The Growth of Digital Feminism in South Korea: A Rising Gap Between Genders or A New Age of Post-Feminism?

Even before its release, the novel and later film, *Kim Ji-Young, Born 1982*, written by Korean author Cho Nam-ju, faced immense online scrutiny due to its commentary on sexism and misogyny in South Korea (Koo, 2021). In the Western viewpoint, a novel that amplifies female voices facing as much misogynistic backlash as *Kim Ji-Young* may raise some confusion. Though, in South Korean society, feminism is stigmatized on a widespread scale (Jung, 2024) such that even labeling yourself as a "feminist" is met with large hesitation, even with those who may support something as simple as supporting women in general (Kim et al., 2024). In this study, I attempt to analyze the root of the public discomfort around feminism and how this has impacted the public expression of feminism on Korean online platforms, specifically YouTube. In order to do this, I will conduct a document research analysis to explore the historical context and roots of Korean Feminism, and then conduct a sentiment-opinion analysis on comments of specific Korean YouTube videos that discuss Korean feminism. In this analysis, the definition of feminism will be as renowned feminist bell hooks defines it: "the movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression" (hooks, 2000).

Historical Context of Feminism in South Korea

South Korea has become a country with a global reputation of technology, innovation, and popular culture (Lee, 2011). Part of what contributed to this global influence of the Korean Wave, or "hallyu", was Korea's period of rapid socioeconomic development post Japanese-militarism in the 20th century (Sleziak, 2013). The strict adherence to the Confucian ideals of collectivism and patriarchal society contributed to the "sense of belonging" of its societal structure (Sleziak, 2013). Korean feminist movements gained its core momentum in the mid 1980's, raising issues about the discontent in women's roles in society, such as voting, domestic/sexual violence, and working rights (Lee and Chin, 2007), leading to the establishment of the Ministry of Gender Equality in 2001 (Kim, 2002). Despite these successes in women's rights, women have still been disadvantaged in many aspects of society, including unequal pay, unequal access to leadership roles, harassment, and sexism in hiring and promotion (Kim and Oh, 2022).

With the boom of the internet in the 21st century, and especially in the 2010's, it has allowed people all over the world to have a platform for expression and interaction. Adding on to this, the internet has given a platform for sexism to grow into something that is more "vitriolic, prolonged, and organized" (Kim J., 2021), which expanded the animosity towards feminist ideals in Korea. This brought forth the rise of online misogyny such as conservative community Ilbe (www.ilbe.com), which targeted its efforts developing hate and trolling culture against women and minority groups (Kim, 2014). Especially with Korea's mandatory military conscription for males and its declining birth rate, this contributed to the growing disdain towards any ideals that

favoured women over men (Jung, 2024). In combat, online feminist groups such as Megalia and Womad during 2015-2016 were created to combat IBLE's misogyny. Though their main goal was to support the feminist movement, they presented themselves as "radical" when users had more extreme and vulgar expression, strengthening the negative sentiment around feminists in Korea as "misandrists", i.e. of a movement against men (Kim Y., 2021). Though online conflicts between radical groups have died down, this has contributed to the overall sentiment around feminism in the current day (Kim Y., 2021), inhibiting the feminist movement for gender equality.

Goffman's Frontstage and Backstage Theory:

According to Goffman's frontstage and backstage theory, our personal identity distinguishes ourselves from others— our interests, hobbies, and beliefs. Though, as our lives are shifting onto a digital landscape, the way we define ourselves is rapidly changing— especially as mass communication platforms are influencing the dissemination of information and trends rapidly. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman touches on the concept that an individual has a public, visible, and performed aspect of their identity (the frontstage) and a private, authentic aspect (the backstage) (Goffman, 1959).

This is reflected in Korean society, especially with our increasingly digital landscape of interaction/expression. The rise of anti-feminism movements has made women resort to "quiet feminism" in private offline settings to avoid social repercussions (Jung, et al., 2024). Those who use their platform to show support towards any ideals of feminism are met with immense backlash (Septiani, 2022), meaning most people online are left to stay in the shadows of their backstage—hiding away their true opinion. This, in turn, reflects onto social activism. If there is no one to show support for a change, will change ever happen?

Though, the internet has allowed women to feel comfortable about going public without having to hide their identities with the stigmatized public view of feminism, and speak about their struggles, such as domestic abuse or discrimination (Hasunuma and Shin, 2019). The popularization of online activism through social media hashtags and online movements, such #MeToo (Jung, 2024) or "Sticky Activism" resulting from the hate crime against women at Gangnam Station Exit 10 (Kim, 2021), has allowed for a new age of female visibility, particularly in media, in Koo's analysis of Kim Ji-Young on Twitter and Naver spaces (Koo 2021). Some may call this a "feminist reboot", as digital platforms allow for feminist issues to be widely discussed (Kim, 2021). Though, recent years still show signs of gender conflict with the win of conservative presidential candidate and popularly known "anti-feminist" Yoon Suk-Yeol, with an overwhelming support with 62.9% of young men voting for Yoon, leading to Yoon's eventual presidential win (Lee 2024). With the fight towards the destigmatization of feminism and the popularization of online content creation, has the response on feminism been shifting on

online platforms? How has this impacted the way South Koreans represent themselves on social media in recent years? These are the questions I hope to explore in my paper.

Methodology

This paper employs a mixed-method qualitative and quantitative analysis to gauge past and current public sentiment around the narrative of feminist ideals.

The study collected and analyzed from two YouTube videos of focus: "I asked Maxim model and (former) Feminist Party activist to become friends" by global media brand wavve (웨이브) and "Feminism Between Equality and Hatred" by knowledge information YouTuber "The Story You Didn't Know" (당신이 몰랐던 이야기). These two videos were chosen in order to provide two types of videos: commentary/leisure and informational, rather than advocating a single perspective. These videos were guided by specific guidelines: being posted within the last two years for relevancy and have garnered over 100,000 views to reflect broader perspectives among Korean netizens.

Summaries on the Videos

"Feminism Between Equality and Hatred" (Park, 2023)

The first video, with over 123 thousand views, presents a nuanced examination of feminism in the Korean context. The narrator of the video tries to communicate that feminism is essentially not a bad thing, but in Korea, you would not simply call yourself a feminist. They dive into the history of feminism back to its origins and what feminism has become today: of varying ideologies and representations. A key argument presented is that social media has amplified more provocative voices, particularly those of radical feminists, whose perspectives have disproportionately shaped public discourse in Korea. This digital amplification has contributed to mainstream negative perceptions of feminism broadly. The video highlights a significant generational and gender divide through statistical evidence: approximately 64% of women in their 20s express support for feminism, while 75% of men in the same age bracket actively oppose it—illustrating a pronounced gender conflict among younger Koreans. The video informs that aggressive groups such as radical feminism causes the drift between the genders and creates a distraction from the feminists' actual mission: creating equal opportunities for women and men in society.

"I asked Maxim model and (former) Feminist Party activist to become friends" (wavve, 2024)
The second video, with over 380 thousand views, presents a series of divisive questions between two women of potentially contrasting ideological perspectives: Ha Mina, a writer who identifies as a feminist, and Kim Na Jeong, an announcer and model with more traditional Korean views. The conversation provides a perspective into two women with different gender experiences in Korea: one very content with her role and career as a woman, while the other shares more

disgruntlement with the state of gender equality in Korea today, and her efforts in making a change. While the video demonstrates both points of convergence and divergence of various points of views, one aligns most with the purpose of this research paper. When asked if they would identify as a feminist, Na Jeong demonstrated discomfort with identifying as feminist, while Mina embraces the idea of promoting equal gender opportunities— not the common misconception that feminism is misandry. This video provided a unique perspective on what modern feminism in Korea is hoping to achieve, and the growth of the presence of Korean feminists (not extremists) on social media content such as YouTube videos.

Analysis on the videos integrated a multi-layered approach. Natural Language Processing libraries including spaCy, NLTK, and Hugging Face transformers (specifically pretrained BERT sentiment analysis models) were utilized to process and analyze the comments. The YouTube API facilitated comment extraction and the DeepL API was employed to translate Korean comments for English analysis. To improve sentiment/stance precision, specialized lexical dictionaries with weighted feminist terminology were developed to aid in contextual relevance. The validation process incorporated human annotation comparison as a benchmark for the sentiment classification to reduce algorithmic error/misidentification of context. For the purposes for this research, feminism was operationally defined through the lens of gender equality, not radical feminist perspectives.

Results

With the limitations of the model, I place an emphasis on the analysis of the top three liked comments of each stance in each video— due to possible misclassification from lack of context and previous classified training data.

Video 1 Results: "Feminism Between Equality and Hatred" (Park, 2023)

Comment	Dominant Emotion	Category	Likes
I'm a woman too, but when I see what radical feminists are claiming, it makes me feel "????"	Anger	Questionin g	28
One prediction: the more misandrist feminism gets out of hand, the less room women will have to stand. I hope they make themselves more competitive when it comes time to make nonsensical shitposting claims.	Empathy	General feminist discourse	16
I'm glad you tried to make the video fair to feminism in general and not just the radical ones. Good job on the video.	Empathy	General feminist discourse	14

Table 1: Top Three Liked Pro-feminist Comments of Video 1

The top pro-feminist viewpoints seem to gear towards a criticism of radical feminism and the reputation that it has on popular media. There seems to be more hesitation on expressing active support for feminist values when the video is geared towards more of a criticism against radical feminism. There is more emphasis on correctly classifying the criticism against "radical" or "misandrist" feminism rather than just "feminism" in general. Though these comments are not specifically geared towards a "feminist" viewpoint, they are still contributing to the viewpoint that radical feminism is setting back the feminist movement in general.

Comment	Dominant Emotion	Category	Likes
Korean feminism is a "women's interest" group. The demands are similar to those of a full-length movie: Please don't put gender "equality" in the slogan.	Anger	Gender Equality	238
While you love equality so much, you only seek equality in rights, and keep your mouth shut about your duties, so it's a selfish, low-level, low-quality, and disgusting movement like a toddler throwing a tantrum. That's all I can say.	Disgust	Gender Equality	88
It didn't start out so great Women didn't pay taxes, usher, or enlist for a long time after they got the right to vote The idea of abandoning duties and seeking rights since ancient times	Anger	General Feminist Discourse	78

Table 2: Top Three Liked Anti-feminist Comments of Video 1

The top 3 liked classified "anti-feminist" comments have a higher like quantity, with the top comment having almost 10 times as many as the top feminist-classified comment. There appears to be more of an aggressive sentiment (anger/disgust) with a negative sentiment against women in general. There seems to be more of an emphasis on women's responsibilities in society rather than any discrimination that they may face.

Comment	Dominant Emotion	Category	Likes
I wish the world understood the biological differences between men and women and respected each other for the capabilities and abilities that come with those differences. I think it would be better to understand the differences, make concessions and live together with respect for each other than the current world that divides men and women.	Empathy	Women's rights	144
Men and women cannot be the same How can they be the same when they are born with different genes lol It is impossible to fully	Empathy	Women's rights	112

understand each other, but it is important to recognize differences and try to understand each other.			
Even if you cover such sensitive topics neutrally, you are censored and accused of ignorance	Disgust	Misogyn y	98
Just 2-3 years ago, if you criticized feminism at all, you were immediately buried in the media			
The Hyehwa Station protests and the Isu Station assault were also covered by all the media as if it was a healthy women's movement, leaving out the content about men's hatred			
It's disgusting.			

Table 3: Top Three Liked Complex Comments in Video 1

The comments classified as complex seem to highlight the roles of women and men as independent, meaning that there is no relationship between one or the other because they are "biologically different". These comments seem to try to identify as a neutral standpoint by not explicitly supporting one stance, but emphasizing the need to listen to each other and not discriminate one viewpoint or another.

Video 2 Results: "I asked Maxim model and (former) Feminist Party activist to become friends" (wavve, 2024)

Comment	Dominant Emotion	Category	Likes
In a world where people are attacked for supporting feminism, thank you for coming out and standing up for feminism, we support you!	Supportive	Women's rights	4802
Isn't the opposite of feminism not equalism, but anti-femi? Anyway, Hamina, it must have been difficult for you to appear on TV in this society pretending to be a feminist, but I think you're great, and I support you.	Empathy	Women's rights	2606
Hamina is so amazing!She says everything you want to say about feminism.	Supportive	General feminist discourse	1053

Table 4: Top Three Liked Pro-feminist Comments in Video 2

The comments in this video have significantly more likes than Video 1, though with almost three times as many views as the first video, but around 20 times as many likes as the top comment in

the first video. The Pro-feminist comments seem more outwardly supportive towards feminist ideals, recognizing the difficulty to publicly identify as feminist, and showing gratitude towards Ha Mina in sharing her views.

Comment	Dominant Emotion	Category	Likes
If you're a woman and you hate Femi, think about the damage Femi has done to you, and you'll only have one thing: the disadvantage and discrimination that men receive because of Femi attacking men.	Anger	Misogyny	184
"It's hilarious that you're talking about women's rights while referring to the Gangnam Station murders 8 years ago.	Humor	Women's Rights	139
The Gangnam Station incident was something the bereaved families told us not to use for strange ideas, but they ignored it anyway and are still talking about it.	Anger	General feminist discourse	135

Table 5: Top Three Liked Anti-feminist Comments in Video 2

The top Anti-feminist comment in Video 2 have around 20 times less likes than the top Pro-feminist comment, though with more emphasis on the discourse against men that feminist perceive to have, along with the discontent in publicizing the Gangnam Station 10 murder as something to support feminism, with a more aggressive and ironic sentiment in the comments.

Comment	Dominant Emotion	Category	Likes
I'm seeing a lot of people in the comments falling into the black and white thinking trap	Anger	General feminist discourse	649
I think that's the problem	Anger	Misogyny	188
People who harass, ridicule, or make fun of sexual things to people who aren't trying to sell sexual things or profit from them. Was it just a violent crime while watching this program? I was a little shocked to see that there were 25,000 victims in 4, but there were about 21,000 female victims, and 91 percent of sex crime victims are women. Of course, I know that the sex crime law is wordy, so there may be people who are unfairly punished for it, or if the victim is a man, they may look at the victim strangely and			

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the perpetrator is not punished, but even thinking about that, it was quite shocking to see that there are so many female victims of sex crimes, even compared to other crime rates.			
I basically think that there is a certain division of male and female gender roles, and I think that's the reality. Men are represented by the military, women by childbirth, etc. but to put it more simply, I think that in order for society to be maintained and run, women need to give birth, and men need to protect women and children. You can't change the two roles, and I think that there are aspects in which each person is born a little more suitable for protection, attack, etc. both physically and emotionally. So I don't think it can ever be a completely free choice to have children, and this seems to be an unavoidable reality in terms of maintaining society. I don't think it's completely free for women or men.	Judgment	Gender roles	166
2. However, I think we need to be careful about stereotyping and stereotyping too much when we look at a person on a micro level. We can expect some basic roles, but I think we need to be generous and open-minded when dealing with a single human being, and in that sense, I support the freedom of both genders, whether it's women or men.			
3. So I think it's best to have a two-track approach that acknowledges the reality of gender roles at the macro level, but when dealing with a single human being, I think it's best to have an open mind and respect their personality.			
4. At the micro level, when I think about a single human being, a single woman, I have a similar opinion to Hamina's, and this is an interview that I used to think was good, so I'm posting it because it's similar. Dior womenswear designer Maria Grazia Chiuri said, "If a free woman likes a corset, she has no reason to resist it. The corsets I create are light and comfortable, and the idea is to break away from the stereotype that feminists don't wear red lipstick or wear high heels. Clothes are a play, a tool of transformation and one of the means to show the different characters within us. Wearing Queen Elizabeth's clothes doesn't mean you're not a free woman."			
5. It would be great if we could have a conversation like			

this where we could disagree and still respect each other. Thanks for the video.		

Table 6: Top Three Liked Complex Comments in Video 2

The complex comments are lengthier than the other comment stances, with a deviation from a straightforward stance and more on an evaluation of Korean society. The second comment recognizes the disadvantages that men might face if they are the victim in sex crimes, but expresses surprise in the statistic 91% of sex crimes have women as the victim. The third comment could be the most controversial from the other two, with an emphasis on the strict roles that women and men have in society, but supports the "agree to disagree" point of view with respect.

Limitations

The population of the study was limited to the commenters of the content creator. Therefore, if there were more biased sentiments in the video, this tended to be reflected within the comments. Though the "The Story You Didn't Know" creator leans towards a non-biased, informative point of view, the emphasis on the video's criticism against radical feminism in Korea was reflected in the comments—more comments had a criticism against radical feminist ideals, which tended to be generalized towards feminism and women in general. The "wavve" video had a more playful tone to the video, promoting a more harmonized perspective of two people with contrasting ideals, as they physically got closer and closer throughout the video. This resulted in more supportive comments. Not only does this skew the bias of the comments, it was more difficult to capture the overall sentiment of all the comments as context was important to grasp their stance. Furthermore, the study did not analyze replies, as this requires a nested context analysis approach, complexifying the study for the time period. Further studies could study the interaction between users in reply threads to have a better grasp on overall sentiment. There were limitations in how the model was built itself, with the context dictionary not being comprehensive enough to capture different sentiments as accurately as wanted. Manual human inputs in the stance had to be integrated after the model was run to further enhance the results of the model. The human inputs by the researcher has the limitation of human error and lack of professional input on feminist terminology. Due to the complexity of statements, it was not always as straightforward as stating a comment was "feminist" or not, especially with how feminism is defined by popular media in Korea versus in this paper. As mentioned in the beginning of the "Results" section, only the three top comments were analyzed in depth so as to not generalize all comments due to the limitations mentioned previously that may lead to misclassification of the comments. Further studies could improve the sentiment analysis model by providing a fine-tuned model of pre-classified comments by professionals to parse sentiments/stances more accurately. Since this video is centred around YouTube videos, future studies could browse more Korean-centred outlets such as Naver and online forums to see if the same pattern reflects on different platforms.

Discussion

This study aims to analyze the current discourse around feminism in South Korea on popular media platforms, particularly YouTube, to examine if there has been a more positive, active sentiment supporting feminist, post digital feminism movements such as "#MeToo" in 2018. Based on searching for videos surrounding feminism on YouTube, finding videos that were not particularly biased towards one point of view was difficult, possibly reflecting the patterns of "quiet feminism" on video content platforms. Especially as a video platform, many who identify as feminist may not want to show their face in fears of public discrimination, especially due to the backlash on korean public figures such as Irene from Red Velvet have faced, such as burning their photocards just from reading *Kim Ji-Young, Born 1982* (Septiani, 2022).

Results show that comments themselves have more active sentiment in demonstrating a particular view. This makes sense, as professor of psychology at Yale, Molly Crockett, states, "amplification of moral outrage is a clear consequence of social media's business model, which optimizes for user engagement" (Brady, 2021). This is a direct reflection on how our identity is reflected on the online "stage"-- those with more extreme views on either side of feminism garner more attention and likes than comments that do not. On digital platforms users get less concerned with the repercussions, they become more comfortable with an "unfiltered" expression of views online, especially with anonymous, text-based media. This can be supportive and aggressive towards the feminist movement at the same time. The increasing transparency of figures online receive anti-feminist comments, but receive overwhelming support as a majorityillustrated in the thousands of likes of the top pro-feminist comment supporting Ha Mina in Video 2. On the other hand, with the rise of right-wing populism and anti-feminism as a coping strategy during Korea's growing economic insecurity, the fight for feminist support persists, as some men argue women have enough rights, or even more, and do not need the fight for equal rights (Lee, 2024). With the complexity of how feminism is defined in the South Korean lens, capturing the entire sentiment on feminism is challenging. During the fight against misogyny and backlash in Korean offline and online communities, more gravity is put upon amplifying support for those subject of discrimination, and how digital platforms can be used as an auxiliary for justice and equality for everyone. This study invites a further discussion on how misinterpretation of terms, such as "feminist" (frequently misunderstood as misandry), impacts public opinion and further political action on gender equality, and questions the contradiction between private belief and public expression on digital expression.

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