younger generation, such hatred is allowed to spread. A final social cause of antipathy towards the elderly is the feeling among Korean youth that they are being alienated from fair competition and the labor market. The outpouring of this anger leads to disgust.

Keywords: older generation, younger generation, disgust, Korean society, generational conflict

Introduction

Korea has already become an aged society. Baby boomers, born between 1940 and 1950, have become an unprecedentedly long-lived generation owing to advances in medical technology. In Korea, life expectancy has already reached age 83. Accordingly, the proportion of the elderly (those over 65 years of age) among the total population is increasing. In 2019, the elderly in Korea accounted for 15 percent of the total population. It is estimated by 2050 this will have risen to 35.9 percent (Statistics Korea 2019).

Korea's low fertility trend began to be evident around 2010, and despite the enormous sums spent on policy measures to encourage childbirth, this trend seemed unstoppable. The fertility rate, which was 1.23 in 2010, decreased further to a shocking 0.92 by 2019. And there are prospects that this trend away from having children will become more pronounced in the future (Statistics Korean 2019).

As the elderly become the largest population group in society, many studies on the elderly are emerging. Since the retirement of the elderly, various studies on the quality of life and welfare of the elderly, the alienation and solitude of the elderly, and the relationship between the elderly and their fellow family members have been undertaken.

However, what is important in an aged society is the question of how the elderly are perceived socially. The nature of this perception influences how the elderly define themselves. According to Mead's Mirror Theory (Mead 1934), humans or groups perceive themselves as they are perceived by another person or group. In other words, when others evaluate one positively, one's self-esteem increases, and relationships with others become smooth. On the other hand, when others evaluate one negatively, self-esteem decreases, and relationships with others are also not amicable. Often, an individual will resent those who have negatively evaluated him or her, and he or she will also perceive the other negatively.

How then are the elderly in Korean society perceived by other members of that society today? In the past, when the Confucian ethos was still strong, the elderly in Korean society were perceived as *respectable*. These norms were insisted upon, especially with the younger generation. Few in society

questioned why people should be respected, and it was generally held that older people should be the objects of deference and admiration.

However, the norms and values that had been taken for granted regarding the elderly have weakened significantly as Korean society's norms changed rapidly through the 1990s. And with the reinforcement of youth human rights, it is no longer socially acceptable, as it was in the past, for an elderly person to act coercively toward a young person simply because they are elderly.

What then are the social perceptions of the elderly in Korea today? This paper focuses on the perceptions of the elderly, especially from the perspective of the young generation. As the proportion of the elderly population increases, the group that is most affected is the youth generation, and how they perceive the elderly will have a very significant impact on the future integration of Korean society.

In Korean society today, a distinct feature of the younger generation's perception of the elderly is that of *disgust*, an emotion that is increasingly dominant over indifference and dislike. This being the case, we need to explain the reasons this disgust toward the elderly by the young is occurring in Korean society. Thus far, this problem has been approached mainly from an economic perspective. In this study, I try to suggest the social causes of this problem.

In this study, previous work on the image of the elderly in Korean society, the relationship between the youth and the elderly, generational conflict, and the emotion of disgust will first be analyzed. Next, I will reveal the ways in which the elderly as a group are diversifying and provide an explanation for why, despite this diversification, they are still perceived as homogenous by the younger generation. In addition, after raising the risks posed by hatred of the elderly, the social causes of disgust toward the elderly will also be identified in three different aspects: negative perception of physical aging; problems in communication, attitude, and behavior; and technology use and economic and social alienation.

Literature Review

Many studies have been done on generational conflict. Previous sociological studies related to this present article may be classified into two categories. The first comprises studies attempting to clarify the communicational *causes* of the disgust toward the elderly. Son et al. (2019) focused on the causes of the conflict between the young and the elderly generations, demonstrating how the primary cause of the conflict between youth in their twenties and seniors in their seventies was a lack of communication, with those in their twenties finding it difficult to communicate with the elderly due to differences in political orientation and ideology. In addition, Son et al. subdivided those in their twenties into the normal twenty-somethings and the so-called N-po generation (translatable as ‘numerous giving-up generation,’ a new term for Korean young people who have given up on numerous things, such as marriage, owning a home, having a career, having children etc.) and analyzed them, showing that those of the N-po generation experienced more conflict with the elderly. Another study (Mi-ri Kim et al. 2020) examined the effects of the interaction of media portrayals of elderly discrimination and media usage on youth-elderly conflict, concluding that the effect of ageism on intergenerational conflict was accelerated the more participants were exposed to media portrayals of elderly discrimination.

This study uses a survey of 865 college students conducted in 2013 to reveal college students’ perceptions of the elderly generation. The survey revealed that college students at the time did not perceive conflict with the elderly generation to be at a severe level. However, problems surrounding the redistribution between generations have occurred, and they were aware that conflicts could increase in the future. These findings in 2013, however, are contradicted by the latest findings, which show that in just a few years the negative perceptions of the younger generation toward the elderly have grown rapidly. Shin and Choi (2020) undertook a descriptive study on the disgust of the elderly among the young generation through an analysis of online comments. Analyzing the comments posted on articles related to the elderly in five major domestic newspapers, Shin and Choi demonstrated the negative perspectives and feelings toward the elderly, with

disgust the highest among these negative emotions. In particular, it raises the issue of the widespread use of aversive expressions toward the elderly. Another empirical study looked at how culture and art education lowers the probability of dislike of various music genres (S. Kim et al. 2020). They revealed that Korean omnivores (classes who have diverse cultural tastes and habitus) tend to despise music genres favored by the elderly with low education levels, such as Korean traditional music and the trot genre. Pnina Ron (2007) studied changes in attitudes and perceptions during the aging process, finding a significant correlation between subjects whose attitudes towards old age in the present were negative and those who subjectively defined their health as poor. The second type of study comprises those attempting to suggest the effects of disgust towards the elderly. One such study is that of Dong-Kyun Lim (2017), as it specifically analyzes the feelings of disgust by the young generation. Lim theoretically analyzes the feelings of anger and disgust of the young generation while attempting to develop a concrete data-based analysis. According to Lim, young generations have a strong sense of anxiety about their future survival and react to subjects that cause this anxiety with feelings of disgust. Research on the effects of the young generation's disgust of the elderly can also be found in a study of suicidal thoughts among the elderly (Park et al. 2019). According to this study, disgust toward older people takes an emotional toll on the elderly, pushing their self-esteem to very low levels and engendering thoughts of suicide. Such findings above demonstrate why disgust of the elderly should be perceived as a social issue, rather than a simple matter of expression.

As social integration was being greatly hindered by an upsurge in animosity directed at not only the elderly, but also women, the LGBTQIA (lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, transgender, genderqueer, queer, intersexed, agender), and the disabled, the National Human Rights Commission of Korea conducted a public awareness survey on hate and discrimination in 2019.

However, while the above-mentioned studies discuss the communicational causes and effects of disgust among the young generation toward the aged, they do not reveal the social cause of that hatred. This paper's departure from previous work is its examination of those

characteristics of present-day Korean society that cause such a large portion of the younger generation to perceive the elderly as subjects of disgust.

Concept and Theory

1) Disgust

What is disgust? Disgust is an emotion that arises when an entity despises the existence of another entity and feels unable to live with that other entity because it does not obey the norms taken for granted in society, does not receive punishment for that failure to obey, or does not feel guilty for its failure to obey. We may have feelings of disgust toward criminals who feel absolutely no remorse for their wrongdoings, or toward those who willingly violate social norms maintained for the public good and neglect to reflect on their actions. Historically, however, this hatred has often been committed against socially underprivileged groups, such as the disgust of Jews in Nazi Germany, the Japanese disgust for Koreans under Japanese colonial rule, and the Westerners' feelings of disgust toward indigenous peoples in the era of imperialism. Therefore, disgust also occurs in power relationships. Those who are alienated from society are at increased risk of becoming subjects of hatred, especially if that society lacks the ability for inclusiveness, or if it is in economic or social crisis. Expressions of collective dissatisfaction and anger are directed toward the socially underprivileged, which leads to further disgust. According to Lim (2017, 96), disgust is more likely to occur the more the survival of the members of the society is threatened. A man whose survival is threatened, or perceived to be threatened, shows hatred toward the group he thinks is hindering his survival and he wishes to alienate the group from society. Lim explains that young generations are anxious about their own "survival," and as this anxiety grows, their acts of disgust increase (Lim 2017, 105). According to Statistics Korea, the younger the member of the young generation, the more negative is his or her perception of the older generation (Statistics Korea 2019, 10).

2) Diversity of Elderly Groups

Far from being a homogenous group, the elderly in Korea are in fact diversifying. Those in their sixties, seventies, and eighties are typically all lumped together as elderly. However, each of these age groups exhibits different characteristics, a result of different historical experiences and social values.

Obviously, it is difficult to compare people in their sixties and seventies because there are common points and differences as well. What I would like to argue in this paper is that although there are differences between Koreans in their sixties and seventies, they are perceived uniformly as the same elderly generation by younger generations. Ron (2007, 660) cites Heider explaining that “in relation to adopting negative attitudes, people tend to associate with those who are similar or equal to them and disassociate from the strange and the different.” In other words, regardless of the differences between the elderly in their sixties and seventies, the young generation tends to disassociate itself from the older generations, who are collectively perceived as strange and different from them.

The elderly in their seventies or older were born mainly in the 1930s and 1940s and experienced childhood during the period of Japanese colonial rule. They harbor hostile perceptions of Japan, but are also part of the generation that unknowingly embodied Japanese culture that was foisted upon Korea during their childhood. These are also of the generation that experienced the Korean War during childhood or youth. To them, North Korea is understood as having invaded South Korea and harassed good citizens. The fear of war and hostility toward North Korea in their childhood and youth persisted into adulthood, strongly influencing their thoughts and actions. This generation lived through the dictatorships of the 1970s and 1980s. As they were middle-aged during the period of dictatorship, they were not able to offer strong resistance to authoritarianism due to strict government surveillance, yet this was the generation that enjoyed the fruits of rapid economic growth. Even during the mass democratic protests of June 1987, this older generation did not directly enter into the uprising. For them, the history of modernization in Korea was politically authoritarian,

yet it was also a history of economic growth in which they took pride. The history of the latter, in particular, remains a positive experience, one that allowed them to forget the pain of Japanese colonial period and the anxiety and fear of war.

For this generation, education was perceived as something to be pursued only by those who possessed innate capabilities, while earning money through labor was a much more pressing issue. When members of these generations were young, the Korean education system was not properly maintained, and attending college was only possible with the full support of the family. These generations are less educated than the current young generation. The college entrance rate of these generations was only 30 percent in 1960, significantly lower than the 2019 college entrance rate of 76.5 percent.¹

The current generations of young Koreans grew up in a society in which laws and institutions were at the level of advanced countries. On the other hand, Korea in the 1950s and 1960s, when the value system of those born in the 1930s and 1940s was being formed, was a society still struggling to recover from the damages of the Korean War, and the nation's laws and institutions were also poorly maintained. Therefore, these generations did not fully experience the notion of civic consciousness.

In addition, this generation grew up learning traditional Confucian thinking and values that predated national modernization, and for that reason, an age-based hierarchical consciousness remains very strong with them. To them, age means authority, and therefore the younger generation must respect the older generation.

This generation is also economically unfortunate. As mentioned above, this generation was able to accumulate wealth during the period of economic growth of the 1970s and 1980s. But its members also took it for granted that they would pass on wealth to their children. In addition, they generously provided financial support for their children's education, with the strong belief that the only path to family success was by raising the level of their children's education. The members of this generation have also taken

1. "Daehak jinhangnyul" (University Entrance Rates), *Maeil gyeongje*, December 11, 1997.

for granted the notion of supporting their children's marriages and housing. As a result, they have become some of the poorest economically among many generations.

Meanwhile, persons in their sixties, also classified as the elderly generation, have quite different characteristics. This is a generation mostly born in the 1950s; many are still active in service or are beginning to adjust to life after retirement. This generation did not directly experience the Korean War, but did experience the realities of dictatorship during youth. Through this experience, the sense of democratization became clear as they were in their late twenties and thirties during in the 1987 democratization struggle, and this generation belonged to the so-called tie unit that joined forces with the generation of college students born in the 1960s and led the uprising to success.

This is also the most stable among many generations in Korea. Although they spent their school days under dictatorship, it was relatively easy to become a productive member of society due to the opportunities provided by economic growth. In addition, as a consequence of the government's policy of raising the national level of education, the number of universities in Korea increased, leading to more college entrances, so that this became a *fortunate generation*, its members finding gainful employment after graduating from college. This is also the generation whose members were able to purchase apartments in their youth when the apartment construction boom occurred along with the increase in population. From that point, their wealth naturally grew with the sharp rise in apartment prices. They invested heavily in the education of their children, but they also made different decisions from their predecessors when it comes to providing housing for their children. In other words, when they reach age eighty and beyond, with some of them even reaching a hundred, they will still be accumulating wealth because they will still be holding on to their properties. This generation is also an object of envy and jealousy to the current generation of seventy-somethings and older, as well as to the young generations.

3) Identification of Elderly Groups

Although the elderly population is diverse in terms of historical experience, persons in their sixties, seventies, and eighties are generally perceived uniformly as *the elderly* by the younger generation. Of course, one can estimate differences in age, for instance, based on the different skin conditions of people in their sixties and those in their eighties, but such distinctions do not mean much to the younger generation, to whom they are all the same *elderly people*.

The problem is that the image projected on the older generation by the younger generation becomes an amplified form of negative image, as they combine the negative aspects that appear in those in their seventies and older with those in their sixties. The conservative political consciousness and value system of those in their seventies, as described above, that justify the hierarchical order form a negative image from the point of view of the younger generation. Likewise, the image of a *comfortable life* due to *luck* and *a generation with no worries about finding a job and accumulating wealth* are also negative images of the younger generation regarding people in their sixties. But these two negative images combine to generate negative perception that is applied to the entire group of the elderly, regardless of age or generation.

Phenomenon of Disgust of the Young Generation toward the Elderly

1) Generational Conflict in Korea

In discussing the perception of the younger generation toward the older generation, the issue of generational conflict can be approached first. The conflict between the young generation and the elderly is nothing new, and it does not appear only in certain societies, but in all societies. Even in the time of Socrates there was already a saying that *young people these days are spoiled*. The elderly are placed in conflict with the young generation, seeing the freedom of youth as disorderly, while the younger generation views the elderly's value of order as outdated and conservative. Regardless of time

and place, the young generation is typically progressive thinking, cherishes freedom, and prioritizes individual values, while the elderly generation is typically more conservative, values hierarchy and pursues community-centered values. Some studies support the *age effect*, namely, that as younger generation becomes elderly, it loses the characteristics of youth and takes on the characteristics of the elderly generation, while other studies support the *cohort effect*, whereby a person internalizes the values generated by experience despite advancing age. Foner (1974) has described these two types of research. In other words, in the former case, the important variable is *aging*, and as people age, their thoughts and values change. From this perspective of aging, the young are all likely to be progressive, and the elderly to be conservative. Even those who are progressive when young are likely to become more conservative as they age. Meanwhile, Foner explains that experience rather than aging per se may determine the characteristics of a generation. In other words, each generational group has particular historical experiences, which are embodied for a long time as they do not change with age and remain a characteristic of that generation. In Korea, the experience of war is a particular example. The generation with this war experience has maintained conservative values regarding Korean division from youth, and these remain firm and unchanging as the members of this generation age. On the other hand, a younger generation who does not possess this war experience, but rather experienced the inter-Korean summit, will have more progressive ideas regarding the division of Korea and reunification. Since this young generation embodies these values through these experiences, it is highly likely that this generation will continue to be progressive even as they age. Regardless of which theory is correct, there are many cases where the young and elderly generations are fundamentally at conflict at any particular time. The same is true of Korean society.

According to the results of the 2016 generational conflict survey conducted by the Korean Institute for Health and Social Affairs, 62 percent of the 3,669 respondents aged 19 to 75 felt that “generational conflict in Korean society is very severe or generally severe.” When presented with the statement, “There is no intergenerational communication,” 28.4 percent of young respondents (in their twenties) responded, “strongly agree,” while 57.4

percent responded “agree.” This means that 85.8 percent of young people in their twenties believed that there was no intergenerational communication (Son et al. 2019).

Generational conflict is also explained as a communication problem between generations. This is because the degree of conflict varies according to the quality of the communication. According to a 2016 Survey on Social Integration by the Korea Institute of Public Administration, only 44 percent of the 8,000 respondents aged between 19 and 69 answered that inter-generational communication was good, which was the lowest among the levels of communication between groups (KIPA 2016). Findings from 2017 reveal a more serious breakdown. In 2017, only 38 percent of the 8,000 respondents in the same survey answered that communication between generations was good, explaining that the generational conflict was deteriorating (KIPA 2017).

2) From Dislike to Disgust

On the other hand, the conflict between the young and elderly generations in Korean society goes far beyond the typical inter-generational conflict. As noted, generational conflict has existed in all societies since ancient times and persists in all societies today; it is a natural occurrence, and need not be a major social problem. Indeed, an appropriate level of conflict can lead to a better society because it serves a positive function. However, the conflict between the young and elderly generations in Korean society today is difficult to see as the general and ordinary variety of inter-generational conflict. According to the results of a survey by the National Human Rights Commission of Korea (2018), 80.9 percent of the Korean younger generation (aged from 19 to 39) have “negative prejudice” toward the elderly in Korean society. In the same survey, 81.9 percent of respondents answered that the conflict between the young and the elderly was severe. These survey results show that perceptions of the younger generation toward the elderly are very negative. According to another study (Shin and Choi 2020), 83.8 percent of the comments on articles related to the elderly in five major domestic daily online newspapers contain negative criticisms of the elderly, while

84.9 percent show negative feelings toward the elderly. What is particularly worrisome is that among the many negative emotions, that of *disgust* toward the elderly is the highest at 21.3 percent. The findings of this survey suggest that the disgust toward the elderly on the part of the younger generation in Korean society is perhaps at its severest level ever.

Amidst this situation of growing disgust toward the elderly, in 2019, the National Human Rights Commission of Korea (2019a) conducted a survey on hate expressions. According to this report, as many as 67.8 percent of respondents had experienced expressions of disgust toward the elderly. This is similar to the 67.7 percent of respondents who have experienced expression of disgust toward LGBTQIA people. In particular, 39.9 percent of respondents answered that expressions of disgust for the elderly have become more severe than in the past, which is significantly higher than the 27.8 percent who responded that they have become less severe. Further, the survey showed that 23.8 percent of young people in their twenties and thirties use expressions of disgust toward the elderly, the highest among the age bracket. From these results, it can be seen that this phenomenon of hatred of the elderly has become more serious in recent years, and we can see that the disgust of the young generation toward the elderly is an obvious social problem.

It would be fortunate if perceptions remained only that, but in the case of Korean society, such negative views are expressed openly to the other party. The negative perception of the younger generation towards the elderly is widely communicated in very strong and pejorative terms, such as “*teulttak*” (an onomatopoeia from the crackling of an aged person’s dentures), “*halmaemi*” (in Korean, the elderly are called *halmoni*, or grandma, and *halabeoji*, or grandpa; here, *hal* means elderly person, and *maemi* means cicadas, thus referring to a tiresome elderly person who constantly talks loudly, especially nagging the younger generations; it is also used as an expression of disgust), and “*kkondae*” (an elderly person who imposes a hierarchical order on the younger generation). In particular, such negative perceptions are being expressed in online spaces, and the underlying characteristic of the expressions used by the young generation regarding the elderly is, in a word, disgust. Examples of Internet comments expressing

disgust include: “When you get old, you’re at home. Why do you crawl out?” and “When you get old, you should die.”²

Meanwhile, an increasing number of elderly have negative perceptions of the younger generation. They also use words that express disgust toward the younger generation, which are used not only in online spaces but also in public spaces such as buses and subways. If the younger generation shows any resistance or exhibits behavior that does not fit the values of the older generation, they do not hesitate to say such things as, “How dare you young man.” In terms of political behavior, the young generations who criticize the conservative values of the elderly are also disparaged as *ppal gaengi*, meaning commies in Korean, an expression used by the elderly to show their disgust toward young people with more a progressive political orientation than their own.

Social Causes of the Young Generation's Disgust toward the Elderly

Then why is this disgust towards the elderly by the young generation increasing in Korean society? What is the social cause of this? Searching for the cause is to ultimately uncover the social issues that form the basis of this disgust, and thereby suggest clues about how to relieve this phenomenon of disgust. First, the causes that are being suggested by the media, are economic. Due to increasing lifespans, the elderly are staying longer in the labor market, something that poses an obstacle to the young generation's entry into the labor market, thus fostering a negative perception of the elderly by the young. Based on work status data from Statistics Korea, in June 2020, the number of workers in their twenties fell by 151,000, and the number of workers in their thirties fell by 195,000 compared to 2019. This shows that the jobs of the young generation are under serious threat. On the other hand, the number of workers in their sixties has increased by 338,000 compared to 2019. On the surface, these figures suggest that the elderly (those over 60) are taking away jobs from the young generation. However,

2. “Yeoseong, noin deung inteonet hyeomo jeoksaekdeung” (Alarming Disgust Towards Women, the Elderly, and Others on the Internet), *Maeil gyeongje*, December 8, 2015.

according to one study (Ji 2012), there is almost no correlation between youth employment and middle age/elderly employment. Therefore, the elderly are not taking away jobs from the young generation, but rather the number of jobs for the young generation has decreased, while the number of jobs for the elderly has increased. Professor Lynda Gratton of the London Business School stated in the Davos Forum in January 2020 that the increase in the number of elderly jobs does not threaten, but rather increases, the number of jobs for the young generation. The increase in jobs for the elderly increases their income, which causes an increase in their product/service purchases, eventually creating new jobs that are required to provide those products and services and helping solve the problem of lack of jobs for the young generation (World Economic Forum 2020, 8–9). According to a study by Yoo-Seok Choi (2015, 234), 25.9 percent of 865 college students responded that because the elderly are continuing to work as they age, it will be more difficult for young people to find employment. This data shows that the younger generation is extremely dissatisfied with older generation due to job anxieties.

Another suggested cause of this disgust toward the elderly is that with the increase in life expectancy, and with the government responsible for the welfare of senior citizens, the young generation will be carry an increasing tax burden. Thus, combined with the above perceptions regarding employment, young people's negative perceptions are compounded by the belief that they will have to pay for the welfare of an elderly population that has not provided them with any help.

But this is only looking at the problem from an economic perspective, and while this may cause discontent, it hardly seems sufficient to engender disgust; being discontent about someone does not always translate into disgust. After all, discontent occurs commonly between family members or in romantic relationships, but its development into disgust is very rare. Such being the case, we have to look more deeply into the social causes that triggered the Korean young generation to feel disgust, as opposed to discontent, towards the elderly.

1) Negative Perception of Physical Aging

The first social cause of the Korean young generation's disgust toward the elderly is the negative perception of physical aging. Humans' physical ability naturally decreases with age. The elderly have very slow movement, and are unable to make fast judgments. With vision also rapidly deteriorating, everything becomes slower compared to their younger days. This is a natural phenomenon, and no one is an exception to this change.

But in Korean society, slow is negative regardless of the reason behind it. Causing slowness in a society where everything happens quickly can be perceived as causing harm to other people. Korean society is a society that is not very forgiving to beginner drivers that are generally slow on the road. This comes from the collective consciousness that has persisted from the period of rapid modernization, where survival was only possible with everything interacting at a rapid pace. The pursuit of extreme efficiency has caused speed to become a social virtue and norm. In this context, Korea's modernization is also referred to as *compressed modernization*. Korean society that has standardized speed was very aggressive in implementing the information technology to support this culture. As a result, Korea became an IT powerhouse, and information technology embedded in society allowed everything to be done much quicker. According to one study (Cha and Suh 2017, 131) that analyzed data from the Korean Time Use Survey of 2004 and 2009, "perceived time pressure" in Korean society increased between those years.

In a society that puts a premium on speed, slowness is evaluated negatively and perceived as a target for removal. This is why there is a negative perception formed towards the elderly who walk, speak, and make judgements slowly. Such a perception is especially apparent in the young generation. The young generation has the physical ability to move the fastest. This is why they cannot comprehend the slowness of the elderly, and form negative perceptions of them. This is directly linked to the disgust of the young generation toward the elderly. They perceive the elderly as those who cause them inconvenience. In the same context, we could claim that the disgust towards the disabled also arises from this negative perception

toward slowness. For the elderly, this negative perception of their slowness is exacerbated by their general lack of information technology skills and literacy, which does not allow them to react as quickly as others (especially the young generation). In the words of Pnina Ron (2007, 656), "Old age is described as a process of degeneration, a voyage towards inutility, unproductiveness." In an industrialized society like Korea, efficiency is the most important value, and those who fail to increase efficiency are becoming increasingly seen as useless and superfluous.

In Korean society, which is highly informatized and digitalized, the process that can explain the attitude of disgust by the young generation toward the elderly is ideological in nature. The qualities of alacrity and efficiency have taken on crucial roles in everyday culture. Korea is becoming a technology-oriented society, to which the younger generations adapt more easily than the elderly.

According to the study by Shin and Choi (2020, 108), among 1900 comments posted to online news stories about the elderly, a large percentage were negative comments regarding the physical image of older people. Of the comments on the physical image of older people, 18.2 percent (233) concerned *physical aging*, while the second largest proportion (143 comments, or 11.2 percent) concerned *death*. This means that as the physical body of the elderly ages, all other capacities are perceived to deteriorate.

Another reason for the youth's feelings of disgust toward the old is the social perception that arises from the disappearance of the elderly due to their natural retirement from the labor market with physical aging. Often the elderly desire to work longer, gain more income, and play an active role in society, but have to step out of the labor market due to physical decline or reaching mandatory retirement age, forcing them to enter the inactive population group. The problem is that this generates a negative image towards the elderly in a Korean society that places great emphasis on productivity. During Korea's modernization process, there was a prevalent labor productivity-centered value of *do not eat if you do not work*, and this is still deeply rooted in Korean society. The negative perception towards the unemployed is already well known, and the retired elderly population is also negatively perceived as a group that has ceased to be productive. According

to Bryan Turner (1989, 600–601), jobs and wealth become limited when the economy of a society undergoes crisis. In this instance, the elderly that have ended their working career and are receiving welfare benefits are perceived as socially negative figures. Turner was describing an American society in the 1980s facing economic recession, but looking at Korean society in 2020, where an extended economic recession has caused the highest level of youth unemployment in history, the negative perception of the young generation towards the elderly can be better understood. As with slowness discussed above, this same negative perception of inutility can explain feelings of disgust towards the disabled, who can also be lacking in productivity due to their physical handicaps.

Currently, labor hours are decreasing in Korean society, and leisure hours are increasing to enhance quality of life by helping one forget the stresses caused by excessive work. Muncho Kim (2016, 191), citing Stanley R. Parker, explains that “leisure is now being recognized as a new form of institution distinguished from work activities.” Kim goes on to explain that we can detect “a new view of life which rejects the keywords and phrases of the 1960s and the age of industrialization, such as productivity or efficiency” (Muncho Kim 2016, 192).

The problem is that as recreation time increases, people want to improve the quality of recreation. What is needed to enhance the quality of leisure are the goods necessary for leisure. And it costs money to consume these goods. In the end, it is ironic that more work is required to make money for improved leisure.

In this context, labor is still perceived as much more important than leisure. According to the “Report on Koreans’ Consciousness and Values” by the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism (2019), 48.4 percent of Korean respondents answered that work was more important than leisure, while only 17.1 percent responded that leisure was more important than work. This means that Koreans still consider the value of work as most important, which consequently leads to a negative perception towards the non-working.

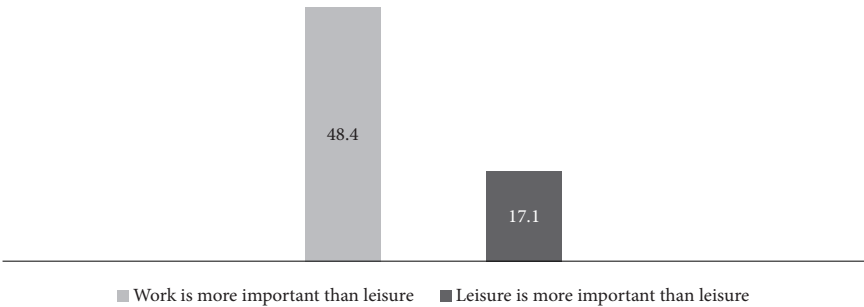


Figure 1. Koreans’ perceptions on work and leisure

Source: Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism (2019).

* Unit: %

Further, Korean society has a strong obsession with youthful appearance. Thanks to mass media and advertising, more and more people desire to have great skin and celebrity looks, and as a result plastic surgery technology is greatly advancing. While plastic surgery alters one’s original appearance, recently, the anti-aging industry, which seeks rather to maintain or recover young skin is seeing a boom. Biotechnologies like Botox are quickly being popularized at affordable prices. In the case of the anti-wrinkle Botox, the domestic market size has almost tripled, from KRW61.5 billion in 2015 to KRW150 billion in 2019. And in the case of injectable cosmetic filler, a technology that temporarily recovers young skin through the insertion of artificial moisture, its domestic market size has steadily increased, from KRW63.7 billion in 2012 to KRW109 billion by 2015.

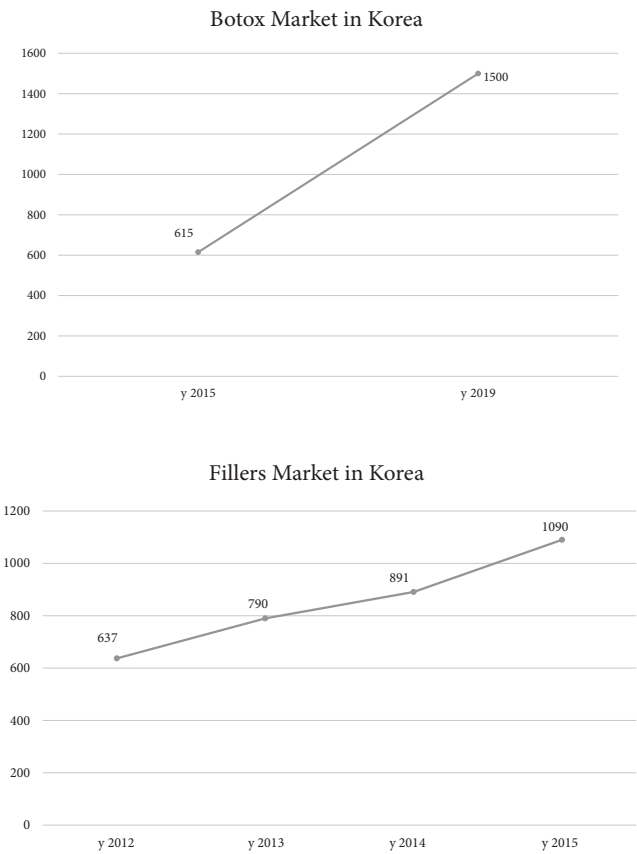


Figure 2. Botox and injectable cosmetic filler market in Korea

Source: Ministry of Health and Welfare (2017).

*Unit: billion won.

At the base of the anti-aging market and its development is a desire for eternally youthful looking skin and appearance. In other words, this clearly reveals a fear and rejection of old skin and appearance. In Korean society, such things as deep wrinkles and grey hair, traits that naturally appear with age, are slowly becoming perceived as burdensome and negative. Such perceptions are perhaps most apparent in the young generation that possesses youthful skin and appearance.

Slow movement and judgment, loss of productivity, and degraded skin and appearance arising from physical aging are triggers of disgust by the young toward the elderly.

2) Problems in Communication, Attitude, and Actions

Another cause of disgust towards the elderly are in issues with communication, attitude, and actions. Those elderly now in their seventies or older were mostly born in the 1930s or 1940s. This is a generation socialized with a notion of age-based hierarchy based on a strong Confucianist tradition. No matter the degree of Korea's political democratization and social equalization, such attitudes do not change easily. The bureaucratic culture that proliferated in the 1960s for the efficiency of the workspace, along with the hierarchy of the household, caused this generation to consider hierarchy as natural. Often a hierarchical power structure manifests itself in language. This can include coercive words, tone of voice, and use of certain grammatical forms. Those with power in such a hierarchy consider the use of such language natural, and force those at the bottom of the structure to assume that accepting such language is also natural. For this generation, this social hierarchy penetrated not only companies, but also schools, making it natural from their childhood.

With the change in eras came policy advances in the rights of adolescents and a stronger sense of equality in social relationships, but the elderly have trouble accepting these changes. To them, using hierarchical language towards the young generation is a natural thing (a good example of this is informal speech). But the young generation, which grew up learning about the justness of equality in relationships, cannot understand such language use by the elderly. For them, the elderly who use informal speech to strangers just because they are older are incomprehensible and lack the characteristics of civilized people.

According to Jennifer Deal (2007), the conflict between the young generation and the elderly does not actually arise from differences in values but rather differences in modes of expression. But in Korean society, the young generation considers the elderly as possessing a completely different

set of values. What's more, they perceive the elderly as unwilling to change their values or to adjust to a changing world, and therefore people with whom they cannot hope to communicate.

Also, the elderly have internalized various discriminations that are natural in the Confucian tradition, and which were taken for granted in Korean society up until the 1970s and 1980s. A key example is gender discrimination; the consciousness of the elderly on matters of gender equality is significantly different from that of the young generation. To the young generation, which has grown up learning the idea that discrimination is essentially a sin, the elderly have become a target of disgust. Turning again to the study of Shin et al. (2020, 18), they analyzed 1900 online comments concerning the psychological image of the elderly. Some 9.7 percent (124) accused the elderly as being "rude and selfish," while 5.2 percent (67) called the elderly "authoritative."

The elderly generations put all their efforts into the survival of themselves and their families during the period of national modernization. They had to work a long time toward this goal, and therefore did not have time to learn civilized niceties and behavior. Speaking loudly in public places is usually a consequence of physical deterioration (hearing loss), but it is also true that many elderly are not used to the idea that such behavior might disturb others. Again, to the young generation that grew up learning that consideration for others and a civilized manner are important values, such behavior by the elderly also informs their disgust toward them.

The elderly's hierarchical tone and language use, discriminative attitude, and behavior that goes against current socially accepted norms cause the young generation to opt not to communicate with the elderly at all. Thus, just having a conversation with the elderly often becomes an exhausting, unpleasant experience for members of the young generation. According to the "Comprehensive Report on the Human Rights of Older Persons" by National Human Rights Commission of Korea (2018), 88.5 percent of young generation respondents agreed that "the elderly and young generation are unable to communicate with each other." According to the "Hate Discrimination National Perception Survey" of the National Human Rights Commission of Korea (2019), which was undertaken via focus groups,

experiences that engendered feelings of disgust by the young generation toward the elderly included “seeing an old person that doesn’t stand in line while waiting for the subway,” “hearing them talk too loudly,” “sitting on the bus, and being criticized by an old person and forced to give up my seat,” and “being scolded for using the elevator instead of the stairs.”

3) Social Media Influence

Social media is characterized by the speed and expandability of information delivery. Something done by someone is digitalized and recorded via text, image, video, etc. and quickly delivered to others in the network via social media. This is then delivered to many others through a network of users. While such characteristics of social media can have a positive impact, they also have the potential to rapidly generate social anger by quickly and widely sharing negative behavior.

When the young generation feels disgust at the language use, attitude, and behavior of the elderly, they deliver these sentiments to others via social media. This serves to proliferate disgust like an epidemic. Taking into account the fact that the primary social media users are in their twenties and thirties, we could say that the proliferation of disgust is largely done through social media. One recent study (Y. Kim 2019) examined social media use by age group, finding that in 2018, 82.3 percent of respondents in their twenties and 73.3 percent of those in their thirties claimed to use social media, percentages much higher than all other age groups.

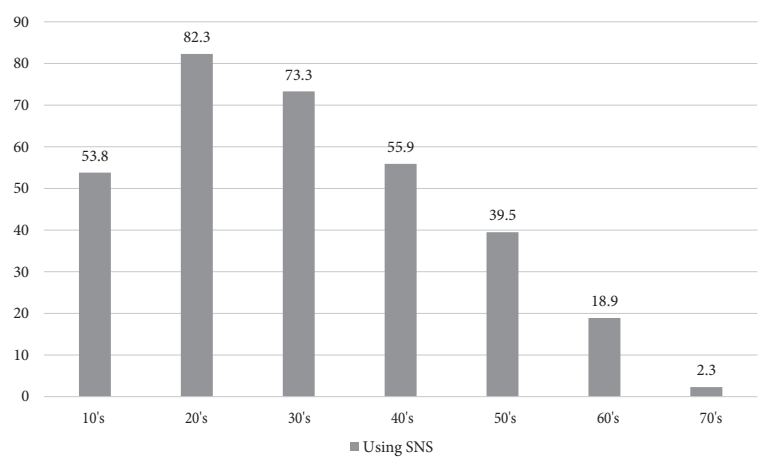


Figure 3. Generational gaps in SNS use in Korea

Source: Y. Kim (2019).

* Unit: %

Finally, to learn about things one has not experienced or to seek advice, people now largely turn such Internet tools as Google, Naver, and YouTube. This has significantly eliminated the traditional role of the elderly as life advisers to the young generation. This in turn has diminished the authority of the elderly, causing the young generation to further ignore and neglect them.

Conclusion: Reproduction and Danger of Disgust

In this article, I have endeavored to identify the social causes of the young generation’s growing disgust toward the elderly in Korean society. The first social cause of the young generation’s hatred toward the elderly is their negative perception of physical aging. The second social cause is found in the elderly’s language use, attitude, and behavior, which embody their historical values and experiences. The third social cause is the rapid circulation by young people of expressions of disgust towards the elderly through social

media. The final social cause is the feeling of alienation perceived by Korean youth who feel alienated from fair competition, giving rise to anger, and the outpouring of this anger leads to disgust.

Disgust is dangerous because it engenders further disgust. The elderly who are the target of disgust by the young generation in turn begin to feel disgust toward the young. Korean society already faces a critical level of disgust between genders and between liberal and conservative ideologies. The young generation and the elderly are now also falling into this vicious cycle of mutual disgust. In the National Human Rights Commission of Korea (2018) survey, 44.3 percent of elderly respondents stated they had serious conflicts with the young generation, and 51.5 percent stated that communication between the elderly and young generation was ineffective.

The alienation and anger of the young generation are also important causes of their disgust towards the elderly. This sense of despair, alienation, and anger that comes from the thought that they cannot and will not be able to have what the elderly in their sixties possess, is projected onto not only those in their sixties but also those in their seventies, and transforms into disgust. Such a sense of alienation and anger by the young generation is not only expressed towards the elderly. There are emotions of disgust appearing between males and females of the same young generation, and disgust is also evident towards the relatively weak or vulnerable members of Korean society—immigrant workers, the disabled, LGBT. Members of the young generation who have experienced a lot of mental and physical stress from intense studying from a young age, and those who have given up on finding a stable job despite their university degrees, feel anger towards a reality where securing employment is so difficult, and disgust is one way through which they express that anger. In fact, the youth unemployment rate in Korea has been increasing over the past decade, causing many young people to give up not only on the idea of a career, but even dating, marriage, and family. It is very unfortunate that such disgust is appearing in the young generation, which is the future of Korean society. We must understand that their sense of alienation and anger are the basis of this disgust.

Disgust towards the elderly is also dangerous because it can go beyond social conflict to cause social division, creating a state of anomie. It can

also cause mental damage, and ultimately serious depression, to the elderly who are the target of such disgust. According to the National Human Rights Commission of Korea (2019) survey, the psychology reactions to expressions of disgust were atrophy and fear. This causes great stress in an individual, and greatly lowers self-esteem. In relation to this, another study (B. Park et al. 2019) investigated the impact of disgust towards the elderly on suicidal thoughts. According to this research, old people who realize they are the object of disgust usually experience a significant drop in self-esteem, and are exposed to depression that translates into suicidal thoughts. This is why disgust towards the elderly is an important issue that must be overcome socially, and why we must examine its social causes from multiple angles.

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