

GENDER WARS IN CYBERSPACE

**Understanding the Effects of
Cyberfeminism and Online
Misogyny to the Deepening
Gender Disputes in South Korea**

INTRODUCTION

South Korea is a deeply patriarchal society with a heavy emphasis on a shared social identity. It was only until recently since the issue of sexism, gender inequality, and misogyny has been properly addressed. As a result, South Korea is undergoing an intensive measure of a major social upheaval with regards to how women are treated in the country. Change has been catalyzed mainly by the myriad scandals, the rise of cyberfeminism, and occurrence of several online gender identity groups. Despite the rise of numerous online activism, the result of cyberfeminism seems to exacerbate the tension between genders, adding on to more hatred with the increase of online misogyny. This article willingly seeks to explore, identify, and theorize the complicated and multifaceted features of online culture in its correlation to exacerbating gender disputes.

It mainly aims to answer why and how the internet's space of pro and anti woman has been transformed and addressed in accordance to new digital platforms and pop culture. We seek to unravel the reason behind the rise of such social phenomenon in the media channel, and to look on numerous cases of gendered pop culture such as the rise of new internet slangs such as "megal", "womad", and "ggol femi (골페미)" to examine the gender politics of internet users through an analysis of different online community groups. Hopefully, we aim to provide a new interdisciplinary work for future research by mapping the types of online misogyny, if there is any, homophobia, gender hatred, and evaluate the limitations and impact of digital feminist in the deepening gender disputes within South Korea.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

In the era of the fourth industrial revolution the purpose of our research was to understand the role and features of digital platforms and media channels in the exacerbating gender disputes within South Korea. With a common social notion within South Korea where "feminism" is coined with gender hatred and women supremacy this paper aimed to analyze and look into why and how different gender-related online community groups in South Korea were formed. Furthermore, the paper examines the rise of new internet slangs and its influence on the gendered pop culture of Korean media. Our research aims to provide new interdisciplinary work for future research by connecting media platforms and gender disputes (the tangled, yet undefined elements of) in gendered pop culture in South Korea. By evaluating and analyzing potential causes and effects of digital gender disputes, we aspire to moderate gender disputes of our generation and to advance forward to gender equality within South Korea.

PRE 20TH CENTURY: THE JOSEON DYNASTY

During the Joseon Dynasty, women were oppressed in various aspects of life. For instance, they were unable to remarry, unable to receive education outside the house, discriminated when inheriting wealth, confined to household chores, and unable to speak for themselves. Based on the Confucian ideals, the patriarchal Korean notion of women were to “*serve their fathers in their youth, their husband in marriage, and finally their sons.*” Basing courtesy and politeness on the Confucianism ideology the difference in treatment between men and women was accepted in all corners of society, where both men and women did not seek equality between the two sexes.

20TH CENTURY: THE JAPANESE OCCUPATION

With the introduction of modern concepts such as democracy, nationalism, socialism, and human rights along the occupation of a foreign intruder, educated women learned that they were unrightfully oppressed by men, society, and the law. During the Japanese Occupation, women also fought for Korean independence. After the large scale March 1st Movement, *the Hyeul Sung Dang Association f de femmes* (혈성단부인회) was formed to help those imprisoned because of the movement. Also, several women founded the *Great Joseon Independent Patriotic f de femmes* (대조선독립애국부인회) in order to collect funds for the Provisional Government of the Republic of Korea. Later on, these two organizations merged together to form the *Republic of Korea Patriotic f de femmes* (대한민국애국부인회). Although the purposes of these organizations were not to give women equal rights or to allow more women to get involved within various professional fields, the independence movements by women elevated the social status of women. Along with women-led organizations, there were also an increase in institutes that were meant for women. For instance, in the late 19th century, *Ewha Hakdang School*(이화학당), the first modern educational institute for women was founded and gradually gained more attention and students as the Korean people became more open with the idea of women education. Such change also urged the late Joseon government to create state-founded schools for women.

20TH CENTURY: THE JAPANESE OCCUPATION (*cont.*)

All of these social changes further encouraged women to voice their abilities and break the oppression from men in society. The organization *Geun Woo Hwe* (근우회) was created for this exact reason. With the motto of “to raise the social status of the women of Joseon”, *Geun Woo Hwe* (근우회) pointed the disparity of women among men was mainly due to the remaining Confucian ideology within Joseon in that with the newly introduced modern ideology from foreign influences the time has come for Joseon to discard outdated social norms. During the Japanese occupation and the years before television, the most prominent method of spreading ideas was utilizing published newspapers. Also using handouts and fliers, *Geun Woo Hwe* (근우회) aimed to reconstruct the social status of Joseon women.

1945 - 2000

In the late 1970s, during the democratization uprising, the feminist movement cooperated with the labour movement. Women labour rights were sought after during this period in Korea, with concurrence with the second-wave feminism occurring. While the first wave feminism concerned the voting rights of women, or enfranchisement, the second-wave expanded upon the sexuality, labour and economic rights, household roles, domestic violence, and reproductive rights.

THE 21ST CENTURY

From the late 1990s, the spread of the internet and the possibility of free and anonymous speech encouraged further expressions regarding the social status of women and the involvement of women in various professional fields of society. During the 2000s, the feminist movements spoke against laws such as *Hoju* (호주제, a family register system previously used in South Korea and currently followed by in North Korea). Along with such movements regarding policies that discriminated women, the feminist movement of the 2000s also dealt with the issues of sexual harassment and sexual assault. Along the global feminist campaign of the “Me, too” movement, the Korean “Me,too” movement gained mainstream attention. “Me, too” movement was one of the first and most prominent feminist movement that gained public attention. With its advanced technology and own search engine, the “Me, too” movement rapidly spread within South Korea within media channels and was more talked about within online platforms rather than offline, leading to what we view as the 4th wave feminism: cyber feminism.

THE RISE OF CYBERFEMINISM

Though the ideology of feminism may occur to as a fairly modern subject, the earliest form of women's rights advocacy is traced back to Plato's *Republic*, wherein he states that "women possess natural capacities equal to men for governing and defending ancient Greece." As time passed, writers and philosophers participated in the feminist movement, with their contribution of feminist artworks and literary works. Throughout the years, with the increased public interest on gender issues along with the development of technology, we are currently experiencing the fourth wave feminism: cyberfeminism . Perhaps we could argue that cyberfeminism was initiated with the #metoo movement where women utilized social media such as twitter, instagram, and facebook to address the sexual harassment and assault cases that were kept silenced. The use of online space as a platform to claim rights created interesting results in the general public understanding of gender equality as well as the formation of social groups in accordance with people with the same understanding and notion of gender.

To begin with, online spaces have provided individuals a better access to interact with a wider range of people with the same philosophical notion. Online platforms make it easy and convenient for people to interact with one another with the same interest. Korea, with its high technology provides diverse group communication apps and domains such as agit, blogs, and naver cafes, which encourages people to create their own e-hubs and formulate a community where they interact, agree, and promote each other's ideas and projects to a specific issue. An example of this is an online radical feminist community known as *Womad* . *Womad* is an online webpage where females gather upon to share their notions on gender and initiate protest on gender equality. Though *Womad* is an online community group of females with the same objective of promoting women rights and gender equality, they have been widely criticized for their methods of protest. *Womad* is a radical feminist group which is highly critical against male sentiments and they mainly utilize the mirroring method of protest that mimics sexual crimes experience by women against men. One famous case with *Womad* was the case of leaking a nude photo of a male that was taken secretly. Using the mirroring effect to combat the issue of spycams inside public women bathrooms, a member of the *Womad* community, took a photo of a male nude model during a life drawing class without the victim's knowledge and posted it on the website. The perpetrator was identified and charged for her acts. The prime message of *Womad* was to let men experience the same struggle women experience on a daily basis. Nevertheless, much criticism has been made with *Womad*'s methods as majority claim crimes as an unjustifiable form of activism.

MISUNDERSTANDING MISINTERPRETATION AND FEMINIST DISPUTES WITHIN ONLINE PLATFORMS



With the Korean rise of feminism initiating on online platforms, interestingly, feminism is more widely spoken within online channels compared to offline channels. With the case of *Womad* marking as an introduction to feminism to many young generation, feminism within Korea is coined with the wrongful notion as women supremacy. The deepening misunderstanding of feminism as a form of gender supremacy has exacerbated with the involvement of youtubers and instagram influencers sharing their thoughts and understanding of feminism without prior education, but only with the objective to gain subscribers and followers as the term “feminism” received much public interest.

Though there are much efforts of several youtube creators and online content makers to fix the wrong notion of feminism as women supremacy to gender equality, the issue with online platforms is that as it has the advantage of spreading ideas and thoughts to a wider audience in a short period of time, the audiences are given the absolute authority to choose the contents that interest them. Mostly, audiences are drawn to titles and contents that are triggering and provocative rather than educational contents.

Upon typing the word “Femi(페미) from feminism, in the youtube search engine (based on February 2020), the automatically recommended most searched wordings are as follows: feminist, teaching a lesson to the feminist (페미니스트 참교육, the term 참교육 is a korean online slang referring to getting out done, outsmarted, or outwitted by someone with a nuance of showing supremacy in terms of intellectuality and personality), feminist youtubers, feminist debate.

Though the first youtube video exposed, searched with the term feminism is a speech from a feminist writer Hye Jung Song from speech entertainment platform known as *Sebasi*, followed by a speech from Hyunjin Lee on misogyny and feminism from *TEDxYouth*, both the the videos has less than 90,000 views while an video from a individual youtuber with the title “*This is while Korean Feminism will Fail 100% Sure* (이래서 한국 페미니즘은 100% 망한다)” gained over 810,000 views. Not only does online channels provide dispute provoking contents, but it also provides online users a space to initiate criticisms and dispute by utilizing the comment sections as battlefields, taking advantage of the anonymous features of internet identifications.

Clicking on the first video exposed by typing feminism on the search engine (the speech by writer Hye Jung Son “*How to view Feminism*,” majority of the comments on the comment section were negative. Some comments stated, “why would we befriend a feminism in the first place,” “how much were you paid by the feminist group to prepare this speech,” “I wish Korea would deport all feminist,” and so forth. The hate and critical comments on the comment section initiated cyber disputes with women rights activist s, further exacerbating the gender disputes within the realms of cyberspace. With their real identification hidden behind their online ID, several of the comments used abusive language that one would rarely say to a person upfront. Cyberspace not only expands ideas, but it also creates spaces where those ideas could be easily criticized and misinterpreted, and worst makes it easier for individuals to share their unfiltered thoughts behind the keyboard.

GENDER DISPUTES WITHIN ONLINE PLATFORMS

Analysis of *dotFace* Youtube contents comment section



We've met a real doll making company

Critical against interviewers. Against commercializing sex toys with the figure of a real looking figure

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=igR623PJP1o&has_verified=1

He Hwa Protest, "We will fight until they say, 'No Spycam,'"

Comment section not available. *DotFace* closed the comment section due to rising disputes among users within comment section

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q2_p8_WwkB4

People who do drag. We visited a drag king contest

Gender disputes in the comment sections

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iSOg5NrmZR0&t=83s>

The friend next door is a Drag Queen. I wish we could be a society that says "why does that matter?"

Gender disputes in the comment sections. Notion of drag as commercializing the female body, coins it with misogyny

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iSOg5NrmZR0&t=83s>

The online gender dispute in Korea mostly argues for the superiority among gender. There seems to be a notion as to where it is wrong for males to become feminine and females to be masculine. Moreover Korean women seem to be more sensitive with the appearance of feminine men than a masculine female.

The Confucian ideals within Korean society have implemented heteronormativity which influences our perception of gender identity. This fixed notion of gender has brought forth greater disputes within the internet community where online users use comment sections as battlefields in every Youtube content about drag queens and kings.

YOUTUBE CONTENTS AND COMMENTS WITH THE KEY WORD “*DRAG*”

The following are the list of most viewed videos on YouTube with the keyword “drag”

What is Drag? Why are Men Referred as Queens? Interview with Drag Artist Nana Kim

Comment analysis:

Supportive of Nana Kim’s thought of referring to the Drag community as “Drag artist” rather than “drag queens” or “drag kings”.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x4UO_7JHkbc&t=185s

Meeting the Drag Queens and Kings of Korea

Comment analysis:

Critical against the term “female-like” and the representation of cosmetics and body line as a form of expressing female-like image.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UbhCMAAdTO-4>

How Would Drag Artist Think of Drag?

Comment analysis:

Critical with the way of drag queens representing women.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fIJetCri2_0

While the majority of the comments are supportive of drag as a form of self expression, comments become critical once drag artist coined the word “feminine”. Majority of the people related with the comments which states, “I understand the part where drag artists use drag as a form of self-expression and to look fancy, however I don’t get the point where they say, ‘drag queen refers to men who dress up as women.’ Dressing up as women, wearing skirts and putting on makeup only refers to imitating women.” Another comment states that, “Why do you emphasize femininity when you want to be ‘yourself’?”

The concept of gender identity is a fairly new subject in the Korean society; thus several people fail to distinguish the biological sex from one's gender identity. Several people are critical with the thought of men representing themselves as women as they consider it a form of mockery. However, what many people fail to understand is that, though drag queens reinforces the social image of what it is to physically appear as women, they deformulate the heteronormative gender guideline and bend the gender notions constructed by social norms.

The criticism claimed by several anonymous writers online towards the idea of men fixating on a particular feminine image and deconstructing gender identity may imply to us how power social heteronormative gender guideline are inserted within us without us knowing.



SOCIALIZED GENDER GROUPS

One of the most prominent and vocal online gender groups is WOMAD, a radical feminist community. Within one of their own on-site wiki pages, they define themselves as a anti-male group who believe in female chauvinism. In another page they state their stances as the following: anti-male, male obliteration, no tolerance regarding hate against women, anti-social norms, no sex, childbirth, dating or marriage, no tolerance for other social groups (e.g. labourers, animal right activists), positive towards wealth and power, negative towards celebrity influenced consumption and finally, values anonymity.

The WOMAD website provides a place for its members to express their thoughts on various issues, request petition participation from other members, and suggest ideas for WOMAD projects (e.g. rallies, new rules within WOMAD, social movements). Members of WOMAD also seem to have a strict unseen rule regarding the wording of all posts. They have adopted the style of ILBE, a far-right online community that is seen as a group of internet trolls and is frowned upon. In addition, WOMAD members use words and phrases that they made as jargon . Examples would be “manghon(망혼)” , which means screwed marriage, and corset(코르셋), meaning the social norms that a woman has to forcefully fit into.

Most of the posts on the WOMAD site explicitly treat men of Korean society with contempt, using strong language to berate the people in question. The following are examples of such posts.

WOMAD CONTENT AND COMMENT ANALYSIS

The following post were selected based on the most viewed contents in the website.

Title of post

“Where did all the People that Left WOMAD go? – The Limitation of 4th Generation Feminists” -

Content analysis:

An analysis of the decline of activity within WOMAD, discusses the reasons why people give up feminist WOMAD activities, such as the slow change in society compared to the violent protests of the 2nd generation feminist movements and the diminishing interest when one leaves the country (the Korean society and Korean men are specifically problematic

The post also views feminism as an anti-governmental, dissident movement. The writer also states the issue of men becoming a member of WOMAD and disrupting the discussions. The various causes for the decline of activity within the community site causes another problem, which is the increase of low-quality discussions. Such discussions are comments that blindly idolize the writer of postings

Comment section analysis:

The majority of comments agree with the content of the posting. Some comments also speak of the necessity of an offline community to increase comradery. Overwhelming negativity towards plastic surgery, marriage and a neutral, bystander-like attitude

Comments also discuss the issue of increasing ‘mindless members’ and their activities. Also, the commenters seem to look at the ‘wording’ in various posts. The commenters seem to believe that the wording must be violent and strong to show the hatred towards Korean men and such wording shows how the posters think of themselves in comparison to men.

Title of post

“Why an American Men Thinks Korean Men aren’t Popular”

Content analysis:

The writer of this posting states that Korean men have small penises, bad physique and ugly faces. To the writer, the most important factor is the mindset of Korean men. The writer quotes, no source mentioned, that an American man who lived in Korea for 5 years said that Korean men are disgusting, have no manners, don’t spend time with their families, instead with other women, talk about their wives behind their backs and do anything to avoid going home

Comment section analysis:

No comment to the post

Title of post

“Those who say hi to the Low-life Bus Drivers”

Content analysis:

This posting simply states that the bus drivers are people who are futile men that don’t deserve respect or their 4 million won paycheck and can be treated in any way.

Comment section analysis:

No comment to the post

Title of post

“One in Four Women Have a Gene fore Cheating”

Content analysis:

This post simply shows an article regarding the finding of a cheating gene in a quarter of women.

Comment section analysis:

Approximately half of the comments say that regardless of the gene, a single Korean man could never satisfy a woman and the remaining comments are either about how the commenters enjoyed cheating on their spouse or boyfriend, or about cheating is just a natural instinct for women.



WOMAD is a radical online feminist group who mainly uses the mirroring effect to their protest and claim gender equality. Though WOMAD is known for their harsh method of protest, they believe that only in their harsh methods and blunt use of language will the public ever pay attention and take initiative to change.

Majority of the public considers WOMAD as a women's group that claims women superiority and loathes men. However, though WOMAD is against the patriarchal and traditional system and mindset of both men and women, they do not claim gender superiority or loathe men. Though some women who mistakenly took WOMAD as an anti-men all women group, write post that physically criticizes or degrade men, members of the group either disagree with such posting or do not respond to it. At times, some post that criticizes men for no reason get deleted by the manage system.

The Korean society pays deep attention to media feeds and news on the campaigns or protest of WOMAD, but their interest does not further deepens to the motive or reason behind such acts. The best example for this was the Hye Hwa Protest for Anti – spycams. A lot of people criticized WOMAD for them taking pictures of men who were holding cameras at the scene, while they didn't allow men to take pictures of them. A youtuber named Ma Jye TV (마재 TV), even caught women sticking out their middle finger in his video while he was filming them protesting. One man at the protest shared his experience on their twitter stating, "I was on the scene taking picture of the protest with my phone when a woman walked up to me telling me not to film and when I denied saying that I had the right to take videos of whatever stuff I want she snatched my phone and threw it to the ground, and the female police was doing nothing just standing and watching us, I guess she was a feminist too. This is why I hate feminist."

At first hand, the WOMAD group may seem unreasonable and majority of the people who described the protest scene made themselves appear as the victim, portraying feminism as an anti-men group. However, the whole motive of the protest, utilizing the mirroring effect, was to ban male journalist on the scene to let them understand how women were restricted on the work field due to their sexuality. Male journalist who knew the motive of the protest refrained from writing and recording the scene in respect to the message of the protest. Such as this, majority of the people are aware with what WOMAD are doing, however their interest does not extent as to understand why WOMAD continues to plan such events.



FEMINISM AS A TREND

Feminism is a controversial topic and to many, misunderstood as a topic of power dynamics. The introduction of feminism in Korea began within online channels through hashtags and video contents instead of academias. With youtube stars and instagrammers commenting and sharing their unfiltered thoughts, people began to accept the concept of feminism as a trend rather than a mindset. The term *feminism* was often used as click baits on several youtube contents and people began entitling themselves feminism not for the purpose of pursuing and supporting the feminist movement, but rather to simply be “in trend”. The popular Korean novel, *Kim Ji-young: Born 1982* was much criticized by the public due to the reason it was coined with the word “feminism”. *Kim Ji-young: Born 1982*, was a novel written Cho Nam-ju who described the life of women in the 1990s. The novel portrayed the reality of Korean society where women were expected to give up their careers forsake of marriage and the struggles a married women faced in serving their in-laws. *Kim Ji-young: Born 1982*, was not a feminist novel, rather it was a vivid, honest portrayal of a person’s life that many people could relate to. When *Kim Ji-young: Born 1982*, was decided to be re-produced as a film with the lead actress Jung Yu-mi, many people criticized Yu-mi for being a feminist, without properly understanding what feminism meant.



CONCLUSION

With people’s interest of feminism focusing on the representation of it mainly through social media such as news articles, Instagram, Youtube, and different e-hubs, majority of their understanding towards feminism is heavily based to radical feminist groups such as *Womad*, who is usually the center of debate on news channels and social media. With the cyber realms both transmitting unfiltered thoughts and providing individuals an anonymous space to debate, criticize, and argue for their thoughts, gender disputes are held in a more casual manner, taking form of mockery and insult, at most time crossing the line. The lack of academic demands for gender subjects despite the heightened heat of the issue implies to us that people are not interested in learning about what feminism and gender studies actually is, meaning they consider it more of a trend rather than a mindset or academic subject. Therefore, though the use of online media to expand and share ideas is ideal, it also brings about greater disputes.