

# Chapter 2

## Narrativizing Relocation, Depression, and Affective Labor in Korean Trailing Wife Vlogs: “I’m Not a Stay-at-Home Mom!”

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter examines YouTube vlogs as a form of Asian diaspora digital history, documenting the lived experiences of so-called trailing wives—Korean women who have relocated to North America for their spouses’ careers. It explores how these women use digital storytelling on the democratized new media to navigate their migration and the profound shift in identity from employed individuals to full-time homemakers. By analyzing their affect-laden vlogs, this chapter highlights two key functions of these vernacular testimonies: first, they enable women to reclaim agency by narrativizing their experiences. Second, they foster a supportive virtual community among diaspora women facing similar emotional hardships of dislocation. Lastly, this chapter interrogates the neoliberal constraints embedded in both their domestic and digital labor, revealing the tensions between empowerment and economic precarity. While YouTube offers agency and solidarity, these vloggers’ digital labor ultimately reveals the structured gendered inequalities of biocapitalist affective labor imposed to women.*

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## INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I explore the digital storytelling and community-building practices of first-generation Korean immigrant women on YouTube, who have moved to North America as expatriate wives. Often referred to as “trailing wives<sup>1</sup>,” these women migrate with their husbands, usually for their spouses’ work or academic opportunities, but this relocation is rarely their voluntary choice, making it feel more like a dislocation. Unlike their husbands, whose moves are career-driven and planned, these women often experience a loss of professional identity, as their careers are considered secondary. Adjusting to life as full-time homemakers, they face structural inequalities shaped by neoliberal economies, as well as gendered and racialized labor markets in their host country. Through their digital testimonies on YouTube, I explore how these YouTubers navigate neoliberal pressures, cultivate supportive communities through vlogging and audience engagement, and redefine their identities, sometimes even turning their vlogs into a source of economic profit.

The traumatic challenges faced by Asian spousal immigrants—including gendered and racialized structural inequalities in host countries, abrupt transitions into the roles of full-time homemakers and mothers, social isolation, and the loss of financial independence—are critical to understanding how gender fundamentally structures migrant experiences and outcomes. As feminist migration scholars have shown, transnational migration is not a neutral process but one shaped by the intersecting forces of gender, race, and class (Bao, 1998; Brah, 1996; Willis & Yeoh, 2000; Pessar, 2003). For many immigrant women, migration entails emotional hardship and professional displacement, particularly when they must abandon established careers in their home countries only to encounter systemic barriers to employment abroad.

This dislocation is particularly pronounced for Korean expatriate wives, many of whom migrate to North America with advanced degrees and professional credentials, reflecting South Korea’s strong emphasis on education (Kim & Hurh, 1988). Despite their qualifications, however, they often encounter structural exclusion from the labor market or find their prior achievements devalued in the host society (Kim & Hurh, 1988; Min, 1998; Lee, 2012). Scholars have noted that male immigrants are generally more successful in converting pre-migration human capital into post-migration labor market outcomes, while women, especially those who migrate in support of their spouse’s professional opportunities, struggle to do so (Waldinger & Gilbertson, 1994). This often leads to a decline in professional identity and social recognition, both of which are closely tied to emotional well-being and self-efficacy of female immigrants. Before migration, many of these Korean women had enjoyed relatively egalitarian marital dynamics due to their economic contributions and career accomplishments (Lim, 1997; Willis & Yeoh, 2000). However, after relocating, they frequently face unemployment, underemployment, or diminishing autonomy,

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