

Mirroring Misogyny in Hell Chosŏn: Megalia, Womad, and Korea's Feminism in the Age of Digital Populism¹

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Abstract

In recent years digital populism has emerged in South Korea as a new type of political behavior, marked by the political use of the internet as both a form of political participation and an instrument of mobilization. Technological advances and the diffusion of social media have enabled social polarization, rooted in post-Asian Financial Crisis neoliberal policies, to take on a new, more intense, emotional, and radical dimension in the virtual environment. The article examines a case study of an online conflict over the issue of misogyny in 2015–2016 to reflect on how a group of online feminists, namely Megalia and its splinter off-shoot Womad, have used the new media as a terrain for challenging the pervasive misogyny in Korean society. As the article focuses on the online activists' strategy of mirroring, it highlights how the experiences and worldviews of members of both groups are rooted in identity politics and argues that the understanding of this online conflict should be embedded in similar global and national socio-economic processes. Lastly, the case study also identifies some of the challenges that online feminism has encountered in Korea.

Keywords: Feminism, Megalia, Womad, misogyny, mirroring strategy, digital populism, South Korea

Introduction

Populism is, as Mudde aptly put it, the *Zeitgeist* of the twenty-first century.² Populism offers a vision of politics and society based on a clear and antagonistic dichotomy between the “pure people” and the “corrupt elites.”³ Among the features of contemporary populist manifestations is the extensive reliance on technology. The rise of Web 2.0, with the emergence of new internet services such as social networking websites like Facebook, Twitter, and KakaoTalk in Korea, have created opportunities for more near-instantaneous un-mediated communication. Populist movements pre-date the internet, of course, but social media represents the glue between offline and online realities.

South Korea offers a particularly suitable ground for exploring the relationship between online and offline activism, and more generally the rise of digital populism,⁴ which Kim defines as “a new type of political behavior marked by the political use of the internet as both a form of political participation and an instrument of mobilization.”⁵ As examined elsewhere, the ties between the internet and politics in Korea date back to the Roh Moo-hyun (No Muhyŏn) presidential campaign of 2002, when young campaigners effectively pushed Roh to the presidency.⁶ Months-long street protests (candlelight vigils) in 2016 and 2017 were enabled by social media, where a diverse, leaderless movement took to the streets against the then President Park Geun-hye (Pak Kŭnhye), ultimately leading to her ousting and impeachment.

The context for this lies in the combination of growing economic inequalities and deepening social polarization, which has led Koreans to refer to the current historical moment as “Hell Chosŏn,”⁷ as the socio-economic predicament of many people bears some similarities to the class-based society of Chosŏn. Socio-economic inequalities and the ensuing polarization have received the lion’s share of scholarly attention among scholars of South Korean society and economy.⁸ The dichotomy between the elite and the people, and the resentment of the people towards the elite has been well covered in the scholarship on populism.⁹ Alongside this vertical dichotomy, a second, horizontal dichotomy stands out as equally important. The focus on horizontal dichotomies between groups, each claiming to represent the “real people,” is especially relevant to the Korean context.¹⁰ The integration of Korea in the global economy and the neo-liberal reforms that followed the Asian Financial Crisis generated sharp socio-economic inequalities. These inequalities have a strongly gendered dimension. In Korea, this has taken the form of misogynistic attitudes among groups of young Koreans directly affected by the above-mentioned global and national processes. While the origins of misogyny arguably date back centuries,¹¹ in a patriarchal and Confucian society

like Korea,¹² the question of why this phenomenon intensified in the 2010s has not yet been subject to scholarly scrutiny.¹³

In this article, I examine how one particular group of Korea's online feminists adopted the strategy of digital populist activists to counter the diffusion of misogyny in a virtual environment. Empirically, the paper focuses on the online feminist movements Megalia and its splinter group Womad. I detail how online feminist groups responded to the misogyny of radical-right groups such as ILBE (*Ilgan Best*, "The Daily Best") by examining their origins, aims, and strategies. The article highlights the centrality of the mirroring strategy as a tool deployed by young feminist netizens as they expose the misogyny pervasive in society and, in particular, counter the actions of ILBE. ILBE and Megalia/Womad were two antagonistic websites, one for far-right male misogynistic activists (ILBE) and the other for radical feminists (first Megalia and later Womad). Megalians started to confront ILBE's pervasive misogyny through a strategy of mirroring. Every derogatory expression was bounced and mirrored with a similar derogatory expression of men as shown in Table 1.

In this way, the article makes a three-fold contribution to the literature. First, the case study of Megalia and Womad and the 2015–2016 online misogyny and counter-misogyny conflict moves beyond the typically ideographic single-case discussions of online feminist movements in Korea. Rather, the article examines the dialectical relationship between Megalia and Womad on the one hand, and ILBE on the other, by examining how online feminist activists took on online misogynists in practice. In the end, the success of Megalia was mixed: their voices were heard in society, but the strong message and the vulgar and often violent language proved polarizing and divisive. Second, while acknowledging the differences where they exist, I bring the two literatures on populism and online feminism in conversation by examining, in tandem, the rise of digital populism on the one hand and the misogyny and the mirrored misogyny on the other. While the rise of online feminism, also in the Korean context, has received attention in the media and communications scholarship,¹⁴ in this paper I contend that our understanding of the rise of online radical feminism and the conflict with ILBE benefits from integrating the analytical tools that are typically applied separately to the two movements. While acknowledging that the two strands of literature are not usually natural "bedfellows," Megalia and Womad's online backlash and their strategy of mirroring were successful, because they could exploit and leverage the strong divisions within Korean society. Populism has thus far focused on the "people vs. the elite" and "us vs. them" dichotomies and has adopted strongly antagonistic, even vulgar strategies to have their voices heard. The Megalians mounted an attack against males and the patriarchal establishment, hegemonic

Table 1 Mirroring strategies by Megalia and ILBE

Words for Misogyny	Meaning	Mirroring Misogyny	Meaning
<i>toenchangnyō</i> 된장녀	Bean paste girl, Material girl, relying on or expecting men's financial support for luxury goods, typically a college girl who would eat cheap meals (beanpaste stew and rice) but have Starbucks coffee.	<i>kkongch'inam</i> 콩치남	Mackerel pike man: free-rider who likes to go Dutch (uncommon in Korean society).
<i>kimch'inyō</i> (woman) 김치녀	Korean woman judging men by their economic ability	<i>kimch'i-nam</i> (man) 김치남 <i>ssipch'inam</i> 씹치남	Korean man judging women by their appearances; Men with 10-cm (i.e., small) genitals
<i>kaenyōmnyō</i> 개념녀	Wise women who are not like <i>kimch'inyō</i>	<i>kaenyōmnom</i> 개념놈	Wise men who are not like <i>kimch'inam</i>
<i>mam-ch'ung</i> 맘충	Mummy-insect, incompetent at raising children and only good at spending money; or mother with baby-stroller and Starbucks coffee.	<i>aebi ch'ung</i> 애비충 <i>hōsu aebi</i> 허수애비, <i>t'umyōng aebi</i> 투명애비	Daddy-insect, Scarecrow daddy, Invisible daddy. Man who does not do any housework.
<i>posūl ach'i</i> 보슬아치	Taking advantage through sexuality	<i>chasūl ach'i</i> 자슬아치	Taking advantage sexually
Dutch pay	Dutch pay	Loser pay, <i>ssipch'i</i> pay 씹치페이	Loser pay, 10-cm pay
<i>nakt'aenyō</i> 낙태녀	Woman who has had an abortion	<i>ssachwit'ung</i> 사취통	Man who ran away after a woman gave birth to their child
<i>sōnggoe</i> 성괴	Plastic surgery monster	<i>sōnggoe</i> 성괴	Sex buyer
Girlsplain	Girls trying to explain things to men and pretending they know everything	Mansplain	Men trying to explain things to women and pretending they know everything

in Korean society, and deployed mirroring strategies against pervasive misogyny. Third, Korea constitutes an especially suitable and novel vantage point to explore the rise of populism beyond the West,¹⁵ both because of the manifold manifestation of populist politics and the early adoption of new tools made available to politics by technological innovation. The article uses several qualitative methods, including the analysis of media archives and audio video contents and digital ethnography. It uses data from Megalia's remaining Facebook group, websites, and other publicly available material on YouTube and social networks. Statistical data are used to provide a more general overview of socio-economic inequality in contemporary South Korea.

To be clear, I imply no moral equivalence between Korea's digital feminism, even in its radical form, and the misogynistic groups that have proliferated online and offline. I do, however, contend that an analysis of both groups in tandem is useful, as it allows us to step back from the specific, intense, but relatively short-lived online conflict between them to capture the broader, structural, and long-term processes that have engulfed Korean society and debates therein. Those developments help shed light on how Korean culture has adjusted, struggled, and transformed at a time of rapid socio-economic transformation and the often vicious debates that have emerged and spread as a result of an acceleration in digital communication.

Naturally, there are also some limitations as to what this article aims to do or can do. This is not a summary of the history of Korea's feminism. I limit my analysis to a relatively short period in time, between 2015 and 2016 and, empirically, only focus on the interaction between online misogyny and the efforts to counter it through a mirroring strategy. This dialectic approach is useful as it allows me, first, to show how neither of these phenomena should be examined as a discrete event or a stand-alone issue, but rather as a dynamic co-constitutive relationship, a form of identity politics enabled by technology and historically embedded in the neo-liberal era. And second, to highlight the effects neo-liberalism has engendered in Korean society. The article thus provides a useful context to understand the emergence of Korea's own #metoo movement, just as the conflict between ILBE and Megalia/Womad seemed to be dying down. As Korea's #metoo has received attention elsewhere, it is not included in this analysis.¹⁶

The article is structured as follows. First, it contextualizes the analysis of the interaction between early conquests by the movement for women's rights and gender equality and the social backlash they have encountered. Next, the article turns to the origins of the Megalia group and the aims of its members. The central section of the article discusses Megalia and Womad as illustrative case studies of the rise and challenges that Korea's digital feminism encountered. Two issues

are emphasized: first, globalization and the structural transformation of Korea's economy, which also called into question social norms and expectations, adds a gendered dimension to such broader processes, and second, the role of technology in deepening polarization and identity politics of which the Megalia–ILBE conflict is a case in point.

Context: The Battle for Gender Equality and Women's Rights and the Social Backlash

The Internet plays an influential role in South Korea's economy (through online shopping), social life (the KakaoTalk mobile application is virtually on everyone's phone), and politics. It has done so for about two decades, starting from the campaign that led to the election of Roh Moo-hyun as President in 2002 to the candlelight vigils in the spring of 2008 and more recently those in the winter of 2016–2017 in the wake of the Choi Soon-sil (Ch'oe Sunsil) scandal that led to the impeachment of former President Park Geun-hye. With an internet penetration of 96% in 2018, Korea is among the world's most wired societies.¹⁷ Social media applications (SNS) tie together government and the citizenry, as was shown—with success, despite concerns over surveillance and privacy—during the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic crisis.¹⁸ Contact-tracing through mobile apps has become one of the crucial tools for the authorities to map the spread of the disease and keep it under control without resorting to lockdowns and allowing ordinary life (and the economy) to continue.¹⁹ Despite such a positive experience, though, a paradox is becoming increasingly apparent in South Korea: the more widespread access to information technology becomes, the more citizens feel the urgency to express themselves and share, unreflectively, freely, and in an unmediated or unmoderated manner, all sorts of views on all sorts of issues. This is certainly a positive development in cases where e-government links government and citizenry and where political campaigns recruit and mobilize those who would not otherwise take part in politics, let alone vote. However, the controversy and verbal violence that has accompanied online debates, as evidenced by the rise in fake news and hate speech online, shows a far less benign face of this phenomenon. A highly developed information technology environment offers fringe elements with radical views the opportunity to recruit like-minded people and mobilize them, while fuelling social antagonism and witch-hunting behavior against “the other,” who are viewed as illegitimate and an outsider in their supposedly “pure” and “homogeneous” society.²⁰

As I show in this section, misogyny and the battle over gender roles in Korea has gone through various phases over the past decade: an initial success of feminist groups in enacting important legislative changes was followed by a

backlash and the growing anti-feminism of certain groups of young men considering themselves as the victims of feminists' institutional achievements. This has been met and countered by a mirroring of misogyny by young feminists, many of whom were born in the 1980s.²¹ The 1980s generation started to enter university in 1997 or 1998, when South Korea's economy was ravaged by the Asian Financial Crisis and the country had to accept neoliberal policies, such as a flexible labor market and opening the hitherto protected domestic market to foreign companies. These, among other policies, accelerated the trend towards the globalization of the Korean economy and the polarization of society through widening gaps in both wealth and income inequality. This is the time when imported luxury goods became more readily accessible in Korean department stores,²² right at a time when their affordability among the more general population declined as living standards and salaries plummeted. I briefly review the beginning of the movement in this section, while the rise of Megalia is discussed separately in the next section.

Feminism in the Neo-Liberal Age: Rise and Early Conquests

The origins of Korea's feminist movements pre-date both the country's economic development and the reforms that followed the Asian Financial Crisis. However, understanding the contemporary debate over online misogyny necessitates a brief historical review of that period and the social and economic changes, which the neo-liberal reforms engendered in Korean society, as well as their gendered dimensions. South Korea's state-led economic development enabled a concentration of wealth around the large industrial conglomerates (chaebol). When those multinational corporations were mired in the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997, the new progressive government led by Kim Dae-jung (Kim Taejung) implemented the International Monetary Fund (IMF)'s restructuring programme.²³ Many chaebol went bankrupt or merged with other companies, such as Daewoo, Hanbo, and Kia. The restructuring programme enforced by the IMF led to mass layoffs and the introduction of a flexible labor market. Many workers in their forties or fifties took "honorable retirement"; in reality, they were fired. Younger people started to be employed on short-term contracts. Securing indefinite contracts became extremely difficult in Korea, especially for the younger generations.

It was during this time of economic crisis under the first progressive democratic government (1998–2003) that the feminist movement, and more generally the movement for women's rights, achieved a number of early victories, such as abolishing in 2000 the additional points in the government's civil service exam that Korean men had hitherto benefited from for performing military service. Further, a Ministry of Gender Equality and Family was established in 2001.

As the labor market became slightly fairer for women, competition between men became fiercer. Competition for so-called “3D jobs” (“dirty, dangerous, and demeaning”), such as cleaning public toilets or collecting trash, soared. At some point in 2001, the application ratio for these positions was 4:1, reaching up to 7:1 in cities like Daegu, with applicants including many university graduates. The trend continued up to a peak of 23:1 for positions of public cleaners.²⁴ Despite the low prestige of such positions, this form of public employment comes with job stability and various benefits including vocational insurance and a pension. While a saturated job market left limited alternatives to many university graduates, paving the way for resentment and anger, the Roh Moo-hyun administration (2003–2008) introduced a new law in 2005 abolishing the family registry system, which had previously only allowed a father, a husband, or a son to be the head of a household. Before this law was abolished, women were either included in a family registry that had their father as the head of the household or, after marriage, they were moved to their husband’s family registry. The traditional family registry was the most vivid illustration of the secondary position that Korean women occupied in society. This was also the time when local women’s rights campaigners encouraged young Korean women to use their father’s and mother’s family names equally. Many feminists used both their parents’ family names followed by their first names in the early 2000s. While most of the public understood that the overall environment was becoming fairer to women, there were also nationwide demonstrations against the new law. The early 2000s were times when local feminists, and more generally the battle for gender equality, reaped a number of successes. The expressions “Alpha girl,” symbolizing students who were attaining high grades in school, and “Gold Miss,” referring to single women earning high wages and enjoying professional careers, became popular expressions in Korean society.

Misogyny and the Anti-Feminist Backlash: The Rise of ILBE

In 1999, the Constitutional Court ruled that the additional points awarded to Korean men when taking government exams was unconstitutional.²⁵ This led to a very vocal backlash by young men who felt they were being “disadvantaged” by this change. Public anger manifested itself through the increasingly widespread use of derogatory expressions towards women such as *kimch’inyō* (김치녀 kimchi woman) or *sōnggoe* (성괴 plastic surgery monster). This was the start of the contemporary wave of misogyny across society. ILBE (the “Daily Best”) was the largest internet humour community, akin to a Facebook group, created in 2010,²⁶ and would later become notorious for fomenting misogyny;

it was ultimately closed down in November 2015 by DC Inside (dcinside.com), a popular web-platform similar to Facebook in terms of its main social network functions, as its members stood accused of crimes against women.²⁷ ILBE is an example of the male-solidarity coalitions that emerged in response to the “victimization” of men engendered by legislative reform. The leader of one such NGO was Söng Chaegi 성재기 (Sung Jae-gi), a vocal opponent of the discrimination against men, enraged by—among others—the fact that Korean women had the option of female-only subway carriages or could sit in dedicated rooms in public places such as libraries. Söng’s view was that men were victims of selfish feminists. Evidence for his claims, according to him, were that men still had to do military service, were expected to be breadwinners in the family, and still had to conform to social norms demanding that men pay more for women while dating or in marriage. Söng’s group became a vocal advocate for gender equality *in reverse*. As the new victims, men had to defend their rights. A comedian on the TV programme “Manyö sanyang (마녀사냥 Witch-hunting)” commented to a colleague on the show in April 2015: “I don’t like wild women speaking loudly and thinking hard.”²⁸ This sparked a furious reaction online, as feminists demanded a response in May 2016.²⁹ The expression went viral and started appearing on T-shirts, bags, keychains, banners, and later even book titles. Due to the massive backlash, the comedian was asked to step down from the show, as his earlier misogynistic expressions in podcasts and TV programmes began to circulate. Feminist scholarship has approached these events as aggravating young men’s loss of feeling, frustration, and anger.³⁰ Söng Chaegi was very vocal about these matters online and also on TV shows, as he emphasized men’s burden in society at a time when they were suffering from financial losses over government support for the jobless and the homeless. Despite taking part in various TV programmes, Söng tweeted that he needed 100,000,000 won (just under 100,000 USD at the time), to cover the costs of his male solidarity NGO.³¹ To fundraise, he decided to stage a performance where he would jump from a bridge into the Han River in Seoul. He publicly pledged to return the sum, which he referred to as a loan. However, the performance ended in tragedy as, not resurfacing after the dive, Söng was found dead a few days later on the riverbank.³² His death rapidly became a social issue with attention focusing on the lack of funding for his NGO (and similarly minded ones) and his views of men as victims in a Korean society allegedly dominated by feminists. Söng’s views and the tragic nature of his death resonated across certain groups where young male students could not compete with their female peers at school or felt that the school environment was being run by their fellow female classmates. A teenager who considered Söng Chaegi as his personal hero declared he would join Islamic State as he “could not stand Korean

women.”³³ This is the time when the group ILBE gained popularity. The website became notorious for uploading files, photos, cartoons, memes, all displaying and fomenting misogyny. Male users interacted on the website’s forum, sharing their anger against women, and uploaded vulgar photos and pictures of naked women. The TV programme “Kkach’il namnyō” (까칠남녀) aired complaints about women’s behaviour, pointing to a number of cases where they expected men to pay for their coffee, meals, expensive gifts, and movie tickets.³⁴ Name-calling was widespread, with women referred to as *kimch’inyō*, taking advantage of men’s financial support while dating and/or after marriage.

Some users of the ILBE website uploaded fabricated stories. In one of these, a man, allegedly injured on the street, asked a lady passing by for help and whether she could give him her jumper to cover up, but she ignored him. The woman in the story was labelled as a typical *kimch’inyō*, although the real story was the opposite. The lady actually helped the injured man, giving him her sweater. On ILBE the story was distorted, creating the image of a selfish woman who only cares about her appearance and for the expensive sweater not to be ruined for the sake of an injured man.³⁵ Another infamous story that circulated widely in 2015 was about two girls traveling back home from Hong Kong and contracting MERS (Middle Eastern Respiratory Syndrome). The two girls were asked to take isolated seats on the airplane, but they refused to do so. Anger spread online about the two girls who were accused of ignoring public health considerations and went viral in male discussion forums, including ILBE.³⁶ This story was also fabricated. Women witnessing such cases of witch-hunting started to mobilize, paving the way to the “#Iamafeminist” movement. DC Inside was used for the creation of the Megalians’ (Megalial activists) discussion forum. As mentioned earlier, a group was opened on DC Inside combining the words MERS Gallery and Egalia’s daughters into Megalia. Megalians adopted a mirroring strategy. Whatever was “thrown at them” by ILBE activists, they “threw it back,” mirroring or reflecting it. When men used the derogatory term *kimch’inyō* to refer to women they would call men back *kimch’inam* (김치남).

In the meantime, a number of other tragic events occurred. On the illegal website Soranet, images and videos of sexual abuse were shared, as well as photos taken with hidden cameras in public toilets in 2015. Megalians raised 10 million won in a few hours to support Member of Parliament Chin Sōnmi’s legal effort to ban Soranet.³⁷ The website was finally banned following pressure from a feminist movement led by Chin Sōnmi in 2016. A femicide occurred in a public toilet near the Gangnam subway station after midnight on 17 May 2016. The murderer confessed to not having had any specific reason for his actions. The police investigation concluded that the man suffered from mental illness, although many

contextualized this episode in the atmosphere of mounting online misogyny that ended up materializing offline. The day after the body was found, thousands of people gathered at the Gangnam station to mourn the victim. They left flowers and twenty thousand post-it messages, holding a series of presentations/talks by women about their fears and complaints of the unfair treatment of women in Korean society. They also held campaigns of group walks at night. Many people joined the memorial event, commenting: “She was dead and I was lucky to survive,” and “Men are potential criminals and women are potential victims.”³⁸ At some point during the memorial event, a man wearing a pink elephant costume appeared with a message saying “Carnivorous animals are not bad, but the criminal.”³⁹ The term “carnivorous” has another meaning in Korean referring to women as food. Some added a post-it on the pink elephant saying ILBE-*ch’ung* (일베충, ILBE-insect), which was a mirroring of *kimch’inyŏ*. In the following days a group of men, allegedly ILBE netizens, also joined the memorial event with posters saying: “Not all men are potential criminals.” Eventually the two groups clashed.⁴⁰ Since then, more young women have started studying feminism and the sales of books on feminism has dramatically increased.⁴¹

The Case of Megalia

Korea’s digital feminist activism takes various forms and does not constitute a cohesive group of users or members, nor does it advance a unified, coherent agenda. Megalia is a fictional land where “traditional” gender roles are reversed.⁴² Womad, a more radical off-shoot of Megalia, is a radical feminist online discussion group, whose name integrates “women” and “nomad.” Megalia arose from the MERS Gallery group on the DC Inside platform on 29 May 2015. Users could upload their photos and video files, and other users could remake or edit them or make parodies of them and circulate them on other websites. By June 2015 the Megalia group on Facebook had been closed and reopened three times due to the use of extremely vulgar and violent language by its users. A group called Megalia 4 was formed on Facebook in September 2015. As of early-2021, the group is dormant and viewers can only access events and discussions up until 2016.

In order to understand the ILBE–Megalia conflict and the specific language that they used, it is helpful to recall the cultural origins of those terms. The expression Megalians responded to were, among others, *toenchangnyŏ* (된장녀, bean paste girl or Material girl) and later *kimch’inyŏ* and *mam-ch’ung* (맘충 mum-insect or mum-roaches),⁴³ which are, in essence, stereotypes of Korean women in slightly different periods. All three terms are related to women’s vanity, obsession with physical appearance, and reliance on financial support from men (husband,

partner, or boyfriend). The origins of the *toenchangnyō* expression is rooted in the experience of young college women who were born in the 1980s, who use the pocket money from their father to buy themselves a cheap lunch such as bean paste stew and rice (된장찌개 *toenchang tchige*), while “splashing out” by drinking coffee at Starbucks, at a time when coffee was more expensive than the meal itself. Korea’s first Starbucks coffee branch opened in the Ewha Womans University area in Seoul in 1999, soon after the Asian Financial Crisis. Before that time, most Koreans were used to instant coffee with sugar and cream. Even coffee at a café was not as expensive as a Starbucks coffee at the time. Holding a mug of Starbucks coffee became a status symbol, implying sophistication and a globalized (in fact, westernized) aura. Among the satires of the *toenchangnyō* common at the time was “A day in the life of *toenchangnyō*.” Supposedly, she routinely wears a branded dress and a LeSportsac totebag and gets on a more expensive bus to go to university. She eats breakfast at Dunkin Donuts, consisting of a donut and an Americano coffee, feeling like a New Yorker. During lunchtime, she looks down on other fellow students for eating a cheap lunch at the school cafeteria. If she can find a senior male student, she asks him to buy her lunch. The classroom is typically filled with her Chanel No. 5 perfume. After class she goes to the Lotte Department Store for some window shopping on the luxury brand floor, thinking of buying something using her father’s money. She imagines her future husband as a medical doctor driving a big, luxury sedan.⁴⁴

Kimch’inyō is the more “advanced” (age-wise), version of the young college girl in her mid-twenties and thirties. She is regarded as a free-rider, expecting her boyfriend to support her expensive taste for Chanel bags or luxury branded gifts. She typically expects her boyfriend or husband to maintain her expensive taste throughout their dating and marriage. A TV comedian captured the situation well: “Men, stand up and have a voice! I bought movie tickets. You buy a bag of popcorn. I bought you a luxury bag for your birthday but you gave me cross-stitch craft. Do not expect an anniversary gift for our 100th day of us dating. My credit card instalment has not yet paid for the last gift.”⁴⁵ Another similar expression went as follows: “Do not look down at me because I do not have a car but paid for your luxury bag. I paid for coffee but why are you collecting stamps on your customer’s card? I spent my credit card for you but you wrote a Christmas card for me. Men, stand up until women pay for their meal!”⁴⁶

Another, possibly even worse, term is *posül ach’i* (보슬아치). The word combines female sexual organs, *poch’i* (보지, vulgar term for female genitalia) and *pyösül ach’i* (벼슬아치), which indicates whoever abuses their power derived from a higher social status. The term describes a woman using her sexuality to receive some sort of benefits.

Mamch'ung is yet another term used to refer to married women not having a job but relying on their husband's financial support. A typical *mamch'ung* image is a lady pushing an expensive baby stroller with one hand and carrying a Starbucks coffee in the other. Luxury, reliance on men, and lack of a job are all captured in this expression.

Digital Populism and Feminist Movements: Never the Twain Shall Meet? Neo-Liberal Globalization as a Shared Economic and Cultural Milieu

How can we make sense of this episode of virtual social contention between Megalians and ILBE? Are populist movements and feminist activists using the same tools to reach out to fellow like-minded digital users? While political scientists and sociologists have primarily focused on populist leaders and the electoral support for populist movements and thus the term has gained widespread currency, scholars of feminist activism have resorted to expressions such as digital or cyber feminism or hashtag movements as they adopted various theoretical frameworks to make sense of specific movements and the online identities and debates.⁴⁷ Apart from a few notable exceptions,⁴⁸ there has been next to no overlap in the debates on populism and feminism in the early twenty-first century. This seems surprising, given that online users from both camps have engaged in heated debates online, often bordering on or crossing over into the legal debates that reinforce antagonistic us-versus-them dichotomies. In brief, web 2.0 and the rise of social media has reinforced “identity politics” and some of the prejudices underlying it.⁴⁹ In its own way the groupness that stems from and drives identity politics contributes to reinforcing and solidifying pre-existing divides in society: gender identities are no exception here. As noted in the pages above, I do not suggest moral equivalence between the two camps. Yet, the strategies used in the contraposition bear resemblance to each other, which makes exploring and unpacking the pushback against misogyny through the lenses of the scholarship on populism especially useful in this case. Though historically and conceptually rooted in the experiences of European and North and Latin American countries, populism's emphasis on “anti-elitism, sovereignty and homogeneity of the people”⁵⁰ and the populists' strategies in their performance using vulgar and antagonistic repertoires to provoke public resentment and grievances, new technologies, and network approaches resonate in the Korean context, too.⁵¹ This is evident in the case of ILBE, as detailed in this article. Further, and perhaps surprisingly, on closer inspection the digital populists and the online feminists

of the early twenty-first century may have more in common than either may be willing to concede and therefore a cross-fertilization between the two scholarly conversations may generate interesting insights.

The first shared aspect is the broader socio-economic environment in which the actions (and perceptions) of Megalians and ILBE users are embedded. Identity politics has thrived as the rise in socio-economic inequalities has deepened polarization. Among the central insights of the scholarship on populism is the socio-economic context that has enabled this phenomenon to grow and flourish.⁵² Among others, sociologist Rogers Brubaker⁵³ has asked why populism has gained in popularity at the current historical juncture. Populism is understood as a thin ideology that seeks to promote the general will of the people against representative politics.⁵⁴ Although it can be either left- or right-wing, Mudde and Kaltwasser contend that populist movements tend to arise in response to crises.⁵⁵ Populism also emerges when ideologies converge to the centre, as Laclau⁵⁶ and Mouffe⁵⁷ pointed out in their seminal works. Thus, a lack of polarization by representative organizations such as political parties (among others) leads individuals who often feel unrepresented to polarize. Francis Fukuyama also emphasizes this trend in his recent work, where he stresses the role of the struggle for recognition and hatred of others in contemporary populist politics.⁵⁸ Social polarization based on the seemingly irreconcilable, ontological opposition between groups leads to the group's self-articulation as victims of others (typically foreigners, religious, sexual, ethnic minority groups), with whom they see themselves as competing and losing against in a very competitive globalized and unprotected neoliberal job market. Brubaker⁵⁹ observes that populism not only emerges and thrives in times of crises. Alongside the more commonly examined vertical axis, where the people oppose the elite, Brubaker helpfully examines a horizontal axis of inter-group competition, where populists draw a line between the majority, a supposedly homogeneous group, and a set of others, typically including foreigners, migrants, and sexual minorities, who in their view benefit from privileges given them by the ruling elites. As I discuss below, both ILBE and Megalians emerged in the same environment of Korean socio-economic inequality and polarization and the cultural dislocation and insecurities that this engendered.

The second shared feature of these otherwise opposing groups includes the tools used. Hate speech has become the web's pandemic. Perceptions of injustice and victimization thrive in an era of a crisis of public information, knowledge, and expertise. While Web 2.0 does not generate fake news, per se, it spreads much faster in an environment that serves as an echo chamber. In his explanation Brubaker links the rise of populism to a broad set of structural transformations. Key to understanding this is a crisis of institutional mediation. Political

parties' role in connecting the state and the people has failed, and this failure has brought about a demand for direct democracy aided by the rapid improvement of social media, thus enhancing a digital hyper-connectivity. The mainstream media also take on a populist style through simplification, dramatization, confrontation, negativity, emotionalization, personalization, and visualization.⁶⁰ Ordinary citizens are more isolated from the collective decision-making process and feel estranged from decision-making institutions, rightly or wrongly, by some of this power having been endowed to supranational institutions.

Scholars of populism have also paid increasing attention to rhetoric and speech, the use of raw, crude, rude language, and the overall lack of civility in online debates.⁶¹ Populists refer to "common sense" as a common set of beliefs, almost a (thin) ideology that allows leaders and ordinary people to communicate with each other in a rather unsophisticated yet relatable manner.⁶² Sensational and scandalous information attracts attention, regardless of whether the information shared is factually correct or not. The currency in these exchanges is the number of likes, shares, and retweets—in what is a virtually marketized environment. The rapid flow and exchange of information does not allow for pause and reflection, consistent with the demand for immediacy. The possibility of a hidden identity and anonymity has increased the sense of protection and often impunity. Rapid advances in information and communication technology (ICT) enabled the early emergence of a networked society in Korea. Rapid and efficient e-government, the internet of things, and the success of global brands like Samsung and LG are part of Koreans' daily lives and illustrate how technology has become part of Korean society. Nowhere is this more evident than in the case of mobile devices and applications. Koreans developed an early social network application, Cyworld, which many compare to early versions of Facebook and Instagram. KakaoTalk, the mobile messaging service, connects Koreans across all generations.

However, there are also less savory developments associated with new technologies: fringes of radical netizens have skilfully leveraged such IT advances to further their own agendas, consolidating in-group solidarity and promoting identity politics and a horizontal us-versus-them dichotomy.⁶³

Unpacking Megalia: Radical Online Feminism in a Neo-Liberal Age

Megalia and the conflict with ILBE, I argue, should not be understood as an episodic outburst of online violence but as part of broader processes set in motion as early as the late 1990s. As examined in greater detail elsewhere,⁶⁴ polarization

in Korea emerged in the context of globalization and neoliberalism. Neo-liberal globalization has polarized society into a small group of very few very wealthy individuals in the world's top 1% or 10% in terms of wealth concentration and the 99% or 90% of the poor, including an impoverished middle class that never recovered from the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis or the 2008 global recession. Although I do not claim that other, older or younger groups were not also affected by the crisis and the changes that it engendered, the generation born in the 1980s experienced the impact most directly. With inequality and polarization came an intra-generational divide along gender lines, because the economic changes that followed the 1997 crisis also led to conflicts over social values, norms, and expectations. This issue took on a Korea-specific shape to which I now turn.

Polarization and Inequality in Hell Chosŏn

In "Feminism Reboot," Son insightfully refers to the individualization of financial disasters.⁶⁵ Since the Asian Financial Crisis, the Korean government introduced a flexible labor market which, among other things, meant extensive lay-offs of workers in their mid-forties and older, and the loss of the prospect of job security for the new entrants into the job market. Professional life would be defined by a succession of short-term contracts one after the other. This serves as a stark and painful reminder that the Korean rapid economic development was achieved at the cost of cheap labor: the 1997 financial crisis was "solved" with the IMF bail-out and the resulting restructuring in line with neo-liberal market policies, creating the vast layer of the precariat. It is in this light that the rise of misogyny can be understood. While the issue pre-existed the crisis, the outburst of frustration and anger of young men was less about women themselves and more about the structural problems that followed the financial crisis. Jobs were as scarce for men as they were for women. When women could not get a job, they had the option to marry into a better economic arrangement. Men therefore saw themselves as victims of feminist movements, which had successfully pushed through the institutional reforms mentioned earlier in the article. Young men rationalized their struggle as the result of the structural imbalance that favoured women and, in a zero-sum game, disadvantaged them. In this logic it was not women who lacked rights or gender equality, but men. Filled with frustration and anger over their decreased social and economic status, they looked for venues for airing such frustrations, and online cafés came into existence right at this time, providing them with a playground for virtually socializing and discussing shared experiences of difficulty and pain. Although the reasons apply as much to young Korean men as to women, the sources of stress were manifold. Competing with each other

to survive in a highly competitive education system first to enter high ranking universities, and later the job market, and even the “marriage market” adds considerable stress to Koreans from an early age.

Korean children grow up with their mothers urging them to work hard; their school performance is determined by how much they spend at after school private lessons, which they are pressured to attend by parents determined to send their children to the best universities so that they can later secure well-paid employment. Another reason for competitive stress is English education. With globalization, speaking English becomes an essential asset to enter university and acquire a decent job with a reasonably high income. To be “ahead of the curve,” children are sent to English-speaking kindergartens, which are three times more expensive than ordinary kindergartens. Private tuition by native speakers is designed to strengthen this competitive edge, although if all compete in the same way one wonders where the added value is. Instead, this is something that becomes expected, even routinized. Many students are then sent to study abroad, as foreign degrees are perceived to provide further advantage in the competitive job market. For all this education, the financial capability of the parents is crucial. All this existed before 1997; however, since the Asian financial crisis, economic polarization has grown deeper in Korea, while a bifurcation occurred, with the wealthy becoming wealthier and the middle class’s financial capability shrinking.

In this context, young men have become more insecure, as the uncertainties brought about by the financial crisis and its aftermath have been compounded by changes in social norms and values across Korean society. The effects of neoliberal globalization thus took on a very Korean distinctiveness. Traditionally, in Korean society men have been expected to cover large expenses. This may range from the cost of a date to a much more substantial purchase, like that of a flat or a house. Because of the peculiarity of the Korean housing system, a tenant must deposit a very large sum upfront. Monthly rents are a very new development, and still not so common, dating back to as late as the early 2000s. The deposit for renting a flat is typically two thirds of the actual housing price. As this has become increasingly difficult to afford (and thus men are becoming unable to “provide,” as traditionally expected), young Korean men have begun delaying or giving up on dating, marrying, having a family, and owning property. The nickname for this “generation at a loss” used to be *samp’o* (삼포 meaning giving up three things: job, dating, and marriage), and now it is “the N generation,” meaning giving up numerous things. Thus, along with the economic challenges brought by Korea’s integration in the global economy and global capitalism has come social dislocation resulting from a change in the social status and ability of

men and women. Stress and frustration demanded a scapegoat, and a number of young men identified this in those they saw as their direct competitors on the job market: in this case, women. While this is to some extent understandable, the indicators below show a different reality.⁶⁶ Far from “stealing” jobs and opportunities from men, women also struggled in the same precarious economic environment. According to the World Economic Forum’s 2020 Global Gender Gap index, Korea ranks 108th out of a total of 153 countries, a far from impressive performance.⁶⁷ Women’s economic participation and opportunity ranks 127th, Educational Attainment 101st, Health and Survival first, together with 38 other countries, and Political Empowerment 79th. The report insightfully ends with suggestions of how to improve the gender gap index in the report titled “The Gender Gap Country Accelerators: Female labor force participation, women in leadership positions, closing gaps in wage and remuneration, building parity in emerging high-demand skills and jobs.”⁶⁸ Other data, such as on the employment rate (Table 2), the unemployment rate (Table 3), and the rate of employment of college graduate by gender (Table 4) reinforces the message that male deprivation, if it has occurred, has been relative (to itself, declining), rather than absolute, and that women have not benefited from this.⁶⁹

Identity Politics and Hate Speech Online: Misogyny and Mirroring Misogyny

Technological advances and the emergence of web 2.0, such as the Social Networking Service (SNS, the acronym used in Korea to refer to social media), took place against the backdrop of the broader social, economic, even cultural changes discussed in the section above.

As social and economic frustrations have grown, the demand for platforms for airing them has also increased. The rapid improvement of internet technology has created digital natives and a media ecology that provided an ideal environment for the emergence of digital populism. Angry, marginalized people hid behind user anonymity to vent their resentment online and set up discussion groups of like-minded people. Actively targeting “the other” was the next step.

As briefly discussed in the previous section, when the misogynist story about female MERS patients in 2015 turned out to be fake news, female users on the platform started to react against misogyny by making a parody of the original photos and editing the original news by replacing the reference to men with women. Megalians used the original misogynistic contents from ILBE and recreated the content replacing “female” with “male” and shared it among fellow female netizens. This mirroring misogyny strategy provoked a reaction by angry male users who turned out to be ILBE users. A heated debate followed, where

Table 2 Employment rate among the economically active population (2018)

Year	Male (%)		Female (%)	
	2018	2019	2018	2019
15–19 years old	7.2	7.6	9.2	9.0
20–29 years old	62.6	63.4	65.2	64.3
30–39 years old	92.9	92.1	62.7	64.1
40–49 years old	94.2	93.3	67.4	66.7
50–59 years old	89.3	88.6	65.0	66.3
Above 60 years old	53.6	54.4	31.5	33.6
Total	73.7	73.5	52.9	53.5

Source: Statistics Korea 2020.

Table 3 Unemployment rate

	Male	Female
20–29 years old	9.7%	8.2%
30–39 years old	3.3%	3.3%
40–49 years old	2.4%	2.2%
50–59 years old	2.8%	2.2%
Above 60 years old	3.8%	2.9%

Source: Statistics Korea 2019.

Table 4 Employment of college and university graduates

	Male	Female
20–29 years old	866	1,324
30–39 years old	2,425	1,611
40–49 years old	2,248	1,341
50–59 years old	1,479	628
Above 60 years old	480	112

Source: Statistics Korea 2019.

misogynistic comments by ILBE members were not moderated or blocked on MERS Gallery. The mounting cases of misogyny during the MERS crisis encouraged digital feminists to deploy the mirroring misogyny approach more strategically and systematically. Mirroring misogyny started on MERS Gallery on the DC Inside.⁷⁰ The mirroring strategy by certain female users started to be targeted in the comments by ILBE netizens. This caused a split among the users of the platform, which eventually led to the splintering of the Megalian group off DC Inside, who then created their own website (Megalian.com) on 6 June 2015. Megalians also set up their own account on Facebook and Twitter. As some of the

messages went as far as inciting violence, the Megalian website was closed down, but it resurfaced under different names and forms on social media, including Facebook groups and Twitter accounts.

Drawing on the derogatory terms that had been used to refer to women mentioned earlier in this article (and listed in Table 1), Megalians mounted a fierce response that entailed the use of a mirroring strategy, deploying terms such as *kimch'inam*, *hannamch'ung* (김치남 kimchi man, 한남충 Korean man insect). When Megalia was warned by Facebook over the use of derogatory terms, it was accused by feminists of discrimination against Megalians, since it had allowed ILBE users to freely use the equivalent expression kimchi woman (김치녀) on their Facebook page for many years. This exposed the hypocrisy of both the social media giant and society, as suddenly the use of the term *kimch'inam* had drawn people's attention to the strategy of mirroring misogyny, which was regarded negatively, whilst online misogyny had been spreading uncensored. Some feminist users reacted to what they viewed as a discriminatory online environment where misogyny by male users was allowed but mirroring misogyny was not and they responded by taking aggressive action, online and offline. Members of Megalia moved from platform to platform, using different social media where they shared messages with hashtags, liked, and retweeted each other's messages and posts. While female naked photos are regarded as acceptable on websites, when Womad members uploaded male nude photos, including male genitalia, it immediately triggered a police investigation. Those who posted them online were arrested in the following days. This sparked further public anger, especially among women, and cemented in-group solidarity among the Womad group users. In his article, Yu Min-seok⁷¹ draws on Judith Butler's theory of speech⁷² to focus on how the use of language by Megalians was central to the group's mirroring misogyny strategy. Yu's work sheds light on the cultural and sociological context of the Megalians' actions. He highlights the gendered imbalance of power throughout history, one aspect of which is that women felt they were being silenced and unable to rebut the belittling and derogatory expressions used to refer to them. Since such violence has been pervasive and embedded deeply in society and culture, misogyny and the violence it perpetuates have become normalized, leaving women in a deeply imbalanced power relationship. For Megalians the mirroring strategy is about "talking back" and "speaking through" the pervasive misogyny.⁷³ For years women had endured derogatory terms such as *kimch'inyō* and *toenjang-nyō*. Similarly, ILBE users also repeatedly used the expression *samilhan* (once in three days), meaning "women should be beaten every three days." The Megalians finally retorted through mirrored misogyny by uttering *sumshwilhan* (숨쉬한 once every breath): "men should be beaten up every time they breathe."⁷⁴

Such parody can therefore overcome misogyny not from a victim's perspective but through a pay-back strategy, whereby the original image of misogyny is recreated and adjusted to the next context.⁷⁵ As Jang points out, Megalia's mirroring misogyny strategy articulated a strong reaction against the pervasive misogyny of Korean society. A reaction had been mounting prior to the emergence of the group, but it was only thanks to the work of digital natives that the issue was truly exposed and brought to the attention of the wider public. As unpleasant, vulgar, polarizing, and ultimately divisive as the strategy was, the mirroring strategy vividly and successfully exposed the misogynistic culture among some Korean men by "throwing back"—mirroring—the very same terminology and demeaning attitude towards them. The aim of Megalians, and of the feminist movement behind it, was to awaken the silent majority that had been aware of the issue and try and build a broader coalition with other women who felt the same way and shared the same views. They reached out to famous male politicians, newspaper columnists, and writers, asking that they identify themselves as feminists and/or out themselves as victims of gender inequality.

Jang Min-ji notes that in order to understand Megalia we need to embed it in the current configuration of the media ecosystem, defined by social media.⁷⁶ Internet culture allows digital natives to share existing content, and to create new content, which is then rapidly shared and spread by various social network systems. Thus, digital natives are not just consumers but producers and providers. Jang also points out that digital natives are the daughters of workers who were laid off in the late 1990s during and in the aftermath of the financial crisis. For them, their fathers were no longer the only breadwinners in the household. They grew up in an environment where there was less disparity in the roles of wives and husbands. Such social changes gave rise to different perceptions of gender roles than the traditional role of women in Korean society. Inequalities did not disappear though. After returning home from work, the daughters saw that it was still their mothers who were engaged in housework, not their fathers. This contradiction between public and private roles also fuelled resentment among young women growing up in the late 1990s and 2000s.

When Megalians took action with their mirroring strategy, male users started to feel uncomfortable and upset. Some even reported Megalia to the police. On Wikipedia⁷⁷ and Namuwiki,⁷⁸ Megalians and Womad are still described as criminal groups. Criticism of Megalia grew because of its perceived radicalism and the users' use of vulgar words mirroring misogyny, although similar terms, when used by men, were usually considered jokes. Jang Hyeyoung, a YouTuber and documentary film producer who recently became a member of parliament for the Justice Party in the 2020 parliamentary elections, uploaded a video where she

discussed her views of Megalians.⁷⁹ Jang contends that they contributed positively to the fight for gender equality. Structural gender inequality had been prevalent, and women could not even express their discomfort with the pervasive misogyny, but it was not until the Megalians' activities that society even noticed that such a pervasive misogyny even existed. Thus, radical feminist activism like Megalians' and Womad's belatedly brought some welcome changes. Yet it also attracted fierce criticism beyond its widespread resort to vulgar expressions. Disagreement on a number of issues caused frictions and splits among Megalians, leading to the creation of Womad as a more radical splinter-group. Specifically, disagreements over sexual minority issues arose among members. Some Megalians accepted lesbians as members but vigorously rejected and insulted gays or transgender women. Eventually, a group splintered off and formed Womad in January 2016. Womad activists were even arrested for sharing their opinions and desire to kill their sexually harassing bosses at work.⁸⁰ Some feminists started declaring that they were feminists but not Megalians. Megalians' and Womad's revolutionary anti-misogyny activities were successful in gaining attention and brought about a change in the perception of pervasive misogyny in Korean society. However, their rapid decline revealed splits inside Korea's feminist movement and also spoke to the sporadic activities typical of digital populism, with a rapid rise and similarly swift demise in online activities.⁸¹ Regardless of their short-lived nature, both groups speak to what, in her insightful work on misogyny in the era of post-feminism, Chung In-kyung has called the human desire to be recognized by others.⁸² Recognized by their "significant other" (ILBE), Megalians have been praised in this sense by many feminists and feminist researchers.⁸³ It was the Megalians who finally stood up against pervasive misogyny, making new derogatory words ending in *xx-nyŏ*.

Conclusion

The article has examined the case study of Megalia and its splinter group Womad as examples of radical online feminist groups active during 2015–2016. The flaring up of intense discussions and the online conflict between ILBE and Megalia/Womad was overall short-lived. However, it is illustrative of broader socio-economic and cultural divisions in Korean society.

The study of online feminism, also in a Korean context, has been typically approached by feminist scholarship drawing on insights from media and communication studies, literature and linguistics, and social movement studies.⁸⁴ In this article I have applied insights from the scholarship on populism to explain the rise and evolution of Megalia/Womad as a group that directly confronted

online misogynists. While the core issue for Megalians was the fight against the misogyny pervasive in Korean society and now the internet, I have argued that the group and its actions are best understood not in isolation or as a set of sporadic outbursts of online anger, nor as a fringe, radical and relatively short-lived online group, but rather as part of a dynamic of contention (online and offline), between different segments of Korean society. In the analysis I have focused on Megalia's mirroring strategy as an example of the intense, but also episodic nature of online feminist activism. The advantage of bringing the scholarship of populism into the study of a feminist movement was two-fold: first, Brubaker's focus on horizontal dichotomies in contemporary populism seems particularly fitting here. The article showed how the actions of Megalia and its main online opponent ILBE were in the end co-constitutive. Secondly, the article argued that the study of Megalia should be embedded in longer-term processes of structural transformation of Korean society, namely globalization and the neo-liberal policies that had undermined job security by introducing a flexible job market; the policies and legislative changes introduced by successive progressive governments that on the one hand contributed to gender equality and on the other rendered the grievances and insecurities of existing social groups even more acute.

In sum, the conflict between Megalia and ILBE was as much over gender and evolving gender roles as it was about the socio-economic issues that affected a particular generation, that of men and women born in the 1980s, who had grown up as South Korea opened up to and integrated into the global economy. The neo-liberal policies that were introduced as part of the IMF structural adjustment package shook some of the certainties of Korean society, including expectations over job security and social norms. Building on this, future research should further explore the emerging divides within Korea's feminist movement, including those that have stemmed from its ambiguous or even outright problematic attitude towards homophobia and transphobia. Another line of enquiry could explore intra- and inter-generational conflicts in Korean society and the way in which the #MeToo movement arose against a growing inter-generational divide and power abuse at work or school.

Notes

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