

Troll Feminism:
The Rise of Popular Feminism in South Korea

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PhD

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Women's Studies

September 2020

Abstract

This dissertation explores a new form of feminist movement in South Korea that has emerged online. The movement, which I refer to as the ‘Megalia phenomenon’, was catalysed by ‘man-hating trolling’ in 2015, which distinguishes this new digital feminism from extant feminist movements. The dissertation interrogates how South Korean digital practices have shaped a specific form of popular feminism – which I term ‘troll feminism’.

In this dissertation, I ask: how the digital venues on the South Korean web have interacted and intertwined with the Megalia phenomenon; how Megalian trolls devised their activist practices based on the digital habits; and how Megalians’ digital discourses were materialised through forms of practical activism. I trace how the participants in the Megalian movement appropriated the practices of online misogynists (such as aggressive and offensive trolling acts) in order to respond to prevalent online misogyny, which led them to develop a feminist movement. The fun entailed in trolling altered how people ‘do’ feminism in this movement, making participants experience it as game playing, hence ‘gamifying’ the activism. As the activism of ‘chasing fun’ through ‘man-hating’ enabled many women to question the gendered reality of their world, the politics of trolling provided a feminist critique of South Korean society that made women’s lives intelligible and made social oppression recognisable, resulting in their involvement in political resistance. I analyse the materialist orientation of feminist politics in the Megalian movement, arguing that its inclination to prioritise what is actual and material, practical and pragmatic derives from Megalians’ nature as digital users, and as gamers, who seek out direct and immediate reactions to their actions – which they experience as ‘triumphs’ in the gender war they are involved in.

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Glossary

4B

4B refers to ‘bihon’ (no marriage), ‘bichulsan’ (no childbirth), ‘biyeonae’ (rejecting romantic relationships) and ‘bisekseu’ (rejecting sexual relationships). These four words which start with the sound ‘bi’, meaning ‘no’, were combined as a slogan in Womad in order to represent the intention to boycott Korean men and women’s reproductive duty which the South Korean nation was seeking to impose. I discuss the development of this slogan and the ‘bihon’ movement in chapter 7.

Boryeok

Boryeok is a compound of ‘boji’ (cunt) and ‘hwaryeok jiwon’ (fire support) and was coined by Megalians. The word generally refers to the Megalian practice of occupying the comments pages in digital news outlets by leaving a number of provocative comments and ‘upvoting’ them, sometimes to irritate misogynistic users, sometimes to disseminate feminist ideas.

Corset

Corset is a Megalian term that refers to the gendered norm that restrains women’s behaviours, as though women are wearing a virtual corset on their body. Megalians encouraged each other to take off their (symbolic) corsets, referring to this act as ‘tal-corset [talkoreuset]’. ‘Tal-corset’ meant refusing the naturalised burden carried by women in practising femininity. I choose to express this as ‘ex-corset’ in order to highlight the connotation of ‘exit’ in the syllable ‘tal’. As the users of this term applied it specifically to the strict beauty standards for South Korean women, the word ‘ex-corset’ came to mean women’s refusal to follow those beauty standards, while disrupting the connection between beauty and femininity.

Daum café/ café community

A café community is a form of website, which includes forums where members can discuss diverse topics or share various forms of data. This form of website has been popular among

female digital users since the early 2000s in South Korea, which has led the café communities to play an important role in disseminating feminism within the Megalia phenomenon that began in 2015.

Hannamchung/hannam

The word ‘hannamchung’ means ‘Korean male bug’; a neologism that combines ‘hannam’, meaning Korean man, with the suffix ‘~chung’, meaning bug. Megalians coined this word and have used it to criticise South Korean men and their masculinity, describing Korean men as ugly, sexist and obsessed with buying sex. ‘Hannamchung’ gradually evolved to ‘hannam’ where ‘hannam’ itself came to be insulting enough without the suffix ‘~chung’.

Kimchinyeo

Kimchinyeo is a compound of a typical Korean food ‘kimchi’, with the suffix ‘~nyeo’ meaning woman. It was coined by male digital users to reflect the stereotype of Korean women as selfish, vain and obsessed with themselves while exploiting their partners. In chapter 3, I discuss how this word evolved from the early 2010s into a discourse that functioned to suppress and control Korean women in general.

Kkolpemi

Kkolpemi refers to an ‘unintelligible/irrational feminist’. The term was coined in the late 1990s when feminist discourse started to emerge in South Korean society. I discuss how this word has been used to silence women online in chapter 3.

Kkwon

Kkwon refers to the members of political agencies, such as activist NGOs as well as political parties, and their supporters. It is an abbreviated form of the colloquial ‘undonggwon’ (activist group) in Korean. Megalians use this word to refer to the members of already-established activist groups, when they want to differentiate Megalian politics from extant progressive/feminist politics.

Megalia (megal)

Megalia was a website for feminist digital users that was established in August 2015, three months after female digital users had spectacularly trolled male users, attacking the prevalent misogynistic culture in digital space. The word Megalia came to signify the new digital feminism that emerged after that trolling incident. Digital feminists who practise and pursue the Megalian way of ‘doing’ feminism have also been termed ‘Megal’ (an abbreviated word of Megalian) and adopt the name themselves whether they are involved in the Megalia web or not.

Mirroring

Mirroring, pronounced as ‘mireoring’ by adopting the English word, is a Korean neologism that Megalians coined to refer to their strategy of imitating the behaviour of misogynists (such as aggressive and offensive acts of trolling and groundless insults towards people of the opposite gender) in order to challenge the prevalent online misogyny. This word captures how women are reflecting what misogynistic male users have done, like mirrors.

Womad

Womad became a website for troll feminists. As Megalia users (Megalians) left the Megalia web after conflicts with the web administrators in December 2015, Womad was established as their new habitat. Thus, ‘Megalians’, not as the ‘users of Megalia web’ but ‘the participants of the Megalian feminist movement’, migrated to Womad and resided there.

oo (ㅇㅇ)

‘oo’ is a word without literal meaning that is used as an unspecified nickname in DCinside, the anonymous web portal in South Korea, where the initial acts of Megalian trolling began.

This nickname does not use the English letters ‘oo’ but the Korean letters ‘ㅇㅇ’, which have

the same shape as 'oo'. In this thesis, I use English letters because multiple character use usually causes encoding errors in the word processor.

Acknowledgements

Above all, I would like to express my gratitude to my interview participants. They generously shared their life experiences of living with feminism, which broadened my limited understanding of the world.

Secondly, I would like to thank my supervisor, Clare Bielby, for guiding me through the PhD process. She put in a lot of effort to read, understand and find valuable things from my unclear writings and raised important questions that I then interrogated.

I would also like to thank the Thesis Advisory Panel members Stevi Jackson and Ann Kaloski-Naylor. They not only provided intellectual support but also heartfelt care that made me feel comfortable at CWS. I would like to particularly thank Stevi, who is also the internal examiner of my thesis, for her meticulous reading of the thesis and insightful suggestions for improving it. This was a challenge as well as an honour for me.

I am also grateful to my external examiner, Kaitlynn Mendes. She provided invaluable advice that improved my thesis and she even suggested some wonderful opportunities for disseminating the research that have enabled me to make plans for my life after the thesis submission.

My PhD life was less stressful thanks to the people I met in York, including Harriet, Evangeline, Elizabeth, Mee Rhim, Jihee, Seonghyun, Jinhyung and June. The friendship of Ting-Fang and Yanisa, in particular is much appreciated. They made me feel less isolated and more connected throughout my PhD study. I would also like to thank Liz, a fantastic proof reader who greatly assisted my writing. My thanks also go to the people who supported me from South Korea: Hyun Mee Kim, Yoonkyeong Nah and YoungOk Kim, who influenced and encouraged me to do this PhD study; Hyangshim, Youngmi, Sooyoung, Yu Seon, Hwajeong, Soyoung, Jihyun and her wife, who kindly helped and inspired me, enriching this project; Daun and MS, who created sparkling moments in a numb PhD life by sharing beers

and ambitions through virtual hangouts. I should also mention Jieun and Kyoung Min who I am grateful to for spending their time and effort pushing me to think more critically and set higher goals. Their untiring curiosity about my work encouraged and challenged me at the same time and has made this project better. I would also like to thank my mom, Jeongshil Moon, and my siblings (and three cats), Dabee, Euirim, Piccolo, Vegita and Porori, for both their tangible and intangible support. In particular, this thesis would not have been possible without my mother's willingness to support my study.

Last, but not least, I would like to thank all the South Korean female digital users who mobilised themselves to fight for women's rights in ways I could have never imagined before the Megalia phenomenon. They may not know me, but they were my informants, interlocutors, mentors, tutors, comrades, friends and sisters. I owe them a lot. My deepest gratitude goes to these women, who had the 'courage to be uncomfortable'.

Author's declaration

I declare that this thesis has been composed by myself and that the work has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification. Over the course of PhD I have used parts of my research in papers given at academic conferences and in published journal articles. I confirm that the work submitted is my own, except where work which has formed part of jointly-authored publications has been included. My contribution and that of the other author to this work has been explicitly indicated below. I confirm that appropriate credit has been given within this thesis where reference has been made to the work of others.

A version of Chapter 6, 'Anonymous women's politics', has been used at the Anonymity Interdisciplinary Conference, 'Anonymity Unmasked: Identity, Agency, Responsibility' at Newcastle University, under the title 'No self-disclosure!: How anonymity works as a strategy of feminist movement in South Korea', 15 September 2017.

Parts of this research have been used at the South Korean PhD Network Seminar at London School of Economics, under the title '#MeToo movement and the rise of popular feminism', 2 June 2018.

A version of Chapter 5, 'An activism shaped by reactions and responses', has been used at the 'National Identity and the Youth in East Asia: Popular Culture, Political Mobilisation, and Digital spaces' workshop at Université Libre de Bruxelles, under the title 'Humans, do your patriotism yourselves, no country for Pigs!: How attention economy works as a strategy in feminist movement in South Korea', 2 May 2019.

Parts of this work have been published in *Feminist Media Studies* in 2018, as 'We take the red pill, we confront the DickTrix: Online feminist activism and the augmentation of

gendered realities in South Korea' by Euisol Jeong & Jieun Lee. This study was conceived by both authors. I co-authored this paper based on my ethnographic data.

Parts of this work have been published in the Journal of Gender Studies in 2021, as 'The 4B movement: Envisioning a feminist future with/in a non-reproductive future in Korea' by Jieun Lee & Euisol Jeong. This study was conceived by both authors. I co-authored this article based on my ethnographic data and analysis of 4B movement that I mainly discuss in chapter 7.

Chapter 1. Introduction

We just called for them to hunt down the ones who took [spy-cam videos], the ones who watched them, the ones who uploaded them. We just called for them to take down the perpetrators, and we were told to be patient. They [the president and his government] said people come first. We are the people! They need to listen to us! We, who are shouting here together, are the people. Sisters, we can cry but let's not cry alone. We can suffer but let's not suffer alone. And, and, let's not die. The courage to be uncomfortable changes the world. (Courage Rally, 2018)

This is a statement made by a participant at the third 'Courage to be Uncomfortable' rally (hereafter Courage Rally) that was held on 7 July 2018 in the Hyehwa district of Seoul, the capital of South Korea. Six Courage Rallies were held by digital feminists between May and December 2018 due to the unprecedented social and legal punishment of a woman who had taken an illegal photo. She had uploaded, without consent, a naked photo of a male nude model, who was her colleague. She was arrested by the police and appeared on the perp walk¹ as though she was a major criminal. Generally, first-time offenders guilty of illegal photo taking and uploading online were released with a warning and their conduct was not publicised by the media in South Korea, so this case was exceptional. What was more exceptional was that it triggered the largest women-only protest in South Korean history, with the last protest in December 2018 being attended by 110,000 women. Why did these protesting women rise up to defend a perpetrator, not a victim? In order to comprehend this

¹ Perp walk refers to 'an occasion when police officers take a person who has been arrested for a crime through a public area so he or she can be seen and photographed by the media', according to the Cambridge dictionary. (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/perp-walk>)

complex situation, we need to know about the emergence of digital feminism, which entails forms of activism that breach South Korean gender norms, and the popularisation of feminism among young women. The women who claim, ‘we are the people’ and their culture are what I have explored for this PhD project.

While the protest was being held on 7 July 2018, I was sitting at my desk in York, UK. Yet, I could have the sense of participating in it because the protest organisers provided real-time audio broadcasting for remote supporters on YouTube, and participants spontaneously generated an online thread for real-time chat in order to share the situation at the protest site. This was also used for just chatting to each other. For four hours, I laughed when the protestors made jokes about male perpetrators, my heart raced when participants yelled at the men who approached to take photos of them without consent² and I was touched by the photos of placards that participants were holding, which other participants shared to the online thread. When the staff announced that 60,000 women were at the site by the end of the protest, I immediately decided to get a flight ticket and attend the next protest in Seoul. The success of the Courage Rally and the number of participants, which was consistently rising,³ clearly showed that more and more women in South Korea were in the same boat of feminism. This meant that the digital feminism of female trolls⁴ that had exploded in 2015, which I was studying, had actually attracted tens of thousands of women on just one day in

² The Courage Rally had protest guidelines that included restricting the taking of photos without consent and excluding men, including men’s participation in the rally and media reports by male journalists.

³ The Courage Rallies began with a protest by 15,000 women in May 2018. The second protest mobilised 45,000 women, there were 60,000 at the third one, 70,000 at the fourth one, 60,000 at the fifth one and 110,000 at the sixth and, tentatively, last one.

⁴ The term internet troll ‘refers to a person who posts offensive, incendiary, or off topic comments online’ in the digital conversations of other users, according to techterm.com (<https://techterms.com/definition/troll>). Trolling refers to the behaviour of these trolls.

2018. In other words, it had become popularised. I was exploring the phenomenon by following the discussions via digital media, but I wanted to be one of those who was physically present during this historical moment for South Korean feminism, along with the other participants.

This thesis explores the popular feminism in South Korea that has emerged online. Known as the Megalia phenomenon,⁵ it was stirred largely by ‘man-hating’⁶ trolling’ in 2015. I trace how digital practices on the South Korean web have shaped a specific form of popular feminism, which I call ‘troll feminism’. I chose to begin my thesis about this phenomenon with the scene from the Courage Rally because it illustrates how young Korean women mobilised themselves to fight for women’s rights by recognising their shared experiences of concern and anger about the social oppression of women. In this case, the oppression was manifested by the arrest of the female spy-cam perpetrator. This is a form of technology-mediated violence – the taking of illegal photos without consent, and uploading them – that had been conducted mostly by male perpetrators. It had generated female victims for 20 years, but had not been properly regulated or punished, even though digital feminists had been demanding active intervention by institutional authorities since the emergence of digital feminism in 2015. The same governmental institutions and media outlets then exceptionally hounded and publicised a female perpetrator of this same crime. She would neither have been

⁵ This naming takes the word ‘Megalia’, the online community place that the female trolls developed for networking each other in August 2015. I will describe its developing process in Chapter 3.

⁶ I use the word ‘man-hating’ to refer to ‘namhyeom’ in Korean, which is an abbreviation of ‘namseonghyeomo (man-hating, in a literal translation)’. This word had been used by anti-feminists in South Korea when they wanted to silence feminist women before the Megalia phenomenon arose. As the word misogyny, ‘yeoseonghyeomo (woman-hating/misogyny)’ in Korean, came to be popularly used by young women from around 2014, and was used in the abbreviated form of ‘yeohyeom’, the female digital users who started trolling by attacking misogynists in 2015 called their behaviours as ‘namhyeom’.

present on the perp walk nor got a prison sentence of ten months if she had been a man, whose actions would have been treated as a minor offence. The exceptional media attention and police investigation of this woman demonstrates the social and institutional desire to punish her, a woman who had breached the gender norm that designated what she could do. This situation provoked reactions from young women who were engaging in digital feminism, with its basis in ‘man-hating’ trolling, which breached the gender norms that designated what South Korean women or female digital users could do.

The digital feminism that young South Korean women enact is composed of heterogeneous elements that seem incompatible. For example, they generated and circulated memes⁷ that sexually objectified Caucasian men, and at the same time they held 19 protests demanding abortion rights over the course of two and a half years. Likewise, they mix and intertwine temporary digital acts and continuous physical actions, occurring both online and offline, seemingly politically incorrect matters and conventional feminist – politically correct – matters, things that seem to be up-to-date ‘lulz’⁸ practices and others that seem to recall the activism of the 1970s’ Women’s Liberation Movement in European and North American countries, all together to create a mash-up that forms this movement. This seemingly disorientating characteristic stems from the nature of this phenomenon: *female trolls made feminist activism*. ‘Lulz’, feeling pleasure at others’ expense, is the only reason why trolls do anything, as media academic Whitney Phillips points out (2015). From this perspective, we can see that the shared aspect of all the above seemingly incompatible acts is fun, or defending the people who produce fun. The fun is the element experienced by female trolls and it is what mobilised them to engage in their activist practices.

⁷ Internet memes are ‘the linguistic, image, audio, and video texts created, circulated and transformed by countless cultural participants across vast networks and collectives’ (Milner, 2016, p. 1).

⁸ Lulz is a corruption of ‘Laugh Out Loud’ that ‘celebrates the anguish of the laughed-at victim’ (Phillips, 2015, p. 27).

It is the ‘man-hating’ trolling that most powerfully distinguishes this new digital feminism from the extant feminist movements in South Korea. Compared to the existing feminist groups, comprised mostly of NGOs and/or academics, the digital feminists of the Megalian movement are seen as confrontational, aggressive and militant. I trace how female digital users have appropriated the practices of online misogynists, aggressive and offensive trolling acts, in order to respond to the prevalent online misogyny, and how this eventually evolved into a feminist movement. The fun experienced in trolling altered how people ‘do’ feminism, and led to participants in the feminist movement experiencing it as game playing, hence, gamifying it. The gamification of ‘doing’ feminism is a product of the culture in digital space, which female digital users have inhabited and where they have interacted so far. In this context, I highlight that digital space is not simply an infrastructure to be utilised by a pre-existing feminist activism, but a space where a new way of ‘doing’ feminism has emerged, with its own feminist politics built around digital practices, tied to the logic of digital natives.

This dissertation is the first academic work on the Megalia phenomenon that takes an ethnographical approach. I chose this method since this research approach in digital space allows observers to understand the generative and ongoing actions and discourses that emerge in real time (Postill & Pink, 2012), what cannot be grasped by merely analysing digital texts – what is said *after* the fact. I followed the links and discussion ‘flows’⁹ of digital users by participating online and taking notes of the dynamic flows in real time, combining this data with the data from my offline interviews and participant observations in order to connect the digital initiation of the movement to the physical enactment of the phenomenon. In this way, I analyse how women’s involvement in trolling, which challenged the gendered order of

⁹ ‘Flow’ is a term that digital users in South Korea use to refer to ‘a stream of discussions and debates that are triggered by specific posts or events and carried out with a certain intensity’ (Lee & Jeong, 2021).

digital space, enabled them to extend the areas where they applied their politics, thereby they eventually challenge the gendered social reality. It is conducted in pragmatic ways that derive from digital practices and discourses, which has also allowed participants to reconfigure their everyday practices, creating feminist lives. I argue that the fun-making of trolls created the momentum of this movement, by opening up the possibility of popular and passionate engagement in political activism by massive numbers of digital users. Because the activism of chasing fun through ‘man-hating’ enabled many women to question the gendered reality in which they are involved, their politics of trolling provided a feminist critique of South Korean society. This made South Korean women’s lives intelligible and the social oppression of women recognisable, which led to women becoming involved in political resistance against patriarchy. In order to explore this digitally mediated, and shaped, feminism, my key research questions ask: What were the circumstances that led to troll feminism emerging in South Korea in 2015? How was this feminist movement practised? How does this digital feminism materialise in reality?

The Megalia phenomenon began on a forum for discussing MERS (hereafter, the MERS forum) on the web portal DCinside,¹⁰ which was suddenly occupied by female trolls who generated ‘man-hating’ conversations in May 2015.¹¹ They appropriated the eccentric and offensive masculine style of writing that was commonly conducted among DCinside users, who were naturally considered to be male (Yoon, 2015). The trolls started writing wickedly funny posts blaming Korean men for anything and everything, which, they thought, had always been done to Korean women by male users of the web. Their provocation went viral,

¹⁰ DCinside was a focal site for fostering South Korean internet culture that involved hostility and vulgarity under anonymous conditions. I discuss this cultural background in Chapter 3.

¹¹ The MERS forum, the forum for discussing Middle East Respiratory Syndrome, was chosen to be trolled by female digital users, since the public attention on the disease was heightened at that time. I describe this ungrounded choice of trolling space in section 3.2.1.

spreading to other online communities, and people from very many other Korean communities swarmed onto this forum to witness or criticise the emergence of this group of women who were performing laddish digital acts that were considered to be only allowed for men. The female trolls' unequivocal aggression towards men and their success in provoking reactions of despair and humiliation from male users generated many successes for women in the gendered battle between 'man-hating' and misogyny. This triumph of women over men, which had been believed to be unattainable by female users in South Korean digital space, encouraged the participants to join in 'man-hating' discourse production and women's abusing of the internet to spread 'man-hating' ideas. What was unexpected was that, as we will see, chasing fun led them to gain aspirations towards participating in feminist activism in order to triumph over misogynistic culture and misogynists beyond 'online' misogyny. This led them to 'update their practices to be constructed as a movement' (Joung, 2018, p. 54).

Participants in the Megalian movement, female trolls, deviate from the common imagery of political activists in the contemporary political environment, a group of people who develop political agency under a shared agenda, in which they exert pressure on certain institutions in order to change social conditions that they find problematic (Smith, 2005). The female digital users in this movement became immersed in trolling, spontaneously investing their time, energy and labour in irritating others, without a shared political goal. But in this seemingly unpolitical, fleeting engagement with fun, the trolling took on the meaning of feminist activism because it confronted misogyny, male misogynists, Korean men and the male-centred South Korean society that has buttressed Korean men's misogynistic elements into constituents of their masculinity, and made them into targets of 'lulz'.

This research explores the social effects of the Megalia phenomenon from a feminist perspective, which produces knowledge about gendered social life (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). At this point, it is worth noting how can 'lulz', producing pleasure from others'

anguish, be feminist. In this phenomenon, women's involvement in 'man-hating' trolling generated a discursive effect of feminism by resisting misogyny and, more importantly, it attracted young women to join the feminist movement by applying the digital politics of challenging gender norms to their everyday lives and practices. They appropriated the transgressive acts of 'man-hating' trolling to challenge the gendered reality of South Korea, as we saw with the opening example, which does not have to be limited to online activities. Their practices of disturbing the gendered order extended the areas of experimenting into material reality, which rendered Megalians able to generate forms of feminist activism and to transgress their previous boundaries to live feminist lives. I analyse this as digital feminism that has been materialised in this dissertation.

The evolution of trolling into a feminist movement does not necessarily mean that participants are political actors who consciously intended the political consequences. However, some of them got to see the effect of their acts in enjoying the 'man-hating' trolling, while becoming feminist activists. At this stage, I need to point out that the people who developed this movement do not constitute a unity, but are intermittent participants in online discussions and in the digital venues where these discussions took place. This aspect means that their own understandings of trolling/participating in feminist activism vary. In this context, this research on troll feminism is more interested in the practices of activism and the expansion of the phenomenon, and is less concerned with the subjectivities and consciousness of people who can be designated as intentional activists. In my understanding, this popularisation of feminism is vitalised by attracting people to become involved in certain digital practices, if I apply the gamification interpretation: playing games that entail the pleasure of engaging in internet trolling. I argue that this activism can be collectively pursued, and can go viral, since it was the digital practices of trolling that formed it, and this aspect eventually brought about the rise of popular feminism in South Korea.

In this vein, I roughly designate the participants in the Megalia phenomenon, which I studied, as *female digital users* because I note their characteristics of being inhabitants of digital space who are experienced in digital practices and able to appropriate the practices for their activism. They are sometimes *digital feminists* because they have contributed to the movement that produced feminist meanings, whether the individuals intended to or not. I call them *Megalians* when their participation in Megalia/Womad¹² is obvious. These names are different from the definitions that the South Korean media and academia gave them through representing them as a political group, such as ‘young-young feminists’ (Chae, 2018) and ‘hell-feminists’ (Sohn, 2017; Yun, 2017),¹³ since I emphasise their basis in trolling, fun-making and gamifying the experience of feminist activism. These aspects are the actions of ‘digital users’, rather than understanding them as a political group.

This dissertation is composed of nine chapters. After I examine the context of this research and review the related literature in the rest of this chapter, I explain my methodology, which employed ethnographic methods to explore the culture of digital feminism and its participants in Chapter 2. As this phenomenon takes South Korean digital culture as the environment in which it emerged, in Chapter 3 I look at the arrangement of digital venues on the South Korean web, which brought about, interacted and intertwined with this phenomenon. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 examine the gamifying practices of the activism that the trolls engaged in based on the digital culture. I describe how practices of creating memes and circulating them

¹² Megalia and Womad are web boards that the MERS forum users developed as their ‘basecamps’, their networking home base. Megalia was developed in August 2015 and Womad diverged from Megalia in December 2015, which I will discuss in detail in Chapter 3.

¹³ These names imply the perspectives of media and academia that focuses on the political aspect of Megalians, situating them in the genealogy of South Korean feminist groups (young-young feminists, meaning they are younger than the ‘Young Feminist’ group) and in the precarious social condition of neoliberalised society (hell-feminists, meaning they are feminists in ‘hell-Korea’) which I will explain in following sections.

configured a playful world of man-hating in Chapter 4, how digital feminists utilised the attention economy of digital media by using the misogynistic desires of the general public in Chapter 5, and how they shaped an activism that they could enact en masse under the title of anonymous women in Chapter 6. Chapters 7 and 8 explore how I understand the Megalian movement as ‘materialist’, in terms of making practical and direct actions that have material effects and having its agenda based on women’s material reality. In Chapter 7, I explore how Megalians’ digital discourses materialised through practical forms of activism. Here, I describe the ‘ex-corset’ movement: resistance to the beauty standards of South Korean femininity, and the *bihon* movement: the refusal to get married or to reproduce the family system, developed by Megalians. In Chapter 8, I analyse the materialist orientation of feminist politics in the Megalian movement, and I argue that its inclination towards prioritising what is actual, material, practical and pragmatic is derived from Megalians’ nature as digital users who seek direct and immediate reactions to their actions. In the final chapter, I conclude my discussions and analyse the meaning of the Megalia phenomenon in contemporary South Korea.

1.1. Why study the Megalia phenomenon?

I am a participant/observer who has been involved in the South Korean feminist movement since 2005, as I had joined in campus activism, and the virtual world, ranging from MUDs¹⁴ to online communities, since 1994. I discerned something that could be interpreted as prototype feminist materials being uploaded to digital space from around 2010. When I found

¹⁴ The term MUDs, multi-user dungeons, denotes ‘a computer-based text or virtual reality game which several players play at the same time, interacting with each other as well as with characters controlled by the computer’, according to the Oxford dictionary (<https://www.lexico.com/definition/mud>). In South Korea, commercial forms of this technology were launched in 1994 and I was addicted to playing them.

a digital post that rectified the common misunderstandings about the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family that was uploaded in 2012,¹⁵ I felt that something was definitely being generated online. The post that was uploaded by a female user to a women-only online community, Naegaaneunkape, seemed to show that some women in digital space were independent of the male-dominated environment and that they were politicised in the topic of gender issues, and distinctively different from male digital users. The symptoms of digital feminism were confirmed by the explosion of the MERS forum trolling and female digital users who concentrated their efforts on the forum in 2015. This led me to look closely at digital space as a place for studying the feminism of young South Korean women, who were inhabitants of digital space.

Before the Megalia phenomenon, feminist ideas had never been popular among the majority of women in South Korea. Until the 1990s, the South Korean women's movements had been considered 'sectional' for the wider social movements, such as of the 'people' – the proletariat, 'self-reliance as an independent nation' – resistance against political interference by the US government and 'democracy' – resistance against military dictatorship (Ohjang, 2004, p. 155). A feminist group who claimed to emphasise gender relations in women's oppression appeared in the 1980s as an elite group who claimed and named themselves to be pursuing 'Alternative Culture', 'ttohanau munhwa' in Korean. A 'Young Feminist' group,¹⁶ who were based in elite universities, appeared in the 1990s and succeeded to its legacy (p.

¹⁵ The groundless condemnation of the ministry by circulating fabricated details about supposed misdeeds of its employees was a classic internet amusement that had been created, circulated and enjoyed by users of South Korean digital space from the beginning of internet communication in the late 1990s. This had not been challenged because the users were predominantly men who were anti-feminists. I will discuss this anti-feminist domination of South Korean digital space in section 3.1.

¹⁶ Some of this group used the early forms of the internet, BBS (Bulletin Board System) for their feminist networking. This fact generated the name of 'Young-young Feminists' that denotes Megalians, meaning that they are the successors of this 'Young Feminist' group, which I do not agree.

157). In the early 2000s, feminist sociologist Young Ja Lee (2002) examined possibilities for the ‘popularization of feminism’ according to the ongoing activisms – challenging the universal oppression of women within the Korean family, uniting precarious female workers into a collective movement, and utilising popular culture in order to increase the feminist population – but this was not realised.

During the 2000s, feminist ideas were circulating in a limited way among a small number of local feminist activists, campus activists and feminist academia, while the feminist NGOs devoted their efforts to institutionalising the achievements that had been gained through working with governments composed by the South Korean Democratic Party since 1998. Around 2010, when neoliberalised living conditions and a neoliberal social atmosphere had embedded itself through government-led economic restructuring, LGBT organisations, feminist NGOs and civic movement NGOs entered the social-media-sphere, Twitter and Facebook, in order to appropriate digital media as infrastructure for their movement because they had limited resources under governmental austerity. Due to their influence in the social-media-sphere, feminism beyond academia and NGOs had gained the meaning of a social justice campaign supported by a small number of social media users who were ‘woke’¹⁷. During the 2000s and early 2010s, Korean feminist academics had been warning about the crisis in women’s studies, which was revealed in the quantitative downsizing of courses and departments within universities (Lee, N., 2011).¹⁸ This was also the period when online

¹⁷ According to the Oxford dictionary, ‘woke’ is a slang word that means ‘alert to injustice in society, especially racism’. It is used as a byword for social awareness, especially in the social-media-sphere. (<https://www.lexico.com/definition/woke>). South Korean slang ‘kkasimin’, which literally means an ‘awakened citizen’, and ‘teupemi’, which means a ‘Twitter feminist’, can both be used as ‘woke’ even though they have different backgrounds. Therefore, I chose to employ the word ‘woke’ because this word clearly shows the group is affiliated with the politics that is embedded in the social-media-sphere.

¹⁸ I will discuss this background more in the following section.

misogyny grew and was alleged to be a social phenomenon, taking ‘Korean women in general’ as its target.

In this South Korean context, the explosion of digital feminist activism by young women in 2015 demonstrates where they needed to fill in the blanks of social discussion on feminism. In the early 2000s, the feminist magazine *If* diagnosed that ‘South Korean feminism [had] been dominated by feminist academia and NGO activist groups, [from] which most women [were] distant’ (cited in Lee, 2002, p. 61). This situation generally lasted until 2015, with the general public not adopting feminist ideas, particularly the term feminist/feminism, which had been stigmatised as irrational and selfish by anti-feminists.¹⁹ Apart from the cultural dimension of widely prevalent misogyny, young women needed to break through the life conditions in which neoliberalism cooperated with patriarchy, which jeopardised their lives in gendered ways. They were trapped by forces that exploited their labour and sexuality, in which capitalism exploited their gendered labour in a low-wage economy while forcing them to consume pink-taxed beauty products, and in which the family system forced them to sacrifice themselves to reproduce the family through childbirth and care labour. This situation of cultural and socio-economic oppression of South Korean young women obviously reveals that they needed the language of feminism. In this context, I analyse this phenomenon as women’s spontaneous attempts to seek feminist ideas when the feminist discourse provided by existing feminist groups had failed to enable them to deal with the gendered social contradictions.

The prevalent and deeply rooted neoliberalism as a life condition and the complexities of negotiating the differences between women would lead to a transnational form of

¹⁹ The meanings of feminist and feminism had been tainted with the sense of *irrational and selfish middle-class women*, a stereotype that was initiated by anti-feminist male digital users and adopted by left-leaning political writers. This view of feminism is epitomised in the word ‘kkolpemi’, meaning irrational feminist, which I will explain in section 3.1.

contemporary digital feminism, as Christina Scharff and colleagues point out (Scharff, Smith-Prei & Stehle, 2016, p. 2). As the ‘austerity’ pursued by European governments made an impact and was resisted by digital feminists in the 2010s (Charles, Wadia, Ferrer-Fons & Allaste, 2018), South Korean NGOs and ‘femocrats’ who had worked for state feminism suffered from the neoliberal regime that was strengthened after 2008. Since Megalians were separated from the impact of austerity and evaded the imperative of negotiating the differences between women by holding the position of ‘anonymous women’, as I will discuss below, the transnationality of the Megalia phenomenon arises in terms of users’ technological involvement in participatory media. Even though the specific aims of feminist activism could and should vary in order to respond to the contradictions in each society, the technology and technology-related aspects can be shared transnationally. The pragmatic and effective practices that Megalian feminism appropriated, which have the potential to attract popular engagement, stemmed from the nature of the digital technology they use – making ideas, messages and materials spreadable and viral. This makes the phenomenon transnationally comprehensible and enables it to be situated within the ‘digital feminist activism’ that make oppression visible and encourage people to question it, while providing tools for collective consciousness-raising, creating connections among participants and providing newly generated, digitally mediated practices of justice for victims (Mendes, Ringrose & Keller, 2019).

1.2. Critical context

This section reviews the academic literature that has helped me to understand my topic, the popular digital feminist phenomenon in South Korea. This section is divided into three subsections: background information to aid in understanding the South Korean context at the moment that troll feminism emerged, the position of the Megalia phenomenon within the

global phenomena of digital activism and digital feminism, and literature in women's studies that provides analytical frames to understand the movement.

1.2.1. Understanding the South Korean society that generated digital feminism

I situate the emergence of the Megalia phenomenon within the contexts of South Korean patriarchy, the socio-economic situation and digital culture. In this section, I explain how neoliberal restructuring affected the young generation, which conditioned the online gender war; how the social environment caused the crisis in women's studies and feminism during the 2000s and 2010s; and how digital space became a source of lived experiences for women.

The young generation who are on the battlefield of the gender war

The Megalia phenomenon is an issue of the young generation. This is evidenced by the fact that the emergence of the Megalian movement generated heated debates among young people, in which both men and women engaged by means of digital conversations and sometimes debates in real life. I examine the social context of the life experience of South Korean young people, in order to understand their intense engagement with the topic.

From the late 2000s, the discourses about the young generation had diagnosed South Korean young people as having 'given up' the normative life course of creating a family, including romantic relationships, marriage and childbirth. They were dubbed the '3-po generation' (the generation that has given up three things), due to the weak social welfare (Yu & Park, 2011) under the expanded neoliberal regime with its precarious working conditions (Woo & Park, 2007). Sociologist Hong Jung Kim argues that the neoliberal restructuring, taking place in South Korea since the 1998 Korean Financial Crisis, not only systemised neoliberalism at the institutional level but also produced neoliberalised subjectivity at the cultural level (Kim, H., 2009). According to his understanding, 'the institutionalised

neoliberalism produces neoliberalised human beings, and they become neoliberalist ethos incarnate as survival seekers' (p. 179).

However, the youth discourse only represents the experiences of young men, as sociologist Eun-kyung Bae points out, reflecting their desire to fulfil the standardised life course as male citizens, based on the imagery of traditional gender relations (2015, p. 10). In this context, 'young women cannot be integrated under the discourse', and they are considered to be a nuisance, targets to be hated by male subjects in that situation (ibid.). Hence, the emergence of the 'hell-feminist', feminists in hell-Joseon²⁰, which refers to digital feminists in my explanation, is an outcome of the contradictions in Korean society that situate women in a precarious condition, according to feminist philosopher Jiyong YunKim (2017, p. 26). While the hell-feminist subject is not defined by her generation, the phenomenon of women's massive participation in the feminist movement is based on the shared social reality experienced by the young generation, and on the gendered reality of young and precarious women who cannot benefit from the pronatalist nation state.

The South Korean government provided family-centred welfare, according to sociologist Chang Kyung-Sup. Korean society experienced 'compressed modernity': compressive development that achieved modernised aspects in a comparatively short period of time compared to other societies, according to Chang's analysis of social indicators across 40 years, starting in the 1960s, for South Korea (Chang, 2010). This national economic development depended on the intense mobilisation of families to carry out the social functions of welfare, including education, child nurturing and elderly care. As Chang points out, this 'overloaded families'. In the South Korean family, where domestic labour is the

²⁰ The word hell-Joseon, which means 'hell-Korea', was popular during the early 2010s. It denotes the precarious working conditions and static socio-economic conditions that force the young generation into a hopeless situation (Song & Lee, 2017).

responsibility of women, an ‘overloaded family’ means women overloaded with labour. Chang and his colleague Song Min-young, in a later discussion, argue that South Korean women ‘restructure their family relations and duties as well as individual life choices’ by participating less in social reproduction in order to minimise family-associated risk in the second modernity, or ‘risk’ society (Chang & Song, 2010, p. 541). We can see that the family-centred system in South Korean society had assigned gendered roles to men and women, which 3-po generation could or would no longer satisfy. The life expectation of young men, creating a family and entering the normative life of male citizens, was thwarted and the forced sacrifice in family system for women were avoided by young women.

In this context, the prevalent ‘hatred’ discourse in the 2010s among young men, represented as the prevalent misogyny, has been explained as being triggered by ‘imagined exploitation’ (Park, 2014). This idea claims that young men are deprived of their reasonable share, which the traditional/male-breadwinner society would have provided, due to the ‘others’ who lack membership of society, such as migrant workers and women. Social critic Kwon-il Park points out that this exploitation is ‘imagined’ because the agents exploiting young men are, in fact, capital and the nation-state, not these ‘others’ (ibid.). The reasonable share expected by men was actually a privilege that traditional patriarchal society offered to the group of men which could not last due to the end of the breadwinner system and the intensified meritocracy of neoliberal society. Young women got to know about these ‘unreasonable’ privileges of the traditional order by becoming involved in feminist activism. This discord between yearning for a patriarchal order and challenging the unfair system, which generates different perspectives on gender relations between young men and women, led to the issue of feminism becoming a contentious field in which they battled against each other.

Crisis of feminism in South Korea

During the days of intensifying misogynistic culture and its spread among the young generation during the 2000s and 2010s, South Korean feminist scholars diagnosed the crisis of feminism and gender politics (Hur, 2013; Kang, 2013; Kim, Y., 2010; Lee, 2011). This crisis was conditioned by the precarious life environment and the rise of anti-feminism. I reviewed the socio-economic situation in the previous section. The cultural domination of anti-feminism and how it caused the Megalia phenomenon will be discussed in Chapter 3. In this section, I explore how feminist academia and NGOs diagnosed the crisis and made efforts to deal with it. Their failures to manage the situation, indeed, grounded the emergence of a digital feminism that was distanced from those feminist circles.

According to feminist sociologist Yi-Soo Kang, the expansion of topics and the quantitative growth of literature in Korean women's studies across 20 years – after women's studies as an academic discipline was established in the 1990s – have failed to increase the influence of feminism on society (2013, p. 230). While the women's movement achieved legal and institutional gains to intervene in discrimination against women, feminist NGOs became passive agents of governmental policies as they worked with and were funded by government (p. 233). This led them to lose direction as instigators of feminist activism as a progressive movement reacting to the increasingly precarious life conditions of women (p. 235), as the South Korean government hastened neoliberalist restructuring in every realm of society.

The inability to respond to the crisis is also criticised by feminist sociologist Soon-Kyoung Cho, who demonstrates that the dependence of South Korean academia on Western feminism led it to fail to understand Korean women's experiences and realities or the conditions that had constructed the specific contradictions within them, forming an 'intellectual colonialism' (2000, pp. 185–189). In order to overcome this situation, she suggests that feminist

researchers need to take a research approach of designing studies grounded by concrete cases, which can be selected in cooperation with activists in the women's movement in an 'organic relationship' between academia and women's activism (p. 190). In a later discussion, she diagnoses the crisis of women's studies, as institutionalised feminist academia distanced itself from, and lost its passion for discovering, the female public who sought feminist knowledge (Cho, 2013, cited in Hur, 2013). Following this discussion, feminist academic Songwoo Hur argues that women's studies needs to rearticulate itself to women's activism (Hur, 2013, p. 67).

With the non-cooperative Lee Myung-bak government (2008-2013), feminist NGOs had little choice but to become only a 'section' of the larger movement against neoliberalism or re-constitute themselves according to the logic of meritocracy, consistent with how they were aligning themselves with the principles of the neoliberalist regime. They also needed to find 'consumers' for their politics – a marketised form of feminism, as feminist academic Hyun Mee Kim points out (Kim, H., 2011, n.p.). In this context, Kim suggests, feminist NGOs' political agenda was softened, because they needed to provide approachable forms of feminism for their consumers (ibid.). During these responses, feminist groups could not provide any efficient policies or new strategies for reacting appropriately to the aggravating gendered discrimination against women, which left space for a new group of feminists to emerge, such as Megalians (Cho, 2019, p. 131).

Women's use of digital space in South Korea

I differentiate the Megalian movement from previous forms of Korean feminism that used the internet, because digital feminism after 2015 was largely constituted of, and influenced by, the culture of Megalians, which is based on South Korean digital culture that is unrelated to the extant feminists' use of the internet. Rather, women's intense use of (non-feminist) online

communities from the early 2000s influenced the Megalian movement, since it encouraged female digital users to appropriate community space as their base for developing political subjectivities as well as exercising political engagement.

Ever since the 1990s, when computer-mediated communication became commercialised in South Korea, female users have participated in digital space, even though they only composed around 25 percent of the user population (Kim, S., 2011b). This skewed population led to the development of a masculine order in digital culture, which was established by silencing women by means of online sexual harassment and violent discussions aimed at them (Soo Ah Kim, 2011b, 2017; Kwonkim, 2017). Female-dominated communities were generated by users who had left mainstream digital space in order to avoid the discomfort of being a woman in the male-dominated culture. In addition, 'Young Feminist' groups opened feminist websites in the early 2000s that aimed to generate 'space for networking feminists and producing feminist discourses' (Kim, S., 2011a, p. 119). Since these feminist websites did not gain general support from women or participation by them, only a few survived to play a role as 'alternative media' rather than functioning as communities of female digital users (p. 120).

Meanwhile, commercial websites, which had emerged as part of the dot-com bubble of the early 2000s in South Korea, targeted female consumers with the purpose of promoting 'feminine products' through providing 'content for women', such as life strategies and techniques related to beauty, fashion, domestic labour and childcare (Kim & Joe, 2001). Even though these websites for women were criticised for reinforcing traditional gender roles (ibid.), their community function was analysed as supporting women's empowerment through enabling users to share life experiences and providing opportunities to appropriate their experiences as sources for raising consciousness about gendered oppression (Kim, 2007; Lee & Choe, 2005). Women's online communities thus became an important part of their users'

social world as users gained a sense of belonging within these communities (Yeran Kim, 2010).

When the conservative Lee Myung-bak government came to power in 2008, users of several women's online communities actively participated in political actions. They became involved in participatory politics, including protests, especially during the anti-US beef protest in 2008,²¹ providing financial support for politicians of the opposition party and campaigns on political issues (Soo Ah Kim., 2010; 2013; Yeran Kim, 2010; Kim, Y., 2009; Young-Sun Kim, 2010). During this period, researchers showed that participation in online communities enhanced users' empowerment at the individual level (Kim, S., 2007) and this influenced an emerging political subjectivity that appropriated the style of consumerist culture (Yeran Kim, 2010). These politicised female digital users revealed the potential to become diversified as women when they faced the issue of sexual harassment among the supporters' group of the opposition party (Kim et al., 2012). However, this conflict did not lead to the development of a differentiated gender politics for women.

These women's online communities, while not explicitly feminist-oriented, provided a space for women to examine and exercise political acts in digital space. These spaces played an important role in leveraging the culture of participatory politics online, since participation in online communities was open to anyone who wanted to share their life experiences. While the online misogyny became a serious social phenomenon, which was conditioned by the differing life expectations of young men and women, women's online communities became a milieu where feminist ideas and discourses could circulate and proliferate during the mid-

²¹ The anti-US beef protest was a series of protests held between May and August 2008. Participants protested against the government's agreement to import US beef in 2008, which had been halted in 2003 due to mad-cow disease in the USA.

2010s, as women sought out feminist discourse to respond to the precarious gendered situation, which feminist academia and NGOs did not offer.

1.2.2. Understanding the Megalia phenomenon in the context of digital activism

This section explains how I locate the Megalia phenomenon within the global rise of digital activism and digitally mediated feminist activism. Since the digital arena has become an important condition that structures people's life experiences in most societies, social movements, including feminist activism, have been conducted in technology-mediated and digitally embedded forms.

The rise of digital activism

The Megalian movement stemmed from spontaneous digital conversations and actions. Practices in activism are derived from digital habits, which can be understood within the academic field of digital politics. Internet technology has been predicted to produce a public sphere for participatory democracy (Hague & Loader, 1999), because it allows open accessibility and equal deliberation by participants (Loader & Mercea, 2012). Sociologists Brian Loader and Dan Mercea refer to the recent manifestations of digital activism, such as the Arab Spring, the Occupy Movement and the Women's March, as 'the second generation of Internet democracy'. These movements emerged through social media platforms, replacing the public-sphere model of first-generation media democracy with the model of a networked, citizen-centred perspective (2012, pp. 1–2).

Within the Megalian movement, the networked women produced and reproduced their activism through their spontaneous labour and savvy use of technology. In this sense, the literature on the political activism of nerds, trolls, hackers and geeks (Coleman, 2017; Deseriis, 2015; Postill, 2018; Sauter, 2014) suggests useful ideas and terms for interpreting

Megalians, probably because of the commonalities between these networked participants, whose experiences are embedded in digital space. According to the observations of John Postill, who explores the digital rights activism of techno-political nerds, participants in digital politics take a pragmatic and practical attitude, seek ‘concrete’ changes and are willing to spend time and effort for the sake of change (2018, p. 17). This form of politics is conducted by appropriating the ‘weapons of the geek’, referring to ‘a shared set of cultural practices, sensibilities and even political tactics’ (Coleman, 2017, p. 100, cited in Postill, 2018, p. 10), which Gabriella Coleman argues to be the practices of hacker politics. Coleman picks up James Scott’s idea of the ‘weapons of the weak’ (1985) in order to emphasise that ‘political formations of resistance often exhibit both a logic and artistry tied to concrete material and historical conditions’, in her understanding of hackers’ development of independent habits of critical thinking, their construction of autonomous communities and infrastructures and engagement with the law to reform/negate it (Coleman, 2017, p. 100). Hackers, who are the craftspeople of computing, form their political lives as a result of their concrete experiences of crafting. Under this logic, we can understand that Megalians, female trolls, form their activism as a result of their specific experiences as South Korean digital users, who are always at the centre of the hostility exploiting the gender discourse.

The capabilities of female trolls who utilise their logic and artistry as online inhabitants are also visible in multiple media engagements with the ‘hybrid media system’ of political communication, as it was termed by media academic Andrew Chadwick (2017). According to his explanation, participants in the system ‘create, tap, or steer information flows in ways that suit their goals and in ways that modify, enable, or disable the agency of others, across and between a range of older and newer media settings’ (p. 4) in which the logics of newer and older media interpenetrate. During their engagement with media systems that allow them to interact with technologies, practices and agencies, Megalians amplify the attention paid to

their dissonant presences and steer it into gendered conflicts. This sometimes forms a ‘cybernetic feedback loop predicated on spectacle’ between trolls and media outlets, in which each agency amplifies and build upon the other’s reactions, resulting in a seemingly ‘symbiotic’ relationship (Phillips, 2015, p. 52).

Not limited to creating a novel pathway to attract public attention by appropriating participatory media (Tufekci, 2013), Megalians play with this attention and the resultant reactions by using their ‘weapons of the trolls’ in the system. Having been treated as targets of ‘lulz’ for their womanhood, and being skilled at making ‘lulz’ on others at the same time, Megalians applied the strategy of disturbing the gender discourse online, because they know how to appropriate digital habits and how to behave in digital space to produce the concrete outcomes they seek in the gender war.

The rise of digital/popular feminism

Feminists in the digital age have appropriated virtual space as an infrastructure for their activism. How feminist groups and feminist activism have utilised digital space for their political ends has been explored by academic works in feminist media studies (Harris, 2008, 2010; Keller, 2012; Powell, 2015; Retallack, Ringrose & Lawrence, 2016; Sills et al., 2016). Unlike the case studies where feminist scholars interpret online hostility as a tool for male perpetrators to silence women online (Jane, 2014; Sundén & Paasonen, 2018), which is also the case in general on the South Korean web, Megalians have appropriated this hostility for their own ends of confronting misogynists. They took it as the weapon of trolls, where it functions not only to produce ‘offensive’ humour for networked feminists (Ringrose & Lawrence, 2018), but also to steer the drive of ‘lulz’ into political interventions in social reality.

Some feminist researchers have insisted that the simultaneity of online feminism and embodied feminism is the ‘fourth wave’, while also emphasising the changed ways of engaging with feminism in the digital age (Chamberlain, 2017a; 2017b; Dean & Aune, 2015; Munro, 2013). Prudence Chamberlain argues that fourth-wave feminism can be defined as the ‘affective temporality’ of experiencing the contemporary, whereby affects emerge within a temporality ‘that is defined by rapidity, personal experience becoming viral and a concurrent, but answerable, backlash’ (Chamberlain, 2017a, p. 463). However, applying a time-frame hinders researchers from analysing the complexities of developing feminist politics under different conditions into the linear imagery of progress under the limited historical experiences of Western societies (Dean & Aune, 2015). Hence, I take the idea that the feminism of the digital age is shaped by networked affects that stem from people’s experiences of what is contemporary, but I do not situate the Megalian movement within this wave.

In discussing the affective networking within this movement, I focus on ‘lulz’, which distinguishes this case study from other cases of digital feminism that highlight ‘the continued need for (intersectional) feminism’ (Mendes, Ringrose & Keller, 2019, p. 11). ‘Lulz’ entails the enemies’ anguish and Megalians’ amusement at seeing this pain, while considering it a triumph, and there are no barriers in taking sources for it, not even the structured attributes of social inequalities. Trolls put on a ‘mask of trolling’ that switches their behaviour into trolling mode, as though they are performing ‘lulzy play’, which establishes ‘a firewall between person and troll’, and furthermore, a ‘robust firewall between the troll and the object of his [sic] attention’ (Phillips, 2015, p. 35). Within this ‘lulz’ fetishism, which ‘obscures the social conditions and interpersonal strife’ and disconnects the object of the ‘lulz’ from the ‘emotional context’ where it arises (p. 30), Megalians refuse to apply feminism’s intersectional criticism to their activism. Rather, they prioritise winning the

battles, or games, which provides the shared or vicarious triumph and ‘hit feel’ – the feeling of satisfaction arising from the damage caused to an enemy by a user’s (metaphorical) hit in online battles – that establishes connectivities between ‘man-haters’.

Still, the ways in which the technology and technology-related habits alter people’s experiences or their pathways for joining in networked affects, which also influence how they ‘do’ feminism, means that the Megalian movement can be well understood through an analysis of the recent manifestations of digital feminism in Western societies. Kaitlynn Mendes and her colleagues explore how girls and women negotiate rape culture through digital platforms in their book, *Digital feminist activism: Girls and women fight back against rape culture* (Mendes, Ringrose & Keller, 2019). The authors argue that: ‘engaging with digital feminism via digital technologies transforms ... participants’ lives’; digital feminist activism creates patterns that are far more complex and nuanced than the general representation, which necessitates attending to a ‘bottom-up approach’; digital feminist participants experience and cope with diverse barriers; and digital feminist activism is composed of participants’ labour, which is sometimes precarious, affective, invisible and time-consuming, and should be understood ‘through social and cultural processes and their entanglement with technologies’, not merely via digital artifacts (pp. 4–7). If the cases their book explores aim to ‘call out rape culture’, then the Megalian movement specifically aims to ‘triumph’ over misogyny in their game of gender war – battles between women who advocate man-hating and men who advocate misogyny. As the achievements of winning – defeating misogynists – were shared within the whole network of South Korean female digital users, it created the notion that this movement was for any female digital user, whether she had participated in trolling or not. The Megalians’ trolling, which had offered a feeling of triumph for any woman in digital space, affectively connected female digital users, and invited them to become stakeholders/beneficiaries in this movement. In this context, the notion they

accepted, ‘feminism is for its stakeholders: women’, allowed them to be concerned with the exploitation of women, which connected their discourse production and politics to topics in women’s studies.

1.2.3. Interpreting the Megalia phenomenon from the perspective of women’s studies

The shared notion of feminism that was initiated by the success of trolling – feminism is for women – enabled female digital users to interrogate women’s oppression in South Korean society. Megalians’ understanding of women’s oppression is based on concrete locales that they inhabit and experience. In order to analyse their practical and pragmatic attempts to ‘create triumphs’ at specific sites of their political intervention, I bring in the ideas of materialist feminism. In this context, their prioritisation of women’s benefit encouraged them to disconnect from men, which links them to the ideas of lesbian feminist scholars. I review the academic literature on the Megalia phenomenon, analysing the general tendency of understanding it and specific ideas that I have picked up among them.

Materialist/lesbian feminism in a phenomenological approach to women’s oppression

Megalians claim that they should stop their energy flowing into men’s interests, and that this energy should instead be concentrated on women’s behalf, which carries the same idea as the concept of the ‘woman-identified woman’ (Radicalesbians, 1970; Rich, 1980). The lesbian feminist approach of disconnecting from ‘male-connected compensation’ (Radicalesbians, 1970) entails refusals of male identification and changes in their lives by abandoning the responsibilities that are imposed on women, which buttress the system. Women’s engagement in gender relations and their embodiment of the gendered hierarchy, in this understanding, can be analysed from the perspective of materialist feminism, which concerns the groups of women and men as social categories (Delphy, 1980; Jackson, 2001; Wittig,

1980). In this section, I review the literature on materialist feminism and lesbian feminism, in order to understand how Megalians discern the gendered oppression within which they find themselves, as they are situated as women.

Materialist feminism, in the definition of feminist sociologist Christine Delphy (1975/1984), takes the condition of women as a social fact to be challenged, from a perspective that conceptualises patriarchy as a system of oppression. The subordination of women raises consciousness of gendered stratification, and feminism is a social movement that is caused by the situation and revolts against it. Delphy claims that patriarchy needs to be understood by avoiding an ahistorical, universal and naturalist approach, since women's oppression is based on their concrete situation in terms of how they are gendered/stratified within a given society (Delphy & Leonard, 1980). By using the concept of class, Delphy underlines that the two groups, men and women, 'are bound together by a relationship of domination; nor can they even be considered together but independently of this relationship' (1980, p. 26). This emphasis on exploitative relations reveals the purpose of the gendered hierarchy and what should be challenged and changed (ibid.) by the feminist movement and feminist critiques.

Associating with Delphy's understanding, feminist sociologist Stevi Jackson criticises the academic tendency after the 'cultural turn' in gender studies during the 1990s (Jackson, 2001). While focusing on the cultural construction of 'women' and the 'feminine', she argues, feminist criticism 'sidelined [the] materialist analysis' of thinking gender in understanding 'women and men as social categories, products of a structural hierarchy' (p. 285). Pointing out that the postmodern approach, which neglected the structural, material dimensions of social life, was less able to provide an interpretation of 'differences' in material 'inequalities' that occurred under different social/structural conditions (p. 286), Jackson proposes interpreting 'the social' – how subjectivity, meaning, agency and everyday

social practices are produced in specific historical, social and cultural contexts (p. 288) – through a materialist approach that is not reduced to critiques of capitalism (p. 290). Under this approach, institutional hierarchies, systematic domination and the deployment of power are revealed to shape and be perpetuated through human practices (p. 287). Examining ‘the social’ and the deployment of power by interpreting everyday practices is a feminist approach that pays attention to concrete cases in order to ‘make women’s lives intelligible’ (Moi, 2015, pp. 191–192). This is the approach I take in this project, which studies South Korean young women’s practices of challenging gendered social oppression.

The gendered hierarchy is challenged by reconfiguring gender relations, according to Radicalesbians (1970), a feminist activist group that operated in the USA during the 1970s. Women’s role as the heterosexual partners of men brought male-connected compensations for women, which led them to remain second-class in status without fundamentally challenging the hierarchy (p. 2). Radicalesbians argue that women should be ‘woman identified’ rather than ‘male identified’, pursuing the withdrawal of emotional and sexual energies from men and disengagement from ‘male-defined response patterns’ (p. 3). This allows women to redirect their investment of energy and commitment towards other women, which generates a situation that can be equated with the status of lesbian, which is a basis for gaining a lesbian perspective. Julia Penelope argues that the lesbian perspective stems from not conforming to heterosexuality, which resets the ‘heterosexual bribery’ (1990, p. 90) that would have been provided to women who engage in heterosexual relationships. The changed material conditions, detached from the benefits that the system of heterosexuality provides, shape a changed situation for women, which allows them to gain a renewed perspective.

Feminist philosopher Adrienne Rich picks up the idea of the ‘woman-identified woman’ in her article ‘Compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence’ (1980). Challenging the assumption that heterosexuality is an individual preference or something natural that ‘does

not need to be explained' (p. 637), Rich posits heterosexuality as a compulsory institution, an ideology that coerces women into subordination through a colonised gender relationship that assures the 'male right of physical, economical, and emotional access' to women (p. 647). In her terminology, lesbian existence includes the 'historical presence of lesbians' as reality, and the existence of comprehensive women's bonding (pp. 648–649). If the term 'lesbian' defines a political status in which the 'male right of ... access' is denied, lesbians are 'escapees' from the heterosexual system, according to feminist philosopher Monique Wittig (1981, p. 20). Wittig describes the social differentiation process of gender, defining female gender and the subordination of women, an idea that resonates with the 'compulsory heterosexuality' that relates the position of women to their accessibility to men (Rich, 1980) and the gender division that binds men and women into a stratified relation (Delphy, 1984). Wittig argues that heterosexuality is an institution that maintains the gender system, which 'ontologically constitutes women into different/others' in order to mask the conflicts of interest that are engaged in the categorisation (1980, p. 29). Criticising the naturalist approach of gender, she argues that the cause or origin of women's oppression 'is in fact only the *mark* imposed by the oppressor' (1981, p. 11, emphasis in original). In this sense, she suggests that it is crucial for feminist aims to dissociate women as 'the class within which we fight' from woman as 'the myth' (p. 15).

Wittig defines women by interrogating 'a specific relation to a man', 'a relation which implies personal and physical obligation as well as economic obligation, ... a relation which lesbians escape by refusing to become or to stay heterosexual' (p. 20). In this sense, the meaning of being a woman is shaped by women's life experiences and how they are engaged in the heteropatriarchy. This understanding of 'what makes a woman' (ibid.) echoes the idea that women are situated by being sexed as the alterity, or Other, of men, which feminist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir suggests from her phenomenological perspective (De

Beauvoir, 1949/2012). In her view, women are situated as Other by how their ‘feminine reality’ is constituted (p. 40). This can be explored by asking ‘how woman is taught to assume her condition, how she experiences this, what universe she finds herself enclosed in, and what escape mechanisms are permitted to her’ (p. 334), to examine the concrete status of being a woman. Throughout this thesis, I suggest that Megalians adopted the idea that women live their gendered everyday lives, and develop their own feminist politics, based on their understandings of the situation of women as stakeholders in their feminist movement or the phenomena brought about by their movement. This approach to the Megalia phenomenon has not been comprehensively addressed by the extant academic works, that I go on to discuss.

Academic works on the Megalian movement

The Megalia phenomenon has been analysed mostly within the academic fields of women’s studies and feminist media studies in South Korea. Since digital feminism has made an impact on Korean society in diverse areas, sociological works that analyse topics relating to contemporary feminist issues also involve authors’ understandings of the Megalia phenomenon. Researchers pay attention to the Megalian strategy of ‘mirroring’, the ‘man-hating’ parody acts of Megalians, and subjectivity in relation to this strategy (Han, 2017; Jang, 2016; Kim, E., 2016; Lee, 2016; Yoo, 2015; Yun, 2015; 2017), examine the discourses that were produced in digital space (Goh, 2019; Kim, B., 2018; Kim, R., 2017; Koo, 2019) and interpret the forms of activism that digital feminists have developed (Cho, 2019; Jeong & Lee, 2018; Joung, 2018; Kim, A., 2019; Kim, E., 2019; Lee, M., 2019; Lee & Jeong, 2021; Yun, 2019).

I explore the digital feminist phenomenon and the participation of Megalians by conducting ethnography in digital space, unlike the existing works on this topic, which were produced by the methods of content analysis of digital materials, interviews with digital

feminist participants, methods in which both were combined, or metacritical analysis. I followed digital users and their materials in order to examine female trolls' labour in making trouble that caused a great deal of material that produced, mediated and spread feminist effects. These could not be anticipated and thus needed to be followed in real time and have been largely overlooked in the South Korean academia. Still, articles that emphasise the nature of this phenomenon as being digitally shaped, its strategic innovations in activism and the materialising process of Megalian discourses provide critical insights to understand the phenomenon. Hence, I focus here on reviewing the digitally oriented aspects of Megalians (Jang, 2016), activist strategies based on the imagery of anonymous women (Kim, R., 2017) and a metacritical analysis of the phenomenon (Cho, 2019).

Megalians are 'digital natives', who participate in the 'spreadable media' system, as media studies researcher Min-ji Jang points out. Taking the term 'digital native' from Marc Prensky (2001), who used it to define the generation of people who have always been surrounded by devices and technology and are thus familiar with interacting with them, Jang argues that Megalians live in and produce a feminist media-sphere online (Jang, 2016, pp. 226–227). She emphasises the aspect of 'spreadable media' to interpret their media involvement, in which texts or content consistently circulate and spread by accommodating to the new environment (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013). Jang emphasises that Megalians embody this spreadability and perform the media act because they are aware that they can influence others through the technologically mediated interaction of spreading digital media/messages, while moving through the media-sphere.

In this technology-mediated activism, Megalians shape the representation of political agency, anonymous women, through shaping a solidarity that can be interpreted as a 'series', according to feminist researcher Ri-na Kim (2017). She brings forward the conception of gender as seriality that was first suggested by Iris Marion Young (1994). In an effort to

conceptualise women as a social collective, but wanting to avoid the normalisation and essentialising of gender, Young suggests the concept of gender as seriality. She thus appropriates the distinction between a series and a group from Jean-Paul Sartre's definition of different levels of social collectivity (1976, cited in Young, 1994), which defines a series as 'a social collective whose members are unified passively by the objects around which their actions are oriented or by the objectified results of the material effects of the actions of the others'. This is distinct from the concept of a group, which is a 'self-consciously, mutually acknowledging collective with a self-conscious purpose' (Young, 1994, p. 724). Kim applies this concept to explain how Megalians define their participants as women, thus relating themselves to an already-organised unity, which is composed of people who are anonymous and interchangeable when they are mobilised as participants in activism (Kim, R., 2017, p. 122).

Feminist sociologist Joo Hyun Cho conducts a metacritical analysis of the Megalia phenomenon, claiming that 'Megalians created a momentum for activating feminist activist field that had waned by losing drive, although their irritating strategies and street protests elicited negative social reactions', hence the novel dynamic of the movement needs to be analysed (Cho, 2019, pp. 113–114).²² She introduces the theory of 'strategic action fields'

²² I agree with her analytical approach of applying the idea of strategic action fields to the Megalia phenomenon. However, I need to point out that her article has limitations in citations that cannot be overlooked. The academic material Cho cited to represent the voice of digital feminists is a master's thesis about a group who are overtly designated as TERF (trans exclusionary radical feminist), who do not compose the major population of digital feminists. This raises an ethical problem because the citations from this dissertation compose most of the claims that are alleged to be digital feminists' in Cho's article, while the other representations of digital feminism in it do not include quotations that reveal the original source or data. This flaw in citation runs the risk of making an inappropriate interpretation of digital feminism. However, I have used this article since her metacritical diagnosis is not damaged by the detailed citations.

proposed by Neil Fligstein and Doug McAdam (2012), which claims that conflicts between the ‘incumbent – who monopolises the resources in the field’ – and the ‘challenger’ in a field lead to transformations of it. Through this idea, she understands ‘the conflict between digital feminists and pre-existing feminists from before digital feminism’ as fights for ‘political, economic and social resources that are invested into [the] women’s movement’ as incumbents and challengers (Cho, 2019, p. 116) that led to a transformation of the field (p. 128).

In relation to the Megalia phenomenon, Megalians become challengers in the field for the discourse production of feminism. During the conflicts, Megalians have produced their own feminist politics, while distancing themselves from existing feminist circles in South Korea. However, the Megalian movement is a gradual, frequently invisible, movement because they mobilise themselves en masse under the title of ‘anonymous women’ without explicit manifestations as a political agency. This enabled their unprecedented feminist practices and politics which, in fact, stemmed from their habits as inhabitants of digital space, digital natives, which I will demonstrate throughout this thesis.

By conducting ethnographical exploration on this phenomenon, I aimed to understand the participants and their culture by following their generative and ongoing discussions real time, which understanding cannot be grasped by examining digital texts after the fact. This research therefore makes an original contribution to knowledge in the realm of South Korean women’s studies, studies on digital activism and studies on digital feminism.

Chapter 2. Methodology

This is an interdisciplinary, feminist project that straddles the disciplines of media studies and women's studies and appropriates ethnographical methods. Since my topic involves both the digital and material experiences of South Korean digital feminists, I have used the qualitative methods of ethnography of the internet: multi-sited mobile ethnography of the digital fieldsite; online and offline participant observation for understanding the life-world of digital feminists; semi-structured interviews to build a comprehensive understanding of their experiences; data analysis, combining the method of discourse analysis with reference to online sources and thematic analysis of online/offline data.

This chapter is divided into six sections that cover how I conducted the research. In section one, I explain my reasoning for conducting ethnographic research; in section two, I explain how I conduct participant observation and mobile ethnography in the internet; in section three, I explain how I understand my research participants as digital feminists; in four I describe my method of participant observation in the offline world; in section five explain the interviewing method; and finally in section six, I discuss the way in which I use digital materials with the data I gathered offline as part of my discourse analysis and thematic analysis methods. The collection and management of my research data followed the ethical guideline of University of York, and the methodological plan of this research was approved by the Economics, Law, Management, Politics and Sociology Ethics Committee in the university.

2.1. Exploring the field of research through an ethnographic approach

The origins of this research can be traced back to May 2015, when I learnt about the unusual phenomenon of female digital users using the technique of trolling; something that soon went viral in digital space. One of my friends had sent me a link to DCinside at the initial stage of

the MERS forum: the place where ‘man-hating’ trolling began. A few months later, I discovered that users in online communities beyond DCinside were actively adopting the strategies of trolling. I started to observe Megalia and, soon, Womad to find out what was happening there.²³ This led me to visit other online communities and social-media spheres, in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon.

After I decided to conduct a doctoral thesis on the Megalia phenomenon, I started to participate in digital space as both a researcher and a user. I used basic methods of ethnographic research to choose the sites to be observed: search for the right places/discussions to stay with and follow in order to understand the culture; wander through the habitat of users; observe the social interactions between participants; examine their textual materials; find potential informants and interview participants; and become immersed in the fieldsite/aggregated digital elements (Bryman, 2012), while distributing my attention across multiple sites. I roamed around many of the South Korean websites that were used by the young generation. These included those that were male-dominated, female-dominated, anti-feminist, K(orean)-pop fan forums, communities for various subcultures, web boards for sharing life experiences, and social media spheres such as Twitter, Instagram and Facebook. In particular, I became intensely involved in the online community (which later became web boards) for troll feminists: Womad. From December 2015, I regularly visited Womad. I visited the community space at least five times a week, catching up with the general flow of the digital conversations, gathering key texts and taking notes as well as screenshots as substitutes for the field notes so customary in ethnographical studies. I also participated in the

²³ Female trolls developed their own web for networking each other, Megalia, in August 2015 and it was divided into Megalia and ‘Daughters of Megalia’ in December 2015. The later community changed its name to Womad in January 2016. This changed online habitats of female trolls will be described in Chapter 3.

community by mingling with users. As ethnographers usually do, I took part in the regular activities of digital users in order to ‘go native’.

The experiential fieldwork method of ‘going native’ by taking part in the social lives of people in the field was suggested by Bronisław Malinowski as long ago as 1922, as a way of grasping ‘people’s perspectives, their relationship to life, and their vision of the world’, in order to interpret the life-world of the ‘natives’ in the field (see Altamirano-Jimenez, 2012, p. 426). The ethical challenges posed by this method, such as ethnographers losing their objectivity and interrupting the fieldsite, are minimised in digital space because the anonymous environment provides a ‘distance between researchers and the people studied’ (p. 427). I chose to employ it, because the speed, tensions, unexpected links and discourse productions in interactions with other users, and sometimes with their enemies, could not be understood without embodying the constant responses to these ephemeral digital conversations, just as participants experienced them.

My participation in activism occurring in digital space involved me engaging in trolling, antagonism, quarrels, attacks, defence, feelings of pleasure and anger, laughter and making others laugh, learning to revile someone and speak insults, immersion and reaction, while constantly being reactive and responsive to the flow of the digital conversations. I learned *how to speak offensively in an anonymous environment*, in order to *strike enemies online by imitating the responses of comrades as well as enemies* to each other. The phrases I have emphasised in the previous sentence were the essential aspects of the movement, which I had seldom experienced, even though I had been an active user of digital space for over 15 years. In South Korean culture, the ‘feminine’ language speakers of female-dominated communities had hardly ever transgressed their benign, ‘feminine’ ways of speaking, which were bound up with gender norms. The trolling involved in the Megalia phenomenon subverted those norm-bound conventions. This led to a change in participants’ bodies, practices and everyday life

experiences, which I will discuss later in the thesis. In this context, the method of ‘going native’ to become a troll was crucial in order to ‘glean a more complete and intense understanding of their [in my case Megalians’] culture and values’ (Bryman, 2012, p. 445), in terms of having the opportunity to take part in the digitally mediated experiences and emotions involved in my fieldsite.

During my engagement with the fieldsite, I would tend to leave comments in Womad and on digital news articles, sometimes uploading posts to communities as part of the goal of not distracting their discussions so as not to contaminate the field. I reacted to the replies of other users to my comments and posts, jumped into intense gendered battles against misogynists, usually in the comments sections of digital news sites. I also sent small amounts of money to support the protests held by some Megalians, participating also in offline protests and rallies. Mostly, though, I ‘lurked’²⁴ in the community to see how the participants interacted, while having fun with their jokes and humour. The status of being a ‘covert full member’ (p. 441) of the community allowed me to understand the lifeworld of digital feminists from the position of an ‘insider’.

Covert participant observation in digital space raises ethical issues because it does not ‘provide participants with the opportunity for informed consent’ and has the potential to violate ‘the principle of privacy’ (p. 436). In this case, research ethics are sometimes presented as being justified ‘situationally’ when the research aim has potential benefits for the field and when researchers have no choice but to use this approach in investigating an issue (p. 133). An article by Sarah R. Brotsky and David Giles (2007) about their research on online pro-ana communities is a clear example that demonstrates how researchers compensate for violating the general research ethics within covert participant observation.

²⁴ ‘Lurk’ refers to ‘read the postings in an Internet forum without actively contributing’, according to the Oxford dictionary (<https://www.lexico.com/definition/lurk>).

They chose to violate the universal research ethics of avoiding deception and informing participants, but justified their decision by referring to the inadequacy of research on eating disorders and the hostility of the community towards observers. The phenomenon I am studying – the rise of popular feminism in South Korea stemming from trolling – was considered by the general public to be on the spectrum between harmful/mischievous and obnoxious moral threats in South Korean society, and that raised questions of the legitimacy of Megalian movement as a feminist movement.²⁵ It led these women to expel suspicious users so as not to expose their digital activities to observers outside the community. The movement could not have existed without the strong tendency to exclude outsiders in the community space, which allowed women to speak and behave however they wanted without being threatened with shaming. However, the speedy, hostile conversations and the production of indecent memes and discourses within the coarse internet culture, could not be grasped without participant observation. Hence I decided to engage in covert participant observation and to not expose myself to other users as a researcher because it was the only way to conduct this research, and because it also minimised my interruptions of the field. I am aware of the breach of the principles of research ethics and would like to legitimise it by carefully anonymising the participants in the digital conversations and by emphasising female digital users' contributions to making a feminist impact on society. The common representations of this movement in academia focuses on digital feminist activism that seems to be explicitly political and they overlook the ordinary digital practices of users. I emphasise that the ordinary habits and culture of these digital inhabitants brought about the rise of

²⁵ The stereotype of feminism as a moralistic, anti-violence campaign automatically rendered the Megalian movement as non-feminist because of its practices of digital offensiveness. I will discuss this in Chapter 5.

popular feminism, pointing out that it was the dynamics within online communities that shaped this movement.

The online communities I observed were not fully open to anyone but only accessible to those who were willing to register to become a member. I registered with the communities as a member by satisfying various joining processes for each community, which usually required verifying that I am a woman. These communities share the assumption that participants are able to reveal their private life experiences because it is safe to speak if it is between women, provided that they exclude from their communities male misogynists who want to attack womanhood itself. This tendency was an outcome of the history of South Korean online communities, whereby most communities had hitherto had a masculine culture, and where male users utilised female users' shared experiences without their consent with the malicious intention of sexually objectifying and harassing them. This scenario led female users to create shelters from this misogynistic culture, which, in turn, led to the creation of female-dominated or women-only communities that had these policies.²⁶

In this context, observing and using others' materials cannot get round the ethical responsibility of gaining informed consent. However, declaring my position as a researcher would have prevented me from conducting the research, as I explained above. To avoid violations of privacy, I used a simple technique of unified and numbered names for digital authors and commenters but marked with the name of the community in which they were active and the specific chapter in which I use the quotation (such as, 'Megalia user 1-001', meaning this quotation was written by an anonymous user of Megalia community, I used this citation in Chapter 1 and numbered this citation as 001), rather than stating exact names or nicknames the users used online. This labelling strategy has the same purpose with how

²⁶ For a detailed historical exploration of gender segregation online, see Chapter 3.

digital users anonymise themselves within the culture of digital anonymity that most online communities employ.²⁷

The topic of this research, participants and their culture of Megalia phenomenon, has both online and offline components that are interrelated, necessitating the linking of both analyses. Specifically, I found that the digital conversations in the Megalian movement usually blurred personal motives and opinions but stressed decisions as being those of the masses.²⁸ This made me curious about the experiences of digital users as participants in this movement. The interrelationship between the physical and the online world can be examined by merging the data from different methods (Kozinets, 2011). The observation in digital space, which I conducted by mobile ethnography that I will discuss in next section, could be complemented by other methods of qualitative research, such as interviews and participant observation that were collected from physical space. Therefore, I conducted interviews with digital users who were engaged in digital feminism and I attended their offline gatherings. The data I collected using these methods were analysed through the methods of thematic analysis and discourse analysis.

2.2. Multi-sited mobile ethnography

I understand digital space to function as a set of spatial environments for the many activities of the young generation in South Korea and read the Megalia phenomenon as a generative process of digital activism originating in the digital space that female digital users inhabit. This follows how ethnographers of the internet conceive digital space as a place for ethnographic study (Boellstorff et al., 2012; Hine, 2000). An ethnographic approach is concerned with ‘specific people and the culture they construct and inhabit’, which is ‘no

²⁷ I will discuss this topic in detail in Chapter 6.

²⁸ This aspect of doing activism as a mass will be explored in section 6.3.

different in virtual world research' (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 57). As I mentioned in the introduction, I claim that the Megalia phenomenon would be impossible without 'man-hating' trolling. This knowledge led me to follow the people who were pointed out as the most notorious group of 'man-haters'. This group changed over time, shifting from the users of MERS forum, to Megalia, to Womad users and to female online community users with the spread of Megalian culture, along with their multiple use of digital spaces. This necessitated a research practice that was different from that of immersion in a single site: the conventional approach of ethnographic study. In this context, I appropriate the idea of 'mobile ethnography', whereby the ethnographic fieldsite can be shaped by means of the ethnographers' movements through the route of digital discussions, as argued by John Postill and Sarah Pink (2012).

Postill and Pink demonstrate that 'the routine practices of the social media ethnographer work towards the making of an ethnographic place – characterised by an intensity of links to digital materials and routine routes online' (p. 130). The research practice of mobile ethnography, as discussed in their article, involves catching-up, sharing, exploring, interacting and archiving (p. 129), because they are focusing on a phenomenon that has a spatial base in the Twitter sphere, where ephemeral discussions are constantly being uploaded. They argue that the ethnographic place is constituted through the practices of gathering and accumulating digital elements, which are shared, linked, followed and tagged, while they are clustered and interwoven (*ibid.*). This fits with the way in which I conduct ethnographic exploration on the internet, through following the discussions of users that link me to materials that allow the accumulation of digital elements, while examining conversations that emerge in them, and figuring out which digital spaces are interrelated. This sort of research cannot be accomplished by analysing a static community space or a fixed group of people, but rather by observing the production of sociality, during 'the experiences

of *being in the digital crowd*', which leads ethnographers to move across platforms and offline sites (p. 131, emphasis in original). My research practices, following the routine practices of mobile ethnography, involved: catching-up with updates and discussions among participants, exploring topics stated by users that are shared and linked to conversations and different sites, and archiving the discussions and background information by searching for and collecting data that are constantly generated and I garner in real-time. Engaging in this routine constituted a fieldsite to be analysed that was 'characterised by movement' (ibid.). The everyday practices of this research routine fitted well with examining the culture and participants of the Megalian movement, which was shaped by the digital participation of users in each situation. As a result, this methodological approach allowed me to map the digital space via the female digital users' movements and engagements, which I followed.

The field of this mobile ethnography is 'multi-sited' in order to understand the context of the phenomenon (Hine, 2007; 2011; Gatson, 2012; Marcus, 1995; 1998). Thus, I observed and participated in both online and offline sites as well as examining institutional, digital and cultural dimensions that are interrelated to the sites, while building a multi-layered account. The multi-sited approach allows researchers to 'track the movement of, or connections between, people, stories, objects, conflicts, and cultural meanings across multiple sites and potentially across historical periods' (Muir, 2011, p. 1015). In this research, the fieldsite can be understood as an 'assemblage of actors, places, practices, and artifacts that can be physical, virtual, or a combination of both' (Taylor, 2009, cited in Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 60) as it deals with the trolling of female digital users evolved into women's movement that challenges institutionalised social conventions that have material realities. This link between the cultural and the material encompasses digital and physical matter that appropriates bodies, practices and experiences of participants both in online and offline. It makes the multi-sited approach 'useful for capturing a holistic picture of the life of a community or

activity, and the scope of the fieldsite may itself be emergent' (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 60). I constructed this research to be multi-sited by following digital users and the culture they are involved in, while looking at the historical and structural arrangements that shape this culture and their life experiences.

For this research, I had intermittently observed websites related to Megalian culture from May 2015 onwards, and started to regularly visit and observe them after I entered the Womad community in December 2015. For example, between the end of January 2016 and February 2017, I visited Womad on 314 days, uploaded 43 posts and left 2508 comments.²⁹ This regular engagement involved 'charting out and living through the ethnographic place of the fieldsite' that 'is a sensorily embodied, rather than "virtual" experience' (Postill & Pink, 2012, p. 128). Along with this, I visited and observed online communities, social media spheres and forums in DCinside that I was linked to by the conversations of the digital users, in order to progressively identify new sites to include or leave out (Hine, 2008, p. 13) as the intense 'man-hating' and feminist discussions shifted their place of emergence over time.

2.3. Subjects of research

To conduct my research through the method of mobile ethnography, I needed to 'follow' digital feminists and the digital materials they produced by searching through the heated discussions and discourse production in each place. I choose to call the subjects of my research 'digital feminists', to refer to participants in the Megalian movement. By using the term digital feminists, I am emphasising that participants in this activism cannot be defined by any shared aspects except for the fact that they were actively engaged in the particular digital spaces and discussions that entailed feminist discourse production, as I briefly

²⁹ This record was given by the Daum café system that Womad users had resided, a community platform provided by an internet company, which I will describe in Chapter 3.

discussed in Chapter 1. Digital feminists are shaped by the digital environment, interacting with everyday gendered antagonism and commonplace trolling, and confronting their enemies on the South Korean web. Since participants in this movement are not a group of people who can be statistically examined, I discuss here how I designate them in terms of their participations in digital actions/activisms/activities and how these participations made them vaguely belong to a group of digital feminists captured by the elements I describe below.

Digital feminists who took part in resistance against online misogyny took their enemies to be male misogynists (primarily misogynistic digital users but not limited to them), who were stereotyped as ‘hannam’ (‘Korean man’ in Korean). This definition based on the dichotomy between friends and enemies or *hannams* and anti-*hannams* led digital feminists to naturally adopt their collective identity as women who are female digital users. In this sense, digital feminists are female digital users who have been suffering from online misogyny until now and are now challenging it. The damage caused by and effects of online misogyny are of course not the same for each participant. However, the generalised approach of hailing ‘women’ in online interactions allowed the participants to share their experiences as ‘women in general’. The digital environment, which is hostile to women and womanhood, offers female digital users the opportunity to become virtual comrades who defend themselves together against male misogynists.

Misogynistic online discourse and everyday sexism in South Korea define women by their genitals and the assumed vulnerability of their bodily situation. The bodily situation materialised by misogynistic definitions became the source for shaping an affinity among women that enabled them to bond together. For example, when male digital users started to call female digital users ‘[period] bleeders’ to insult them, those who had not directly heard the word by encountering a specific user could also empathise with those who had heard it if

they shared the bodily experience of ‘bleeding’ during menstrual periods and the life experiences of being reduced to their bodies from a male-centred perspective. As each digital feminist adopted the idea that she was one of these objectified women, she became able to share and empathise with the experiences and emotions that each user had gone through as a female user of digital space where misogynistic culture is prevalent. At the same time, as women living in a sexist society, they were constant targets because misogyny and sexism do not specify the target, but denigrate women in general.

Therefore, Megalians’ imagined circumstance of being ‘one of the women’ was discursively constructed during their responses to misogynistic attacks and insults, which led to their positions being designated within sexism. How online misogyny and sexism addressed and treated ‘women’ shaped how digital feminists understood themselves as a group, as those who fight against the oppression of women. In this vein, misogyny ‘interpellated’ (Althusser, 2006) them to be constructed as the subjects of this feminist activism. Since online misogyny interpellated ‘women in general’, people who resisted this misogyny were shaped as a group of women. This concept, not as a single woman but as a group of women, was usually appropriated by the movement’s participants, who labelled themselves as ‘anonymous women’, referring to the people who were directly involved in this activism.³⁰

This representation of the subject of the activism allows participants to not identify themselves in the static imaginary of the symbolic actor within the political movement. Participants could think of themselves as participating in an ‘online community’ or a ‘digital conversation’, rather than ‘political activism’. This means that it is okay for each of them to follow others’ discussions or intermittently join in with the process of producing discourses online as one of the female digital users, as they casually use online communities as one of

³⁰ This emphasis on anonymous women is a habit of digital users, which I discuss in Chapter 6.

the many users. In this sense, I avoid defining the ‘women’ or the subject of the activism by means of shared attributes, and instead leave them to be covered by the vague definition of ‘anonymous women’ or the generalised name of women. Apart from the common purpose of this activism, challenging masculine power in symbolic and material forms, the group does not have any common aspects among participants. The members have various examined and unexamined components because they are floating in and out of the anonymous digital environment, which does not regulate their participation by ‘who they are’. Megalians appropriated this vague identity to represent their activist participants, which meant that any woman could, but one particular woman could not, represent the movement.³¹

2.4. Participant observation at offline gatherings

My participant observation at offline events organised by Megalians aimed to understand the ways in which they actualise their digital movement offline. By becoming part of the physical crowd, I was able to understand what I had observed online from a different angle. The data that was gathered by being part of the ‘digital crowd’, which experience the ethnographic research in social media provides (Postill & Pink, 2012), was analysed within these multiple approaches. Female digital users organised events, gatherings, rallies and protests beginning in May 2016, when the Gangnam station incident, involving the murder of a young woman and becoming a crucial juncture for the digital feminist movement (Lee, 2016, p. 62), occurred.³²

Before leaving South Korea in September 2016 to start my doctoral study, I visited offline gatherings organised by digital feminists between May and September of that year. I visited

³¹ How this concept of ‘one of the women’ is appropriated in their movement will be discussed in Chapter 6.

³² I discuss this incident in detail in Chapter 4.

the Gangnam station incident memorial site and attended the silent march for it in May; I went to the street exhibition problematising the price increase of sanitary pads and attended the protest against a game company that sacked a voice actor for wearing a feminist t-shirt in July; I went to the protest against a revision in the law that attempted to reduce the punishment for spy-cam crimes in August; and I attended the protest against the unfair treatment of female perpetrators in September. During March to April in 2018, I stayed in Seoul for a fieldtrip. There, and at a time that the #Metoo movement was reaching its pinnacle in South Korea, I took part in feminist events that were held by both digital and non-digital feminists, and about which I had gathered information in advance online. I visited events on feminist topics that were organised by various agents during my stay: feminist activist groups that had started in Megalia or Womad; women's movement NGOs and their associations; female Twitter users; a gender-equality department of local government; a feminist society of a university. In August of that same year, I visited Seoul again to participate in the fourth Courage Rally protest. By participating in this protest, I was able to observe how the protest culture of digital feminists had evolved from what I saw in 2016. I observed how participants used slogans and performances as part of their activism, how they experienced a physical gathering as conveyers of non-physically/digitally shaped feminism, and how the organisers and participants interacted with each other.

I visited some feminist events that were open to the public; an environment that does not allow one to get informed consent from the participants. If a gathering was less public, such as a meeting for supporters of an NGO, I gained prior consent for my participant observation from the organisers through emails. If offline gatherings were organised by digital feminists, held by and composed of anonymous women, they announced the time and place of the gathering without giving the organisers' information and every participant's anonymity was protected. I participated in these gatherings, following their guidelines, such as not taking

identifiable photos of participants when I was observing. I myself participated in the gatherings as an anonymous woman, not revealing my identity as a researcher, in order not to disturb the field of study. I observed the events by taking notes with a mobile phone at the sites, writing reflexive journal pieces after participating in the gatherings and collecting participants' own stories of taking part in the gatherings, which they shared online after the gatherings.

2.5. Interview method

I conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews to ask about interviewees' experiences of engagement with digital space and digital feminism. This interview method allowed me to identify topics that were raised by hearing participants' own accounts of their experiences (Cook, 2008, p. 423), which led me to elaborate the research questions. The interview conversations also led me to specify my questions that had stemmed from online observation, by putting the puzzles together in order to understand this phenomenon from both sides – online and offline. As part of the ethnographic methods, the interviews filled the lacunae of online observation.

My interview participants were made up of Megalia/Womad participants, other female online community members or social media users who were not Megalia/Womad participants, former and current activists in women's movement NGOs, and inactive users of Womad but active users of platforms such as Twitter and Instagram. These 20 interview participants were all women and they were in their twenties and thirties. When I recruited interview participants, I initially sought people who were directly involved in the Megalian activism, but soon I broadened recruitment to include more diverse voices around the Megalia phenomenon.

In my initial thoughts in 2016, I planned to interview users of Megalia or Womad, but I had to change my mind due to the spread of digital feminist ideas and as the digital environment changed. The Megalia phenomenon became more widespread as it began to influence users outside the online communities for trolls, to the extent that people who were not interested in feminism or ‘man-hating’ began to also employ the methods of female trolls, such as using the memes and logics that were created within Megalia. This led me to want to meet people who use online communities or social media in order to explore which path and which part of Megalian culture they had encountered and were influenced by or adopted. As the digital feminist ideas of Megalia and Womad provoked diverse reactions within feminist academia and existing NGO-based feminist circles – which were linked together – I decided to involve people who had been working for NGOs from before the rise of the Megalia phenomenon as interview participants. Furthermore, both the culture and activism of ‘man-hating’ were popularised and dispersed across digital space, to the extent that nowhere could be pinpointed as the centre of this activism from around the end of 2017 and the beginning of 2018. This led me to add interview participants who were actively involved in up-to-date feminist issues through Twitter.

I conducted face-to-face interviews with each of them, except for two cases in which the interviews were conducted via video meeting. The participants were currently interested in and/or involved in the feminist movement in contemporary South Korea and therefore it was likely that they would be involved in or influenced by the Megalia phenomenon (see table below for more details). In addition to these interview participants, I conducted an interview with a group of five women who were lesbian feminists for an auxiliary case (which is not added to the table). As existing feminists from before the Megalia phenomenon and part of an LGBT group, they said they had considered for a year among their members how to deal with current discussions of digital feminism as lesbian feminists. This group offered a chance to

see the discordances between being women, lesbians, queer people and part of an LGBT group during the rise of popular feminism.

To recruit interview participants, I used two different routes for approaching people who were engaged with digital feminism. By online means, I sent direct messages to digital users in the platforms outside Megalia/Womad, in cases where users had uploaded posts to online communities or blogs that explicitly conveyed the idea of digital feminism, and to an activist group that had started from Womad (Bwave), via the message sending function provided by the platforms they used. By offline means, I met with feminist friends who could introduce me to interviewees who were or had been working closely with Megalia/Womad participants or NGOs. After finding interviewees using these approaches, I used the technique of snowballing to find more participants who were engaged with digital feminism. Snowball sampling is employed when probability sampling is ‘impossible or not feasible’ (Bryman, 2014, p. 424), hence I took this method in order to study digital feminists, whose population cannot be statistically examined. Moreover, in this research on the Megalia phenomenon, being connected by people whom they knew to be reliable was the best way to approach Megalians, because digital feminists were usually cautious about approaches from unknown people since their digital acts could be used to harm them. Indeed, many of the digital feminists doubted my intention of meeting them and some refused to meet me. I endeavoured to find participants who could answer my questions about digital feminism and the tensions around it from various perspectives, by broadening my participants towards those who had diverse voices and who were at different phases of joining in with the feminist community.

The table below gives brief information about the participants and their involvement in digital platforms. The names or nicknames they used were anonymised to protect participants. I omitted or changed some of their information in order not to identify how someone I met in person may also have done something online because this kind of linking of

a real person with their online persona has the potential to harm the participants. I chose to record the age group of each participant to illustrate the different involvement in digital platforms according to age, while preventing identification by not providing their exact ages. Additionally, I did not add one of my interviewees, Sol-va, to this table because she did not want me to describe her in any way in order to be certain that no one can recognise or trace her through reading this dissertation. This table is intended to show how the interview participants have engaged with digital and sometimes non-digital feminism in various ways and on various platforms. Omitting this one case of Sol-va from it will have little effect on this intention of illustrating the general tendencies among participants. For the list of the digital platforms that interviewees mentioned, I addressed the platforms that Megalians inhabited (the MERS forum, Megalia, Womad) at the top of each user's list in order to indicate each interviewee's direct involvement in the Megalian movement at different phases.

Table 1 Interview participants

Name	Age group	The route for encountering feminist discussion >getting involved in it	Involvement in digital platforms mentioned in the interview	The route I took to approach them
Sam	Early 20s	Female-dominated online community > Women-only online community	Womad, male-dominated community, female-dominated community, women-only online community	Sending direct message after reading her post in an online community
Pang bang	Early 20s	Twitter >Twitter	Womad, Twitter, Facebook, fandom community for an animated series, group chat for local feminists, women-	Meeting at an open forum held by a feminist NGO

			only community, comment sections of digital news	
Spar kle	Early 20s	Searching for Megalia online because ‘Megal’ was a buzzword among the people around her >Womad	Megalia, Womad, DCinside, blog, YouTube, comment sections of digital news	Introduced through an interviewee (Lyon)
Jeon gwo n	Early 20s	Womad user friend >Womad	Womad, male-dominated community for college entrance examinees, community for university students, YouTube, Instagram, comment sections of digital news	Introduced through an interviewee (Enya)
Garr a	Early 20s	Twitter >Twitter	Megalia, Womad, Twitter, Instagram, KakaoStory, ³³ YouTube, web boards for sharing users’ drawings, community for Courage Rally participants, fandom community for an animated series, communities for gamers, massively multiplayer online role-playing game (hereafter, MMORPG)	Meeting at a coffee house before the Courage Rally, as a friend of Pangbang
Suji	Mid 20s	Women-only online community	MERS forum, Megalia, Womad, Instagram, women-	Introduced through an

³³ A South Korean platform for sharing photos, while linking their digital activities with people in the contact list for a mobile messenger ‘KakaoTalk’ (Lee et al., 2015).

		>MERS forum	only community, female-dominated community, male-dominated community, community for boys' love genre consumers, community for gamers, DCinside, comment sections of digital news	interviewee (Jeongwon)
Juha	Mid 20s	Joining in a discussion group in an NGO >creating an activist group after the Gangnam station incident	Megalia, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, group chat for supporters of a feminist NGO	Introduced through a friend who works in a government institution for child education (hereafter, informant 1)
Enya	Mid 20s	Twitter and Womad user friend >Womad	Womad, Twitter, DCinside, women-only community, community for gamers, comment sections of digital news	Introduced through an interviewee (Lyon)
Zizi	Mid 20s	Twitter user sister >MERS forum	MERS forum, Megalia, Womad, blog, Twitter, YouTube, women-only community, MMORPG, comment sections of digital news	Sending direct message after reading her blog posts
Seungjoo	Mid 20s	Books and digital posts published by a feminist NGO >Setting up a discussion group in her university	Megalia, women-only community, male-dominated community, community for sharing young adult novel, community for subculture consumers, web boards for	Introduced through informant 1

			sharing users' life experiences, DCinside, Facebook, Twitter, dating application for lesbians	
Bwa ver	Mid 20s	Women-only online community >Bwave ³⁴	Women-only community, Twitter, Facebook, community for boys' love genre consumers	Finding participants by connecting to Bwave organisers
Bo	Mid 20s	Online community for subculture consumers >MERS forum	MERS forum, Megalia, Womad, Twitter, community for subculture consumers, women-only community, blog, comment sections of digital news	Introduced through a friend who works in feminist education (hereafter, informant 2)
Jeon gah	Late 20s	Women-only online community >MERS forum	MERS forum, Megalia, Womad, women-only community, female-dominated community, comment sections of digital news, Instagram, blog	Sending direct message after reading her digital post in an online community
Jiyoo n	Late 20s	Male-dominated online community >Megalia	Megalia, Womad, male-dominated community, Facebook	Introduced through informant 2
Anna	Early 30s	Female-dominated online community for subculture consumers >Womad	Womad, Facebook, community for subculture consumers	Finding participants by connecting to Bwave organisers

³⁴ Bwave is an activist group for abortion rights started by Womad users.

Lyon	Mid 30s	Male-dominated community >Megalia	Megalia, Womad, blog, micro-blog, Facebook, YouTube, male-dominated communities, women-only community, community for finding dates among peer group, DCinside	Introduced through informant 2
Nano me	Mid 30s	Women-only online community >MERS forum	MERS forum, Megalia, Womad, community for university students, women- only community, male- dominated community, DCinside, Twitter, YouTube, comment sections of digital news	Introduced through informant 2
Mapl e	Late 30s	Volunteer works for feminist NGOs >working for an NGO	Facebook	Introduced through a friend who had worked in a feminist NGO
Meri da	Late 30s	Discussion group in her university >working for an NGO	Facebook, micro-blog, blog platform for feminists, comment sections of digital news	Introduced through informant 1

The interviews took place in and around Seoul. I offered to travel near to where the interviewees lived for their convenience. Some of the Megalians did not want to reveal the neighbourhood where they lived and chose to meet in Seoul city centre in order to be more anonymous and less identifiable. Before starting the interviews, I gave the information sheet and consent form (Appendix 1) to each participant and carefully explained the intention of the interview, while checking if they understood my explanation around the research aim and

interview process by asking questions, taking questions from them and answering those questions. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by me. They were transcribed in the original language, Korean, and partially translated into English for thesis writing. The data was anonymised at the transcribing stage.

The interview questions (Appendix 2) covered: basic information about the participant; her general engagement with digital space and/or digital feminist activism; her experience of online communities; her sense of the popularisation of digital feminism; her experience of online misogyny; her experience of misogynistic affairs and/or resistance to them; her engagement with digital feminism after 2015 and its influence on her life; and her opinions on controversial issues in Megalia and Womad.

Since the interviews involved discussion of personal opinions and thoughts about the controversial topics of ‘man-hating’ trolling and feminism, I tried to provide a comfortable and safe atmosphere for participants. Particularly due to Megalian slang and neologisms that have the potential to attract unpleasant attention from others,³⁵ I used the study-room rental service, a paid service that provides rooms for private meetings, for my interviews with Megalians in order to enable them to speak comfortably. I proposed that interview participants could check the transcripts of their interviews in order to directly see how their words would be used for this research. This technique of giving access to transcripts is used in order to mitigate the imbalance of power between interviewer and interviewee by providing research participants with the opportunity to control their words (Mero-Jaffe, 2011, p. 239). Most participants agreed to this procedure and approved their words by reading the transcripts. After checking them, some of the participants requested that I omit some of their words for privacy reasons, and I agreed to delete them and not use them.

³⁵ An episode from Enya’s experience of unexpectedly gaining attention in public space by using Megalian slang will be presented in Chapter 8.

I combined the interview data with other data that I collected both online and offline and analysed them using the method of thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is used for ‘identifying and analysing patterns of meaning in a data set’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006, cited in Joffe, 2012, p. 209). In order to interpret the themes that emerged in the data, I read interview transcripts and picked out concepts and notions that were commonly raised in the participants’ statements, crosschecking them with the data that I gathered from online observation.

2.6. Analysing data through discourse analysis and thematic analysis

I employed discourse analysis to interpret the data because this phenomenon started from and has its basis in digital conversations and discourse production. The Megalian movement is composed of conversations between random visitors to the web. Therefore, their digital conversations as social practices need to be analysed, in order to examine the construction of digital feminist discourse within this movement. I take a constructionist perspective of discourse analysis for this research that asks how social realities are constructed and maintained (Gergen, 1999; Phillips & Hardy, 2002). However, I choose to limit discourse analysis to being only a part of the methods I use, rather than the methodology itself, in order to avoid reducing the phenomena I observe to linguistic conduct.

Discourse analysis does not have a single definition, and it is applied differently within diverse disciplinary and theoretical traditions (Bryman, 2012; Cheek, 2008; Phillips & Hardy, 2002). In general terms, it ‘connects texts to discourses, locating them in a historical and social context’ in order to ‘refer to the particular actors, relationships, and practices that characterize the situation under study’ (Phillips & Hardy, 2002, p. 4). One aspect of this study involves uncovering how the Megalian movement was produced through digital texts; in other words, how it ‘came into existence through constructive effects of various discourses

and associated texts' (p. 7). Moreover, how I approach the broad context of this research can be seen as a discursive interpretation in terms of providing understandings by exploring how the micro-empirical data, enacted with discourses, constitute social reality (p. 9).

Megalian participants' language and linguistic practices, which challenge and replace with the conventional ones, are crucial aspects of this phenomenon. Even so, the broad Megalia phenomenon involves participants' collective experiences and practices of materialising their discourse, beyond text and language. Their experiences of speaking and communicating with others, both online and offline, in this study are treated as being more important than the exact words spoken, because I emphasise that this social phenomenon was constructed through the practices of participants, which influenced them to reconfigure their life experiences. I explore their discourse as collective experiences, sometimes experiments, of the speaking acts of participants, which can be analysed within the boundaries of lived experiences. In this sense, I understand this research to produce feminist knowledge from the lived experiences of women, including altered linguistic practices.

The research data for this dissertation is composed of ethnographic data from the web, fieldnotes from both online and offline events, and interview transcripts that I have collected during the last five years of studying this topic. Ethnographic data analysis 'moves from systemizing our data, to generating core thematics, to developing narratives and arguments that bring us to larger theoretical and conceptual points' (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 174).

During and after the participant observation and archiving in digital space, I discovered keywords and topics in the digital materials that seemed to be reiterated in users' accounts and thus to be important for analysing the phenomenon, while I followed the discursive 'flows'. These keywords were used for sorting out the materials at the writing stage. I stored the data – pdf files of online posts, digital images and video files – in Google Drive provided by the university. I renamed each datum with the date when it was generated and its original

title. Since the Google Drive explorer provided accurate search results for the titles and content of the files, I sorted out materials using the keywords when I needed to use them. Sometimes I added keywords to the titles of digital materials at the stage of storing them if they could not be searched because the contents were written in deformed words³⁶ or screenshots of words, which cannot be located through a keyword search. I also examined the interview transcripts, interpreting them alongside the digital materials for thematic analysis as I explained in the previous section.

Before the interviews, I used the keywords and questions that had been raised during the fieldwork in digital space to construct the interview questions. After the interviews, I extracted keywords and topics from the transcripts and used them to revisit the digital materials, fieldnotes and secondary literature, which became sources for developing the topics of analysis. By doing so, I identified and categorised the most salient themes: the concepts of a ‘gender war’ and ‘warrior tribe’ formed chapter 3, in which I understand digital space to be a battleground for gamified activism; ideas around the ‘weapon’, ‘fun’, a ‘hit feel’, ‘memefication’, ‘attention-seeking’ (by inducing the misogynistic desire of gendered punishment and ‘irresponsibly’ doing whatever Megalians wanted under the ‘digital anonymity’) developed into chapters 4, 5 and 6 that analyse the practices of the Megalian movement; finally ‘immersion’, ‘absorption’ and the notion of a ‘practical’ feminism that challenges unfair ‘reality’ formed the basis of chapters 7 and 8, in which I examine the movement from the perspective of materialist feminism.

³⁶ Digital users casually deform words when they write online for various purposes. They do so, for example, so that people from outside the community cannot understand the words, to make words funny by using alternate spellings, or to make words extreme by replacing syllables with similar pronunciations that have slang or insulting meanings.

Chapter 3. Megalian activism and the gendered battleground

In this chapter, I examine the digital, social and cultural conditions under which the Megalian movement emerged, specifically elucidating how and why it sprang up in digital space when it did. I, hence, undertake a historical exploration of the circumstances within which the Megalia phenomenon is located. I make the argument that digital space became a battleground between men and women; a key condition for the emergent Megalian activism.

This chapter provides the context for understanding the unique, sometimes unintelligible, phenomena occurring within Megalia and Womad over time. It also shows how the political goal of ‘winning the gender war’, the chief aim of this movement, was generated. The Megalian movement can be understood as an explosion of pent-up gendered conflicts in South Korea. Through exploring the trajectory of the relation between digital culture of young generation and feminism, I focus on what I am terming the ‘activism of triumph’ of the Megalian movement.

In the first section of this chapter, I explore how digital space had hitherto functioned as a space for fostering anti-feminism, which saw the invention of strategies for excluding feminists from online conversations. In the second, I explore the trajectory of the Megalian activism, which started with an unexpected case of ‘man-hating’ trolling on a web forum, and evolved into the phenomenon of disseminating digital feminism. I conclude the chapter by arguing how the confrontation between men and women, which the Megalia phenomenon made visible and manifest, reshaped the meaning of digital space to become a battlefield for the gender war.

3.1. Digital space before the ‘man-hating’ phenomenon

South Korean media and society started paying attention to the fact that digital space is where gender war occurs only after the Megalia phenomenon emerged.³⁷ Before that, there had been no explicit gendered confrontation because South Korean digital territory had been a playground for predominantly anti-feminists since the earliest period of internet history in the late 1990s (Kwonkim, 2001). The anti-feminist sentiment of digital space in the early days gradually evolved into the pervasive online misogyny we see from the mid-2000s when DCinside, the male-dominated community notorious for its offensive culture, began to play a leading role in cultural production in digital territory (Lee, G., 2012, p. 86). When female users started hitting back against online misogyny and attacking Korean masculinity in May 2015, they attracted considerable public attention due to the fact that digital space started to function as a battleground between men and women, and no longer as a field only for anti-feminist attacks. Through exploring the milestones that exploded into gendered battles in South Korean digital territory, I show how the unchallenged anti-feminism in digital space contributed to the gender-segregation that led to gender-segregated discourse production among online communities.

Digital space as anti-feminist playground: inventing kkolpemi discourse

In the early 1990s, the first generation of digital inhabitants emerged in South Korea through the increased use of BBS³⁸ among so-called early adopters, who were largely college students

³⁷ A digital news article of *Moneytoday* reported about the MERS forum phenomenon and named it ‘namnyeojeonjaeng’, which means ‘a war between men and women’ (Lee & Kim, 2015).

³⁸ BBS, Bulletin Board System is a ‘computer server running software that allows users to connect to the system using a terminal program’, according to Wikipedia.

(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bulletin_board_system) South Korean digital users used BBS until the WWW system overtook its position in 2000 as an early form of online community.

(Kim, S., 2010, p. 166) who could access the educational and cultural resources provided by universities (Kwonkim, 2000, p. 133). As high-speed internet services were commercialised from 1997, digital space became more accessible (ibid.). The earliest gendered conflict online in South Korea was the heated debate over a constitutional decision regarding the elimination of the military-extra point system in 1999, which had granted extra points on civil service examinations to men who finished their compulsory military service, as a way of compensating for it (Chung, 2016; Kim, H., 2016; Kim, S., 2016; Kwonkim, 2000, 2001, 2017; Yoon, 2013, 2014).³⁹ Digital users debated the issue on BBS and this led to attacks against the female users who participated in the debates, involving groundless insults and/or offensive emails, which expanded into real-life threats (Kwonkim, 2000, 2017).

A common tactic of anti-feminism, to fabricate rumours about women's associations in order to create the stereotype of 'paranoid feminists' (Kwonkim, 2000, p. 136), was initiated by male digital users at this time. During the chaotic online discussions, absurd rumours were accepted as fact by digital users. These portrayed women's associations as filled with irrational people who were not appropriate counterparts for public discussion (ibid.). For digital users who opposed women's equal rights, the stories of paranoid feminist groups became reason enough to attack all feminists. In this process, they created a useful tool to denounce their opponents in debates on feminism by branding them 'kkolpemi' (unintelligible feminist). This simple stigmatisation functioned to ostracise female/feminist users from these online communities.

³⁹ Since the military service has been compulsory for South Korean male citizens, it has influenced to construct South Korean masculinity (Kwon, 2000) and to define ideal femininity, in terms of deploying people who protect and people whom to be protected, which renders the concept of femininity to be constituted of vulnerability and located in the gendered hierarchy (Moon, 2005). As the experience of military service constitutes South Korean masculinity, South Korean men defended the institutional advantage attached to it for protecting their gendered privilege.

Male users amused themselves by fabricating facts and stories about feminist groups (*kkolpemis* to them), demanding that random female users address their political or ethical stance on those issues. Forcing female users to account for *kkolpemi* problems became a way of testing their potential for advocating feminist ideas in order to kick them out of the space. If someone answered properly by explaining the arguments of *kkolpemi*, she was branded as *kkolpemi* because if she knew about *kkolpemis* it meant she was one of them. If her answer was insufficient to explain the (fabricated) claims of *kkolpemi*, it was proof of her ‘unintelligible’ nature as a woman and led her, again, to be branded as a *kkolpemi*: an unintelligible woman who might advocate an unintelligible idea – feminism.

Many female users grew tired of this situation and left the community to seek women-only spaces, or hid their gender in the online space they resided in (Kwonkim, 2017). Female digital users also trained themselves to be vigilant about cyberattacks and avoided becoming targets because they were not protected by any authoritative institution. One of my interviewees, Merida, says that she limited her online activity after her microblog, which involved her offline life and acquaintances, was attacked by unknown male users because she had left a critical comment on an anti-feminist online post in the early 2000s. She asked the blog provider company for help, but she got no support except for the advice to shut down her blog. The company’s response epitomises the attitude of the authorities to digital violence; they refuse to intervene properly and instead hand over responsibility for users’ safety to a ‘digital vigilantism’ of victims (Jane, 2016). In this context, Merida explained that her digital reticence, which has lasted until now, is for the sake of safety. This attitude has become a habit for her, because the internet is a ‘space of misogyny’ where anyone can be a target of online hostility if she irritates anti-feminists and no one provides proper intervention.

In this context, male users' takeover of digital space by expelling women made the space universally masculine; a space where users could enjoy a culture made exclusively for men that allowed and welcomed misogynistic content. Hence, the construction of digital space as a playground for anti-feminists started in the late 1990s with the triumph of anti-feminists and the defeat of feminists through the powerful tool of the *kkolpemi* discourse.

In employing that discourse, whether a rumour was fact or fabricated was not important. Digital users initially accepted all the rumours because the major premise of this mockery was that *there were kkolpemis who wanted to deprive males of their privilege*. I want to point out that this anti-feminist strategy of circulating groundless slander about feminism works like a game. In playing games, participants learn the specific rule and the background story that the game sets, and follow them without doubt because their aim of playing the game is to win. In the game of anti-feminist discourse, digital users believe mocking stories about *kkolpemi* and follow what the story orders: identify and expel the *kkolpemi*. The ridiculous stories about women were not intended to be verified, rather they were an essential condition, 'backstory', of the game. Winning the *kkolpemi* game provides pleasure because it makes fun of the annoying group (*kkolpemis*), and at the same time it achieves a discursive triumph over women, creating the notion that *women who try to deprive males of their privilege are punished*, while eradicating any possibility of feminist existence in their communities.

Online witch-hunting games and trivialised digital offensiveness

Anti-feminism was shared online through the technique of targeting well-known female figures or women's associations through applying *kkolpemi* discourse to them. By the mid 2000s, digital users had begun to target *ordinary* women for cyberbullying (Jeong, H., 2013) in a context in which the offensiveness of users' communication had progressed from its base in DCinside, which provided an anonymous environment (Lee, G., 2012). Here, I want to

emphasise that the gaming aspect of *kkolpemi* discourse evolved into a gaming culture of online witch-hunting that most male-dominated online communities shared at that time.

The 2005 ‘gaettongnyeo’ incident, involving a woman who failed to pick up her dog’s excrement, is widely acknowledged as the first ‘online witch-hunt’ case in South Korean society (Yoon, 2013, p. 45). The victim became a target of nationwide blame when one user of a male-dominated community, SLRclub,⁴⁰ took the woman’s photo and uploaded it onto its board. This user also provided a narrative about her, claiming that her dog had defecated in the subway and she ignored it, even cursing other passengers who urged her to clean it up. After the photo and the narrative, which condemned her misdeed, had spread via Utdae community⁴¹ and DCinside, the biggest male-dominated online communities at that time, digital users discovered her identity and tracked her down, disclosing her name, age and assumed registered university while attaching made-up stories about her (Geobugimat, 2005).

Online witch-hunts continued, targeting women/girls (*nyeo* in Korean) without ‘gaenyeom’ (common sense). The Korean phrase ‘mu-gaenyeom’ (lacking *gaenyeom*) implies misbehaviour and lack of awareness of norms that involve conforming to hierarchy. Confucian ideology sets out everyday customs to distinguish social ranks depending on someone’s gender and age in South Korea (Sechiyama, 2014, p. 169), which makes sensing and respecting hierarchy a part of everyday demeanour, and is necessary in order to meet the standard of having *ganyeom*.

During the development of this witch-hunting culture, many *mu-gaenyeom-nyeos* (women who lack *gaenyeom*) were discovered and circulated by digital users, which led to threats of physical attack and put their real lives at risk. According to the logic of cyber terrorism on

⁴⁰ <http://www.slrclub.com/> Digital photographers’ online community, founded in 2001.

⁴¹ [Http://humoruniv.com](http://humoruniv.com) An online community for sharing humorous digital content, founded in 1998.

mu-gaenyeom-nyeos, a woman who does not follow social norms, who violates the boundaries of what women are allowed to do, should be punished by the ‘playful’ activities of digital users. These (mostly male) users jokingly call themselves the ‘netizen [net-citizen] investigation unit’ due to their collective behaviours of ‘doxing’⁴² and tracking down the target. Digital users witnessed and recognised how ordinary women had become public prey and how misogynists repeatedly reposted these episodes for fun. The difference between *kkolpemi* and *mu-gaenyeom-nyeo* was that the latter added the social punishment of public humiliation, by shaming the *mu-gaenyeom* behaviours of women, which could be entirely meted out by digital users.

These online witch-hunting games were made possible by the offensive culture that existed in digital territory, which stemmed from the DCinside culture during the mid to late 2000s, when DCinside was the ‘capital’ of digital culture (Lee, 2012, p. 86). I emphasise the particular culture of DCinside for two reasons: Firstly, it has been a base for online witch-hunting culture buttressed both by the digital offensiveness of users, which was trivialised within the space, and by the interface, which provides an open and anonymous community where anyone can participate in harassing others as game players. The culture of offensive masculinity that was propagated by DCinside led to the dominant discourse of hostile misogyny that resonated with the social context, which became condensed into the ‘kimchinyeo’ discourse of the 2010s, as I will go on to discuss. Secondly, DCinside was the origin of the Megalia phenomenon. The culture of DCinside largely constituted the culture of Megalian activism, which appropriated digital offensiveness and the collective exercise of hostility that were only viable for women due to the almost-complete anonymity. This chain

⁴² Doxing or doxxing means searching for and publishing private or identifying information about a particular individual on the internet, typically with malicious intent, according to the Oxford dictionary. (<https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/dox>)

effect of anonymity, hostility and liberated women's activity were the very factors that enabled digital feminism to be popularised and to flourish.

Digital offensiveness, which was enhanced by digital anonymity in DCinside, influenced and generated the masculine ethos of that community (Lee, G., 2012, p. 228). DCinside users conducted and enjoyed virtual wars between users of different forums, while developing their identities as 'warriors'. The hostility of users pitched them into constant battle between themselves (pp. 144–145), making them 'warrior tribes' and rendering the forums constant battlefields (p. 93). After the owner of DCinside extended the topics covered by the board in 2005, forums for feminine-connoted hobbies, such as fandoms of boy bands and TV dramas, were created. Some of these forums adapted the unique trait of DCinside by embodying the hostility and 'makjang' (living as though in a dead-end situation)⁴³ culture. Female users in the forums participated in playing with digital offensiveness, while absorbing DCinside culture. These women embodied the masculine culture, taking part in the battlefield of DCinside as one of the 'warrior tribes'.

From the mid to late 2000s, then, the culture of online witch-hunts flourished, along with the trivialisation of digital offensiveness in users' communication, which was largely influenced by DCinside culture. The anonymity that DCinside provided supported the hostile behaviour of digital users. During this period, many female digital users resided in anonymous women-only or female-dominated online communities. Meanwhile, some women who inhabited DCinside invented their own culture of anonymous female digital users, assimilating the DCinside culture and battling with the other inhabitants of DCinside.

⁴³ *Makjang* originally means the dead end of a mine. However, the word is used to refer to a terrible situation that cannot get any worse, and a trait of someone who goes too far, as though s/he has nothing to lose and thus no reason to worry about the outcome of his/her actions.

The rise of kimchinyeo discourse and women who resisted

The space that bred anti-feminism and online hostility towards women, as we have seen, developed a misogynistic discourse, which gradually enlarged its target over time. Hateful expressions that labelled the targets of online witch-hunts not only involved criticism of one specific woman but tended to expand to denounce all women as a group (Kim, J., 2018; Lee, 2012). In this context, *kimchinyeo* discourse emerged, creating a stereotype of Korean women as selfish, vain and obsessed with themselves while exploiting their partners. The compound of a typical Korean food, 'kimchi', with the suffix '~nyeo' meaning woman, targets Korean women in general. *Kimchinyeo* discourse produces stories of individual women's misbehaviours, translating them into shared traits of Korean women, while suggesting that these women should be suppressed and controlled by men.

The cultural domination of misogyny had been naturalised in South Korean society both online and offline, thus rendering gendered problems imperceptible (Kim, Y., 2016; Jeong & Lee, 2018). However, the word 'misogyny' (*yeoseonghyeomo* in Korean) came into the spotlight in around 2014 because of the rise of the online community Ilbe. According to feminist academic Soo Ah Kim, public attention around misogyny and feminism increased in 2014, as the Ilbe community was problematised in the media and the term 'misogyny', as one of its users' shared sentiments, caused public controversy (Kim, Y., 2016). Although the term *kimchinyeo* had been used from the early 2010s in DCinside, when its cultural influence on digital territory had been strong, Ilbe came to be the home for fostering and nurturing this discourse, buttressed by its community rule that guaranteed a male-exclusive environment.

As I discussed in chapter 1, the profound transformation of the South Korean economic structure had undermined institutionalised patriarchal privilege. This privilege had protected the male breadwinner system and secured permanent jobs for the previous generation of South Korean men, who had not been required to compete with female candidates in the job

market (Bae, 2015, p. 29). In this context, *kimchinyeo* discourse, which postulates that contemporary gender relations consist of ‘privileged women and exploited men’ (Kim, J., 2018, p. 164), can be seen as an attempt to put women back in their place within the hierarchy between men and women in order to sustain the gendered order (Kim & Kim, 2016). The discourse conceals the class divergence between men, while setting up young women, who might appear to be competitors in the job market, as targets for their anger, in order to compensate for a ‘crisis of masculinity’ (Hwang & Kang, 2014; Kim, J., 2018; Kim & Lee, 2017).

The effect of *kimchinyeo* discourse that denounces women in general operated by making all women police their behaviours by seeing themselves reflected in these negative figures, *kimchinyeos*, while internalising ideal woman’s behaviours in order not to be identified as a *mu-gaenyeom kimchinyeo* (Hwang & Kang, 2014, p. 383). These women needed to become the opposite – *gaenyeomnyeo*, a woman who has *gaenyeom* – who knows how to behave. However, the intensified misogynistic discourse also triggered women’s resistance, which I read as the potential and what can be read as direct resources of the rise of digital feminism in 2015.

In January 2015, a Korean teenager fled to Turkey to join ISIS, after leaving messages on his Twitter account stating that he wanted to join the group because he hated feminists and because ‘males are being discriminated against’ (Kwon & Park, 2015). In response to the incident, the media questioned the legitimacy of feminism in South Korea. They claimed that anti-feminism was a proper reaction against feminist discourse, positing that gender equality in South Korea had already been achieved and institutionalised (Chung, 2016, pp. 201–202). Media reactions kindled controversy over the misogyny of the journalists. When a music columnist published a magazine article entitled, ‘Stupid feminism is more dangerous than ISIS’, Twitter users began uploading #iamafeminist hashtag to reclaim feminist identity from

stigmatisation (Kim, J., 2017, p. 804), and making visible the collective presence of feminists within this anti-feminist environment. After approximately two thousand tweets were posted in three days, the word ‘feminist’ became more acceptable to ordinary Twitter users, since users’ own stories, which were aligned with the hashtag, resituated ‘feminism’ as a part of women’s lived experience (p. 811).

In parallel with the growing visibility of feminists in Twitter-sphere, users of women-only communities were building strength in gendered battles as they experienced enormous cyberattacks from male misogynists and attempted to fight back. The online community Yeoseongsidae⁴⁴ had been a particular target for digital stalking by devotees of *kimchinyeo* discourse. It had been a target of constant cyberattacks because ‘its users demonstrated their ability to act in public by holding protests for women’s issue or fund raising for political ends’, which was buttressed by their huge number of users (Yeoseongsidae user 3-001, 2017). The attacks included the same pattern of stigmatising women under the demeaning *kimchinyeo* stereotype. For example, Yeoseongsidae users gained the nickname of ‘abortion-bugs’ (‘naktaechung’ in Korean) from around 2012, because it was discovered that they had shared information about surgical abortion within their community.⁴⁵ Initially, this invective was coined and disseminated through the efforts of Ilbe users.⁴⁶ However, the Yeoseongsidae community was considered to be ‘female-Ilbe’ in other male-dominated communities,

⁴⁴ <http://cafe.daum.net/subdued20club> An online community for ‘women in their twenties’. This online community had 300,000 users in 2013, rising to 620,000 in 2015, and it has 780,000 users now (August 2019).

⁴⁵ Abortion was illegal in South Korea until the Constitutional Court made the decision that outlawing abortion is unconstitutional in April 2019. Female users of online communities commonly shared information about hospitals where surgical abortion was available in secret because such information was not provided in public.

⁴⁶ The Ilbe post ‘It is about to confirm the stereotype of Yeoseongsidae = [equals] abortion’ (Ilbe user 3-001, 2012) shows this.

because they violated the boundaries of normative behaviour for women. They shared everyday experiences about audacious sex lives, rows with boyfriends (Yu & Park, 2015), abortion and even issues relating to feminism (Natepann user 3-001, 2014), which should be silenced among women. Male digital users took, or sometimes fabricated, screenshots of online discussions in Yeoseongsidae and spread them around other communities with the intention of public humiliation by making the users seem *mu-gaenyeom*. Even though Yeoseongsidae users tried to defend themselves from false rumours, the closed interface of the community made it difficult to disseminate their explanations (Sheygh843yg, 2015).

This kind of online harassment exploded when users of female-dominated communities targeted the misogyny of a comedian, Dong-min Jang. Jang ran a podcast radio programme and some of his statements were called out as misogynistic in April 2015. Yeoseongsidae users collectively publicised the problem and Jang stopped appearing on a popular TV show due to the scandal. Interestingly, the gender segregation of online communities was manifested in the division of opinions on this issue. Most users of male-dominated communities defended what the comedian had said during his podcast by arguing ‘men usually speak like that’ and dismissing women’s protests as ‘overly sensitive’ reactions that killed others’ joy (Yeoseongsidae user 3-003, 2016). Through debating the scandal, female users of online communities developed their ability to fight back against misogynists by using the logic that labels ‘misogyny– what Ilbe users do’,⁴⁷ while building the possibility of digital feminism.

What I have illustrated in this section is a chronicle of online misogyny in South Korean digital space, as well as the history of constructing an anti-feminist environment. This environment became an important precondition for the emergence of a digital feminism that

⁴⁷ This way of criticising misogyny was possible because Ilbe users were labelled as anti-social trolls who were harming society.

is armed with online hostility. The discourses of anti-feminist and misogynistic users over 20 years became resources for nourishing Megalian culture. Megalians appropriated those discourses, using parody to belittle such men in their man-hating discourse. Creating stereotypes of a group, fabricating narratives around them and disregarding them in any discussion by branding them as ‘trashy/unintelligible/impossible to talk to’ were all applied to Megalians’ enemies.

3.2. Digital feminism initiated by the ‘man-hating’ trolling

In this section, I explore the progress of digital feminism from the initial trolling in DCinside in May 2015 to Womad in 2018, at which point Womad lost its meaning as the focal site of digital feminism and its function was distributed in many online venues. As I briefly discussed in chapter one, the Megalian movement started on the MERS forum of DCinside in May 2015, before moving to an independent website, Megalia in August of that year. It then moved to a board provided by an internet company, Daum, in December 2015, renaming itself Womad early the following year. Womad moved again, to an independent website, in February 2017, in order to be away from the Daum platform.

Each platform provided a space that was more approachable and accessible for different groups of people, which shaped differences in the style and culture of the community. For each community, I examine: 1) significant occurrences in the community and the environment that shaped them; 2) which group of people constituted the participants in Megalian feminism in that phase; 3) which groups/spaces of the digital feminist community emerged during that period outside Megalia/Womad, precisely because digital feminists who were not familiar with the Megalia/Womad platform for each phase still continued their digital feminist activities in parallel with Megalia/Womad.

3.2.1. The MERS forum in DCinside: a playground for ‘man-haters’

The Megalia phenomenon started on a forum in DCinside.⁴⁸ DCinside is composed of forums that each have particular themes. It started in 1999 with a few dozens forums for digital camera reviews but grew over time until the number of forums had increased to over 1,600 by May 2015, when the Megalia phenomenon started to emerge.

Before the Megalia phenomenon, several female users in DCinside were accused of being ‘man-haters’ because they were fans of male celebrities who were not Koreans. These included users of a fan forum for a TV show, in which foreign male celebrities appeared (forum for ‘Non-Summit show’), and a forum for ‘Foreign Celebrities’ (DCinside user 3-001, 2014). Even though these women were fans of male celebrities, they were branded as ‘man-haters’ because their enthusiasm for foreign men was interpreted as the outcome of ‘hating men (who these women could meet) in reality’ (DCinside user 3-003, 2014). Sometimes, these presumed ‘man-haters’ participated in debates on misogyny and misandry, but the battles were just inner conflicts between the forum users, which were common in DCinside.

It was in the forum for discussing ‘Male Celebrities’ (hereafter, the Male Celebrities forum), that female users started to actively ‘drive the flow’ (‘*gaelpeul dallida*’ in Korean) of ‘man-hating’. *Gaelpeul dallida* is a phrase that DCinside users commonly use, denoting a situation where digital users temporarily upload excessive numbers of posts about a single topic while occupying a forum.⁴⁹ In the Male Celebrities forum, users began to mention

⁴⁸ <https://www.dcinside.com> A web portal for discussion forums, founded in 1999.

⁴⁹ What I describe as ‘driving the flow’ is a similar practice to ‘running in a gallery’ that is illustrated in the PhD dissertation about DCinside freaks (counter-normative identity of DCinside users) by Sunyoung Yang (2015). This practice is mentioned by an interviewee when she describes her use of the forum for a TV drama. It is explained as ‘doing activities in a gallery, meaning, enjoying a gallery’ (p. 140). So general activities in a forum are called ‘running the forum’ and if users indulge in a particular topic for ‘running’, then it is called ‘running the flow [of something] in the gallery’. I call it ‘driving the flow’ in order to emphasise the aspect of momentum.

‘driving the flow of “jahyeom” [dick-hating]⁵⁰’ in February 2015, three months before the Megalia phenomenon emerged. These users were the initial trolls of the MERS forum which started at the end of May 2015. However, the ‘man-hating flow’ they drove before the Megalia phenomenon was unknown to other digital users, because it was merely a temporary amusement among the forum users, and their forum did not attract attention from people outside it.

The Megalia phenomenon began with an unexpected case of ‘man-hating’ trolling, initiated by the heavy users of the Male Celebrities forum. It saw them occupying the newly generated MERS forum, using an eccentric ‘masculine’ style of writing while mobilising hostile language, for uploading wickedly funny posts blaming Korean men for anything and everything. What the trolls uploaded were common statements in *kimchinyeo* discourse, which included racist and offensive jokes and neologisms that implied derogatory meanings. For example, they used a slur for a stereotypical Korean man, ‘kimchinam’, who is ugly, sexist and obsessed with buying sex, poaching the denigrating function of the *kimchinyeo* stereotype. The word *kimchinam* was simply coined by replacing the suffix *~nyeo* (woman) of *kimchinyeo* with *~nam* (man).

Unlike the previous ‘flows’ of ‘man-hating’ in DCinside, this ‘flow’ was attention-grabbing because: public interest in the topic of MERS was high because it was in the middle of the MERS pandemic and the forum was newly generated, which attracted people in DCinside to visit the MERS forum. In other words, the Male Celebrities forum users relocated themselves to the MERS forum and ‘drive the flow’ of ‘man-hating’ that they had already enjoyed in their original forum, in order to troll the new forum and gain attention,

⁵⁰ Following the DCinside culture of using vulgar, masculine language, the Male Celebrities forum users called men as dicks and women as cunts. Thus they said ‘man-hating’ (*namhyeom* in Korean), as ‘dick-hating’ (*jahyeom* in Korean).

utilising the concentrated attention on the topic of MERS at that time – steering the public attention on MERS into their trolling.

At the time when the MERS forum began, the online communities with a male-dominated culture were waging a war against ‘indecent’ female digital users – Yeoseongsidae users, I discussed above (DCinside, 2015).⁵¹ The users of the forum for ‘Muhandojeon’ (a fan forum for a TV show *Muhandojeon*) played an important role in this, and the forum became a ‘headquarters’ for the anti-female-users digital ‘troops’. Indeed, DCinside had been used as a battlefield, not only for this gender war, but also for many other wars between ‘warrior tribes’, who used different forums and were hostile towards other forum users and other community users (Lee, 2010). As the ‘man-hating’ trolling emerged in the MERS forum just after the battle between different community users, DCinside became a virtual battlefield that provided ‘headquartered’ areas for both sides: misogynistic male users and ‘man-hating’ female users.

Since DCinside had generally been male-dominated and was a home for the misogynistic culture of contemporary South Korea, many digital users, as well as the media, paid attention to this unprecedented, ‘man-hating’ phenomenon. Many were concerned that it spread ‘hatred’ (Lee & Kim, 2015). However, many female users were enthusiastic about attacking misogynists using the very means they had suffered: ‘lulz’ of *kimchinyeo* discourse. Female users from all over cyberspace who were interested crowded the forum and tried to watch what was happening inside it (MERS forum user 3-002, 2015). Gradually, they became supporters, participants, or experimenters in ‘man-hating’ trolling.

⁵¹ ‘DCinside news for May 2015’, an article written by DCinside staffers, deals with the ‘Yeoseongsidae uprising’ by depicting how male digital users punished Yeoseongsidae users by arguing with them about their collective deceptions and shaming them by revealing their misbehaviours of sharing pornography and indecent sexual jokes.

MERS forum users appropriated the offensiveness, mostly constituted of trolling and flaming⁵², that irritated others for fun, which violated the boundaries of normative behaviour for women. Therefore, some participants found a word to sugar-coat their behaviour: ‘mirroring’⁵³, showing how female users mimicked what misogynists had done, like mirrors. This concept was a simple interpretation for an inexplicable situation – female digital users, who had previously used an amiable and empathetic tone of speaking, were speaking like Ilbe users, who used coarse and provocative words and styles. This simple explanation was largely accepted by the media and academia, as well as by other digital users.

MERS forum users had to be involved in constant gendered battles with male digital users because they were part of DCinside, and were considered as one of the DCinside’s ‘warrior tribes’. During the endless fights, they learnt how to defeat male misogynists. A cartoon uploaded by a MERS forum user shows how they learnt to triumph over their enemies (Figure 1) (MERS forum user 3-001, 2015).

⁵² Flaming is ‘the act of posting or sending offensive messages over internet’, within online discussion forums including bulletin boards, according to techterms.com. (<https://techterms.com/definition/flaming>)

⁵³ I describe how it functions as a tactic in Megalian movement in Chapter 4.

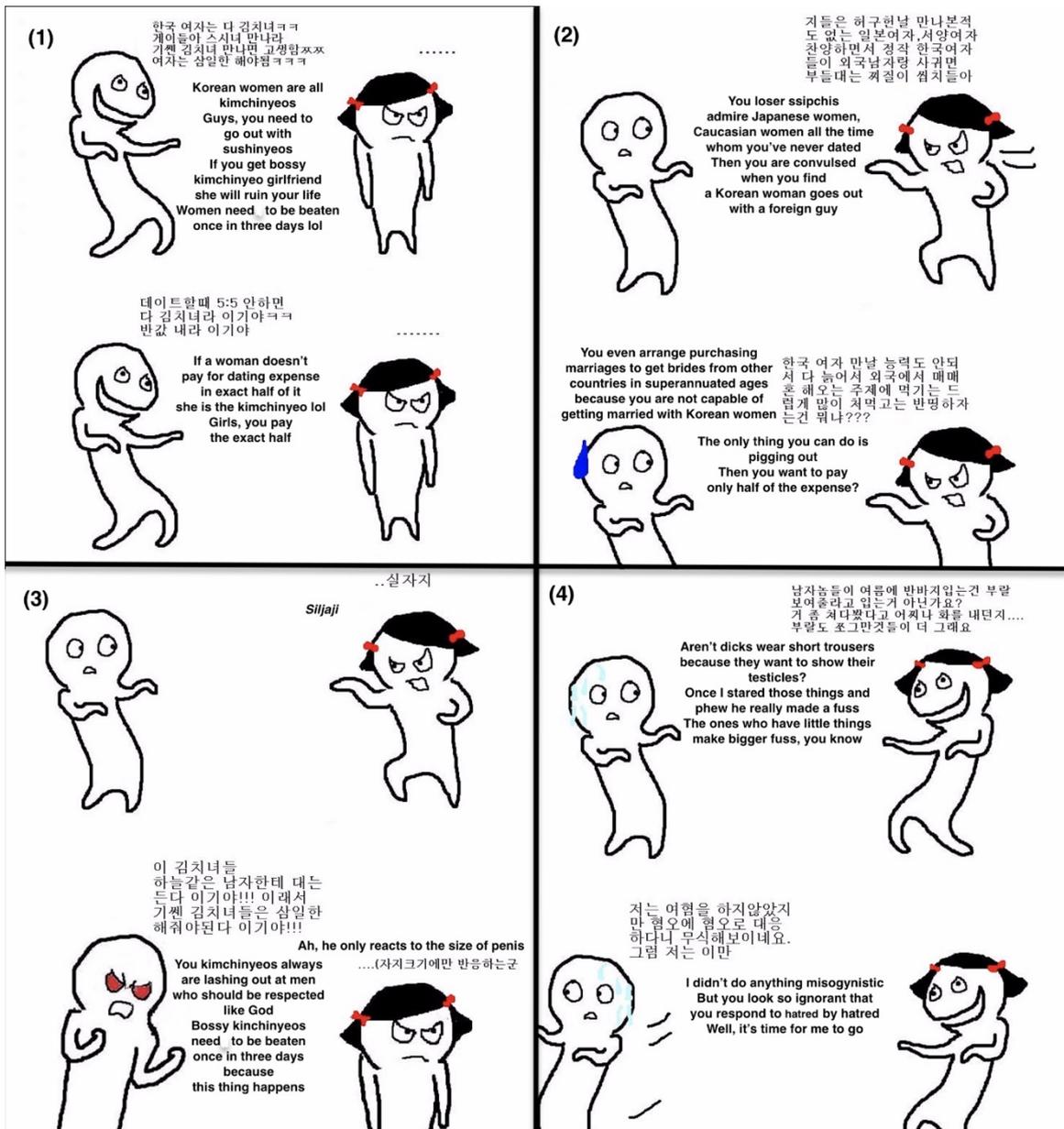


Figure 1 Excerpt from the cartoon “a cartoon that kimchinams can’t read because it’s too long”

The cartoon shows a man and a woman speaking to each other. The man repeats misogynistic claims from the *kimchinyeo* discourse, the woman begins to refute his claims, but he does not understand her and asks for a simple summary. She uses the words of attacking South Korean

masculinity, ‘Kopino’,⁵⁴ ‘rapist’, ‘intimate partner violence’ and ‘siljaji’ (a thin dick like a thread). The man becomes upset at the last word, *siljaji*, a groundless insult compared to the other words. The woman notices that he only reacts to *siljaji* and starts to make derogatory remarks about Korean masculinity, mimicking the *kimchinyeo* discourse the man used at the beginning of the cartoon, and then he leaves the scene. The first part of the cartoon reflects female users’ experiences when they attempt to persuade or criticise misogynists, which does not manage to stop their harassment. The later part of the cartoon represents Megalians’ experiments in swearing at misogynists, which does stop them as they run away from the women who counterattack.

This cartoon was circulated and repeatedly uploaded as ‘classic’ and ‘education material’ for Megalians (Megalia user 3-001, 2015). It shows how MERS forum users experienced battles and gained knowledge during their experiences of defeating their enemies. They learnt that groundless derogatory insults stopped their enemies’ trolling because these words made the men convulse with anger and thus give up arguing. Through trial and error in the constant war against misogynistic invaders, Megalians found that they could win their battles against misogynists by ‘mirroring’ the derogatory remarks that are designed to provoke their enemies’ anger by finding their weaknesses. This is one of the gaming aspects of Megalian activism; a game to elicit the greatest emotional response in targets which appears to be pleasurable and competitive, just as the ‘gaming speech’ of ‘e-bile’⁵⁵ perpetrators do (Jane, 2014, p. 534).

⁵⁴ Kopino refers to children of couples consisting of a Korean man and a Filipina woman, who became a social problem because many of them were abandoned by their Korean fathers.

⁵⁵ Feminist media researcher Emma Jane defines the term ‘e-bile’ to describe the extravagant invective, sexualised threats of violence, and recreational nastiness that have come to constitute a dominant tenor of Internet discourse.

Since Megalians dealt with their enemies who did not react to attempts at discussion but were responsive to insults, their ‘mirroring’ activism become gamified, doing activism as if they play games that aims to achieve a goal of dominating the enemies. In this context, they become ‘power gamers’, while employing the survival strategies they embodied as inhabitants of the digital battlefield. According to the T. L. Taylor’s book on the culture of MMORPG gamers, *Play Between Worlds* (2006), power gamers work and rework the same tasks, gaining more knowledge about how things work in the game than other, ‘average players’ (p. 78). They seem sometimes to regard the game as arduous rather than enjoyable; however, they feel pleasure by achieving knowledge and being experienced in games. Similarly, MERS forum users become ‘man-hating’ trolls by learning and embodying the method of defeating their enemies. Repeatedly defeating their enemies in order to triumph over them enables them to gain knowledge about how this game of the gendered battles work. The process is not always enjoyable and is sometimes exhausting. During these onerous game plays, some people just watch and support as allies or even abandon the stressful situation and leave the scene. For others, however, winning this game of collective battle alongside feminist comrades produces pleasure, more accurately, ‘lulz’ from the enemies’ anguish.

During this earliest period of the Megalia phenomenon, then, participants in the MERS forum invented the ‘mirroring’ strategy and enhanced it by diversifying their ways of practising ‘mirroring’. The spatial aspect of DCinside, which had an open community environment, provided opportunities for any user from inside and outside of DCinside to witness, observe, read and participate in ‘driving the flow’ of ‘man-hating’. This, in turn, generated the abundance and diversity of Megalian practices during this period, cultivating their ability to triumph over male misogynists in the game of gender war.

3.2.2. Megalia: a convergence of veterans and laypersons of feminist activism

DCinside administrators frequently restricted users' community activities on the MERS forum and banned the neologisms coined by female users,⁵⁶ unlike DCinside's general policy of minimising regulations in order to protect 'freedom of speech' (Lee, Y., 2019). Hence, several MERS forum users sought to construct an independent website separate from DCinside from early June 2015.

The independent website Megalia was launched in August 2015. The name was inspired by the feminist novel, Gerd Brantenberg's *Egalia's Daughters*,⁵⁷ a work of fiction about a society in which the gender hierarchy is reversed. The website was developed thanks to a private donation from an unknown person, alleged to be 'a doctor who had supported the women's movement' who was an acquaintance of one MERS forum user after they met in a feminist NGO when the user was working at the organisation (Megalia user 3-002, 2015). This explanation about their relationship shows that the MERS forum user had been or was involved in a feminist NGO and the 'doctor' was a financial supporter, a common type of relationship among Korean NGOs and their supporters. Just as the 'doctor' had donated to the feminist NGO, she would donate to Megalia – presumably expecting that Megalia would be a feminist community. This shows that people from existing political organisations participated in this spontaneous movement of digital users. The funding from someone who had a connection with a feminist NGO opened a pathway for political organisations to intervene in the Megalian movement more actively. This aspect was manifested by Megalians' adoption of political practices that had been utilised by NGO groups as we will see below.

⁵⁶ The neologism *kimchinam* was registered among 'banned terms' in DCinside four days after the man-hating trolling began (Nyuppang user 3-001). It was an unprecedented decision for DCinside, where the word *kimchinyeo* had been used in any forum from the early 2010s.

⁵⁷ *Egalia's Daughters: A Satire of the Sexes*. Written by Gerd Brantenberg in 1977, Korean translation published in 1996.

Political activities, known as ‘projects’, that cooperated with and were largely influenced by existing organisations thrived during the Megalia period, from August to December 2015. Campaigns to eradicate spy-cam crimes grew in Megalia, which the MERS forum users had raised the issue within the period of DCinside inhabitancy. The project team for eliminating the pornography website ‘Soronet’ was founded in October, and aimed to shut down the website, which was notorious for arranging gang rapes and sharing revenge porn as well as photos and videos taken by spy-cams by the spontaneous participation of users. To raise awareness of the problems of spy-cams, Megalians raised funds for a billboard advertisement in a subway station. Since the Megalia community did not have an explicit representative, in order to protect participants from the stigmatisation of being a ‘man-hater’, they worked with a feminist NGO for the advertisement’s official contract (Yeoseongsidae user 3-002, 2017). Megalians also expressed their support for a member of parliament who had urged the national police agency to investigate Soronet by donating money to her. These kinds of engagement with participatory politics were not new, in terms of the political participation of digital users. Female digital users had expressed their support for politicians or shown their opinions on various political issues by fundraising or campaigning via online communities since the late 2000s (Park, 2010). NGO practices and digital practices, campaigning and supporting politicians/political parties, were blended in Megalia. Yet, there were novel practices at the boundaries of politics; the ‘post-it note project’ and ‘boryeok’ on digital news as I will now discuss (Kim et al., 2018).

The ‘post-it note project’ began in October 2015. Megalians wrote messages about their own feminist ideas on post-it notes and left them inside the toilet stalls of public bathrooms where each of them usually used, in order to disseminate feminist ideas and attract newcomers to Megalia. As well as leaving the notes, they took photos of them to ‘verify’ their acts, and shared these photos online, labelled with numbers and stating locations, which

showed that Megalians had done this over 700 times. Expressing opinions by sticking up post-it notes was a practice of K-pop fandom when fans wanted to protest against decisions of the management agency. K-pop fans tried to make their messages heard by collectively leaving post-it notes on the walls of company's building several times from 2009 onward (one of its earliest cases can be found at the blog of Miacarlany, 2009). We can see that this is a method used by people who did not have public pathways to send their message. Megalians who could not find a way to disseminate feminist ideas, specifically messages that might have been read as 'man-hating' at that time, individually, but at the same time collectively, left post-it notes. They sent these messages to those who might use the same toilet, another woman, whoever she might be. This post-it note activism in toilets was continued by users in Megalia and Womad, because it actually attracted newcomers.

*Boryeok*⁵⁸ is a Megalian practice of occupying the comments pages in digital news outlets by leaving a number of provocative comments and upvoting them, sometimes to irritate misogynistic users, sometimes to disseminate feminist ideas. This had also been a fandom practice, which had started in the early 2010s. Through the upvote and downvote system on the comments pages that news companies provided, fans of K-pop idols left and upvoted comments that had messages of support for their stars to make the nice comments stand out on the page. In their words, they had 'purified' the comments.⁵⁹ Comments pages in digital news outlets had been spaces where male users poured out their misogynistic ideas without reason. Megalians did the same, but uploaded man-hating comments.

⁵⁸ *Boryeok* is a compound of 'boji' (cunt) and 'hwaryeok jiwon' (fire support) and was coined by Megalians following the Korean digital culture of using military terms that are commonly used in real-time strategy games.

⁵⁹ One of the Facebook groups that Megalians gathered for *boryeok* in 2016 had the title of 'purify', and this shows that digital feminists understood their *boryeok* act as juxtaposed with the comment 'purification'.

In addition to new and old forms of political practice, Megalia also provided a hybrid pathway to feminist politics for users, generated by its interface. The website Megalia was an open community, similar to DCinside. Any user could read the posts without registration but could upvote posts and upload posts or comments only by registering on the Megalia website, using an email address. It had boards for ‘upcoming events’ and ‘notices from administrators’ on the main interface, which resembled the common formations of online communities, rather than the forums of DCinside that did not show the presence of an administrator on the interface. Feminist NGOs promoted their events on the board for ‘upcoming events’. This shows that people from political organisations not only went into Megalia but were also able to use the space to promote themselves. This in turn provided opportunities for casual digital users to get close to NGOs, which had hitherto been difficult for ordinary citizens.

The users of the MERS forum largely migrated to Megalia, and, at the same time, many users from beyond DCinside became new members as it became increasingly popular. Due to this population influx from other communities, conflicts between Megalia users around ‘channae’ (the smell of a café) were constant. The word *channae* had been offensively applied by users of DCinside as they picked out the difference of their culture from that of female-dominated communities, which were usually in the system with titles that included the word ‘café’ which sells tea – *cha* in Korean. In contrast to the assertive and aggressive style of speaking in DCinside, *channae* signifies the speaking tone of female-dominated community users, which is intimate, warm and amenable, speaking whilst considering others’ opinions all the time.

Megalians could see how hostile language use, which was completely different from the common speaking style of women in digital space, had changed their own digital experience. Therefore, advocates of online hostility refused the café style and continued to follow the notion of DCinside that performing offensiveness is a kind of ‘ritual’ to become a ‘warrior

tribe' (Lee, G., 2012, pp. 226–229). Users repeatedly drove the flow of 'bashing *channae*' (denouncing users who 'smelt of café' in their speaking). This confirms that users from different communities outside DCinside made up a significant proportion of the newcomers to Megalia. I am not suggesting that people who 'smelt of café' were all newcomers. Rather, I want to point out that the fact that *channae* could be an issue for debate in Megalia shows that there were significant numbers of users who seemed unfamiliar or uncomfortable with the 'masculine' culture of hostile language use and the appropriation of digital offensiveness, so much so that other users could notice their existence even in this anonymous environment.

One of the heightened conflicts was around making memes and slang words involving dead people. Some users claimed that this was going too far, holding that the Megalian movement should work together with other feminist NGOs, in a society where ridiculing a dead person is taboo (Megalia user 3-004, 2015). Megalians who advocated the use of memes and slang words claimed that using them provided a bigger 'hit feel' (Megalia user 3-005, 2015), which refers to the amount of emotional responses that an invective/insult can evoke from enemies. After the dispute, several users who advocated an extremist use of memes left the community. However, in the end Megalians agreed to use the memes and slang words because they realised that their self-control at not violating the taboo actually 'pleased Korean men', their enemies (Megalia user 3-007, 2015) and their aim was to offend their enemies, not please them in any way.

Another heightened conflict led to the ultimate disintegration of Megalia, because the website administrators intervened in the dispute in a strict manner. In December 2015, the use of the word 'ttongkkochung' (butthole-bug)⁶⁰ spurred a dispute between people who thought it could be used to insult Korean gay men and others who thought the word itself was

⁶⁰ *Ttongkkochung* means gay, and was originally used in DCinside for teasing male fans of sports stars, meaning 'he likes his star like a gay man'.

homophobic and so should not be used in Megalia. During the dispute, the ‘hit feel’ was mentioned again. One Megalian argued that ‘this short word is more useful for beating up [Korean men] in the circumstance where they have never listened to our voices when we spoke at length’ (Megalia user 3-008, 2015), emphasising the efficiency and effect of using derogatory invectives in defeating their enemies. However, some users believed Megalia to be a space for feminist purposes and that ‘derogatory remarks about sexual minorities are not feminism’ (Megalia administrator 3-001, 2015). This idea represented the decision of the administrators, who banned use of this word in Megalia, which led to many users leaving the community.

The disputes around the use of hostile language reveal that Megalian activism was understood differently by different participants. After the Megalian community disintegrated, the Megalia website declined and then disappeared. However, Womad, the community to which the users who did not agree with the decision of Megalia administrators migrated, was active and thrived during the days of Megalia’s decline. This reveals that Megalian activism was driven by the actors who fought against male digital users, while appropriating whatever could ‘beat up’ their enemies with a ‘hit feel’, rather than those who protected ‘proper’ feminist values in the community. It also suggests that the momentum of this movement was the fun and enjoyment of the collective conduct of offensiveness, both inside and outside Megalia. Hence, this feminist activism activated by ‘lulz’ kept reproducing itself in the Womad community.

It is my understanding that the more conventional forms of feminist activities, such as the enlightenment and consciousness raising of participants, within the Megalian movement were by-products of digital behaviours, which derived from users’ participation in digital offensiveness. Their involvement in this activism enabled them to join in fun produced by Megalian activities – the fun of collectively conducting digital offensiveness, ‘beating up’

enemies, triumphing over misogynistic attacks, breaching gender norms and gaining a ‘man-hating’ perspective along with other women. Involvement in the constant battles had the goal of irritating and triumphing over misogynists. This, in turn, gave them the ability to perceive misogyny both online and offline; something that can be interpreted as feminist. In this context, the collective abuse of the internet through ‘man-hating’, in other words the ‘lulz’ of ‘man-hating’ trolling, was the momentum of this feminist movement. This could no longer be pursued within Megalia due to the beliefs around ‘proper’ feminism that the administrators held.

Why was it, then, that made ‘proper’ feminism win in Megalia? The source of funding, which I discussed at the beginning of this section, essentially took effect. The material basis of Megalia, the online space itself, was constructed through this funding, from a person who advocated for a feminist NGO. The ‘proper’ feminism that feminist NGOs promote could not allow ‘Megalian’ feminism, in which the essence of the movement is creating fun by appropriating digital offensiveness, because it sometimes transgresses the boundaries of ‘proper’ feminism. This conflict on what constitutes a feminist movement will be discussed in Chapter 6, when I analyse the practice of this digitally mediated movement. Here, I emphasise that how the spatial environment of activism is developed, and from which source, eventually has an effect on the political aim of the space. This sometimes overwhelms the collective ‘will’ of participants.

The convergence of the experts and laypersons of feminist activism in Megalia was largely undone by Megalia’s disintegration in December 2015. In Megalia, experts from NGOs composed a proportion of Megalian participants. Their interventions influenced the political practices of Megalians, while being mixed with the habits of participatory politics that had already been conducted in online communities and the habits of fandom in which many Korean women had once been involved. Conflicts between users over the level of

offensiveness were inevitable because the forms of online misogyny they parodied were constituted of immoral, anti-social, politically incorrect expressions and practices that sometimes violated taboos, so that ordinary female users, who smelt of *channae*, and ‘proper’ feminists did not use them. The decline of Megalia and the rise of Womad demonstrated what had constituted Megalian activism: women’s participation in ‘man-hating’ that made them share the emotion of ‘lulz’. This bad breakup caused Womad users to invent a new activist culture that was different from existing ones, which I will discuss in Chapter 6.

3.2.3. Womad-shelter⁶¹: the start of ‘community’⁶² feminism

Womad-shelter was founded in December 2015 on an online community platform that was provided by the internet company, Daum. When Megalians moved to Womad-shelter, they blamed Korean men for the disruption of Megalia. Any Korean man was basically a ‘sitting duck’ whom they could blame for provoking the uproar in Megalia. Due to its anonymous environment of Megalia, trolls could easily disrupt Megalians’ communication, while being involved in it. Megalians developed a habit of ‘jajimori’ (meaning, hounding a dick out, excluding a particular speaker/troll from conversation by branding the user a man)⁶³. Any uproar or disturbance could be explained by the claim that ‘a dick caused it’ because one of

⁶¹ Womad users planned to develop an independent website just after they left Megalia in December 2015. Thus they entitled their habitat in Daum café space a ‘temporary shelter for Womad users’ (hereafter Womad-shelter). The development of this website kept being delayed so that Womad users stayed in the Daum café system for one year and three months, until the Womad website was finally launched in February 2017.

⁶² ‘Community’ in this title refers to ‘online communities’, largely ‘café communities’, in which many Korean digital users live and share their life experiences.

⁶³ This is similar to the rule of ‘bomingban’ in Ilbe, which community rule imposes that a woman/cunt is banned from using the community if she self-discloses as a woman. I discuss its function in the later part of this chapter.

Megalia's principles was mimicking misogyny, which included the basic attitude of blaming women – men for Megalians – for anything that went wrong. In this context, Womad became a women-only community in order to avoid repeating the mistake of Megalia, which was they did not strictly exclude men who eventually caused the disintegration of Megalia, in their scenario based on the logic of *jajimori*.

Womad-shelter resided in the community space of Daum, which named its community space service a 'café' (hereafter Daum café). It therefore became much more accessible to other female-dominated community users who had inhabited the Daum café platform. The Daum café service had started in 1999 and several female-dominated communities had resided in it from around 2000. Many female digital users were residing in cafés, as I mentioned above. In December 2015, when Megalians migrated to the platform, these female-dominated communities were very large. For example, Seongda, which started in 1999, had 770,000 members and Jjukppang, which started in 2003, had 1,560,000 members. The whole female population of these Daum cafés cannot be calculated because users could join multiple cafés, sometimes with more than one account, and these communities were not all women-only. Even so, the influence of the Daum café seems significant considering that the total population of women in their twenties and thirties in South Korea in 2015 was 6,800,000 (KOSIS, 2019) and Yeoseongsidae, which was a women-only community that was only open to women in this age group, had 630,000 members at that time.

Unlike open community spaces such as DCinside or Megalia, the Daum café platform had a closed interface. To use it, users needed to create an account for the Daum service, which required them to register their resident registration numbers,⁶⁴ including information about

⁶⁴ The resident registration number is the national identification number system that is issued to all residents of South Korea. Every Korean citizen registers themselves with this system when they turn 17 and are issued resident registration cards that contain their name, registration number, home address and picture.

their gender, age and real name, and then they could join each café community. Owing to this membership registration, the Womad-shelter could be more strictly women-only because administrators of each café in Daum system could set options to filter members by their gender, using the information that was saved by the company. In this process, most male users who had participated in Megalia were systematically filtered out from Womad. At the same time, some female users who could not or did not want to register for the Daum system were barred from the community.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, some male users managed to join Womad-shelter by using others' IDs in order to leak posts from it to criticise Womad users.⁶⁶

During this phase, some Megalians returned to the communities or social media platforms where they had resided before. Some of them established a Facebook group. One of my interviewees, Jiyeon, says that Daum café was inconvenient for her and felt suffocating because she was used to using open community platforms. When Megalia divided and she could not be accommodated in Womad-shelter, she chose to stay in Facebook. The Facebook group she joined initially had the purpose of doing *boryeok*, usually on Facebook news pages. It grew into a secret group of 700 members who were loyal to their Facebook-feminist activism. The population in the Megalia website had therefore dispersed into DCinside, Twitter, Facebook and Daum café, with their 'base camp' in Daum, at the Womad-shelter.

⁶⁵ As the Daum system had a real-name policy, users needed to submit their resident registration number through public certificate, which was processed by the mobile verification of each user, requiring a mobile number registered in South Korea. This made it difficult for some Megalia users who lived abroad to access Womad-shelter.

⁶⁶ Representatively, users of the forum for Muhandojeon stayed in Womad-shelter and took screenshots to share women's misbehaviours as they had done with Yeoseongsidae posts, as I mentioned in the previous section. Users of Oyu, one of the biggest male-dominated communities at that time, also uploaded massive numbers of screenshots from Womad-shelter until the administrator of the website asked users not to upload Womad materials that intensified the misogynistic atmosphere in the community.

Digital feminism was cultivated within this online geography, and the form that Megalian activism took here was different from the previous activism, as I named it in the section title: ‘community’ feminism.

‘Man-hating’ feminism in the networked online communities

In the Daum café system, networked communication between different café users was much easier using the technology it provided. The mobile application for the Daum café platform provided an interface that displayed bookmarks for cafés and their boards on its main page so that users could directly approach one of the spots in the cafés as they arranged their bookmarks. This interface allowed users to freely move between posts, boards and cafés. Through this technological environment, female-dominated online communities in Daum café were influenced by the ‘man-hating’ culture of Megalia/Womad and it came to be the place where users could gather to discuss issues relating to misogyny, more markedly after the Gangnam station murder in 2016 (DCinside user 3-002, 2017), which I will describe below.

Although the turmoil caused by migration and the dispersed population weakened the ongoing political actions, the ‘post-it note project’ and *boryeok* continued in Womad. Along with these acts, Megalians’ political engagement in the offline world became bolder after May 2016, when the Gangnam district murder occurred. I emphasise the aspect of networked activism by community users in this section, while saving a discussion of the memefication and augmentation of gender war that became salient by this incident for Chapter 4. On 17 May 2016, a young woman was murdered and this was trivialised as an incident perpetrated by a person with a mental health disorder. The media and the police reported it as the personal misfortune of the victim, even though the offender claimed that he had committed the murder with misogynistic motives. Womad users resituated the incident as something that

any woman could experience. This incident became a huge issue as users of Womad and Yeoseongsidae started to attach post-it notes bearing their commemorative messages on the gate of the Gangnam station in order to raise awareness about the murder.

After the offline appearances in Gangnam, Womad users began to actively organise protests and rallies in order to express their opinions in public. For example, the Bwave (Black-wave) protest, a campaign for the ‘legalisation of termination of pregnancy’, started in October, inspired by The Black Protest, spontaneous women’s activism against the tightening of abortion laws in Poland (Bwave staff 3-001, 2016). The agencies of the Bwave protests were alleged to be composed of ‘Womad and women’s communities alliance (Daum café Nyuppang, Developing women’s village, Barcode, Supsokgatchideul and Yeoseongsidae)’ (Narang, 2016). These online communities resided on the Daum platform and two of them were derived from Womad.⁶⁷ We can see here that Womad-oriented communities banded together with other women’s online communities to engage in feminist struggle.

During the same period, ‘Joint Action to Abolish the Abortion Ban for All’ was launched by feminist NGOs (Womanlink, 2016).⁶⁸ Their parallel existence shows, on the one hand, that digital feminists around Womad and less-digital feminists around NGOs were both acting on urgent problems in society and, on the other hand, that Womad was obviously

⁶⁷ As Womad continued to be vicious and prioritised ‘man-hating’ in its online discussions, Womad users who wanted to share other things rather than ‘man-hating’, which was possible in ordinary online communities, established different cafés in the Daum system. Womad users established: communities for less vicious ‘man-hating’ with a less hostile speaking tone (Supsokgatchideul, meaning ‘God-women’ in the forest); for lesbians (Lebsody); for discussing an anti-marriage lifestyle (No-M, Only for no-marriage); for discussing the development of a women’s town (Developing women’s village); and for sharing information about expatriation (Ex-Joseon café).

⁶⁸ This was an umbrella group for abortion rights in South Korea, which was composed of feminist NGOs (Kang & Yoon, 2018). It held four protests and a press conference from September 2017 to April 2019.

separated from feminist groups involved in NGOs, which had been mingling with each other since the date they resided in Megalia website.

What Womad users did after they separated themselves from the influence of NGO feminism clearly shows how they were different from the ‘proper’ feminist NGOs. From June to July of 2016, Womad users ‘drove the flow’ of abortion in order to challenge the stigma surrounding it, by ‘verifying’ their own abortions with photos of aborted fetuses and claiming that they ate them as ‘bibimbab’ (Korean mixed rice bowl). These were really photos of menstrual blood or images of fabricated foetus-like creatures that could be downloaded from the internet and normal mixed rice bowls that usually had red sauce on them. These photos spread across other communities and provoked disgusted reactions from both male and female digital users⁶⁹, which encouraged the demonisation of Womad. Since this tactic of stimulating people’s disgust succeeded in gaining public attention, users’ playful activities of ‘verifying abortion’ continued throughout Womad and many ‘foetus bibimbab’ posts were uploaded whenever the issue of abortion was raised.

Even though Womad itself had only 34,000 members at its peak (November 2016), the Daum café system provided an opportunity to expand the numbers of people who could simultaneously participate in discussions. A Womad post, ‘female-dominated communities nowadays’, shows how the discussions about digital feminism were shared among Daum café communities (Womad user 3-003, n.d.) in the environment of café platform. This post contains two cartoons and three screenshots of replies from Yeoseongsidae posts and was uploaded onto Womad. The cartoons have four differently coloured characters who represent

⁶⁹ Their reactions can be found in their online communities (Yeoseongsidae user 3-004, 2016; Bobaedream user 3-001, 2016).

users of the Daum cafés: Womad-shelter, Ladism,⁷⁰ Ssangko⁷¹ and Yeoseongsidae. These four characters demonstrate their own practices of ‘man-hating’/feminism. The Womad-shelter user threatens Korean men with extreme language, the Ladism user teases them with less critical words, the Ssangko user bullies them by criticising their ugly appearance, while the Yeoseongsidae users collectively discuss and act out sundry things, such as donating, protesting, raising petitions and shouting derogatory words in order to overwhelm them. The constant offline protests and rallies organised by digital feminists during this period were buttressed by this setting of discourse sharing, among huge numbers of participants and through diverse conversations in different venues via the Daum system. This means that this popular feminism was based on the café-community platform, which created a ‘feminism of networked communities’.

In this online sphere of ‘community’ feminism, the culture of women-exclusive discussion thrived, and allowed Womad users to freely discuss counter-normative ideas. In Womad-shelter, users developed their feminist discourses that had originated in Megalia into more sophisticated forms and, as we will now see, applied them to their lives in practice. This became the most prominent outcome of digital feminism after 2015. It can be seen in the ‘ex-corset’ (‘talkoreuset’ in Korean, meaning taking off one’s corset) and *bihon* (choosing not to get married) phenomena. These two agendas were generated by Megalians or feminists before Megalians; however, they gained expanded and intensified meanings via online community users after 2016.

⁷⁰ The forerunner of Supsokgatchideul, which was derived from Womad.

⁷¹ <http://cafe.daum.net/ssanguryo> Ssangko café started as an online community for sharing information about cosmetic surgery in 2003 (C. Lee, 2010). The Megalian culture of actively performing *Kimchinyeo*, encouraging women to own products of the brand Chanel and consume Starbucks, in order to cast out Ilbe users, was partially influenced by the culture of these female-dominated communities (Yoon, 2013).

‘Ex-corset’: refusing the enforced labour of achieving standard femininity

‘Corset’ connoted the patriarchal oppression of women in Megalia, in which Megalians encouraged users to take off the (symbolic) corsets that restricted women’s behaviour (Choi, J., 2015). Megalians used this word to refer to their former unconscious embodiment of gendered norms, including ‘constantly making excuses for their own behaviour’ (Megalia user 3-006, 2015). In this sense, corset came to mean an embodied attitude of behaving like a *gaenyeom-nyeo* (a woman whose behaviour follows social norms, mentioned in 3.1.3), as though they were wearing a virtual corset – the tightly fit garment that shapes the figure – on their body. In this section, I focus on how Megalians coined the word and developed its use in their feminist discourse, leaving its evolution into a practical form of activism for Chapter 7.

The symbolic meaning of ‘corset’ for Megalians encompasses the socially required burden or labour that is differentially required according to gender. The Womad post, ‘Driving the flow of health, the flow of success, is all good, but don’t impose another standard of “normalcy”’ illustrates the core of the ex-corset argument (Womad user 3-004, n.d.). The poster takes the example of a male celebrity who appears on the reality TV show, *I Live Alone*, which observes the everyday life of celebrities who are single. One of the casts, a famous web-comic writer, Gian84, is infamous for his bad hygiene with the media reporting in 2016 that ‘his dirty habits had shocked viewers of the show’ (Chosun.com, 2016). The Womad user points out in her post that Gian84 is just an average Korean man and that his behaviour is the norm for men in South Korean society who are raised without having to do chores and who are able to choose to be lazy with the excuse that ‘boys can’t help it’. She claims further that women have been indoctrinated with the need to be perfect in everything they do, while men have been encouraged to achieve the freedom of living however they

desire. For this freedom of men, according to her explanation, ‘women spontaneously made themselves perfect [to serve men’s needs], thus providing care and devotion, domestic labour, emotional and sexual labour, fashioning themselves as sexual objects [for potential male partners] and voluntarily objectifying themselves’. She states that ‘not only makeup, but also washing oneself, cleaning one’s room and living like a decent human being’, at which Gian84 seemed to fail to meet the standards but was allowed to do so, are all ‘corsets’ that impose stricter standards on women than men. In this sense, the ‘corset’ comes to mean women’s socially imposed unfair labour due to the stricter standards that are expected of them; and ‘ex-corset’ comes to mean challenging this enforced gendered labour and the embodied inclination to undertake it docilely.

Womad users applied ‘ex-corset’ in diverse ways in their behaviours and activities, and in doing so, they caused controversies. Defining makeup as a ‘corset’ sparked debates among digital feminists because some thought that the ‘ex-corset’ discourse restricted women’s desire to pursue beauty, and others claimed that the desire itself is socially constructed and imposes extra labour on women (Womad user 3-013, 2016). Their ‘ex-corset’ of morality provoked astonishment even among users. Users criticised the ‘moral’ attitudes of women who take care of animals and empathise excessively with them. Spiteful users uploaded crass photos of abused animals, claiming that ‘these animals are male’ and that it was acceptable to upload them because Womad was a ‘man-hating’ community (Womad user 3-006, 2016). ‘Ex-corset’ also applied to insulting male celebrities without ethical barriers (Womad user 3-007, 2016), as well as accepting sex workers as users, thereby challenging the ‘whore stigma’ that was involved in socially designated sexual morality. They claimed for example that ‘we [Korean women] are all whores’ because of being ‘treated as sex workers in whatever occupation’, alluding here to how female workers are judged by their sexual attractiveness and are expected to provide gendered services for men (Womad user 3-008, n.d.). Womad

users wanted to challenge popular discourse on sex workers based on contempt. Their aim was achieved through sex worker-Womad users sharing their own narratives of becoming ‘man-haters’ as a result of dealing with male clients in the sex industry. If sex workers were ‘man-haters’ and keen to provide new sources of ‘man-hating’, they were welcomed as Womad users.

The meaning of ‘ex-corset’ became narrower after 2017 as a result of interventions by online platforms (Instagram and Jjukppang café) outside Womad. In this context, the discourse became more focused on oppressive beauty standards for young women, who were the primary users of the platforms. Here, the ‘ex-corset’ movement came to mean ‘a movement against beauty practices’ (Kuk, Park, & Norma, 2018), following this popularised interpretation.

4B: refusing exploitative practices of state patriarchy

The word *bihon* was coined in the late 1990s to refer to the status of remaining single and to the people who choose to do so. This term replaced the commonly used word for unmarried, *mihon*, which implies one is ‘not yet married’ (Hankyeong, 2001; emphasis added).

Megalianism appropriated the word *bihon* for ‘man-hating’ purposes, with the implication that Korean women should boycott Korean men as marital partners. This gradually developed into a movement advocating that women reconstruct their lives through excluding male involvement. In this section, I explain how *bihon* evolved into the 4B movement within the Megalia phenomenon, keeping the discussion of making an activism from the idea for Chapter 7.

In the context of ‘man-hating’, Megalianism degraded Korean men as inadequate partners, comparing them to men of other nationalities who ostensibly have less misogynistic mindsets. Megalianism shared their own stories of suffering from STDs transmitted by their ex-

boyfriends, evidencing them with statistics of the high rate of visiting brothels among South Korean men, alleged to be the major infection route for STDs (Megalia user 3-003, 2015), and the low rate of using condoms (11% in 2014), which increased the risk of infection (Park, S., 2017). Within these narratives, individual Korean men who maintained the toxic masculine culture of damaging their partners were the problem, to which Korean women would respond by using the individual tactic of not marrying them in order to ‘weed out’ the uncivilised ones. However, as the government revealed its pursuit of using women’s bodies and reproductive capability to boost the national economy, *bihon* became a political agenda of resistance to state patriarchy.

The South Korean government’s launching of the online ‘National Birth Map’ in December 2016 brought to the fore how women’s reproductive bodies are perceived as objects to be managed. The map visualised the number of ‘women of reproductive age’ residing in each municipality via the use of pink dots. It stirred heated debate and criticism, and Bwave (a group for abortion rights) organised an offline protest claiming their ‘refusal to be fertile’. While the birth map website was soon shut down (Choe, 2016), another event in February 2017 rekindled the debate. It concerned a paper presented by Jong-wook Won, a researcher at KIHASA (the Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs). According to the press release, Won’s presentation attributed South Korea’s low birth rate to the deferral of marriage, women’s withdrawal from the marriage market, and women’s tendency towards hypergamy. He even proposed that a ‘harmless conspiracy’ should be propagated through the popular media to influence women to choose hypogamy.

These occurrences taught digital feminists how the female body counts in South Korea. They realised that, even if they give up or postpone marriage, it is the reproductive bodies of women that matter to the nation. Now they could see that it was not only individual men and their personal idiosyncrasies that they needed to fight. Rather, they witnessed how South

Korean society as a whole, and its patriarchal state structure, seeks to exploit women and the female body, as a means of its own reproduction.

As they collectively criticised state patriarchy, digital feminists tied *bihon* and ‘bichulsan’ (rejecting birth) together to become their slogan *bihon, bichulsan* (Yeoseongsidae user 3-005, 2016). The slogan was soon developed into *bihon, bichulsan, biyeonae* [rejecting romantic relationships], *bisekseu* [rejecting sexual relationship] in response to the ‘birth map’ incident. These four words, which all start with the sound ‘bi’, became ‘4B’, referring to Womad users’ intention to boycott Korean men and the reproductive duty of women that the nation was seeking to impose.

The slogan of 4B, boycotting marriage and birth, romantic and sexual relationships, seems radical and unrealistic. Residing in the populist environment of ‘community’ feminism, digital feminists revised and selected aspects of 4B in order to apply the slogan to their lives in practice. The popularised form of the 4B movement was the spread of the idea of *bihon* and of the *bihon* movement among the young generation. *Bihon* discourse was popularised by online community users who actively accepted this idea and redesigned their lives without men.

The digital feminist geography after Megalia: networked café communities and social media

In Womad-shelter, the mixed population of former Megalia users and former/ongoing online community users produced feminist discourse together, as I described in previous sections, and that sometimes led to conflicts between them. An important issue that created disturbances among Womad users was the use of memes about the former president Geunhye Park (2013-2017) during the period of her impeachment from 2016 to 2017.

The disturbance started like this: In September 2016, it was known to digital users that Womad administrators became the target of background checks by the police and were

accused of being involved in ‘abetting defamation’ and ‘preparation for murder’ due to prank posts uploaded by Womad users (Womad administrator 3-001, 2016). Since Daum company and the police collaborated in order to track down Womad users, these users intensified their digital anonymity and began to use memes about President Park as both a tactic to protect themselves and for fun. Womad users thought that the use of her photos as memes could be a gimmick because there was a rumour that the National Intelligence Service, the chief intelligence agency of South Korea, supported Ilbe because its users sided with the Park government. Womad users tactically used this rumour by disguising themselves as fans of President Park, pretending this fandom had been generated in Womad because she was a single woman (*bihon*) and did not have a child (*bichulsan*) (Yeoseongsidae user 3-006, 2016). While general users performed as fans of Park, some users actually claimed to be defending her situation.

Most Womad users ‘drove the flow’ of admiring Park to generate fun and without a political agenda (Womad user 3-009). During the process of the impeachment of President Park, Womad users criticised how the media and politicians were attacking her with unproven evidence and misogynistic forms of defamation, such as circulating rumours about her private life and blaming her mistakes on her femininity⁷². Since they realised that critiques of Park unfairly related her gender to her wrongdoings, Womad users eventually decided to side with her, while making fun of the political world itself. For example, they claimed that ‘Godmother Geun-hye is simply applying the rule of exact half [between men and women]⁷³ to political corruption [because male politicians had committed corruption in

⁷² Similar things happen to female politicians in other countries as well. See Manne, 2017.

⁷³ The ‘rule of exact half’ is one of the important claims in *kimchinyeo* discourse that a man and a woman in a romantic relationship should spend exactly same amount on expenses in order to challenge the relations of ‘a privileged woman and an exploited man’. Making a joke about this rule by applying it to the case of Park mocked the devotees of *kimchinyeo* discourse and Korean men in

many ways and many times over]’ and that she aimed to achieve ‘equality’ between men and women in the numbers of conducted political corruption (Womad user 3-005, 2016).

Meanwhile, opponents of the Park government were involved in Womad and were naturally irritated by the production and use of these memes. The problem was that many Daum café users were active opponents of the president and her government. As I addressed in Chapter 1, female digital users had engaged with participatory politics through their online communities. During the 2008 Anti-US beef protest,⁷⁴ many digital users protested against the Lee Myung-bak government (2008-2013) of the Liberty Korea Party. Particularly, the Daum café communities, Ssangko, Souldresser and Hwajangbal, created a coalition for the protest and users actively participated it (Lee, C., 2010). After that experience in 2008, the users of the communities continued with their political acts of fundraising and campaigns, which led to a position where objecting to the Liberty Korea Party and its members, including Park, became an important identity for those community users. In this situation, many settlers of Daum cafés eventually split from Womad due to the playful use of the memes of Park and users’ support on her. We can see that the people who could not dissociate their political creeds from the ‘lulz’⁷⁵ they had enjoyed left the space for troll feminism.

While the Daum café network aligned and split during 2016, social media users were active in spreading feminist ideas in their platforms. Some digital feminists spread feminist messages on Facebook, while struggling with misogynistic users. Since Facebook was used by the young generation, especially college students, who used its page for their communities, the Facebook pages of digital feminism became routes for young people to get

general, while also criticising the media and politicians who had trivialised corruption among male politicians but were exaggerating Park’s case.

⁷⁴ The 2008 Anti-US beef protest was an anti-government rally that lasted three months.

⁷⁵ This trolls’ ability to dissociate something from its context is described as ‘lulz fetishism’ (Phillips, 2015), which I discuss in section 5.1.

involved in digital feminism. In this period, Twitter users actively pursued the culture of ‘calling out’ the prevalent sexual violence against women in the communities they were involved in, which was shown in the hashtag activism of #sexual_abuse_in_OO [a certain field] in late 2016.

Through witnessing how the Megalia phenomenon occurred, digital users realised that the ‘man-hating’ trolling directed towards misogynists actually stopped their online behaviours. This enlightened ordinary female digital users who had been the target of misogyny. It seems rather natural that the primary victims of online misogyny before the Megalia phenomenon, the users of women’s online communities, accepted and followed the Megalian way of fighting against it. The quick absorption of Megalian/‘man-hating’ culture by Daum café users confirms this aspect. The situation whereby the descendants of the Megalia community settled in the Daum café system accelerated the assimilation of online community users into Megalian culture, because transmitting data between communities had become much easier than before. The direct activism within Womad-shelter was buttressed by huge numbers of digital users who could directly or indirectly participate in the production of feminist discourses via the café platform.

The Daum café system linked different online communities, used by over one million female users (Womad user 3-001, n.d.). As a result, the discourses produced in Womad-shelter were able to meet the popular needs of women, especially young women in their twenties and thirties who were the major users of the Daum cafés. During the Daum café-centred digital feminist movement, these community users learnt how to fight misogyny by offending misogynists, rather than limiting their behaviours to defending themselves in their closed café communities as they had previously done. These conditions of participants and the platform became the foundation for the popular feminist politics of Womad.

3.2.4. Womad website: demonising Womad and the prospering of digital feminism outside Womad

In February 2017, Womad users developed a website that could evade South Korean law because they had been surrounded by the censorship of the Daum company and by police authorities in Womad-shelter. On the new Womad website, users progressed to extreme forms of ‘man-hating’ while experimenting with enhanced digital offensiveness because they were free from the interference of authoritative institutions. After they left the Daum platform, however, the popular appeal of their discourse was undermined and the group were increasingly demonised due to their explicit separation from ‘ordinary’ Daum café users.

I define Womad as web boards for female trolls, rather than feminists or female users, because the technical arrangement of Womad allows users to follow the ‘anything goes’ culture, to the extent that it even gave users the opportunity to violate the legal boundaries of using the South Korean web. After October 2017, however, this merit of the web was lost, which caused the active population of Womad to severely decline and their ‘anything goes’ culture to be curtailed.

Womad: a fortress for troll feminists

Womad’s head administrator was alleged to be a woman who lived outside South Korea and held citizenship of another country (Womad administrator 3-002, 2017). She was elected to the position because someone who has a different nationality is not commonly investigated by the police for the kind of trivial violations of the law that often occurred in Womad, such as uploading photos without consent or engaging in online defamation. The website’s server was also in another country to evade the South Korean police authorities. Womad users had learnt how to evade the law through their previous experiences of struggling with misogynistic digital crimes, which were not punished because the police claimed that they

could not investigate websites that had their servers in other countries (Park & Lee, 2016). These methods of evading South Korean law intensified the wicked aspect of Womad.

Womad website is an almost open community for those only wanting to visit and read its content, but requires registration as a member by setting an ID and a passcode to upvote and upload posts and comments. The open platform on the website meant that it was open to both digital feminists and to observers. Womad users were using the attention of observers to exaggerate their activism through others' reactions. Provocative postings attracted people to visit, look at and/or discuss Womad. Uploaded posts about harassing male celebrities compelled both fans and 'anti-fans' of the stars to visit Womad's website. Staged photos of a male cat uploaded by a poster who claimed she had abused it spread right across online communities and shocked people. This public reaction soon led to a question that asked why people were less responsive to cases of abused women than abused animals. Uploading the feeds from spy-cams concealed in male bathhouses shocked male digital users because it demonstrated that they too could be victims of spy-cams (Kim, S., 2017).

Such violations of norms and ethics attracted people's attention because generally women are considered to be protectors of public morality, and most digital users, not only male misogynists, were keen to criticise and demonise this group of women. Womad was seen as an appropriate target for demonisation because its users were alleged to be women and they were violating social norms, like *mu-gaenyeom-nyeos*. Womad users themselves played a part in this demonisation process. Since Womad's 'man-hating' is extreme and Womad users are commonly considered to be extremists who are not to be associated with, less severe forms of 'man-hating', or feminism in the more conventional sense, are considered to be less extreme and part of rational discourse (Womad user 3-010, 2016). Womad used the logic of domination by male oppressors, divide and conquer, for its own ends of steering the malicious attention of misogynists to Womad, enabling other female-dominated spaces to

evade it. In other words, setting up the strawman, Womad, as a group of extremely insane, evil women, which in comparison render other feminist women reasonable, moderate and proper feminists, who should not be the main adversary for misogynistic attacks.

Womad's violation of norms gained the attention of the public. Digital gender wars have by now become part and parcel of the media, which are voluntarily watching and reporting on every move made by notorious Womad users. Media outlets produce news articles that startle people, using gendered stereotypes and reporting Womad users' violations for clickbait. The more extremist claims and behaviours of Womad users draw more attention and create more public discussions around the 'man-hating'/feminist group and the prevalence of online misogyny. Whilst male misogynists attack the extremist group that functions as a strawman, female digital users in other places proceed with their feminist deliberations.

Thriving digital feminism outside Womad: YouTube, Twitter and Daum cafés

Along with the intensified demonisation and self-demonisation of Womad, several platforms outside Womad emerged as important digital feminist venues. The video uploading platform, YouTube, is one of these. YouTubers who adopted the digital feminist culture of 'man-hating' emerged in early 2017, starting with Gatgeonbae, a YouTuber who livestreams gaming videos while making fun of Korean men. The games industry and consumers had always been male-dominated in South Korea, as elsewhere, and users had developed a culture of distressing women. In massive multiplayer online role-playing games, users blame female gamers for their defeat or sexually harass female gamers without reason when they identify female users in the games they play. In this environment, Gatgeonbae repeated the common phrases directed at women through in-game voice chats, such as 'we lost this game because we had a cunt in our team', but replacing the target with male gamers; a strategy echoing 'mirroring'. Her Megalian attempts at game livestreaming simultaneously transformed two

different digital venues into gendered battlefields, in which the gender war had been less severe because online misogyny in the places was too pervasive: the gaming sphere that connects users to each other through gaming activities and in-game text/voice chats; and the YouTube sphere that connects YouTubers and viewers through live chats, donations and comments on videos.

From 2017, YouTube had been rising in popularity among teenagers in South Korea as a platform that covered the various needs of the young generation (Joo, 2018). Some Megalians began to upload and stream videos on YouTube at this time. They uploaded videos ridiculing South Korean men and criticising male misogynists, shared memes and ideas that originated from Womad relating to feminist narratives of their own, or just had chats with digital feminist viewers (Kiyon, 2017). Self-identified feminist YouTubers, who did not identify as Megalians, also appeared in the YouTube sphere prominently around 2018 (Kim, S., 2019). As YouTube became a popular medium, so the influence of YouTubers increased. A survey conducted in 2019 found that teenagers do not just use YouTube for watching videos that interest them, but also as a search engine, a music app and a form of social media (OPENSURVEY, 2019). In this context, young audiences had more opportunities to connect with digital feminism via YouTube.

Twitter was actively used for disseminating Megalian-oriented digital feminism after 2018. I specify 'Megalian-oriented feminism' because there had already been non-Megalian-oriented feminist acts in the Twitter-sphere. Some of these Twitter users had participated in Megalia but had largely distanced themselves from the Megalian culture of politically incorrect 'man-hating' by the end of 2015, except for a few participants of Womad (DCinside user 3-002, 2017). A handful of Twitter feminists who advocated Womad's arguments began to call themselves 'radical feminists' from June 2017. After Womad's inner conflict in

October 2017, and the thriving of hashtag activism in early 2018, more Womad-oriented users entered the Twitter-sphere.

The #MeToo movement in South Korea erupted in February 2018 and hashtag activism continued on Twitter on various topics even after the media attention on the #MeToo movement declined after two months. Especially the #School_MeToo movement, a #MeToo movement for revealing sexual assaults and harassment in middle schools and high schools, continued with endless disclosures by female students. 'School-MeToo' was the most tweeted keyword in 2018 in South Korea, followed by the word 'feminism' (Min, 2018). This statistic shows that Twitter was an important site for digital feminists in 2018. According to the CEO of Twitter Korea, Chang-seop Shin, the fandom activities of the K-pop industry in 2018 were the core content of Twitter, producing 5.3 billion tweets, attracting young people from all over the world, including South Korean teenagers, and leading to the growth of Twitter (Baek, 2019). It was assumed that the use of Twitter by the young generation for their fandom activities might also affect their use of Twitter as a public sphere for political participation and feminist engagement (Bloter, 2019). As many teenagers were familiar with Twitter, due to having engaged with fandom activities, it became a medium that allowed them to participate in the digital feminist movement. Twitter became a novel path for attracting newcomers into digital feminism during this process.

Even though the Womad community had left the Daum café system in February 2017, Megalian culture and ideas were shared by Daum café users, producing fun and creating conflicts between users. As Womad gained a reputation as extremist, digital feminists who remained in the Daum cafés distanced themselves from it and softened the tones of 'man-hating' in their communities. Popularised forms of feminist activism, *bihon* and 'ex-corset' campaigns, were disseminated during this period of 2017 and 2018 in Daum café communities. As users engaged in aggressive discussions on feminism in the Megalian style,

the administrators of these communities adopted policies on Megalia and Womad, such as banning any mention of them (Jjukppang) and expelling users who were accused of being Womad users (Yeoseongsidae, Ssangko) in order to lessen conflicts between users. In particular, Jjukppang café, which had 1,700,000 members, mostly young women who were teenagers or in their twenties, adopted a new rule of banning users who criticised others' posts as 'encouraging users to wear the corset' for one of its boards in June 2018 (Jjukppang administrator 3-001, 2018). These kinds of community policies in cafés led some users to set up new communities in the Daum system, where they could freely discuss feminism without censorship. Therefore, several Daum cafés for feminist users were founded in 2018 (Womad user 3-011, 2018) and broadened the feminist sphere of the Daum platform.

Explosion of pan-Megalian anger: Courage Rally

Disturbances created by Womad users were quickly reported by the media but usually with limited circulation since they were serious matters in digital space only. However, the 'Hongbonjwa' incident in 2018 incited great anger among women and led to a series of high-profile protests that mobilised many participants: the Courage Rally that I discussed in the opening to this dissertation.

On 1 May 2018, a Womad user uploaded a photo of a nude male model to the Womad website, commenting that 'he does not show proper behaviour as a modest male' to ridicule him in a 'man-hating' narrative (Womad user 3-002, 2018). As the photo was alleged to have been taken at a nude drawing class at Hongik University of Seoul, digital users, especially male users who were familiar with the online witch-hunting game and wanted to make a 'female college student' a target of the game, claimed that this incident should be quickly and thoroughly investigated by the police (as shown in the blog post of Happygaza, 2018). The police soon identified the perpetrator. She was not a student, but a colleague model of the

victim. During the week-long investigation, the media published enormous numbers of news articles, while recalling every incident that had happened in Womad and reporting updates of the police investigation in real time.

Meanwhile an Instagram influencer Suhee Hahn, who had revealed her ‘man-hating’/feminist inclination within having arguments with the ‘anti-fans’ of her, uploaded a post that criticised the exceptionally quick response of the police, commenting: ‘everything is really fast because this incident involves a male victim. I should say that I honestly envy men’ (Soyeon Kim, 2018). This post revealed the emotions that many women shared at the time and that were provoked by the situation around the incident. In their experience, the rapid investigation, the level of media reporting, public concerns about the mental health of the victim, and the prevention of secondary harm to him had never occurred for prevalent spy-cam crimes that had female victims, nor even for worse cases like revenge porn and gang-rape videos. Moreover, the imprisonment of the female perpetrator was actually broadcast by the media. This kind of exposure was unprecedented.

Female digital users soon gathered to protest against the unfair investigation of the police and the mistreatment of female perpetrators more generally: the Courage Rally. The protest was arguably the outcome of three years of Megalian experiences for digital feminists that involved: the wilful disregard of spy-cam crimes by the police (collective report of Soranet in 2015) and the trivialisation of crimes that had female victims (Gangnam station murder in 2016; death threat against Gatgeonbae in 2017); the double standard of media reporting in treating perpetrators according to gender; and attempts at public humiliation as a means of punishment charged to female perpetrators (arrest of Hannampatch, who was arrested by police for uploading defamatory post about men on Instagram, which sort of illegal act of male perpetrators had been ignored by the police when it had female victims, in 2016).

Some female digital users opened a Daum café to discuss the protest organisation, carefully considering distancing participants and organisers of the protest from Womad. They were eager that their protest should not be tarred by the brush of ‘man-hating’ and of Womad⁷⁶ as they wanted to mobilise as many women as possible. As digital feminists, ranging from Womad users to ordinary female digital users, wanted to engage in protesting against the double standards of institutional authorities under the identity of Korean women who had been mistreated by them, the agenda of the protest was established to represent ‘women’s rights’, while strictly avoiding political affiliations (Courage Rally organiser 3-001, 2018). The first protest was held in May 2018 before being held further five times until December of that same year, bringing feminist claims to the attention of the public. The success of the protest shows that feminists who inhabited different venues within South Korean digital territory in 2018 gathered around a shared agenda, even though they were involved in different community cultures and backgrounds due to their different online habitats.

Downturn of Womad and rise of dispersed feminist venues

Having an independent website meant that Womad users were freed from the unfair regulation and intervention by the authorities because they were technically outside the control of a Korean company and Korean laws. This encouraged female trolls to do anything they wanted, ranging from challenging gender norms to violating national laws. After October 2017, however, the Womad community administrators had a conflict with the web developer, and they changed the website owner to someone with Korean nationality. Womad

⁷⁶ At that time, Womad users enjoyed ‘evil’ behaviours, while praising the perpetrator as the master of ‘man-hating’ by naming her ‘Hongbonjwa’, meaning she was a ‘bonjwa’ (a Korean slang word that refers to a lay expert) who performed a ‘man-hating’ act at ‘Hong’ik University. They uploaded jokes, photoshopped images and videos that used the picture of the nude male model as a meme.

community has been dwindling due to various factors, such as spatial isolation, its discarding of the function of community, technical interventions that hindered the ‘driving of flows’ and a police intervention that threatened the existence of the Womad website. Significantly, in August 2018, the police intervened in Womad activism by issuing an arrest warrant for the Womad’s head administrator. This was possible because the Womad administrator was now a woman who held South Korean citizenship, who could be easily investigated and punished by South Korean law. This led Womad users to hold back from uploading provocative and sometimes illegal postings that could be investigated as crimes, in order to reduce the burden on the administrator (Womad user 3-012, 2019). These efforts by users, however, led the community to dwindle by restraining free discussion.

Meanwhile, female-dominated or feminist communities in the Daum café system grew and diversified, and the number of digital feminist accounts on YouTube and Twitter increased. Obviously, Womad was no longer a focal community for digital feminists. Its decline can be seen by the falling number of hits for each post as well as the fact that Womad users constantly ‘drove the flows’ of analysing the decline of their website (in June, September and October of 2018). The unstable environment of Womad’s website⁷⁷ also encouraged users to move away towards more stable digital space, such as Facebook, Twitter and Daum cafés, which are operated steadily by big companies. In this sense, the decline of the Womad website can be understood by considering the circumstances that the spatial advantage of Womad as a space for aggressive discussions and fun-producing trolling was undermined, while the communities for digital feminists, which could offer alternatives to Womad, were thriving.

⁷⁷ The administrator of Womad announced the shutdown of the community when she recognised that she had been identified by the police and could be investigated because she was running the website during the inner conflict of October 2017. Although she quickly withdrew this decision, Womad users needed to bear in mind that the website might be suddenly closed at her unilateral decision.

3.3. The battlefield that the Megalia phenomenon brought about

South Korean online communities have been largely gender-segregated, as I discussed in section 3.2. After the Megalia phenomenon, this tendency became intensified in terms of changing community culture and the introduction of policies expelling particular users. This is clearly shown in the case of Oyu, which was a less strongly male-dominated community before the Megalia phenomenon. Oyu had 68% male users and 32% female users in 2013. However, there was uproar around Yeoseongsidae and Megalia in 2015 and 2016, which led to many female users leaving the community (Kim & Lee 2017). During this period, self-revealed female users or users who uploaded posts or comments about online misogyny and feminism were accused of being Megalians, by male users combining the *kkolpemi* test with the online witch-hunting game (which I discussed both in section 3.1) in order to ‘snipe at Megalians’. These users identified particular other users as Megalians and pushed them to leave the community, or marked them to be ignored in the discussion (Nam, 2019). This tactic had also been used by Ilbe users, and was known as ‘sniping at cunts’ in order to weed out or silence women in their community. The habits of ‘bomingban’ (a woman/cunt is banned from using this community if she self-discloses as a woman) and ‘sniping at cunts’ in Ilbe constructed a male-exclusive environment in online conversations (Kim, J., 2018). We can see that the same strategy was used in other male-dominated communities after Megalia.

In female-dominated communities outside Megalia/Womad, users often tried to distance themselves from Megalia/Womad, as I mentioned earlier. At the same time, communities that were female-dominated but not women-only started to adopt policies of ostracising male users and banning them from joining the communities, or female users in mixed-gender communities left the original community to set up a women-only community. The decisions to pursue gender segregation were responses to requests by female users who had suffered

from the behaviour of male users. Yet, those problems had not newly emerged after 2016. The changes in women's online communities should be interpreted as female users deciding to stop being interrupted by men in their online conversations after they had actively taken part in digital feminism from 2015 onwards.

As the spread of feminist ideas in digital territory proliferated as a result of the emergence of the Megalian movement, confrontations between online communities became prominent, whereby mostly female-dominated communities adopted the discourse of fighting against misogyny and mostly male-dominated communities adopted the discourse of fighting against feminism. Newly adopted community policies and the tactics of expelling the other gender led to the spaces being completely gender-segregated. This contributed to the separation of discourses and their solidification inside these communities.

The staged condition of confrontations between men and women conceals the misogynistic digital environment that has been disadvantageous to women and led them to not dare to imagine fighting against online misogyny for over twenty years before the MERS forum trolling. Digital space nurtured and still retains the online misogyny that male digital users have been involved in and enjoy, which is indeed the fundamental cause of the gender war. However, the interpretation on this phenomenon as a 'confrontation' also provides opportunities for women to have 'combat experiences' as women, that is, to identify and defeat enemies, and to struggle for and achieve triumphs against male counterparts even though they were on a sloping battlefield. In the discursive arrangement of men versus women, Megalians re-interpreted the 'ordinary' user in male-dominated communities as a misogynist, who is bad and is the enemy of the feminist citizen – the feminist, who should become the new-normal of society.

I argue that the Megalian movement could thrive since it gamified activism because they applied this 'confrontation' interpretation to the gender relation they involve in. Throughout

this thesis, I frequently employ words that are used for game plays in South Korea: Korean expressions of ‘hit feel’ (‘tagyeokgam’), ‘banging’ (‘teolda’), ‘bashing’ (‘paeda’), ‘fire support’ (‘hwaryeok jiwon’), ‘warrior tribe’ (‘jeontu minjok’)⁷⁸ and general expressions of ‘defeating’, ‘enemy’/‘counterpart’, ‘headquarters/base camp’, ‘worldview’, ‘battlefield’ and ‘triumph’. This employment of words follows the South Korean digital culture that commonly use terminologies of real-time strategy games for ordinary experiences in digital space. In the case of Megalia phenomenon, this linguistic custom of digital users resonated with the hostile digital environment, which especially could be applied to the gendered antagonism heightened by prevalent online misogyny. It allowed Megalians to interpret their combative experiences against male misogynists to be game plays, and the hostile digital environment to be a battlefield in the game. The gamification of something attracts people to try it and to repeat it if the gamified pursuit is fun to play and if a triumph can be achieved. Megalian participants set specific goals and particular enemies to be defeated in the shared worldview. This chapter has demonstrated how the ‘battlefield’ of the game of the gender war was developed under the conditions of South Korean digital territory and how Megalians participated in the war and settled in the battlefield as a ‘warrior tribe’.

During the gender war, women won the debates on misogyny by utilising their digital experiences as well as their experiences in practice that reflect their material reality as women in society. Their different levels of experience around feminist issues were blended in digital space. In other words, digital feminists utilised the aspect of hybridity in online conversations in pursuit of their ends. For example, Megalians appropriated the experiences of discrimination in reality as evidence to attack the arguments of misogynists in virtual space.

⁷⁸ These words were used for and partially derived from the words that people used for games that were popular in South Korea, representatively, StarCraft (1998), World of Warcraft (2004), and League of Legends (2009).

Even though such discrimination was appropriated for the simple aim of defeating their enemies, it produced feminist arguments of their own. In reverse, the feminist arguments they developed during the online battles could be applied when they thought of reality. In this process, the experiences of creating and applying feminist arguments online encouraged them to challenge the social discrimination against women, and to defeat their enemies in practice. The experiences of virtual battles and triumphs became sources with which to challenge material reality. In short, offline and online experiences become mixed up and dialectically related to one another, each bolstering the other (Jurgenson, 2012). This led to the production of digital feminist activism and the gender war that extended offline. Poaching the logic of ‘gamification of misogyny’ (Kim, S., 2016; Lewis, 2012) for their ends of ‘man-hating’, women transformed the space in which they had suffered from prevailing misogyny into a battlefield in which they could fight against that misogyny, and they implemented the gender war in reality in order to achieve triumph in their material reality, appropriating their experiences of defeating, losing and winning in the digital gender war.

Chapter 4. Configuring the memetic world of ‘man-hating’

In this chapter, I trace the effects that ‘man-hating’ trolling had on those engaging in it, arguing that the practice created a worldview of ‘man-hating’. Ryan M. Milner, author of *The World Made Meme: Public conversations and participatory media*, defines internet memes as cultural tapestries that are woven out of the strands of multimodal texts that are created, circulated and transformed by countless instances of memetic participation (2016). Individual digital texts that are memetically⁷⁹ created by participants intertwine and generate broader conversations about that media text, or meme. In the Megalian case, following the initial trolling in 2015 and the coining of the word *kimchinam* to refer to Korean men in general, ‘man-hating’ words and conversations were created, imitated and reproduced by other users, until a playful world of ‘man-hating’ had been created. The memetic participation of the many users who entered into online discussions ‘drove the flow’ of ‘man-hating’, and this flow became a discourse of ‘man-hating’ with a feminist effect. The practices I explore in this chapter are memetic participations in ‘man-hating’ that are interwoven into the ‘tapestry’ that provides the backdrop for the ‘man-hating’ memetic world. ‘Man-hating’ memes were produced and went viral due to countless instances of cultural participation. This resulted in the development of a ‘man-hating’ worldview that provides a lens through which female digital users can interpret gender relations in South Korea.

⁷⁹ Milner borrows the term ‘memetics’ from its primary inventor, Richard Dawkins, to refer to the spread of cultural units by imitation. Milner emphasises the mediated participation involved in creating, circulating and transforming memes, the practice of which cannot be understood as the self-copying and self-perpetuating propagation to which the original deterministic concept of the meme refers (2016, p. 21).

4.1. Creating ‘man-hating’ memes that generate a ‘man-hating’ worldview

Title: If I could get a truck that is packed with Korean men for free then I’d rather get the truck without the men.

Content: Like this?

Commenter 01: TRUE.

Commenter 02: Why is this one so smart?

(MERS forum user 4-001, 2015)

This excerpt from a screenshot at the time of the initial MERS forum trolling⁸⁰ shows how Megalians imitated the ‘man-hating’ words of other users and complimented each other’s usage. The poster, presumably a newcomer to the MERS forum, uploaded the post above to ascertain whether she could become involved in the discursive flow that was ongoing on the forum. Commenter 01 reacts to the title of the post by showing her agreement while she follows the flow herself. Commenter 02 answers the poster’s question by complimenting her for understanding the flow so well. Through insulting and irritating Korean men, users of the MERS forum were experimenting with how to produce ‘man-hating’ discussions, and with what could be circulated and spread in terms of how much fun it was and how much ‘hit feel’⁸¹ it had.

⁸⁰ Female digital users have preserved screenshots of the primary stage of the MERS forum and regularly repost them to commemorate the initial triumph of women in digital space and the start of ‘man-hating’ culture. This quote is from one of those screenshots.

⁸¹ I use the term ‘hit feel’ specifically as a literal translation of ‘tagyeokgam’ in Korean. This word is used by digital users to describe the feeling of satisfaction from the damage caused to an enemy by a user’s (metaphorical) hit/attack/irritation in online battles. I explore the impact of this hit feel in detail in Chapter 5, while focusing on the aspect of weaving memetic worlds of ‘man-hating’ through shared emotion of ‘lulz’ in this chapter.

Visualising the stereotype of Korean men: hannamcon

‘Man-hating’ memes had the purpose of ridiculing Korean men, in order to irritate male digital users. Female digital users started to have fun creating and using these memes, regardless of enemies’ presence, which allowed them to produce negative ideas on Korean men in any context. To elaborate on the process through which discourses of ‘man-hating’ were spread via memes, I present the example of the *pyeongbeomsu/hannamcon* meme (Figure 2).



Figure 2 The basic form of pyeongbeomsu/hannamcon (left) and its altered variations

The digital image of *pyeongbeomsu/hannamcon* represents the appearance of an average Korean man. This image (the left-hand image in Figure 2) was originally uploaded on the blog of an optician, who was trying to recommend suitable glasses for men who have fat faces (as found in his blog post, Haengbokanangyeongsa, 2014). Without knowing the original purpose of this image, female digital users created and circulated the *pyeongbeomsu* meme, modifying the original image.

Megalians started by ridiculing the appearance of Korean men by citing the name of a certain comedian (whose name I will not mention for ethical reasons) who looked typically

Korean. His first name was used as a byword for the average appearance of Korean men and for name-calling Korean men who looked similar to him, implying that Korean men all look the same and are ugly. Digital users soon found and adopted the ‘fat-faced man’ image (above) and named it *pyeongbeomsu*,⁸² which means that the *pyeongbeom* – average or common – appearance of Korean men looks like this face. *Pyeongbeomsu* therefore soon replaced the comedian’s name. As well as using the name *pyeongbeomsu* as a byword, female digital users played with the image to portray variations in the average appearance of Korean men, altering the basic form of *pyeongbeomsu* using the mobile applications of photoshopping, and virtually putting on make-up (Yeoseongsidae user 4-001, 2015), as I present in Figure 2. It was amusing to virtually transform the image, and many digital users in women’s online communities as well as in male-dominated communities said that they ‘know a person who looks the same’ as this image (as shown in the post of Jjukppang user 4-001, 2015). It was also ‘lulzy’ because making the original *pyeongbeomsu* look better was difficult, recalling the notion that ‘Korean men are ugly’: they cannot even be helped by the technology of photoshopping.

The image of twelve *hannams* (Figure 3) is an outcome of users’ playful digital conversations that share the meme and the connoted meaning of the meme: *Korean men look*

⁸² This is a term that is used in the subculture of boy’s love genre – novels and mangas that depict male-male romantic relationships – and refers to the categorised stereotype of the gay bottom position in the grammar of that genre, as someone who has a common appearance. Naming the *pyeongbeomsu* image for the average appearance of Korean men was invented in an internet post that compared a *pyeongbeomsu* in the imagination of boy’s love consumers. According to this post, this character should be basically good-looking but should not stand out because he does not overly groom himself, while in reality, a Korean man of average appearance is not good-looking and never cares about his appearance, and this is considered ‘common’ among Korean men. As South Korean young women widely consume boy’s love subculture, the meme of *pyeongbeomsu* could be seen as an ‘insider joke’, which is an aspect of internet memes (Milner, 2016, p. 217), that was shared between them.

similar and are ugly. Twelve *hannams* became a new meme that was derived from the original *pyeongbeomsu* meme, with digital users classifying their male acquaintances according to the twelve figures, saying things like: ‘I know who is 1 o’clock’ (I know a guy who looks like the figure at one o’clock in the twelve *hannams* image). Even male digital users found themselves in the image, saying, for example, ‘I’m at 12 o’clock’ (as shown in the post of Ijong user 4-001, 2018). This meme became very popular and gained the name of *hannamcon* (meaning Korean men emoticon) as its variously altered images were uploaded by a user in DCinside as a set of emojis that could be used in posts and comments on the website (Womad user 4-001, n.d.).

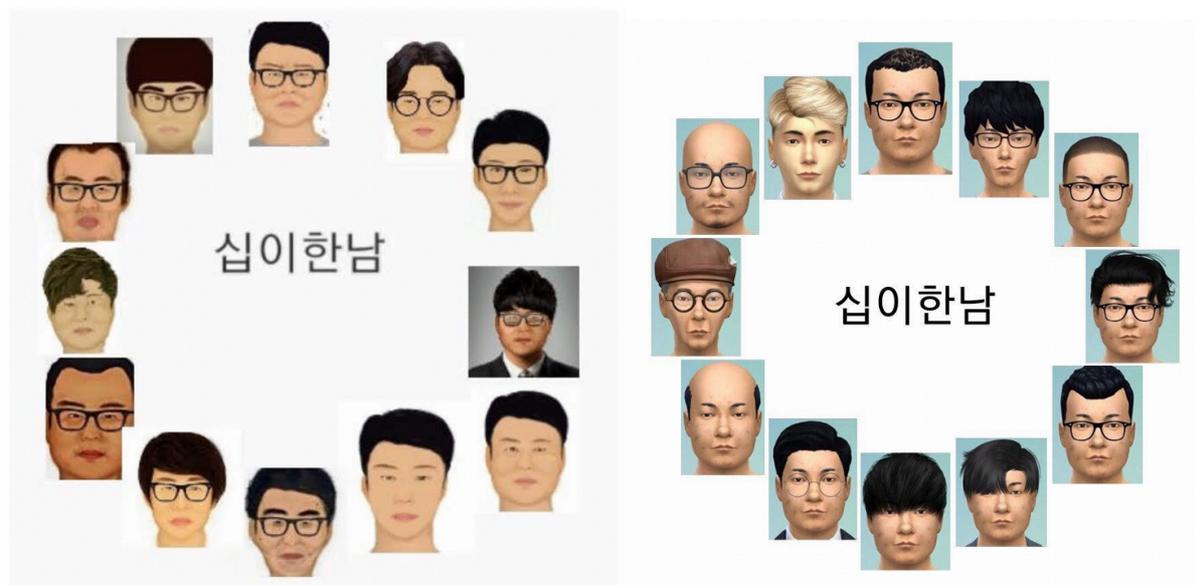


Figure 3 Twelve *hannams* on the left and the new twelve *hannams* on the right.

Since this meme was widely shared in South Korean digital space, the inventor of the original face image claimed copyright to prevent more parodies (Chae, H., 2018). Female digital users then created alternative images of twelve *hannams* in order to replace the original image. One such user created a new twelve *hannams* image (the right-hand image in

Figure 3) by creating faces using the game *The Sims* – a video game in which players simulate virtual people they invent and which provides an easy tool for players to create three-dimensional figures for creating the virtual people.

This example of *hannamcon* fits the fundamental logics of internet memes, which according to Milner, include multimodality, reappropriation, resonance, collectivism and spread. The image was combined with narratives about the figures it recalls (it was ‘multimodal’); it was used for making variations of it (it was ‘reappropriated’); it gained participants who iterated uploading and making jokes about it (it ‘resonated’); it was widely shared as a social experience (it gained the aspect of ‘collectivity’); and it was pervasively circulated (it was ‘spread’ within an environment that makes it easy to do these things with abundant forms of technology) (Milner, 2016, pp. 22-39). These elements are not new to message circulation in participatory media, but ‘memetic media illuminate their emerging interrelations and implementations’ (p. 23). Since female digital users are accustomed to the logic and techniques that are required for joining in the ‘memetic’ participations by living within the participatory media, the message circulation through massive participations in producing appropriations and variations of the ‘man-hating’ memes were possible.

Branding all Korean men hannam

The *hannamcon* meme was frequently used in Womad-shelter. Its users inserted the image on their posts when they wanted to represent Korean men, regardless of whether their post was focusing on the appearance of Korean men or not. For example, a *hannamcon* face was added to the post ‘how to talk to Korean men’ (Womad user 4-002, n.d.), which simulated conversations between a woman and a man that the woman talks back to sexist claims of the man. The post ‘eventually, you guys will end up marrying a Korean man’ (Womad user 4-004, n.d.) listed the flaws of having a relationship with a Korean man, and added various

animated GIF files that ridiculed or tortured the person with *hannamcon* face in the animation. Sometimes the word *pyeongbeomsu/hannamcon* was used without inserting the image, showing that the writer expected readers to understand what it was. The word was mentioned when referring to ordinary male acquaintances in sharing their life stories such as ‘I’ve been bashing *pyeongbeomsus* in the college club I joined by stating hurtful truths’ (Womad user 4-005, n.d.).

The memefication of the average appearance of Korean men concisely expressed various ‘man-hating’ themes. As shown in the examples listed above, Womad users’ application of the meme connected negative ideas about Korean men to the *hannamcon* meme, while making a stereotype of *hannam* (Korean men). Juxtaposing this meme with the worst narratives that these women had experienced, or that they could imagine in relationships with Korean men, had a multimodal impact, the impact within multiple modes of perception, in a real sense because the image that recalled ordinary male friends and acquaintances made the stories vivid and emphasised that this could happen to anyone who lives alongside Korean men.

In this section so far, I have cited data from four different online communities for evidence. Likewise, *hannamcon* has been found everywhere in South Korean online communities, from Megalia and Yeoseongsidae in 2015, to DCinside, Jjukppang community in 2016, and many other women-only communities and male-dominated communities over the last five years, because it was created to be an internet meme. The circulation of this meme conveys the idea it implies and solidifies that meaning mostly without criticism precisely because it is shared as a joke. The ‘harmless’ banter about stereotypical Korean women, calling them *kimchinyeo*, had also been circulated as an internet meme, while depicting women as people who should be punished and educated on how to be submissive to men, through narratives and cartoons that contained expressions of physical violence (Kim &

Kim, 2016, p. 35). The meme of *hannamcon*, likewise, created a stereotype of Korean men, who all look almost the same: an ‘ugly, but overly confident [of their looks] because they are too stupid [to see that they are not attractive]’⁸³ group of men. Consistent with how stereotypes function, all Korean men were branded *hannam*, under the simplified and exaggerated aspects that were understood as their nature, while reproducing the fun of the derogatory stereotype.

Throughout the process of meme making and their proliferation, the ‘man-hating’ world was created by ‘man-hating’ memes. The ‘man-hating’ world is constituted by ‘man-hating’ images and texts that participants have created, circulated and transformed, and which interact and intertwine with each other in the memetic media, while providing a worldview of ‘man-hating’. An example of that is this exemplary chain of ‘man-hating’ ideas: Ridiculing the appearance of *hannam* is linked to the claim that culturally permitted carelessness is a male privilege and harms female partners. This statement is then linked to the statistical evidence of medical facts involving STDs that women are infected with by their male partners. In turn this knowledge is linked to photos of Korean men queuing outside cheap brothels on holiday. The image is then linked to the experiences of sex workers who have witnessed the trivialised custom of buying sex that constitutes Korean masculinity, which is linked to the attitude of Korean men who calculate the expense of dating and compare it with buying sex. This is linked then to the stereotype of *gaseongbichung* (a neologism that means ‘calculator-bug’): a man who always calculates low expenses, not only for buying products but also for having relationships. These links generatively configured the meaning of

⁸³ This depiction of Korean men stems from a comment in a Japanese women’s online community, which was translated and imported to the South Korean web. It was appropriated by Megalians and used as the adjective ‘motjanunssik’, which was coined from the initial letters of the phrase.

hannam/hannamchung that had started from the MERS forum, but actually the group of people who these meme creators – female digital users – were living alongside.

These images, texts, narratives, social customs, figures and stereotypes interact and intertwine with each other to weave a ‘tapestry’ of altered representation of Korean men, based on ‘man-hating’. In particular, simple words and expressions that resonated with female users, such as *pyeongbeomsu*, *gunmusae* (men who talk thoughtlessly like parrots about compulsory military service as a case of discrimination against men in South Korea whenever a gender issue is raised in conversation);⁸⁴ 6.9 (a word used to ridicule the average size of the penis of Korean men: 6.9 centimetres); and, most importantly, *hannamchung* (Korean male-bug), which gradually developed to the word only state *hannam* (Korean man), made the imagery of ‘man-hating’ – denigrating Korean men in general – go viral. Many of these terms were a form of ‘mirroring’, a commonly used tactic of Megalians, as I will now go on to discuss.

4.2. Logic of memefication: ‘mirroring’ the *hannam*

During the primary stage of ‘man-hating’ culture in 2015, the basic strategy of female trolls was to appropriate misogynistic words and narratives and reinvent them as ‘man-hating’ ones through positioning men as the targets of sexist insults. This strategy was termed ‘mirroring’ by Megalians, as I discussed in the Chapter 3. Many sexist memes, which denigrated women in general and the feminine itself were simply reworked to create new memes for denigrating men in general and the masculine. Whilst South Korean scholars of the Megalia phenomenon have hitherto focused on the strategy of ‘mirroring’ as a parody of misogynistic culture (Han,

⁸⁴ As I briefly discussed in chapter one, the experience of military service has constituted South Korean hegemonic masculinity (see footnote 39). This made the derision on military service generate huge, angry reactions of men, and at the same time, more ‘hit feel’ and ‘lulz’ for Megalians.

2017; Jang, 2016; Kim, E., 2016; Yoo; 2015; Yun, 2015; 2017), analysing the discursive effect of that parody with little interest in how it operated digitally. I emphasise that ‘mirroring’ was constituted of participations in memefication, enabling Megalians to create a memetic world of ‘man-hating’, which provided a field of activism for participatory politics that attracted young women familiar with the grammar of memetic media.

Winning through the ‘mirrored’ memes

Since the term ‘mirroring’ meant that Megalians ‘mirrored/imitated’ what misogynists had done in digital space, it included any digital behaviours which enacted ‘memetic performances’ (Milner, 2016, p. 18). On the one hand, the naming of ‘mirroring’ accurately showed that the ‘mirrored’ texts or behaviours were memetically created from the original ones, and that the digital behaviours of ‘man-haters’ imitated those of misogynists.

Megalians’ use of Ilbe dialect, a particular tone and style of language that Ilbe users used, underlined that what female users were doing with the dialect copied and parodied the behaviours of the original users of the dialect – masculine trolling. On the other hand, this neologism, ‘mirroring’, revealed female digital users’ awkwardness that was instigated by their participation in trolling. The gamification of activism, defeating misogynists by trolling and triumphing through ‘chasing’ fun entailed in ‘man-hating’, was an unprecedented situation for most of the Megalian participants as they were female digital users who were not the usual bearers of digital offensiveness.

The word ‘mirroring’ was coined about a week after the MERS forum trolling began in May 2015, in order to defend female users’ behaviour from critiques that emphasised their anti-social, Ilbe-like behaviours, which digital users, both male and female, had raised. Indeed, what female trolls were doing was distinctly Ilbe-like, in terms of using dialect and memes that were reworked from the Ilbe’s language and memes. More importantly, their

trolling gamified ‘man-hating’, echoing the gamified misogyny that ‘justifies violence and aggression under the excuse of producing fun’ (Kim, S., 2016, p. 1). For example, they insulted their opponents by using the word *neugaebi* (your dad), echoing how sexist men used the word *neugeumma* (your mom) derived from the sentence ‘your mom is a whore’. Thus, the word was frequently used in the context of ‘your dad is a male prostitute’. As the word *neugaebi* was popularly used, it was transformed into a new, generalised meme that ridiculed Korean men on account of their petty acts from a ‘man-hating’ perspective. The online post ‘list of *neugaebi*’ (Jjukppang user 4-002, 2017), which enormously circulated in 2017 and generated tones of derived jokes about *neugaebi* in their comments sections by users’ participations, lists the petty behaviours of men while combining them with *neugaebi* to say: ‘your dad does this’. This list took its sources from examples that had been circulated as internet stories, as well as from digital users’ own experiences or what they thought up as petty behaviour. These include: ‘*neugaebi* stole straws from Starbucks’, cited from an internet story about an annoying customer; ‘*neugaebi* entered the wrong PIN five times’, a common mistake that could happen to anyone but still showing the dullness of the person; and ‘*neugaebi* was christened Megalia’ was thought up to invent an absurd figure who is ignorant of internet memes, presuming that he is a sexist and has been unwittingly fooled into using Megalia as a baptismal name. The word was used for insulting others without context, which was exactly what the Ilbe trolls did.

The prospect of becoming ‘man-hating’ trolls sometimes made people who wanted to participate in feminist activism nervous, as shown in their reactions. One female digital user said she used a ‘mirroring’ explanation when she had encountered people who criticised Megalians because of their vulgar use of language. This user explicated that ‘mirroring’ is a ‘psycho drama therapy’ that enables ‘misogynists to experience and understand the reality of online hatred’ (Yeoseongsidae user 4-003, 2015). This understanding of ‘mirroring’ framed

Megalian behaviour as ‘misogyny-hating/resistance against misogyny’, which allowed Megalian participants to defend themselves from arguments that equated socially prevalent misogyny with the digital experiment of ‘man-hating’ and to justify their participations in trolling in a more recognisably political way. Several Womad users confessed later that this way of evading an explicit definition of ‘man-hating’ had attracted them, who themselves were ‘morality-bugs’ (people who annoyingly want to invoke moral standards on everything), to Megalian trolling. It had done so by lowering the psychological barrier induced at the thought of being seen as the same kind of person as an Ilbe user, which had previously been high enough to prevent women from joining in trolling (Womad user 4-003, 2016). However, some of the first MERS forum trolls disliked the term ‘mirroring’ because they thought it ‘ruined the fun’ of trolling by making it seem too serious (DCinside user 4-001, 2016).

The term ‘mirroring’, even though it had been criticised by the inventors of the tactic as well as by Womad users who became experts at it, makes clear that the female users of MERS forum were not the people who had invented gendered hatred; rather they were imitators who came to be the ‘mirror image’ of online misogyny. By ‘mirroring’ the misogyny in the same way that it had been produced and reproduced in the forms of internet memes, the sexism in South Korean society that buttressed online misogyny, was unveiled and became a target to be defeated. If Ilbe dominated the culture of young men that sought suppressing women in general by the online discourse on gender relation they articulated, Megalian trolling could influence the culture of young women, which would threaten men in general. Accordingly, Megalians gained a simple but effective tool for making the banal reality of women into a problematic situation of sexism that should be challenged.

One strength of ‘mirroring’ was that the memetic formation of ‘man-hating’ memes made their reproduction ‘relatively cheap and easy’ (an aspect of memetic participation discussed by Milner (2016, p. 7)), allowing vast numbers of users to participate in this reproduction just

by replicating it. Women who had never had disputes over gendered discrimination and were too shy to leave comments actively criticising gender inequality in digital space started to use ‘man-hating’ memes, because this was something easy to do and provided the experience of triumph in online battles. If they had wished to attack misogynistic enemies before ‘mirroring’ had become a strategy, they had to do so by citing feminist knowledge which usually led to them being branded as irrational (*kkolpemis*) and to losing the battle, since misogynists usually did not understand feminist ideas while asserting their anti-feminist claims and outpouring misogynistic invectives. Learning feminist ideas, enduring these invectives on womanhood, and responding to unfair stereotyping was not an easy process. However, as they acquired the primary weapon of female trolls, ‘man-hating’ memes, they were suddenly able to win battles by simply stating, for example, *hannamchung*, 6.9, or *neugaebi*. Since this new feminist tool was easy to use for female digital users, the possibility that more and more women could participate in this activism was opened.

The memes that triggered the most irritation were widely reproduced, defeating the misogynistic memes by functioning as ‘counter-memes’ that made the original ones lose effect (Godwin, 1994). For example, the number 6.9 (which sounds like ‘yukjeomgu’ in Korean) became a ‘man-hating’ meme because stating the number itself induced furious reactions from male digital users, which means that it was an effective weapon for defeating them by humiliating their manhood and provoking them. This meme thrived in South Korean digital space, so much so that Megalians started to use the numbers six and nine as substitutes for single quotation marks (6like this9), and digital feminists held one of their biggest protests, the second Courage Rally, in 2018 on the 9th of June (6/9). The success of this meme meant that the joke of saying 69 (‘yukgu’ in Korean) to recall the sexual position became less offensive because stating 69 now recalled the meme of 6.9 that, at the same time, ridiculed the hypersexualised male attitude in the original joke. In addition, male digital users’ naming

of their penis as a meat-bat ('yukbong' in Korean) disappeared because the words 'meat' and 'six' have the same sound, 'yuk', which made it now sound like a six-(centimetre)-bat, not a meat-bat (Yeoseongsidae user 4-004, 2019). Creating and circulating 'man-hating' memes, then, functioned to defeat or substitute for insults that had misogynistic meanings, at least for female digital users. Consequently, the spread of the 'mirroring' memes, poached from male misogynists, countered the sexist insults and memes, while being used as viral jokes between women.

Becoming trolls, re-perceiving enemies

Before the Megalia phenomenon, many women had never imagined using offensive language online, which violated the gender norms of language use in South Korea. However, hostile language use, it would seem, is not only effective for attacking enemies but also reduces fear of the unknown, of faceless counterparts, when female digital users see themselves after using this language. The meaning of offensive language itself has changed over time through 'mirroring', as users of women's online communities explain:

Commenter 01: Before, encountering them [users of Ilbe language] sometimes made me feel revulsion. I was dazed just by reading '~no', 'igiya' and 'bojinyeon'.⁸⁵ But when I read these words now, I react like, so what? Ha! Honestly, I was afraid [of them] before. Now it's just laughable and petty.

Commenter 02: Ilbe dialect? Hahaha. I don't care now. I can speak it better than Ilbe users. ... Once my eyes welled up only by reading 'bojeonkkae' [I will break a bulb in

⁸⁵ In Ilbe dialect, '~no' is a nongrammatical phoneme located at the end of a sentence, which seems similar to the dialect of Kyeongsang province in South Korea. 'Igiya' is a filler word and 'bojinyeon' means 'cunt bitch'. These words function as indicators of Ilbe dialect.

your cunt]. But it's no longer so. *Hujeonkkae* [I will break a bulb in your butthole], *hujeonkkae*, such excitement, I have the chance to sing it!⁸⁶ (Yeoseongsidae user 4-006, 2016)

The cited comments are from a post about Megalians' use of Ilbe dialect from 2016, entitled 'Ilbe lost their most important weapon', and how the 'mirroring' strategy took away the power of misogynistic language. The comments were left in Yeoseongsidae, a women-only community, eighteen months after the Megalia phenomenon began.

Ilbe's words were offensive to women because they delivered misogynistic ideas in a hostile tone. As the commenters make clear above, the language itself had the effect of causing distress to the random women who read it. Even when they were not directly told the Ilbe words within the situation of fighting with Ilbe users, but read a message that was left somewhere online, these commenters felt fear and revulsion because of the connoted meanings. This occurred by reading these words, perceiving Ilbe users' existence, as shown in the first comment. The effect of this language was clearly severe. It thus functioned as an 'important weapon' for Ilbe users to exercise their offensiveness. However, Megalians' use of Ilbe dialect for the purpose of sharing 'man-hating' ideas changed these women's responses to the language. Its destructive power had gone, while transforming the commenter's experience of encountering Ilbe users into regarding them as 'laughable and petty'.

The second commenter writes part of a popular song, using a 'mirroring' word to brag about the fun she gets out of speaking the word. She writes the word 'hujeonkkae', which originates from Ilbe's neologism 'bojeonkkae'. The word *hujeonkkae* recalls Ilbe's word and its context of usage. *Bojeonkkae* is used to intimidate women with threats of physical harm

⁸⁶ In this sentence, the commenter is pretending to sing a popular song while adding the word *hujeonkkae*.

and to recall the male domination which can result in violence. Hence, this word had previously made her ‘eyes [...] well[...] up only by reading’. But now, she uses the word *hujeonkkae* and has appropriated the offensiveness that the word conveys. She was able to do so, she claims, after being exposed to Megalian discourse and language, which was poached from those of misogynists. The word *hujeonkkae* or *bojeonkkae* does not recall the traumatic experience of being suppressed by its usage anymore; rather it provides her with an experience of retaliation through speaking the word. Use of this word produces pleasure for the woman. And its usage is even funnier because the word would irritate former perpetrators who used the original word that had traumatised her. Megalians’ use of ‘mirroring’ language allowed these women to face the fearful object and to transform it into a playful object. As women gain this new language and use it for fun, its oppressive capacity is undermined. The language is no longer an object of fear or revulsion; rather, it is a tool for playing games with the goal of distressing one’s enemies.

In the chaotic environment of the South Korean web, any available expression is used and circulated if it has the potential of going viral. Offensive words like *bojeonkkae* reigned in digital space by reminding women of the possibility of physical violence against them, functioning to silence female users. By becoming trolls, poaching the language through the ‘mirroring’ strategy, the former victims of misogyny became players of the game of ‘man-hating’. Their participation in ‘mirroring’ enabled them to re-perceive their enemies, previously oppressors in a sexist environment, as opposite players in the gender war. Megalians now could defeat their opposite players, who becomes ‘laughable and petty’, since they ‘have the chance to’ participate in the game. Participation in ‘mirroring’, imitating what *hannams* do, created a world in which the players of the ‘man-hating’ game could live and fight against their enemies. The backstory of this ‘man-hating’ game is that ‘this world has

been reigned over by the cultural domination of misogyny’, which attracts ‘man-hater’ warriors to get into the war.

Megalians’ ‘mirroring’ labour and ‘spreadability’

The memefication of ‘man-hating’, ‘mirroring’, has arguably changed how Megalians interpret reality. However, the tactic of ‘mirroring’ and the worldview that ‘mirroring’ produced were only shared by Megalians, thus needed to be popularised. Megalians have worked hard to spread ‘man-hating’ so that more women share this transformed view of gender relations. Messages are disseminated via Megalians’ sophisticated act of disseminating ‘man-hating’ message, which enhances ‘spreadability’ (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013) of it. In this process, I argue that Megalians become intermediaries in the media-producing pipeline; a process not limited to digital space. As I will show, Megalians take online discourse and refract it in such a way that it is digestible to others, transgressing the digital and the physical realms as ‘in-between matter’.

In a discussion of how she influenced her friends, Suji, one of my interview participants, explained how she tempted them with slightly adjusted Womad posts. While Suji immersed herself in ‘man-hating’ discourse from Megalia and Womad throughout 2015 and 2016, her friends were only ‘moderate’ receivers of online feminist messages, who would say: ‘You’re right. But the ‘mirroring’ words sound extreme.’ Suji explained how she attempted to get her friends on side, utilising Womad posts. Since her friends were repelled by the expressions that were used in Womad, Suji changed the words and the aggressive tone of the Womad posts (by deleting insulting neologisms and Ilbe dialect) and sent them to her friends, in order to persuade her friends to engage with the feminist messages in the posts. Through her labour the ‘mirroring’ words were filtered out, but the ‘mirroring’ discourse in Womad posts remained. Just as Suji acted as an intermediary between digital ‘man-hating’ material and

moderate friends in reality, so Megalians processed ‘man-hating’ messages to be digestible to their receivers, thus functioning as conduits. This, in turn, rendered those messages spreadable.

Even though ‘moderate’ receivers of feminist messages were repelled by the ‘man-hating’ neologisms coined by Megalians, these neologisms and their use nevertheless functioned as materials that spread messages. Megalians arduously created neologisms and collectively experimented with using them. The wide use of such neologisms arguably shows that their implied meaning gained broad sympathy from the users of such language. Maple, one of my interviewees who had never participated in Megalia or Womad, opposed the use of the morpheme *chung* (meaning bug) and of the stereotyping of marginalised people through insulting neologisms because she believed that people could send messages without using invective. However, she noted that ‘branding Korean men as *hannam* is worth it’ because the sexist substance of Korean men ‘cannot be better captured than by calling them *hannam*’. The meme of *hannam*, which had become an invective only by stating ‘Korean man’, highlights how Korean masculinity is constituted by the practice of sexism, articulating the ‘man-hating’ discourse.

Megalians knew their neologisms made the users of ordinary language feel awkward, since they have ‘man-hating’ connotations. Thus, they refined their neologisms in order to conceal the blatant ‘man-hating’ orientation but still inject the ‘man-hating’ idea into them when it is required. For example, the Megalian neologism ‘*ssatwichung*’ (‘fleeing-after-cum bug’), which refers to a man who gets a woman pregnant because of demanding sex without a condom and avoids taking responsibility, was appropriated by the abortions right group Bwave.

When Bwave organisers initially formed their protest group in October 2016, they had an open discussion with participants in their online community. The aims of the protest were

listed as: '1. Legalisation of abortion. 2. Legalisation of abortion pills. 3. Introducing legal punishment of *ssatwischung*.' The organisers and participants discussed whether use of the word *ssatwischung* would prevent the message from being successfully conveyed due to its tone, which might offend the general public encountering the protest on the street (Bwave staff 5-001, 2016). After the discussion and gathering of opinions from participants, their slogan for the protest did not involve the exact word *ssatwischung* but included the sentence 'we demand for punishment on the men who flee-after-cum' (Bwave participant 5-001, 2016). This was because the colloquial 'flee-after-cum' ('ssago twineun' in Korean) could be within the boundary of the ordinary but impolite language use, unlike the word *ssatwischung*, an obvious Megalian – anti-social, 'man-hating' – neologism. According to participants' accounts of the protest, this sentence in the slogan still grabbed the attention of pedestrians, and especially irritated *hannams* (Bwave participant 5-002, 2016).

Inducing awkwardness is 'a mode of politics' that digital activism embraces (Smith-Prei & Stehle, 2016, p. 12). In this case this occurs not merely through the meaning of the phrase, fleeing-after-cum. Rather, the chanting of words that recall the Megalian neologism, *ssatwischung*, in the middle of the street raises and blends questions of online 'man-hating' and the offline women's movement; that is, virtual space where Megalian neologisms can be heard and physical locations where the words are chanted, while sending a message and generating a digital-feminist menace that visualises the fact that Megalian feminism is expanding its arena. The awkward words function as matter that conveys the 'man-hating' messages, which enables the 'man-hating' memes to be spread even in physical reality. Departing from their online origins, these neologisms go offline, disturbing the offline world through the digitally created worldview of 'man-hating'. And the 'conduits' of the neologisms, Megalians, link and interrelate their memes and women's social realities, while

pursuing their digitally articulated ‘man-hating’ discourse to be applied for the reality and to be permeated to the physical world.

4.3. Memefying social reality: the Gangnam station incident

The phrase ‘she was killed because she was a woman’ has come to signify the Gangnam station incident,⁸⁷ in which a man stabbed to death a woman he had never met near the Gangnam station in Seoul in May 2016. This murder went unnoticed except for by a few female digital users who raised awareness about it. The incident became a huge issue, enhanced by digital feminists’ labour to gain public attention and the reactions of South Korean men that followed. I use this case to demonstrate how the memefication of social reality provided a feminist perspective that had been developed by the labours of Megalians. Through examining data from my participant observation, interviews and digital texts about the Gangnam station incident, I explore how the gendered reality of South Korean women was articulated by digital feminists, which rendered gendered antagonism visible and tangible through augmenting it in reality. I argue that the practice of memefication that applied to this incident enabled many young women to join in the world that ‘man-haters’ were making.

Augmentation of the incident and the gender war

On 17th May 2016, and during the night leading into the 18th, Womad users discussed the incident while sharing digital news about it. They created a slogan that changed the

⁸⁷ The Gangnam station incident is a colloquial naming of an incident in which a young woman was killed by a man at a public toilet in Gangnam district on 17 May 2016. It is known as the ‘Gangnam station incident’ rather than the ‘Gangnam district incident’ because referring to ‘Gangnam station’ denotes Gangnam district in colloquial language. Moreover, the post-it note protest, which gained more attention than the murder itself, was held at the one of the gates of Gangnam station. Therefore, it is publicly known by the name ‘Gangnam station incident’.

murderer's statement 'I killed the woman because she was a woman' into 'she was killed because she was a woman', adding the phrase, 'and we [as women] accidentally survived' to underline the shared reality of women, in a context in which any woman could have been a victim of this incident. I was observing the process of meme-making on the night in Womad. Two of my interviewees were also involved in the process and talked about it in their interviews. I describe below how I followed the real-time discussion 'flow' of digital feminists that transformed the incident into an issue, which started in Womad.

Hey there's a suggestion in the female-dominated community that one user wants to more widely publicise this incident

Like, *a tragedy that happened in Gangnam of the 'Gangnam Style'* to spread it to other countries. What do you think? (Womad user 4-007, n.d., emphasis added)

In this quotation, 'Gangnam Style' refers to a song by Korean singer PSY that was a huge hit in 2012, becoming famous for reaching one billion views on YouTube, which means it had gone viral worldwide. Womad users assumed that the incident would become a public issue if it gained attention from other countries, even though it was being trivialised in South Korean society. This Womad post initiated collective action by female digital users.

Womad users started to create 'card news',⁸⁸ containing information about the incident that underlined the murderer's misogynistic motivation, and images showing condolences for the victim. They gathered ideas to invent a slogan for a billboard advertisement about the incident, while planning to immediately express their condolences by leaving sympathy flowers at the 10th gate of Gangnam station, with post-it notes that explained their purpose

⁸⁸ A form of interactive digital news that resembles PowerPoint slides to enhance the readability of news articles that is used by South Korean news companies.

(Yeoseongsidae user 4-005, 2016). According to the post, ‘let’s leave sympathy flowers at the 10th gate of Gangnam station’, that was uploaded at 6 am on May 18th encouraging Yeoseongsidae users to participate in the plan, one Womad user had suggested leaving sympathy flowers at 4 am and another user had the idea of leaving post-it notes with the flowers at 5 am, while other users came up with the phrases ‘she was killed because she was a woman’ and ‘at 1 am on 17th, I [as a woman] survived [unlike the victim]’ by leaving comments on Womad posts.

During that night, my interviewee Lyon and other Womad users created images of white ribbons stained with blood as a symbolic image of the incident.⁸⁹ Womad users employed these images when they spread word about the incident on social media, such as on Twitter and Instagram, sometimes adding a QR code⁹⁰ for the ribbon image, which was linked to an English-language report about the crime that they had written. Lyon also created a digital image of a drawing of a man holding a knife, rather than a man dancing as though riding a horse – the signature dance of the song ‘Gangnam Style’ with the words ‘this is the real Gangnam style’.⁹¹ This phrase suggested that Gangnam district, which symbolises the exciting night-life culture of Seoul, was actually a dangerous place for women, where misogynistic crimes occur and are treated as trivial.

⁸⁹ The ribbon image is used to encourage public awareness on various issues. In the South Korean context, it had been used specifically to express condolences for the dead after the tragic Sewol ferry sinking in 2014, which caused 304 fatalities.

⁹⁰ QR code is a machine-readable code consisting of an array of black and white squares, typically used for storing URLs or other information to be read by the camera on a smartphone.

(https://www.lexico.com/definition/qr_code)

⁹¹ This image cannot be reproduced here because she deleted her works in order to erase her digital footprint. Participants in Megalia and Womad usually did so in order to avoid being embroiled in judicial attempts of penalising ‘man-haters’.

From early morning on 18 May, a Twitter account with the purpose of ‘publicising the Gangnam station incident’ (as shown in the post written by Womad user 4-006, n.d.) and other Twitter users uploaded hashtags of ‘murder_in_Gangnam’ and ‘male_murderer_of_Gangnam’ (Twitter user 4-001, 2016) to encourage public engagement with the issue. As Womad and Yeoseongsidae users left flowers and messages on post-it notes at the gate of Gangnam station, the news media started to report it, citing the Tweets (Asia today, 2016) from around 10 am. According to a news article in *Asia Today*, there had been over 8,000 Tweets containing the hashtag ‘male_murderer_of_Gangnam’ and over 5,000 Tweets with the hashtag ‘I_survived’ by 10 am on the 18th.

The paragraphs above demonstrate how the meaning of the murder incident was articulated by digital feminists and how it went viral due to the labour of women in the synchronised digital environment of café communities and social media, including Womad, Yeoseongsidae and Twitter, which, in turn, brought reactions from the news media. Considering that the number of news articles covering the incident was eight on the 17th May and soared to 285 on the 18th May,⁹² it is clear that the aim of attracting public attention that digital feminists had worked for was achieved.

Womad users’ creation of digital images and of phrases turned the messages into memes that could be reappropriated in multimodal forms and reproduced, while being spread at various digital and physical venues. For example, the symbols and slogans that Megalians created were used in social media, as well as for written messages on the post-it notes. Above all, the sentence ‘she was killed because she was a woman’ gained an immense virality. The sentence had the potential to resonate in two ways due to its structure. Korean sentences usually omit subject and object because they are thought to be clear from the context (Kim,

⁹² I took this result from the news section of the web portal Naver, which provides an aggregation of Korean news articles from more than 500 news media. (Searched on 15 January 2020.)

C., 2008). In the case of the murderer's statement, '(I) *killed* because (she was a) woman' the bracketed words are omitted in the Korean sentence. The changed form of the sentence created by Womad users is '(she) *was killed* because (she was a) woman' if I take the exact form of the Korean sentence. This structural feature provides an opportunity for other women to add themselves in place of the subject, such as: '(I) was killed because (I am a) woman'. Furthermore, changing the (implied) subject from the murderer to the victim shifted the focus of this incident onto the death of a young woman, rather than a murder by a lunatic. When the murder was the focus, it was an extraordinary case perpetrated by an abnormal criminal. If the death, from the perspective of the dead person, was the focus, the incident became an unexpected situation, which could not be prevented, and that could have happened to any woman. Because of these two aspects of the phrase, the sentence '(she) was killed because (she was a) woman' became a meme that spread and signified this incident, while resonating with the situation of many young women.

The phrase '(she) was killed because (she was a) woman' emphasised the claim that it was a 'misogynistic crime' asserted by digital feminists. It gained the pattern of a meme by being circulated and transformed by the memetic participation of women both online and offline. Moreover, digital users and news media cited the phrase when they discussed the incident, thus spreading the idea of misogynistic crimes and the gendered reality of women. The process of memefication, eventually, rendered this incident a social issue through the virality that the memes entail.

Meanwhile, the increased attention provoked reactions from diverse actors. The reactions of male digital users to the Gangnam station incident were remarkable and influential for digital feminism afterwards. In brief, men demonstrated their discontent over the charge that the incident was a misogynistic crime, and women were disappointed and upset by the men's

collective denial. The two quotations below are from a male digital user and a female digital user, which are about the reactions of male digital users to the incident:

Now, [is it a situation of] internet comments going offline? (MLBPARK user 4-002, 2016)

After dicks[men] collectively displayed frenzy over the Gangnam station incident, women, truly and entirely changed. Including me. ... If they would have understood [the women's shared emotion about the incident], Megalia and the following feminist movements would not have grown as far as they have developed today. (DCinside user 4-002, 2016)

The user of the (male-dominated) baseball fan community, MLBPARK, referenced in the quotation, left the above comment on a post that shared a digital news piece with an image of the situation in Gangnam station when the gate was covered in post-it notes that had been left by visitors. The news images showed phrases on the notes, such as 'Pray for the bliss of the dead – [in this incident which involves] a man who killed, a woman who was murdered'. The cited MLBPARK user evidently perceived the situation within the frame of a gender war that occurred in 'internet comments'. On the post where that comment was left, other MLBPARK users also reacted in the same vein, complaining about people 'absurdly generalising' the issue to 'fabricate confrontation between men and women', which must have been 'activated by Megals' (MLBPARK users 4-003, 2016).

As I described, the incident became an issue on account of digital feminists – Megals by the label that male digital users allotted. However, the incident was not the creation of Megalians; rather, it was a manifestation of misogynistic hatred and the trivialising of violence against women that assisted that manifestation. While the incident was memefied via a phrase that many young women could engage in, the form of spread, the memefication,

made the women's claim around the Gangnam station incident seen as 'of Megals', which male digital users could deny because they were 'man-hating'. The DCinside user (in a female-dominated forum) I cited above, who explained herself to have been a digital user who had never engaged in feminism or 'man-hating', wrote that 'women, including [her]' were 'truly and entirely changed' after witnessing the reactions of men to the Gangnam station incident. She adds that the feminist movements in contemporary South Korea 'would not have grown' if the reactions had been different.

As shown in the cited sentences, this situation around the misogynistic charge of the murder generated two groups who exhibited different reactions. Firstly, the group of (largely) men who denied the social phenomenon of misogyny and tried to reduce it to a matter of internet culture. Secondly, the group of (generally) women who tried to focus on the social problem of misogyny that had become a threat to women's real lives, and found it necessary to actively criticise and locate the male reaction of denial in the specific context of a misogynistic/sexist social environment. In a more general interpretation, the former group wanted to maintain the status quo and the latter group wanted to challenge it by attacking people who tried to maintain it.

A worldview that 'man-haters' provided: Feminism

As is becoming clear, unlike more conventional forms of feminist activism, where women's equal rights are worked towards through the strategy of persuading others of one's ideology, Megalian activism used the method of trolling, enacting every aspect of this method, including hostility, aggressiveness, 'lulz', perpetration and abuse of the internet. Thus, digital users, especially male digital users who were familiar with the grammar of masculine trolling, collectively disavowed this activism, arguing that it is just trolling, not political activism at all. Hence, the Gangnam station incident manifested the confrontation between

two groups and their reactions to each other: the group who considered misogyny to be a social problem and the group who treated it as an internet subculture.

The differing reactions to this incident were actualised as clashes at the memorial site from the night of 19 May, as the media paid huge attention to the memorial at the 10th gate. In order to spoil the memorial, an Ilbe user sent a garland that bore the message: ‘(they) were killed because (they were) men, let’s not forget the victims of the *Cheonan*’⁹³ under the name of Ilbe and the dead president Mu-hyun Roh⁹⁴ (Hyeji Kim, 2016). The phrase I discussed earlier, ‘(she) was killed because (she was a) woman’ was parodied as ‘(they) were killed because (they were) men’ in order to present a counter-meme. The seemingly irrelevant message about the *Cheonan* incident, which happened in 2010, that the Ilbe user sent suggested that the death of a woman could not be interpreted as a misogynistic crime, in the same way that the deaths of male soldiers had not been interpreted as a ‘man-hating’ crime. Combining this Ilbe meme with condolences for male victims that pretended to be mourning had the intention of belittling the women’s condolences as exaggerated reactions that actually had the same implication as Womad memes commonly had, ‘man-hating’. This parody turned the scene into a confrontation between internet memes, rather than a civil reaction of grief at a woman’s death.

Along with this attempt to counter the ‘man-hating’ meme, some young men went to Gangnam station to ‘snipe at’ Megalians and ruin the site. At that same time, male and female digital users in online communities were fiercely debating the issue of whether the incident was a misogynistic crime or not. Many users of male-dominated communities claimed that defining the incident as a misogynistic crime was a delusional ‘man-hating’ idea that

⁹³ A warship of the ROK Marine Corps that was sunk by a North Korean torpedo in 2010, with 40 male victims.

⁹⁴ President Roh Mu-hyun is a signature meme of Ilbe that has the intention of ridiculing his death as the typical last days of a progressivist politician.

encouraged gendered antagonism (as shown in the post of MLBPARK user 4-001, 2016). From their shared perspective, problematising the misogyny of the incident was a ‘man-hating’ act since, in their understanding, a ‘man-hating’ group were the ones who actively challenged misogyny and ‘calling out’ the misogyny of a certain matter using the form of internet memes was considered a part of ‘man-hating’ culture. They argued that these women’s claim about the ubiquitous misogynistic threats in Korea was an attempt to generalise men as potential perpetrators. The debate was intensified by the police announcement that the incident was not a misogynistic crime because the perpetrator had symptoms of schizophrenia (Park, 2016), which was released on 19th May.

Several men from Ilbe and elsewhere started to hold one-man protests in front of the 10th gate of Gangnam station, claiming: ‘not all men are murderers’ (Kim, G., 2016). This assertion resonates with the anti-feminist hashtag #notallmen that exemplifies masculine resistance to the idea that ‘harmful and sexist outcomes do not require consciously misogynistic intention’, based on the perspective that men are victims of a political correctness that privileges women (Nicholas & Agius, 2017, pp. 44–46). Lucy Nicholas and Christine Agius suggest that ‘aggrieved entitlement’ is a characteristic of masculinism (p. 32), which is a gendered sense among men that they are justified to feel and express rage against their humiliating loss of manhood and are entitled to compensation for this loss (Kalish & Kimmel, 2010). In a situation in which ‘man-hating’ feminism exerted its power to disparage their manhood by tainting it with the irrationality and brutality that the Gangnam station murder signified, male digital users were driven by this ‘aggrieved entitlement’ to attack Megalians.

However, if the ‘aggrieved’ feeling of men is heightened, which means that their emotion is intense, then hurting them generates a bigger reaction, bringing greater triumphs for the opponents in online battles. Responding to the attacks, Megalians played the game of

ridiculing the grievance. They fought with the one-man protestors and other men who tried to interrupt the memorial. When a silent march for the victim was held on 21 May, in which I participated, several Ilbe users were visiting the site to hold one-man protests, claiming that the memorial was a ‘man-hating’ act. After the march, the men were surrounded by upset women. Some women started arguments with these protestors. To confirm that the protestors had no other opinions beyond the mantra of ‘do not generalise men’, women yelled at them ‘jaegihae’ and ‘sochusosim’, which are slang terms coined by Megalians that mean ‘kill yourself’ and ‘you’re narrow-minded because your penis is tiny’. When a protester tried to say something, someone from the crowd yelled: ‘I can’t hear you because of your tiny dick’.⁹⁵ This was a popular form of mockery of Korean masculinity that Megalians had enjoyed from the days of MERS forum, which made every woman on the site burst out laughing.

The fighting situation was video-recorded and uploaded onto YouTube for the purpose of denouncing the women who were involved (Kimwangguk, 2016). The short video clip of women yelling at daunted boys presented the memorial site as a ‘playground for man-hater girls’ (which is the title of the video). Their yelling became evidence reassuring men that both the memorial and the group who set it up had the purpose of ‘man-hating’ and trolling. Indeed, the ‘man-hating’ and bullying of anti-Megalians produced great ‘lulz’. My interview participant Nanome, whom I discovered had been at the same place as me at the moment of the clash, remembers the clash as ‘such a hilarious experience’ that she did not realise her voice was being recorded by the anti-Megalian when she was yelling ‘jaegihae!’. Since this pleasure among Megalians was ‘troll’ish and was humiliating manhood by harassing the anti-

⁹⁵ This sentence should be: ‘I can’t hear you because of your small voice’ but female digital users made jokes about ‘not hearing’ and ‘dismissing’ someone by using this sentence, such as, ‘I can’t hear you because of your bad breath’ or ‘because of your tiny dick’.

Megalian ‘victims’, the reactions of male digital users became stronger. These stronger reactions from men led to stronger responses from women, and so they goaded each other and the situation escalated.

At the weekend of 21st, many more anti-feminists and feminists gathered at the site for two days and quarrelled over the incident, the memorial, feminism and ‘man-hating’, sometimes leading to physical conflict. More clashes between the two groups generated more evidence that could be used to make a frame that those who had pretended to mourn for the victim were actually making playful attacks. In other words, they were ‘man-haters’, and they enjoyed it. After the incidents around the memorial, many video clips and animated GIF files were circulated online, evidencing that Megalians were Ilbe-like ‘man-hating’ trolls who should be socially punished because what they were expressing was not grief but pleasure.

Since this framework was created by misogynists’ media labour and was adopted by young men, young women who sympathised with the claims of Megalians were shocked and disappointed, as I presented above in the quotation. Even though trolling behaviours produced pleasure, the essence of the situation was grief – grief for a woman’s death and grief about the unexpected and unavoidable social reality of South Korean women: the prevalent and trivialised violence against women. Young women knew that the incident was about their own social reality under the shadow of misogynistic threats. The DCinside user I quoted in the previous section continues by saying:

At least dicks should have read the sense of fear. I know that not all men are potential criminals, just some of them are. But all women live with fear from birth because of that part of the group. ... [Most] Korean women who had been pro-man for decades would be appreciative of the small understanding of men, and they would criticise Megalia on the men’s side, even though those guys would just do what human beings should do. For

‘doenjangnyeo’⁹⁶ and *kimchinyeo*, I could deal with them by doing the *kimchi-pay*.⁹⁷ But [after this incident], if I want to be [approved of as] a *gaenyeomnyeo* then I need to say that women are killed because they are weak and that it [the thing that should be blamed] is not misogyny but schizophrenia, even though the perpetrator killed the woman after waiting for her while letting several men pass by. I found that women’s patience reached its limit in this moment.

... What Megals say, not the indiscriminate insults but about women’s rights and the reality of Korean men that they’ve exposed, is now largely shared by almost every woman as a basic perspective [on gender relations] and [the word] *gaenyeomnyeo* is used as an insult now. Isn’t it funny that, in the past, I was the pro-man Oyu user? Lol. (DCinside user 4-002, 2016)

This poster says that she ‘found that women’s patience reached its limit’ with the reactions of men claiming that they did not understand, or were unwilling to understand, the fear that was evoked in women by the Gangnam station incident, which was demonstrated by the men’s collective resistance to the social recognition of the misogynistic nature of the crime.

Branding the people who claimed the misogynistic intention of the crime as ‘Megals’, which male digital users did at that time, had the purpose of silencing women in their discussion.

The fear of gendered violence in everyday life that women experience ‘from birth’ was not comprehended by men or the wider society, even though the emotion was shared by one

⁹⁶ A stereotype of selfish and vain Korean women, which was generally used in the early 2000s that had a similar function with the *kimchinyeo* meme.

⁹⁷ The habit of splitting dating expenses between a couple. The fact that men usually paid more than their female partners had been one of the pieces of evidence for the claims of the male victim narrative of *kimchinyeo* discourse. Megalians criticised this claim and called splitting the dating expenses on men’s behalf *kimchi-pay*.

woman who was ‘pro-man’. Her experience was disrespected by men as well as by the police, which allowed her to realise the different gendered realities and that society only represents men’s perspective, which Megalians had repeatedly pointed out.

One of the commenters on this post adds: ‘more women adopted the Megalian idea because the dicks admired the Ilbe user who held one-man protests’, which was evidence for the Megalian claim that ‘misogyny was not limited to Ilbe users but a commonly shared belief of users in male-dominated communities’ (DCinside user 4-003, 2016.). Even though many users of mostly male-dominated communities had distanced themselves from Ilbe users, their reactions to this incident revealed that they actually empathised with the misogynistic ideas of Ilbe users. Specifically, ridiculing someone’s death was a taboo and was considered to only be done by Ilbe trolls, who were notorious for creating memes of dead people. However, users of male-dominated communities showed that they were on the side of the one-man protester, even though he was ridiculing the death and condolences, and was an Ilbe user. Although male digital users who thought they were different from Ilbe could not be allies when Ilbe users ridiculed the dead (male) president or his death, they could be on the same side when Ilbe users mocked a dead woman at Gangnam station and her death.

As the poster of the quotation points out, ‘what Megals sa[id]’ was ‘shared by almost every woman as a basic perspective [on gender relations]’. This is because what the ‘man-haters’ claimed was the social reality for people who can add themselves into the phrase: ‘(she) was killed because (she) was a woman’. The poster mentions that the word ‘*ganyeomnyeo* is used as an insult now’ among young women. This shows that the ideology that the word signifies, *women who know how to behave are controlled by men*, is discarded by these women, and moreover, it is replaced by new ideas about ‘women’s rights and the reality of Korean men’ that ‘man-haters’ were providing. Even though the reality of women’s social situation went viral by memefying the famous phrase and gaining attention by

employing the means of internet trolls, it was an urgent social problem that women were facing, which was symbolised by the death of a woman.

Social reactions to the incident revealed that women's shared problem, which constituted their life experience, was not considered a social problem, and that, if it is articulated as such, this is considered to be an anti-social idea spread by internet trolls. This led many women to become involved in feminism based on the simple reality that they were women, and that feminism is concerned with women's survival, unlike the Korean society more generally, which neglects women's voices. What was regarded by male groups and pro-male society as 'man-hating', something that revealed the material reality of women and emphasised how that reality is different from men's, was disclosed as a feminist idea. Not all women became directly involved in Womad; however, many women started to engage in the idea 'of Womad', feminism. As a result, the digital space that South Korean young people use split into communities in which users advocate feminism or object to feminism (for the users, man-hating). This splitting maps largely onto female-dominated and male-dominated communities, of 'Megals' and of 'hannams', which were inhabited by people who could and could not add themselves in the memetic phrase, '(she) was killed because (she was a) woman' and in the world the 'man-hating'/feminist idea configured.

Conclusion: The world woven out of 'man-hating' memes and/or feminist ideas

As female digital users developed the memetic world of 'man-hating', they came to have different experiences. A world woven out of 'man-hating' memes emerged, initiated by the coining of the words *hannam/hannamchung*. By stereotyping all Korean men as *hannams*, Megalians developed a discourse of *hannam* through appropriating digital texts. These texts were produced and diversified by the strategy of *mirroring*, which was accomplished through the labour of female digital users. Their discourse production creates the claim that 'The only

good *hannam* is a dead *hannam*' (DCinside user 4-005, 2017), as female digital users who have assimilated the 'man-hating' worldview commonly say. In this context, *hannams*, the creatures that deny women's life experiences and regard their articulation as 'man-hating', can be defeated when women take on the 'man-hating' worldview and embrace the antagonistic position of their counterparts. Since Megalians are South Korean women, whose living environment is inevitably shared with South Korean men, the 'man-hating' perspective also needed to be applied to social reality. Thus, the meme-making in digital space led to a reinterpretation of the world. This newly created worldview was actively adopted by young female digital users, who were familiar with utilising memes in their life experiences, since it provided a worldview that enabled them to resist *hannams* and the *hannam*(-centred) society.

Chapter 5. An activism shaped by reactions and responses

In this chapter, I explore the Megalian practices that have been developed through attacking and responding to both their enemies and media outlets. I want to make it clear that, during its early phases, the Megalian movement did not have an ideological orientation of feminism. Rather, what shaped their activism was Megalians' aggression towards male misogynists, which provoked reactions from them and, in turn, Megalians' improvised responses to those reactions, which included any practice that suited the attacks. Since the attacks on male misogynists were interpreted as feminist activism in the media and among female digital users, participation in trolling came to acquire the meaning of being involved in a feminist movement. Through this process, Megalians created the momentum for this feminist movement through practising and experimenting with trolling behaviours.

In the following sections, I present the specific practices and outcomes of this process. First, I describe how the 'hit feel' and 'lulz', which make up the game of 'bashing' *hannams*, provide the momentum that drives this activism, through compelling participants to continuously start a new game. I then discuss how Megalians stimulate attention and reactions through their position as women whose deviations from gender norms are considered to be an ethical menace. As misogynistic society desires to police women's behaviour, Megalians' acts of transgression were able to act as bait, drawing public attention. Finally, I discuss the practice of amplifying attention on digital news pages (*boryeok*) and how Megalians are 'doing' feminism through gamifying it. The chief aim of this chapter is to show how ordinary digital habits, which digital users experienced through their involvement in online battles as trolls, were utilised as activist practices.

5.1. 'Hit feel' and 'lulz': Creating the momentum for troll feminism

In this section, I explain the practice that is based on digital offensiveness, while bringing in the concept of 'hit feel'. The term 'hit feel' is a literal translation of the Korean word 'tagyeokgam'. My usage of it is inspired by the term 'game feel', which is used to indicate the tactile and visceral sensations that gaming produces, which gives immediate feedback to the gamer through his/her control, mostly in a role-playing game (Swink, 2008). Likewise, *tagyeokgam* is used in Korean to indicate the sensation stimulated by the online battles by digital users, measured in terms of how much impact an insulting or irritating speech or post has had on the target, which is gauged by discerning their reaction. Just as Korean gamers say *tagyeokgam* to note the sensation that is generated by how the game environment reacts to the players' motion of hitting the target, online debaters, or trolls, sense the *tagyeokgam* when their targets react to their hit/attack/irritation. In the gaming environment, the 'feel' is generated by the aural/visual, sometimes tactile, effects within the game (p. xiii). Considering the video game environment and users' gaming experience, where the notion of *tagyeokgam* originated, we can see that a 'hit feel' is about a hit/attack in a virtual environment, for which feedback is not virtual, but rather tactile and visceral, produced in the interaction with the target during hitting and bashing. The feeling is also related to the user's gut response of 'getting excited' that motivates him/her to play or try again. Just as a game with a weak 'hit feel' fails to stimulate gamers to play many times, the 'hit feel' in online interactions makes users, or trolls including Megalians, become excited, and that is what drives them to exercise another hit, or restart the game.

In Chapter 3, I discussed how Megalians become a 'warrior tribe' in the context of online battles. In this game of repetitive attacks, the 'hit feel' involves distressing other people, unlike in more conventional forms of gaming, which usually involves users interacting with virtual enemies mediated by digital reactions. Megalians gain their 'hit feel' from attacking

hannams, Korean men, who are abstract but actual targets. ‘Bashing’ *hannam* in digital space is practised in the same way as the ‘game of misogyny’ or bashing *kimchinyeo* games had been practised entailing ‘lulz’ in them.

Awakening to the ‘lulz’ of ‘man-hating’

My interviewee, Lyon, articulates her experience of circulating ‘man-hating’ images that she herself had created, and how these ‘man-hating’ acts had an effect, creating a pleasurable ‘hit feel’, as follows:

After seeing that many men were annoyed and convulsed with what I’d created, ... by searching on the internet, I found that, oh, things that I was upset about in the past because they derided and ridiculed [women], those things, were what *I* can do to them [misogynists who derided and ridiculed women]. ... What we [Womad users] were doing was just for fun for us but it was exactly *what* made them upset. This is not what I simulate [by the logic of ‘man-hating’]. I could have that kind of actual feeling. I actually felt it. (Lyon)

As Lyon emphasises, if the anguish of enemies, described as them being ‘convulsed with anger’, is ‘felt’, this produces pleasure for Megalians. This digital habit of gaining amusement at another’s expense is called ‘lulz’, which is ‘a corruption ... of “laugh out loud”’, which ‘celebrates the anguish of the laughed-at victim’ (Phillips, 2015, p. 27).

Through witnessing the reactions of male digital users to her created materials, Lyon gained a ‘hit feel’. This ‘feel’ in the Megalian movement is not just limited to the fleeting sensation of fun in distressing a specific target, but includes the satisfaction of triumphing over one’s extensive enemies, which incites Lyon to recall misogynists and their culture that had made her ‘upset’.

Other interviewees who had participated in the MERS forum, Megalia and Womad explained to me how they shared similar experiences and emotions when they confronted their enemies and achieved triumph. According to them, the emotion stemming from triumph was an important reason for their participation, in terms of learning, experimenting with and staying in the movement. My interview participant Suji argues that this triumph erased the negative emotions caused by online misogyny: the source of the fun/pleasure she was able to seek through participating in the Megalian movement.

(Euisol [hereafter, EJ]: You said that you left Ilbe because it was no longer funny. Did [Megalia's] fun last?) Yes, it was really funny. It was hilarious even when I read over again. (EJ: The fun didn't end. Then what do you think was the difference between the fun in Megalia and the fun in Ilbe?) It's totally, you know, ... you should know that because you would also experience what I experienced in male-dominated communities. The repulsion and resentment [that I felt from my experience of male-dominated community] were resolved. (Suji)

Suji was once an Ilbe user and enjoyed its humour. However, she left the community because she felt the code of humour in Ilbe, repeating the same derision of the stereotype of women and of the former president Moo-hyun Roh,⁹⁸ was no longer funny. Nevertheless, she had fun with 'man-hating' humour, even though the content was repetitive. She identifies a reason for the lasting pleasure of Megalian humour in the context of the repulsion and resentment that

⁹⁸ Ilbe users shared a form of humour deriding groups of women, left-wingers, foreign workers and people from specific regions. They made the former president Moo-hyun Roh into a ridiculous internet meme to deride him and to irritate people who supported him after his death. This shared code of humour in Ilbe is understood as a way of gaining attention, rather than political persuasion, as analysed by the cultural critic Kwonil Park (Ban, 2019).

she felt when she was exposed to online misogyny. As these sources of humour show, the fun Ilbe users enjoy is also ‘lulz’ through distressing (imaginary) women and supporters of the president Roh. Whitney Philips uses the term ‘lulz fetishism’ to refer to how trolls obscure the social conditions and interpersonal strife of a situation when they enjoy what is ‘lulzy’ (2015, p. 30). In doing so, trolls dismiss the emotional context as well as the harm their actions cause, while focusing on the ‘punch line’, the absurd, exploitable detail of the situation that the trolling mocks (p. 29). What is more, it can be applied to trolls’ own experiences, whereby their offline experiences can be dissociated from the content of their trolling (p. 36). This made Suji also enjoy the ‘lulz’ of mocking *kimchinyeos*, while dissociating herself from the absurd details of stereotyped Korean women. However, she eventually found that the repetitive humour was no longer funny, as she could no longer sufficiently dissociate from *kimchinyeos*, and felt ‘repulsion and resentment’ at being involved in the culture. This experience, in turn, enabled the fun in ‘man-hating’ to prosper because it resolved her negative emotions of the past and the present, triggered by the prevalent misogyny. Suji asserts that these negative emotions are a common experience among women in South Korea, who have been interpellated by the generalised name of *kimchinyeo*, especially those who were involved in male-dominated communities, since in those places women should have tried to avoid confronting the hostile messages directed towards them if they were women. These emotions are linked to women’s experiences of (metaphorical) defeat in digital space.

In a 2013 article that was published while Ilbe was highly influential in the culture of young digital users, feminist researcher Bora Yoon suggests that Korean women were confronting the threat of ‘invisible Ilbe’ in everyday life (2013, p. 34). How can women confront an ‘invisible’ enemy? This was possible because misogynistic discourse that suppressed women gained the position of a dominant discourse among the young generation

and created a cultural pressure on those groups who were highly influenced by online discourse. The form of online misogyny that originated from Ilbe and its origin DCinside circulated in every online venue where male users dominated (p. 51), whether they claimed to advocate progressive or conservative politics and whether enjoyment of this discourse was explicit or implicit. The misogynistic discourse sets a normative gender relation that involves the domination of men over women. The emotions that Suji mentions, repulsion and resentment, come from the experience of being suppressed, by residing in a digital space where misogynistic discourse has power. Suji argues that this emotional situation was resolved through her Megalian experiences. Like misogynistic discourse, the Megalian discourse of ‘man-hating’ creates a virtual domination of women over men, it simply changes ‘who’ is being suppressed.

The satisfaction of ‘man-hating’ trolling stems from ‘bashing’ male misogynists in the very setting where female digital users have been ‘bashed’ by them, and at the same time attacking digital culture as a structured ground, where has been hostile to them. It derives from violating the patriarchal social order that is imposed in digital space. Digital culture has enforced regulative norms around women’s behaviour, as my interview participant Zizi explains. When asked about her first impression of the MERS board, Zizi told me that she was ‘excited’:

I was excited because I could speak like that [using offensive language]. ... In the MERS forum, it was not only me who spoke like that. Everyone spoke like me. And we had a motivation. (EJ: Motivation of what?) *That I can bash those who deserve* [criticism] to my heart’s content. When I left comments on the internet [in other places], people judged my comments by what was the proper emotion I should express. Like, ‘this isn’t an issue that

you should criticise that harshly’ or something. But this time, it was a social emotion, what people sympathised with.

Zizi says that she was foulmouthed and was treated as a weird person both online and offline because of her bad language habit. When she visited the MERS board, she was no longer an aberration who used offensive language. Since users shared the idea that Korean men who enjoyed misogynistic culture deserved harsh criticism, they all expressed aggression as Zizi used to do. She mentions that ‘it was a social emotion’, which suggests that the users in MERS forum shared a craving for ‘bashing’ misogynists with coarse language. Underlying this playful trolling of other users was a prevalent culture that restricted women’s behaviour online. The offensiveness against random Korean men also offended the gendered norm of online conversation. It linked Megalians’ ‘lulz’ of ‘bashing’ *hannams* to the ‘transgressive appeal’ (Phillips, 2015, p. 66) of violating norms, which both produced (metaphorical) triumphs of women – against misogynists and against misogynistic regulations – that caused the ‘hit feel’ of Megalians.

Violence as a women’s tool

The digital conversations that Megalians participate in are not merely chats, but battles that aim to triumph over their opponents. This means that participants need to become attackers rather than remaining victims or defenders, which requires women to violate the gendered allocation of the roles of perpetrator and victim to men and women.

When discussing how violence is gendered in the context of the self-defence training of learning how to attack, feminist scholar Martha McCaughey points out that femininity becomes ‘the biggest hurdle’ for female self-defence practitioners because womanhood is associated with the ‘inability to fight’, and this has been embodied throughout women’s lives

(McCaughey, 1997, p. 90). In this sense, women's participation in attacks requires the 'unlearning' of femininity, which is closely associated with victimhood. From her observation, women practised to 'unlearn' gendered behaviour in this training, which, in turn, transformed their embodiment to achieve a 'fighting spirit': a new bodily comportment made up of practice-made bodily memories that capture a 'will to fight' (p. 112). In the Megalian case, the aggression is practised by women in their reiterated 'lulz' directed at Korean men.

I want to use the example of a change in 'man-hating' jokes in order to show how Megalians developed a 'fighting spirit' through their practices, while transforming their position from the gendered allocation of victimised women into women who can be perpetrators through bashing *hannams*. In the early MERS forum writings, one user, writing in the voice of a man, uploaded a phishing joke, which had the title 'we men are rational so we don't hesitate before doing things by chattering like girls', and which had the content 'we simply kill you!' Attached was a pie chart showing that 94 percent of felonious crimes were perpetrated by men in South Korea (DCinside user 4-004, 2015). This post gained 1,158 upvotes on the day it was written, and a screenshot of the post has been circulating in women's online communities ever since as a 'Megalian classic' (Yeoseongsidae user 4-002, 2016). In this forum of 'man-hating flow', users criticised Korean men as perpetrators of crimes, underlining the generality of violence against women in South Korean society.

A 'man-hating' joke that was invented in 2018, meanwhile, describes a 'lifecycle' for a situation 'when an unknown *hannam* does a shoulder check', bumping somebody else's shoulder with his own, to 'punch another guy' because 'they are all the same *hannams*' (Jjukppang user 5-001, 2018). If a random man makes you annoyed, it says, you can vent your anger on another guy because they fall into the same category of *hannam*, whose stereotype is composed of being rude, annoying and having no sense of apology. As the 'man-hating flow' came to be a shared culture for female digital users over the course of

three years, ‘bashing’ random men became a joke in women’s online communities. This change in ‘what is lulzy’⁹⁹ specifically shows that women’s collective mentality is not limited to the position of victims who satirise ‘the strong’. Rather, they laugh at a victimised and distressed, probably innocent, man, branding him with an awful stereotype, and the implied message is of a woman’s transgression of her position, from a victim to a perpetrator, through achieving ‘the fighting spirit’.

In the Megalian movement, the ‘hit feel’, which motivates users to exercise more ‘hits’, is a somatic experience that involves the emotional response of winning. Emphasising emotion as an essential quality for understanding social movements, sociologist James M. Jasper points out that reactive emotions, which are responses to the actions of other players in conflicts, become internal movement dynamics (Jasper, 1998, p. 407). In this sense, Megalian activism is driven by a feeling of triumph, a reactive emotion from defeat and triumph within online battles. Since this triumph is an outcome of their enemies’ anguish, the triumph in battles resonates with the success of ‘lulz’ in trolling. This fun, pleasure, or triumph within Megalian activism is what drives Megalians to repeat the online battles, by using any means of defeating their enemies. While ‘unlearning’ their hesitancy about using the ‘master’s tools’ (Lorde, 1984), they find the courage to be perpetrators, while pursuing ‘lulz’ that works alongside the ‘hit feel’.

By training themselves through repeated battles, or restarting games, triumphs and the entailed ‘hit feels’, Megalians come to embody the will to fight, and this opened up the possibility of women’s transition away from the gendered position of victims. I write the ‘possibility of transition’, rather than that ‘they transgressed’ because the ‘fighting spirit’ is not gained equally by all users. Just as the degrees of training in self-defence would lead practitioners to rewrite bodily comportment at different levels, so digital participation in

⁹⁹ Lulzy is a derivative of lulz, an adjective form.

offensive practices can lead to different embodiments of fighting spirit. I emphasise that the Megalia phenomenon unlocked women's participation in digital offensiveness and, by extension, their achievement of the 'fighting spirit'. The practice of offensiveness enabled women to enjoy violating gendered behaviours, deviating from the expected gendered position and attracting angry responses from what we might term norm-protectors. In other words, Megalian activism challenges the frame that sees 'violence as patriarchal and bad' and feminism as 'good, virtuous, nonviolent', which neglects the complex deployment of violence and power, while supporting the notion that 'men are the only ones capable of violence and agency' (McCaughey, 1998, pp. 197–198). Resistance to this idea, which unlocks the gendered restrictions placed on women, can legitimately be understood as feminist.

Megalians' use of offensive language, furthermore, disturbed the linguistic arrangement of digital space: male digital users claimed that Megalians were not women but men who were pretending to be women, because they thought 'women are not capable of using these hostile words' (Kimhong, 2015). This claim shows that, through the Megalia phenomenon, the online hostility that was exerted through language was no longer monopolised by male digital users. Megalians' appropriation of online hostility disturbed not only polarised language use between genders but also the static setting of perpetrators and victims within the digital environment, as well as the gender of internet trolling, perpetration, insults or violence. This poached offensiveness is used for 'bashing' *hannams* not only by Megalians but also by many other female digital users.

5.2. Baiting the misogynistic desire to penalise women

This altered position of women, which deviated from the allocated position of victims, attracted public attention, as I have been highlighting throughout this study. As I mentioned

in the previous section, the conventional idea on perpetration, which supports the notion that ‘men are the only ones capable of violence and agency’ (McCaughey, 1998) punishes not only women who ‘misbehave’ but also those who simply ‘behave’ with agency. This tacit misogyny, it would seem, is what amplified public reactions to Megalians, ironically helping their movement to thrive. Womad users steered attention towards their ‘man-hating’ acts by using the figure of ‘the woman who violates social norms’. I discuss how Megalians amplified reactions by violating norms through the case of ‘bentogao’, which was created by my interview participant, Sol-va.

Bentogao: baiting the tacit misogynists to react

Sol-va, a Megalian, dabbled in drawing comics, creating parody works of various texts, such as advertisements, government policies and fairy tales, in order to ridicule masculine culture. She uploaded these to Megalia and Womad throughout 2015 and 2016. Her works conveyed the obvious identity of ‘man-hating’ feminism. Her drawings followed the unashamed approach of ‘mirroring’, such as deforming male body parts to overtly sexualise them. This resulted in her works usually only gaining attention and applause from Womad users, rather than circulating outside Womad.

Unlike her other materials, *bentogao* provoked huge reactions from people outside Womad as well. In 2016, just before Korean Independence Day, which celebrates the end of Japanese colonial rule in 1945, Womad users discussed how anti-colonial activists, who were generally regarded as heroic figures in South Korea, were actually average Korean men who exploited their wives in their private lives. It might seem odd to devalue people who lived in the colonial society of the early 20th centuries using the standards of misogyny and feminism, ideas which originated in the experiences of Megalians, women who live in contemporary society. Nevertheless, Megalians did not hesitate to apply their standards to anything that

seemed misogynistic for unhindered criticism, if it would be funny and aid in ‘driving the flow’. They started deriding anti-colonial activists as inferior men in the Korean colony who had projected their anger onto women through violence or prostitution, while citing their biographies.¹⁰⁰ Womad users interpreted their militant deeds as uncivilised and violent, even though contemporary Koreans had learnt about them as heroic deeds. This was even funnier because, when these women criticised the anti-colonial activists, they used the claims of Megalia’s opponents, applying them to the situations of the national heroes. One Womad post that was uploaded on Korean Independence Day in 2016 and its comments exactly reproduced what Megalians had heard said about their activism:

Title: How can Koreans say their acts of founding the army, bombing and shooting people are liberation activism?

Content: They are complete liberation-Nazis. I feel shame as a Korean.

Commenter 01: We need to be the first ones who break this vicious chain of violence.

[The people who use violent means] are providing evidence for Japanese people to criticise Koreans in general. The innocent ones would be damaged by their provocations.

Commenter 02: Koreans are crossing the line nowadays. It would certainly bring hatred against Koreans.

Commenter 03: Dicks are so emotional. They should have done things with their words, not destroying property or killing others. So uncivilised. If Koreans keep doing this, the Japanese will hate all Koreans, so will not give a shit [about the Korean issue].

Commenter 04: Liberation-Nazis are culprits who ruin liberation activism.

¹⁰⁰ Since these practices are trivialised in South Korean culture, it is written in the biographies of the ‘great men’ for representing the sorrow of colonial masculinity that needed to be projected onto the more marginalised group, women.

(Womad user 5-001, 2016)

What Womad users were pretending to discuss in this quotation were parodies of the narratives that had criticised Megalian activism: calling Megalian trolling violence that should not be counted as advocating social justice, just as the title shows, and comparing it to fascism by calling it femi-Nazism, as the content shows; lecturing women on being the first ones to break the ‘chain of violence’ by giving up using their means of defeating misogynists in the battle, ‘man-hating’. If they do not do so, is the claim, it would provide evidence to criticise feminism or women in general; claiming that women were taking the wrong paths and an inappropriate degree of assertion that would definitely lead men to develop misogynistic attitudes and an indifference to feminist issues; and the claim that Megalian/‘man-hating’ feminism is ruining ‘real’ feminism.

While this flow was being driven, Sol-va uploaded a digital image with a short sentence, which was named *bentogao* by another user. The term is a compound of ‘bento’ and ‘ahegao’, literally meaning ‘lunchbox-face’. As the image on left of Figure 4 shows, *bentogao* was a portrait of Yun Bong-gil, an anti-colonial activist in Korea who sacrificed his life in 1932 by detonating a bomb which killed and injured several dignitaries in the Japanese colonial government. South Koreans learn in elementary school that he hid this bomb in a lunchbox, and threw it in an attack that appealed for Korean independence. In the image, a portrait of Yun has been photoshopped so that he has the face of an *ahegao* (see below), with the caption ‘bento daisuki’, which means ‘I love lunchbox’ in Japanese. She also uploaded an *ahegao* of another anti-colonial activist, An Jung-geun (the right side image of Figure 4).



Figure 4 Bentogaos of Yun and An uploaded by Sol-va

Ahegao is a form of expression used in Japanese adult manga. It shows a silly face, with a sticking out tongue and weeping, rolling eyes. This face is interpreted as expressing unmanageable pleasure after sexual intercourse in adult manga culture. South Korean comics and manga consumers also follow and use the pornographic grammar of *ahogao* to sexualise ‘mostly’ female characters. The image, *bentogao*, itself was highly provocative, then, because it positioned a national hero in the place of a helplessly aroused feminised body. It also implied more provocative aspects: that ‘man-haters’ in digital space can depict the national heroes in a pornographic context, as misogynists have done elsewhere; in this subculture, the heroic behaviour of detonating a ‘bento’ becomes a ‘punch line’, that is ridiculed by trolls.

Appropriating ‘lulz fetishism’ (Phillips, 2015), the absurd detail – throwing a lunchbox in this case – was dissociated from the historical and cultural contexts of the figures. The image, and the staged narrative of criticising anti-colonial activism, became a serious affair that quickly went viral in digital space. It was also reported in the mass media, including in a vast amount of digital news and in newspaper and television news in South Korea. This virality was possible thanks to the people who always kept an eye on what was happening in Womad.

Certain male digital users took screenshots of Womad posts and spread them to other communities with the intention of encouraging criticism of Womad users. Digital news and newspaper articles carried various emotional words to describe public reactions to this image, such as people ‘being enraged by’ (reported in the major news provider Chosun.com, Sangyoon Kim, 2016) and ‘furious at’ (reported in the cable news channel YTN, Kang, 2016) the woman’s ‘unforgivable act’ (reported in the business news provider MK, Hong, 2016). According to this article of MK, a group of patriotic senior citizens, ‘Aegook Yeonhap’, the Patriotic Association, even filed a complaint against *bentogao* to the police.

Bentogao was a trivial kind of material that Sol-va or any other Womad users were creating at that time in Womad. Its success was due to its ‘transgressive appeal’, which violated a taboo, and ‘its status as subcultural Trojan horse’ (Phillips, 2015, p. 66). This echoes the case of the ‘pedobear’ attack on the Oprah Winfrey show in 2008. The pedobear was a meme that made jokes about the imagined perpetrator of child sexual exploitation, provoking a serious reaction from Oprah Winfrey, due to 4chan¹⁰¹ users’ trolling with the meme on the board for her show (ibid.). This trolling could be seen as a meaningless prank, or a hoax in the eyes of people who knew about online culture. However, it seemed real to others, including Winfrey, who came to be baited by the trolling due to its provocative topic, child sexual exploitation. This, in turn, increased the ‘online visibility of trolls’, while ‘lending more infamy to an already infamous’ group, and even provided ‘a catalyst for further memetic creation’ (pp. 66–67).

When *bentogao* was on the TV news, Womad users celebrated it and praised the nameless creator. This type of Megalian creation, an exaggerated ridiculing of normativity, was the stuff of the internet, which was hard to spread beyond the digital network. However,

¹⁰¹ An English-language image board website that provides an anonymous environment, ‘where the populist type of trolling that is well known today first emerged’ (Coleman, 2015a, p. 41).

bentogao transgressed the boundaries of the areas in which Womad content could go viral.

Users shared how their friends and acquaintances, who were uninformed about Womad, reacted, as the Womad user in the following quotation describes:

Putting up a strawman Womad is just awesome. This is so exciting. We need to insult the great men more. My friend was really upset and literally convulsed with anger, and asked me if I was involved in Megalia, which community s/he¹⁰² had heard was insulting the national heroes. ... I answered 'I think it's a Womad user [who insulted them]' then s/he apologised to me. Oh, I'm involved in Pomade, you know. (Womad user 5-002, 2016)

In this post, the author's friend, who did not know much about Womad, in that s/he could not discern the difference between Megalia and Womad, was 'upset and literally convulsed with anger' upon hearing the news about *bentogao*. As the friend knew that the author was involved in Megalia, s/he was trying to blame her for being involved in the group who was conducting this immoral behaviour. Then the author evaded the accusation by putting up the 'strawman Womad' and her friend even apologised for having tried to criticise her. Her words 'I'm involved in Pomade' is a pun shared among Womad users, showing how they dealt with attempts to blame them for joining the notorious group: they just gave any random name to evade accusations of being a Womad user because the accusers would usually not know whether the group of that title existed or not. The other user also said that her friends, to whom she had sometimes sent quotations about feminism, asked if '[it was] Womad you sent links from' while expressing their shock (Womad user 5-003, 2016). These authors' situations show that: Womad was not previously known to the general public; *bentogao* made

¹⁰² The Korean language does not have gendered pronouns (it has gender-neutral pronouns). Hence, I write s/he.

them aware of Womad; it even induced intense emotions of upset, anger and shock so that they tried to find someone who knew about Womad; they tried to blame anyone who was involved for the immorality of Womad that was reported in the media.

These reactions take the direction of finding out who is an immoral woman, in order to discipline and police women's behaviour. This is how misogyny works as a form of moralism, as proposed by feminist philosopher Kate Manne (2017). Manne differentiates misogyny from sexism, pointing out that sexism works by '*naturalizing* sex differences, in order to justify patriarchal social arrangements, by making them seem inevitable', whereas misogyny '*functions to police and enforce a patriarchal social order*' in order to '*enact or bring about ... social relations in ways that may be direct*' (p. 79, emphasis in original). In her analysis, they share a common purpose of '*maintain[ing] or restor[ing] a patriarchal social order*' but, unlike sexism, which finds evidence for discrimination against women, misogyny divides good women from bad ones and punishes the latter, which turned it into a moralism that encourages '*witch hunts*' (pp. 79–80). Hence, '*sexism is to misogyny as civic order is to law enforcement*', whereby sexism concerns beliefs in male superiority over women, while misogyny relates to '*anxieties, fears and desires*' to uphold the social order (p. 88).

In this sense, the moralism of hunting down immoral women functions to discipline them by situating them in their rightful place as women under patriarchal norms. When this policing fails, anxiety, fear and the desire to fix the disturbance burst out, as we could see in the case of *bentogao*. Thus, this Megalian practice of amplifying reactions utilises the very desire to police and discipline women under '*the mantle of moralism*' (p. 101). As the violation of norms grows bigger, the reactions, which stem from the desire to regulate, also grow bigger. Patriarchal desire to police and patrol '*bad women*' becomes a medium that disseminates issues related to Womad, this allegedly infamous female group, whether they are feminists or '*man-haters*'.

Women's offensiveness in Womad, then, was widely considered a problem that threatened public morality.¹⁰³ However, what was more problematic was that Megalians seemed to be enjoying it. They were not the stereotypical feminist activists, who appealed for an end to women's victimised situation and for the legitimacy of women's equal rights, advocating human rights and anti-violence. Rather, they were villains who attacked any Korean man, whether he was guilty or innocent, for fun. This provoked angry reactions regarding Megalians' 'gwaessimham', which means a sense of their 'impertinence' due to their brazen attitude of claiming *women's rights*, while they were deviating from a women's *right position*. The imperative of meeting their obligations and then claiming their rights, in this situation, connotes the sexist perspective on the women's movement that believes feminist activists need to beg for their rights as the weak, womankind, to the strong, mankind, while embodying the conventional expectations of women. The discordance between the stereotype and what Megalians practised amplified this reaction. The impertinence, which was created in-between the playful Megalian trolling that worked with feminist claims that had a basis in women's adverse reality, amplified the reaction fuelled by the moralism of policing women. However, this 'impertinent' enjoyment, pleasure, or playfulness, additionally induced by the dazed reactions of their opponents, created more 'lulz', the momentum of this movement.

Women in a wrong position

Korean society is still under the influence of Confucianism, long 'accepted and adopted as a guiding philosophy in daily life and all social classes' and that led to the formation of the particular mode of South Korean patriarchy (Sechiyama, 2013, p. 149). According to Kaku Sechiyama's comparative study of constructions and manifestations of patriarchy in East

¹⁰³ For the details of this context, see section 3.2.4.

Asian countries, this culture in South Korea implies the daily norms of distinguishing social ranks depending on gender and age (p.169), which led to a culture that identifies hierarchy in all relationships. The violation of this hierarchy provoked anger from people who followed the norms of the social hierarchies between men and women, older generations and contemporary youth, those who should be admired and those who should be scolded, in the case of *bentogao*.

However, this hierarchy had always been violated, but this did not usually generate the kind of social reactions that Womad users induced. The factor that amplified these reactions was that the issues were generated by women's misbehaviour. This is because women were considered to be weak, appropriate targets to attack, a group that was easy to suppress, and who should not be positioned as a group that incites criticism. This meant that Womad users were in the wrong place. The gut response when discerning this incorrect placement of women and femininity induced people to react within the grammar of misogyny, which polices and patrols women with the purpose of locating them in their rightful places within the patriarchal social order. It was soon revealed that the easiest way for this movement to induce a reaction was to violate the norms of what *women* do.

According to Michelle Meagher, this process of inciting a negative reaction, a gut response of disgust in her case study, provides an opportunity to interrogate the 'ethical implications of a cultural system' (2003, p. 25). By analysing Jenny Savill's artworks, which deal with the fleshy bodies of women, Meagher examines how the emotion/affect of disgust can allow spectators to recognise the cultural and social frameworks that make Savill's works disgusting. Moreover, their visceral engagement leads them to look at how they experience their own bodies as well as other women's, which was influenced by these frameworks (p. 38). The disgust stems from the artist's style, which follows neither the conventional style of

nudity nor the contemporary way of representing feminine beauty, which deviates from how things should be arranged in the social order.

The series of emotional disturbances that emerged from *bentogao* shows why the violation of social norms induced these reactions, as though it was a violation of morality, which should be policed and patrolled in order to restore the social order. The gendered code of the ‘helplessly aroused feminised body’ and the ‘patriotic hero’ who is unmarked but always masculine cannot be compatible.¹⁰⁴ The digital mischief of sexualising or ridiculing a real person by uploading deformed images is considered an offence to the people, especially what Ilbe users do when it involves dead people. *Bentogao* dismantled the boundary of what female users do when female users, assumed to be passive victims of online misogyny, were revealed to be the ones who did ‘what Ilbe users – notorious misogynistic trolls – do’. They were no longer limited to being frightened victims, but had rather become ‘warriors’ who wielded the same weapons as Ilbe. Since internet trolling was masculine behaviour and the hierarchy between nationally admired heroes and young women living in the contemporary society was static, things were no longer in the right places.

Within the exceptionally concentrated attention of media outlets on Womad, its users knew about the impact of the violation of norms, thus conducted more blatant attempts at such a violation. These encouraged intense reactions also generated interrogations of what parts of the social agreement these reactions were based on. For example, when a Womad user uploaded a photo of a burnt sacramental wafer in July 2018, media outlets published an enormous amount of news about it and the Korean Catholic Church defined it as an act of

¹⁰⁴ If the patriotic is a woman, it was acceptable in the case of Ryu Gwan-sun, a female anti-colonial activist. While mentioning the case, Sol-va criticised the prevalent double standard between insulting messages about men and women or being uploaded by men and women, because ‘in male-dominated online communities, posts that sexualised Ryu with detailed descriptions about sexual torture, even though it may not have happened, and images that depicted her like a hostess were uploaded’.

serious profanity. When the uploader stated that she was insulting the Church on purpose because she was upset about her parents, who forced the religion on her and the Catholic Church which oppressed women by opposing the legalisation of abortion, it incited a discussion about the naturally accepted discrimination against women within the religious community. Some female digital users joined in criticising the Catholic Church by going *boryeok*.¹⁰⁵ The comments section of one of the digital news pages that dealt with the issue was occupied by digital users who criticised the reaction of the Catholic Church, demanding: ‘are you [Catholic Church] also going to sue Ilbe users who insulted the Virgin Mary as a call girl in a stable?’ and ‘is it blasphemy if this woman burnt a wafer and it’s not if a priest sexually assaults a child?’ (Digital news commenter 5-001, 2016). As we can see in these questions, the actions themselves were not the problem, rather it was the fact that Womad users, women, who had done them that made the actions problematic. It drew clamorous reactions from people based on the specific social agreement that the women’s deviations from the rightful places should not be tolerated.

Throughout the process of amplifying reactions by Womad, public attention was attracted through the violation of social norms. This created a novel pathway to provoking angry misogynists’ reactions via their spontaneous/unpaid labour and participation. The misogynist conglomerate, which is comprised of both male and female digital users, the media, the police and sometimes the judicial authorities, worked together to spread and circulate screenshots within other communities, to pass them on to the mass media, and to designate them as a crime. These actions all amplified the meaning of the misbehaviour of women as a serious matter that the general public should be concerned about. As a result, this small feminist group gained huge publicity in Korea and became widely known, even to people

¹⁰⁵ The collective action of leaving feminist/‘man-hating’ messages in comment sections of digital news, which I will discuss in detail in the next section.

who were not familiar with online feminism or the gender war itself. To be sure, it led people to visit the Womad website to figure out who was involved, and they asked or discussed whether a particular incident was a feminist act or not. Eventually, this ‘monstrous woman’s act’ (Han & Lee, 2018)¹⁰⁶ opened up debates over what feminism is and what feminist practices are, while broadening the social arena as well as the numbers of people that were responsive to the issues generated by Womad, which implied messages of digital feminism, even though this was not always explicit.

Womad’s digital content generated a feminist effect by gathering, utilising and encouraging reactions from the public towards Womad. Meanwhile, this practice of violating norms allowed Megalians to experience things that had not been allowed to women under the gendered regulations: doing something unethical – what Ilbe users do, disturbing the hierarchal relationship within which they were required to serve for their entire lives, and placing themselves in a position that could be criticised by the public, while claiming that this position can also be occupied by women. In this context, the phrase ‘girls can do anything’¹⁰⁷ not only meant the empowerment of women, which usually aims for positive liberation or upward mobility. It also meant that they could make wrong decisions and be involved in wrongdoings, which should not be met with gendered/additional punishment. One Megalian

¹⁰⁶ Although this report by *Hankookilbo* contains misinformation about Womad, the news encapsulates incidents that illustrate many of the reasons why Womad has been demonised and its title ‘Womad became the same monster as Ilbe’ epitomises how the media outlets amplified reactions to Womad by demonising it.

¹⁰⁷ The phrase ‘girls can do anything’ was one of the slogans used by South Korean digital feminists. It was all the rage in early 2018, when a K-pop idol star Na-eun Son uploaded a photo of a mobile phone case that bore this phrase onto her social media. Although she uploaded the photo to promote the fashion brand that manufactured the case, Zadig & Voltair, she became embroiled in a controversy about whether she was a feminist or not, which she had to clarify. Since this phrase and related disturbances signified the clamour against feminism of male digital users, digital feminists used this phrase for brazenly showing their support for feminism.

referred to this as a key impact of the Megalian movement: that they ‘broke the glass floor’ (Kim et al., 2018, p. 34). Inspired by the term ‘breaking the glass ceiling’, this phrase means that Megalians challenged the invisible floor that limited the boundaries of women’s experience of downward mobility in terms of immorality and criminality. They did so by breaking the gendered barrier that applies stricter moral standards to women and that entails gendered punishment.

Megalians utilised any available resources – including unruliness, raunchiness, offensiveness, anti-sociality and anti-nation sentiments – for their ends, attracting attention and amplifying reactions to feminist issues. These women should not ‘be’, from a perspective that unconsciously denies women’s autonomy. Hence, people in the misogynistic mindset reacted. These people could be both male and female, and might be engaged in the specific patterns of online misogyny or not. Their attention was easily baited by women’s misdeeds, which Megalians used precisely for inducing this reaction.

5.3. *Boryeok*: gamifying competition for attention

As I described in Chapter 3, *boryeok* is a form of collective action that leaves comments on digital news, originated from K-pop fandom culture and was appropriated by the MERS forum users. *Boryeok* is the art of increasing the numbers of people who pay attention to Megalian/feminist/‘man-hating’ messages. This word implies the meaning of ‘hwaryeok jiwon’ (fire support), and it generally means digital users’ support for women’s or feminist issues. It includes financial, personal, physical and calculable aid, when these are needed for women or feminist/‘man-hating’ purposes. I focus here on the *boryeok* strategy of leaving comments on digital news in order to explore the Megalian practice of competing for attention and mobilising participants by gamifying the activism.

Megalian practices operate with the aim of provoking reactions from people outside the digital feminist group, within the unstable constellation of steering attention, amplifying reactions and responding to those reactions. In her book *This is Why We Can't Have Nice Things*, media academic Whitney Phillips analyses internet trolls in the community '4chan' and the amplified social disturbances that they created by working with media outlets. She accurately describes the situation by stating that trolls and sensational media outlets are 'locked in a cybernetic feedback loop predicated on spectacle; each camp amplifies and builds upon the other's reactions, resulting in a relationship that can only be described as symbiotic' (2015, p. 52). The amplification of meaning that occurs amid the reactions of each agent shows that the digital content could be a trivial prank, or a hoax, but it becomes an issue, a topic to debate, sometimes even a social problem, if reactions around it accumulate through these amplifications. This 'cybernetic feedback loop' is how the Megalian movement has been amplified through garnering attention and reactions, while orbiting the issues that female trolls raised. This can be seen most obviously in the form of *boryeok*, which forms a game of attention-seeking, as I shall now discuss.

*'Boryeok is the essence of the Megalian movement'*¹⁰⁸

Megalians amplify attention by crisscrossing multiple digital venues, conducting games in the context of their gendered battle. The following *boryeok* case was conducted on the news aggregator service provided by Naver,¹⁰⁹ which was used by 93 % of digital news readers in 2017 (KPF, 2017) – the reason why Womad users chose to occupy it.

¹⁰⁸ This is a statement of a Womad user, which I discuss below.

¹⁰⁹ Naver is a big South Korean web portal company that provides various functions for users, such as searching, blogging, a digital newsstand, webcomic viewing, shopping, etc.

In January 2016, one early morning around 7 am, I was residing in Womad community, while following how Womad users go *boryeok*. They uploaded a series of links to the weather forecast news article on Naver and I followed the series of acts for ‘doing’ *boryeok* suggested by Womad users. I visited the news link that one user had uploaded onto the Womad board, left comments on the news page, upvoted comments that had seemingly been left by other Womad users and downvoted comments by other people. At times Womad users were leaving comments related to the weather, such as ‘lifehack: Korean men can smoothly cover their ugliness in this cold weather by wearing masks’; at other times they left ‘man-hating’ statements that were irrelevant to the topic of weather news, such as ‘Men should keep their chastity under any circumstances’ (Womad user 5-004, n.d.). One of the goals of this game was to attain the ‘most upvoted comment’, meaning that the message became the one most likely to be read by other news readers. The game also aimed to induce distressed reactions from their enemies through ‘bashing’ *hannams*, for the ‘lulz’ of female trolls.

The *boryeok* action required the multiple, simultaneous engagement of digital web pages, which enabled participants to check the progress of their actions and to find the link upon which their ‘fire support’ should be concentrated, which was constantly changing. Some users shared the real-time list of ‘upvoted comments’ of the news on the Womad board, revealing the competitive situation created by the upvotes and downvotes of Megalians and their enemies. Megalians uploaded screenshots to encourage users to keep participating in the *boryeok*. Even though it was time for ‘weather *boryeok*’ as Megalians named it, the action was not only concerned with weather news but also to other news topics that could kindle a gendered battle. When a user wrote ‘*boryeok* for this link is urgent’, it meant that this piece of digital news had the potential to gain many views and to provoke a gendered battle in the comments section due to its particular conditions – being situated on the main page of a digital newsstand and having a provocative title, in a context where male misogynists were

already leaving comments. The target news was selected by estimating the number of enemies or comments that they had left, the potential for Megalians to occupy, and the provocation the title or its topic generated. Once the target had been selected, female trolls visited the link and fought to win back its comments section from their enemies by covering it with ‘man-hating’ messages.

In one instance, the comments section of a piece of digital news that had the word ‘misogyny’ in its title was targeted and occupied by Megalians trolls. Meanwhile, misogynistic users were also there, leaving comments and making complaints about the women’s trolling that was ongoing on the page. An anti-feminist user, whose anti-feminist inclination could be confirmed by his previously having left comments, left the message: ‘this kind of digital news that generates a gendered conflict should not be uploaded’ (Digital news commenter, 5-002, 2016). That was interpreted as a gesture of submission by Megalians: he had left many comments on other pieces of digital news that generated gendered conflicts and had not found them problematic, but urged that this sort of news should not be uploaded when misogynists could not dominate the comments section of the news. His reaction ascertained the triumph of Megalians.

This collective behaviour for each comments section in ‘weather *boryeok*’ continued until the ‘man-hating’ messages occupied the page. Once the first page of the comments section or the list of upvoted comments was filled with comments that female trolls had left, it was time for the trolls to gather in Womad board, their ‘headquarters’. In the meantime, some users had already shared screenshots of their comments to share the fun as well as know-how about how to irritate misogynistic users. One woman bragged about how many downvotes her comment had got in one second. It seems ironic for female users to enjoy getting downvotes, but actually the number of downvotes revealed just how many misogynists were upset by her comment, something that female trolls clearly aimed for.

While uploading a not-visited link, one Womad user said that she found Naver staff were replacing the news that had been exposed on the main page with other weather news, which made the ‘man-hating’ messages that Womad users had left on the page useless. She encouraged users to quickly follow the changed link for the news on the main page and to occupy the comments section. This became a new battle, or a game, between Womad users and the invisible Naver staff who arranged the digital newsstand. Womad users were easily motivated to join this battle because Naver staff had always been enemies of Megalians since they had for a long time been actively deleting Megalians’ comments and sometimes suspending users’ accounts for their ‘man-hating’ messages in the comments. In order to defeat their enemy, Naver *hannam* who wanted to conceal ‘man-hating’ messages, Womad users went *boryeok* even more fiercely. They started to leave comments and ‘man-hating’ messages not only about the news, but also to criticise the Naver company and its staffs.

On the morning, news links were constantly being uploaded during the rush hour, when many people read the Naver news page on their mobiles during their commute. When the trolls had abused the internet enough, or when the morning rush-hour ended at around 9.30 am and there were no more enemies showing their anguish at the comments of female trolls, the ‘weather *boryeok*’ also ended. Womad users who had participated in *boryeok* complimented each other and praised the comments they had read in the comments section while sharing screenshots. One user wrote that her account had been suspended by the Naver staff. The suspension of accounts was considered to be a medal for trolling, like that awarded to a warrior on the battlefield, and other users celebrated this achievement since it meant that her comment had infuriated the Naver *hannam*.

One Womad user said, ‘*boryeok* [for digital news] is the essence of Womad’ (Womad user 5-005, 2017). She pointed out that Womad users can encounter ‘outcries from testicles

[men]¹¹⁰ ... at a banquet of harsh facts in the scene of endless laughter'. Indeed, this *boryeok* action epitomises what Megalian trolls do in their activism: trolling the digital space. They abuse the web page, which irritates male digital users and induces their reactions, creating 'lulz' for female trolls. This, in turn, attracts the attention of digital news readers to messages that Megalians spread and it compels Megalians to participate in the gendered battlefield through: fighting against male users, 'bashing' *hannams* with 'harsh facts', aiming to occupy the place of 'the most upvoted comment', outshouting others through their 'man-hating' claims, all while playing the game of competing for attention.

As we can see, *boryeok* creates a battlefield for a gender war for mediated participants and makes women jump into the war. Unlike when they create and circulate memes, using offensive language in their own communities and provoking reactions through digital materials, here Megalians directly face and fight against their enemies in the *boryeok* situation. Having direct enemies who should be defeated makes this practice more game-like, particularly resembling the form of the massive multiplayer online role-playing game. This game is played by team 'man-haters' and team misogynists, or team Megalians and team *hannams*. The interview participant Suji claimed 'I believe every woman must once be involved in a battle, and making comments is a great gateway for that'. Joining in battles is a simple and direct path to experiencing 'lulz', the important emotion that Megalians share through generating direct 'victims' of their attacks. Participating in *boryeok* is a moderate form of joining in the game, which allows the practitioners to evade more consistent conflicting situations since they are able to flee after leaving comments, still this experience makes participants learn the ethos of a feminist 'warrior' or a 'man-hating' game player.

¹¹⁰ The word *bural*, which means testicle, is often used to refer to (especially) an angry man because of the similarity in pronunciation with the slang word *jiral*, which means insanity.

Moreover, *boryeok* is a strategy that enhances Megalian visibility and their feminist ideas. This staged but enhanced visibility increases the number of opportunities for people to be exposed to Megalians' messages. One Womad user explained that 'people believe what the majority think is right' (Womad user 5-006, 2017). This statement echoes a chief assertion of 'Bubble Studies', the academic field that focuses on how digital users see skewed or limited information through algorithmic bias (the bubble phenomena). Vincent F. Hendricks, for example, suggests 'liquid, readily available and easily transferable, means', such as 'Likes', which can be equate with 'upvotes' in *boryeok*, are invested to create a value, which can 'chase the wrong assets' or 'overheat the value of a social asset', while pushing 'collectives of people ... in the same direction' (Hendricks, 2015, p. 1). In this sense, people end up 'thinking the same thing, acting in the same way, ... holding the same polarized opinions in politics' by the phenomenon (ibid.). This description on the bubble phenomenon problematises the illusion that it creates – that seemingly democratic means (such as, upvotes) generate skewed information or biased belief with regard to what is factual. Megalians actively utilise this scenario, anticipating that the majority of people who read the digital news are already in the belief system and will be affected by the phenomenon. In digital space, which does not require accurate facts or academic knowledge for people to express their opinions by 'liquid means', if many people claim that a particular idea is right, it becomes an opinion that the majority agree with, sometimes persuading other readers to follow. Therefore, Megalians enhance their virtual/physical visibility by concentrating their support on exaggerating their presence in order to fabricate a scene in which there are many people who concede to feminist ideas, suggesting that their opinion (feminist ideas) is correct and should be followed.

This means of increasing the visibility of feminist ideas through *boryeok* is cautiously designed and delivered through the labour of participants: virality is achieved though

Megaliens' collective work. They have studied and shared know-how about *boryeok* as 'power gamers', who understand the game more than the average player, which makes their playing seem arduous but actually generates pleasure for them through achieving knowledge and being experienced in games (Taylor, 2006, p. 78). According to their accounts, digital news pages are the most efficient locations in digital space for 'doing' *boryeok* actions, attracting likely supporters of the movement because they provide an open space that people can approach regardless of their gender, age, political background or familiarity with digital feminist discussion.

At times virality is aided by the labour of male misogynists who are participating in the game or gendered battle as team anti-Megaliens. In response to *boryeok*, angry misogynists spread the word about their defeat in the gendered battle and compel others to participate in it, as shown in a post appearing on the male-dominated community Clien. The post provides a link to a page occupied by Megaliens and encourages users to visit it to fight against them, saying: 'we shouldn't ignore this situation ... users who have Naver accounts, please visit this link and just give some clicks away [to support the opinion left by anti-Megaliens]' (Clien user, 4-001, 2017). Such posts, displaying the same pattern of encouraging men to defend internet pages from Megaliens, 'fire support' in other words, are found in almost every male-dominated community. Through the process of encouragement among male digital users, whereby anti-Megalian users upload the post, urge other users to defeat Megaliens, provide screenshots of Megaliens' comments to incite their allies' anger, provide links to visit and share their emotions after visiting the links by leaving comments on the post, the overall reaction towards the issue is thus encountered by larger numbers of people.

This reaction by anti-Megaliens expands the boundary of areas in which different people react to this movement. An issue that might have been noticed by a few digital news readers becomes one that the users of certain online communities might know about and discuss. As

the trolling and occupation by Megalians easily scandalises misogynistic users, the issue spreads to other communities via the ‘flow’ of criticising Megalians. Occupying the page, ‘bashing’ enemies by using insulting language, holding the position of the most upvoted comment and asking for backup supporters from online communities – all practices in which both male and female parties participate in – increase the number of people who react to what can broadly be called feminist issues. The gender war fought by an increased number of feminists and anti-feminists is taking place on news comments pages due to Megalians’ *boryeok* setting and the spontaneous labour of misogynists. In this situation, male misogynists and their community members function as active agents that steer attention toward Megalians messages.

What boryeok makes visible

As is evident in the ‘weather *boryeok*’ case, the site of *boryeok* functions as a locale that makes the gendered antagonism in South Korea visible. Weather reports usually feature female newscasters who wear ‘skin-tight’ clothes, which led to comments pages filled with messages of sexual harassment, written by male users. Before the intervention of Megalians, the comments sections of digital news sites were showcases for online misogyny, where readers could see misogynistic culture prevailing and that digital space was a hostile environment towards women, or indeed where readers saw nothing if they were assimilated to the prevalent misogynistic culture in South Korean society. Through Megalians leaving ‘man-hating’ messages and struggling against male misogynists, these spaces became showcases for the gender war. They revealed that some women were challenging established culture by attacking the bearers of online culture, and this could be seen by the readers of digital news, and some of them, in turn, could become involved in either the digital culture of misogyny or ‘man-hating’.

In analysing how South Korean digital feminists challenge the prevalent voyeuristic culture of male digital users, feminist anthropologist Jieun Lee points out that they politicised the Google search algorithm through problematising the male gaze (2020). The male gaze was manifested in the search results for mundane keywords in everyday life. In her article, Lee explains how digital feminists drew attention to the fact that the search result for ‘street’ is filled with images of sexualised female body parts. They pointed out that this is directly related to the practice of male digital users, who share voyeuristic images tagged with this keyword in their online communities. As these voyeuristic images have been included to the search result of Google and the male digital users have shared enormous amounts of the images with the keywords, they have trained the algorithm, in the accounts of digital feminists. Presenting this as a problem makes an antagonism between ‘competing publics’ (Gillespie, 2016) visible: the user group whose culture resonates with what the algorithm calculated to be ‘the public’ that defines what is a ‘trend’, and the feminist group, who recognise this ‘trend’ as being against them (Lee, 2020, p. 14).

In a similar vein, the comments pages are spaces where the dominant culture of online misogyny is problematised by Megalians and where these ‘competing publics’ of misogynists and ‘man-haters’ can be seen to be in confrontation. Since misogynistic messages in digital space are all-pervasive and naturalised, comments that criticise them, that reverse the direction of such comments (anti-misogyny and ‘man-hating’) or that by contrast advocate misogyny while cursing Megalians (misogynistic attacks directed against Megalians), create an unusual, contentious scene on the page. And they all contribute to increase the amount of attention on the scene and some female digital users becoming Megalians. Indeed, many Womad users confessed that they had seen *boryeok* comments on the weather news and these were what led them to become Megalians.

The unusual information posted in comments sections is not only limited to gendered confrontations. The showcasing of the gender war also conveys the following message: women are using the tool of offensiveness in order to ‘beat up’ their opponents, and women sometimes actually defeat their enemies, triumphing in the gender war. The impression that women are making equal fights with male misogynists is fabricated by Megalians’ *boryeok* action, which is staged by concentrating their ‘fire support’ on specific links at specific times. Indeed, the culture of online misogyny has not disappeared as a result of Megalian strategy and misogynists in online communities still prevail in many digital venues, their culture reproduced via enormous numbers of advocates. However, women’s ability to use offensiveness and their triumphs in some locales has been generative, enabling any reader to believe in the possibilities of defeating misogynists, feminist domination and women’s retaliation, while attracting more women to participate in Megalia/Womad.

Simply by watching the battles in the comments sections, female digital users witnessed or had proxy experiences of these unprecedented forms of resistance. Megalians aggressively participated in online feuds, something most women had previously avoided or they had pretended to be men when they had become involved. Megalians poured out streams of insulting words that targeted random men, something that most women had experienced in the reverse. One Womad user said that, previously, she had seen lots of ‘out of context’ misogynistic comments, which had made her afraid to check the comments sections because they could contain comments hostile to women. She claimed that Megalians should make men experience being attacked for their gender through *boryeok* comments, which should make them feel ‘cowed’, as she had felt due to misogynistic comments (Womad user 5-007, 2017).

Through *boryeok*, Megalians leave comments showing their pleasure in reading news about tragedies happening to men, having fun at men’s expense, and they bring groundless

evidence or irrational logic to blame men in all kinds of situations. In doing so, the existence of Megalians, or ‘man-haters’, reveals the backdrop of their appearance: their life environment that has always contained gendered antagonism. Hence, their enhanced visibility allows readers to ask: ‘is it just an extreme claim or for real?’, just as one Womad user did (Womad user 5-008, 2017). This wondering led them to become interested in what Megalians say and claim, women’s reality in the hostile environment that exists for them.

Conclusion: The game of competing for attention

Today I’m [filming this video] sniping at Gatgeonbae, that you guys asked me hundreds of times [to upload]. [...] Gatgeonbae, you fucking bitch, *you will get tons of views and subscribers because of this video that snipes at you.* But I will do so, you moron. So, I hope you will also make a video snipe at me. You and I both gain benefits from this [confrontation]. [...] Guys, can you just stop being obsessed with Gatgeonbae? (Shintaeil, 2017, my italics)

Shintaeil, a famous YouTuber in South Korea with 800,000 subscribers, uploaded this video on 7 August 2017. As a YouTuber, he had uploaded dozens of videos of himself doing whatever his viewers asked him to do, in order to provide vicarious experiences under the content title of ‘the vicarious-guy’ (‘daesinmaen’ in Korean). His content usually included immature and dangerous behaviour and had attracted young male misogynists who became his fans. At the time this video was uploaded, his viewers had asked him to insult Gatgeonbae, whose ‘man-hating’ speech in game-streaming videos had come to be a huge issue, as I discussed in section 3.2.4. In response, Shintaeil uploaded the video cited above. After pouring invective on her in this video, he asserts that he and Gatgeonbae will both benefit from it. He then implores his viewers: ‘can you just stop being obsessed with

Gatgeonbae?’ This statement reveals that the disturbance that he and his viewers create will attract attention, eventually enabling the person who initiated the disturbance, Gatgeonbae, to ‘gain benefits’ from it. If his viewers keep obsessing about Gatgeonbae, he suggests, this will allow her to ‘get tons of views and subscribers’. The logic of the attention economy, according to which attention is in increasingly short supply and can be viewed as a currency that can be converted into other currencies (Davenport & Beck, 2001), seems extremely familiar to this person, probably because he earns his living through the same sort of media labour: gaining attention through absurd behaviour in ways similar to those employed by Megalians, as I have been exploring in this chapter.

This chapter has described the ways in which the Megalian movement utilises the attention economy of digital media. Megalian practices in this context are composed of various attention-seeking digital acts. Megalians have sought increased numbers of recipients for their messages and ever more places where these recipients were dispersed across digital space, in order to build new pathways to gaining public attention. They did so by enticing misogynists to react – not only the overt misogynistic users of digital space who fought against Megalians, but also the tacit misogynists who reacted to women’s misbehaviours louder than to men’s, and demanded stricter moral standards for women due to their desire to penalise women who violate the norms. Aided by the misogynistic desires of the general public, Megalians repeatedly won the game of competing for attention within the media environment, achieving the ‘hit feel’ and ‘lulz’ that drive this gamified activism.

Chapter 6. Anonymous women's politics

A Megalian practice that I want to explore in this chapter is how Megalians applied the digital culture of anonymity to their activism. Not disclosing one's identity is a basic principle shared by most South Korean online communities. This was largely influenced by the culture of DCinside. Here, users usually employ an 'improper name' (Deseriis, 2015), a practice described as 'the adoption of the same alias by organized collectives, affinity groups, and individual authors' (p. 3). Just as users in 4chan community use 'Anonymous', DCinside users and Megalians use 'oo'¹¹¹. Megalians' anonymous participation in political activism ultimately allowed them to act en masse, in the context of what Molly Sauter describes as 'the culture of the hive'. This concept illustrates the culture of the 'Anonymous' group (2014, p. 78), which was observed in the group's 'distributed denial of service' (DDoS) actions.¹¹² According to the author, participation in DDoS actions enables a participant to position herself along the blurred line 'between an autonomous actor and the crowd behind her'. Taking 'each action [...] under the collective pseudonym becomes incorporated into the overarching sense of identity', thereby extending the area of influence of her activism (pp. 81–82).

As Megalians came to represent themselves as anonymous women, so they became distinguished from the umbrella concept of 'digital feminists' that I use in this thesis. The digital feminists who use diverse online platforms, outside of Megalia and Womad, are somewhat identifiable, in terms of disclosing their real names, having fixed nicknames or

¹¹¹ Technically this nickname is not 'oo' using English letters but 'ㅇㅇ' using Korean letters, which has the same shape as 'oo'. I used the English letters because multiple character use usually causes encoding errors in the word processor.

¹¹² DDoS is an action/attack that uses an activist tool to disturb the operation of a certain cybernetic machine, analogous to the activist repertoire of sit-ins, in order to draw attention.

sharing details about their personal lives. By contrast, users in Megalia and Womad do not disclose their real names or nicknames, which can be used to trace their internet history and personal lives. Even when they were using more individualised forms of social media, such as Twitter, Instagram and Facebook, they did not reveal who they were in reality if their affiliation to Megalia or Womad was obvious. In these social media environments, they used pseudonyms attached to newly created accounts. I argue in this chapter that the Megalian appropriation of digital anonymity brought with it a unique, disruptive style that opened up the possibility of ‘popular feminism’ for this movement. I explore why and how Megalians adopted digital anonymity, how they produced their discourses and politics according to the logic of digital artifacts, and how this digital culture enabled them to develop their own feminist politics while distancing themselves from the extant feminist groups composed of individuals and political agencies who have names.

6.1. A movement made up of digital anonymity

As I explored in the previous chapter, Megalians enriched their activism by provoking negative reactions from others. This was possible because they were internet trolls, not physical beings. However, they were sometimes dragged into physical space, such as when they were sued as perpetrators of online insults, or when they needed to be physical beings for public engagements: occupying space and holding protests. Whether the appearances were active or passive decisions, their offline appearances put them at risk because they were branded as a notorious ‘man-hating’ group. In this section, I analyse how protecting anonymity became an important activist practice of the Megalian movement, shaping their ‘politics of anonymous women’.

How Megalians adopted anonymity

As I pointed out in Chapter 3, South Korean online space had originally been a playground for anti-feminists. The internet culture of online witch-hunts ultimately served as a condition requiring the adoption of anonymity in Megalian activism. Megalian participants became likely targets of the witch-hunt by misogynists. Since Megalians had appropriated digital offensiveness as their weapon in the gender war, cyberattacks against them were considered acceptable and justified by anti-Megalians and their allies, with the excuse that ‘they’re harming society’. Although Megalians’ hostility ran the risk of them being targeted by the witch-hunt, they sustained that hostility because offensiveness was what drove this movement. Hence, Megalians needed to enhance their anonymity and make it more sophisticated in order to protect themselves from ‘hunters’. The construction of anonymity extends in two directions: enhancing unidentifiability and erasing individual identity. To be unidentifiable, Megalians practised the simple strategies of using instant or encrypted emails for their Megalian activity. This avoided being traced through an email account that could be used for other internet services that might offer clues to her identity (Womad user 6-001, 2016). A more sophisticated strategy was experimented with when Womad users tried to help a gaming streamer, Gatgeonbae in August 2017.

When a group of male YouTubers claimed that they had identified Gatgeonbae and were planning to track her down and chase her around her neighbourhood, one Womad user suggested the novel ‘I’m Gatgeonbae’ trick. She proposed that readers should ‘make fake accounts’ on social media and upload evidence to suggest it is Gatgeonbae’s account, such as ‘Gatgeonbae’s voice recordings’, but with ‘fake self-disclosing clues like messenger IDs or address’, and ‘spread the account as Gatgeonbae’s’ (Womad user 6-002, 2017). The basic idea of this trick was that users deliberately uploaded fake information about the YouTuber and pretended to be her in order to confuse the people who were trying to gather her personal

information. This form of disruption directly intervenes in the ‘doxing’ behaviour that is essential to the online witch-hunting game. By diluting the real with fake information, Megalians disturbed identifiability, drawing the target back into the realm of unidentifiability.

This strategy was practised again by digital feminists when an arrest warrant was issued against the administrator of the Womad website in August 2018. Many women claimed that it was an unfair investigation with the intention to penalise this feminist woman via public humiliation. They started to insist ‘I’m the Womad administrator’ on their social media accounts in order to protect her and to protest against the police. This led to the hashtag activism of #I’m (a) Womad (user) and #I’m the Womad administrator. Since the police authorities had already identified the real Womad administrator, this was a symbolic act rather than a practical one. Nevertheless, this reaction by digital feminists still demonstrates their understanding that the police investigation is an extension of the online witch-hunt and is another example of digital feminists’ shared technique of diluting identity to protect their comrades by using anonymity.

Erasing identity involves not merely cleaning up individual digital footprints but also altering the authorship of digital writing into nobody and/or anybody. The habit of erasing digital footprints has been commonly practised by users of female-dominated community space in South Korea, through frequently changing the accounts and nicknames they use to protect themselves from unwanted identification by other users. It was a strategy adopted by the Megalian community to encourage user-unspecified communication. This digital strategy intensified in 2016, when Womad community was in the Daum café system, when the administrators became targets of censorship by the police due to hoax posts that users uploaded.¹¹³ Savvy users encouraged others to regularly delete their Daum accounts because the company had a regulation that it must destroy users’ personal information when they

¹¹³ For the details of this restriction on Womad activities, see section 3.2.3.

delete their accounts.¹¹⁴ In this way, users eliminated the identity that was attached to their written posts, which were intended as provocative pranks but could be investigated as crimes.

If a user deletes her account, the post she wrote from that account loses the information about the writer, but the post itself remains. Posts that have lost the information about their authors equate technologically to posts that are written by nobody or by the dead, because the author is untraceable in a legal investigation. Leaving a post without any identity is what Megalians aim for, rendering the post as having been written by nobody. Nevertheless, everyone knows that they were written by one of the Megalians, so these posts are written by anybody in the group as well. Korean literature critic, Kyung-Eon Yang, points out that ‘the enhanced *anonymity* of writings in Megalia rendered the text as belonging to anyone who participated in the discourse production’ (Yang, 2016, p. 32, emphasis in original). By using this trick, which exploited Daum’s policy, Womad users made Yang’s claim technically true. It was not individual activists, but *any* participant in the Megalian discussion who became the author of Megalian writings. Through detaching authorship from their writings, Megalians vacated the area where writers’ identities should have been.

To make this detachment clear, Womad users created a back-up site and deleted the entire community space when they stopped using it. Now the posts produced by Womad users between January 2016 and February 2017 have all lost their authors and have been floating online under or without the name of Womad or Megalia, without carrying any specified author identities. In addition to that, the community space that Megalians used from August to December 2015 was removed in February 2017, which left a lot of authorless texts online. Due to its culture of using an ‘improper name’, many DCinside users in the MERS forum

¹¹⁴ Technically, personal information could be retained for three months, according to the Daum company policy (Kakao corp, 2016). However, Womad users encouraged people to delete their account when someone’s post was in trouble because the police investigation of that kind of minor crime could be delayed by more than three months.

also used the unified name of ‘oo’ as their nickname. This also means that Megalian posts from the early days of May 2015 are generally authorless. Hence, this feminist activism is mediated by digital writings that are written anonymously. Feminist discourse production in an anonymous environment erases identity from the political acts and it renders digital feminism nameless, but written under the name of unspecified ‘women’.

Feminist scholar Emma Jane points out that the perpetrators of e-bile (hostile conversation in digital interaction) can appear to have a single voice while erasing the individual and coalescing all the voices under an anonymous or quasi-anonymous status (Jane, 2014, p. 566). In this sense, the perpetrators are distributing the responsibility for online hostility while reducing the sense of perpetration by individuals. This responsibility distribution also occurred in Megalia’s case: Megalians made themselves indistinguishable participants in ‘man-hating’ discussion, which was buttressed by intensified digital anonymity. Such unrestrained discussion ‘can engender anti-social behaviour’, but at the same time, it ‘provide[s] a means of pushing back against increased surveillance’ that discourages someone who wants to voice unpopular beliefs or whistle-blowing (Coleman, 2015b). The digital anonymity protected users from threats of prevalent ‘hunting’ that targets women who advocate the unpopular beliefs of feminist ideas.

How the Megalian movement was shaped by the politics of anonymity

In digital space, Megalians could remain anonymous during their political acts. In DCinside culture, users retain anonymity in order to avoid individual conflicts, which would be triggered by personal affairs, and to sustain the community (Lee, 2011). As Megalians appropriated DCinside culture, they shared the culture that stemmed from this anonymity among ‘improper names’, where participants remain ‘egalitarian and anticelebrity’ (Deseriis, 2013, p. 44). The Womad guidelines for anonymous interaction – ‘no friendship among

users’, ‘no self-disclosure’ and ‘no named users’ – aimed to make everyone into the same anonymous users (Womad administrator 4-001, 2017).

Megalian activism broadened its reach into physical space in May 2016 through the demonstrations around the Gangnam station incident, as discussed in Chapter 4. Whilst users in digital space can be anonymous when they participate in something without self-disclosure and as an indistinguishable voice within a group, if the activism operates in an offline venue, participation necessarily means that each individual brings her body into a certain physical area, generating the corporeal and visible action of specifiable individuals. New rules of activism were therefore needed in order to retain the anonymity that was viable in digital space. Accordingly, the rules of anonymity were adjusted for offline gatherings, translating what is digital into the material.

As I discussed in section 5.2, Megalian activism utilised the participants’ position of ‘the women who violate social norms’ that incited criticism of the public toward them. This intended vulnerability was not a problem in digital space, if users succeeded in protecting their anonymity. When the same group held offline gatherings, however, the vulnerability of the movement affected the participants by putting them in a potentially dangerous situation. Indeed, the woman who gave a news interview for the South Korean broadcasting company MBC with her real name as an organiser of the silent march for the Gangnam station incident was ‘doxed’ and traced by digital users, and her personal information, including her university, major, and alleged comments she had left on Facebook, were spread in male-dominated communities accompanied by the rumour that she was the head administrator of Womad, Neugaebihujang (the nickname of Womad’s head administrator during that period, which means ‘your dad’s asshole’). This led to sexual harassment and invectives directed towards her (as shown in the post of Gaedeurip user 4-001, 2016).

The guidelines of being anonymous in offline gatherings aimed to follow the online rules, which protected participants as far as possible. The guidelines of Bwave, the campaigning group for abortion right which was initiated from Womad, illustrates how they protected the rules of anonymity in offline spaces:

- Conversations that can be spoken among participants: Do you want a drink? Did you get the burger? Where's the toilet? Which group of people didn't get the snack?
- Conversations that should be avoided among participants: How old are you? Where did you find out about this protest? Twitter? The [Womad] website? Are you a student?
- No self-disclosure, no free speech, no participation under the name of a group or organisation

...We claim this as a protest of anonymous women who do not belong to any group or organisation. If you discuss your name, age, or profession, it builds a hierarchy among participants. We aim to avoid this and keep everybody's participation equal at the protest. (Bwave organiser 4-001, 2016)

As we can see in this quotation, the advice of 'no self-disclosure' among digital users expanded into detailed guidelines for the protest, which invited the participation of any woman, and was not limited to Megalians. Protest participants agreed that they would not share personal details in order to prevent participants from finding out about each other. As the quotation shows, small talk usually contains exchanges of personal information. Therefore, the organisers prevented any chance of identifying others by offering detailed guidelines about conversation. These strict rules functioned to avoid the *natural* situation of

socialising, which can happen at an offline gathering, through *unnatural* efforts expended by the participants.

The Bwave organisers prohibited free speech in order to prevent uncontrolled political statements that had not gained consent from other participants beforehand. Participants discussed the protest in detail in their online communities and demonstrated in line with what they had consented to. Instead of presenting free speech by individuals, they continuously chanted two pages of slogans, which had been prepared during the online discussion, for several hours during the protest. Prohibiting free speech had the intention of excluding any attempt by existing political groups/organisations to take over the scene, or to act as though they could represent the spontaneously mobilised women.¹¹⁵ At the same time, it functioned to make participants indistinguishable to others. Setting a dress code for the gathering and recommending wearing caps and masks also helped participants to be one of the group. The recommendation was to protect participants from potential offenders, and it also worked to make them unidentifiable by their looks, as they set the digital rule of ensuring unidentifiability. Making participants homogeneous and unidentifiable, that is, anonymous, puts the focus on the message, not the messengers – allegedly ‘man-haters’ – as the things to be discussed.

Erasing all identifiable marks from activism clarifies, and at the same time obscures, the composition of participants in the activism as women. The phrase ‘anonymous women’ says nothing about the individual participants, since it mobilises women in general, who make up the largest and most unspecified group that is directly related to feminist activism – the activism that concerns women’s rights. However, this means of mobilisation also clearly demonstrates who the participants are, by making digital feminists visible in public space.

¹¹⁵ I discuss the artificially formed anonymity here, leaving the topic of avoiding interventions of political names for section 6.3.

Protesters witness and confirm others and themselves to be adequate participants in the women's protest/movement, even though they know nothing about each individual except for her gender.

Feminist researcher Ri-na Kim (2017) points out that Megalians' mobilisation of women in its activism shapes a solidarity that can be interpreted as a 'series', bringing forward the conception of gender as seriality that was first suggested by Iris Marion Young (1994). In an effort to conceptualise women as a social collective, but wanting to avoid the normalisation and essentialising of gender, Young suggests the concept of gender as seriality. She thus appropriates the distinction between a series and a group from Jean-Paul Sartre's definition of different levels of social collectivity (1976, cited in Young, 1994), which defines a series as 'a social collective whose members are unified passively by the objects around which their actions are oriented or by the objectified results of the material effects of the actions of the others' (Young, 1994, p. 724). This is distinct from the concept of a group, which is a 'self-consciously, mutually acknowledging collective with a self-conscious purpose' (ibid.). Kim applies this concept to explain how Megalians define their movement participants as women, thus relating themselves as being in an already-organised unity, which is composed of people who are anonymous and interchangeable (Kim, R., 2017, p. 122).

Megalians call their participants women, which led to the creation of an activism for any/anonymous women. The purposeful conception of women is designated by 'the general constraints and expectations' that any woman has to deal with in the social context, but does not define who she is (Young, 1994, p. 733). It lowers the threshold for engaging with activism for women, because women as a social collective are an 'unself-conscious' (p. 724), naturalised unity, in which they are already involved. In this form of mobilisation, Megalians made their activism accessible to any woman who has lived as a woman, which means no serious interrogation about whether they are entitled to be actors of the movement or not is

required. It is closely related to digital users' creation of 'hivemind', a collective that participate in activism through adding 'individual voice to the stream of other voices' (Sauter, 2014, p. 82). The Megalian movement calls for the people who can be subsumed under an online/offline collective of women.

Through materialising the digital rules of anonymity, Megalians erased all names from their political acts by making participants indistinguishable from each other. This anonymous form of participation renders women able to appear en masse, making themselves unidentifiable but contributing to the activism, even in physical space. By maintaining the representation of 'anonymous women' as its participants, Megalian activism appeals to women in general, while obscuring specific individuals as participants, but clarifying that this feminist activism is made up of, and for, women.

6.2. A politics mediated by digital space

As Marshall McLuhan's famous aphorism 'the medium is the message' (1964) indicates, digital media play roles that shape the message and shape the ways in which people receive the message. The particularities of message proliferation in digital space shape Megalians' discourse production. In this section, I focus on how digital space that provides an anonymous environment shapes Megalians' messages – following the grammar of digital media, while rendering the authenticity of activist discussion trivial.

While analysing /b/ board of 4chan in terms of ephemerality and anonymity, Michael Bernstein and his colleagues point out that users in an anonymous environment are not bound to their online history. This means they are less seriously affected by failure in their online activities, such as failing to attract attention or being chastised for creating uninteresting threads by other users (Bernstein et al., 2011, pp. 55–56). Since people cannot identify who wrote what and who failed or was attacked, users are encouraged to be irresponsible in their

writing, which leads them to generate unexamined or uncensored writings. In communities for anonymous users, such as Megalia/Womad and DCinside, users experience the same phenomenon. DCinside users' use of the phrase 'to excrete posts' to mean 'to write/upload posts' (Yang, 2015, p. 220) reveals their digital habits of irresponsible writing. 'Excreting' many posts also contributes to making a single post ephemeral, which might not be subject to serious examination by others.

Below, I examine how Megalians and their messages are shaped as digital products, following the approach of creating ephemeral and inauthentic content in the logic of digital space. This aspect of ephemerality grounds the basis for generating digital feminist politics against the backdrop of the 'post-truth' era. Later, I point out that the outcomes of this political message production, which is assimilated to media that are inauthentic in nature, are unintelligible to old-school feminist circles.

Messages shaped in a digital way

According to the Oxford dictionary, post-truth, which was declared as 2016 international word of the year, means 'relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief'¹¹⁶. As I explored in Chapter 3, fabricating stories about women has been a popular strategy of anti-feminism in digital culture. Misogynistic discourses about women were grounded in this tradition of homo-social bonding that aims for 'lulz' (Hwang & Kang, 2014). It created a misogynistic lens through which to view women, and this method of forming a perspective was poached by Megalians to create a 'man-hating' lens to turn on men (Jeong & Lee, 2018).

¹¹⁶ <https://www.lexico.com/definition/post-truth>

The lenses that have been developed in digital space join the post-truth era, which allows individuals to appropriate their personal beliefs to shape shared opinions.

Based on her observations of a male-dominated online community in South Korea, feminist researcher Soo-Ah Kim (2017) points out that the digital habit of fact-checking aims to support the worldview of participants, rather than literally checking whether information or data is factual. Accordingly, what is called a ‘fact’ is actually a discursive outcome that is shaped by selective data (pp. 23–24). A digital deception (Hancock, 2009) in this situation, such as the tactic of fabricating *kimchinyeo* stories, is a way of producing discourse and forming public opinion, rather than something that has to be detected and corrected. Thus, online materials cannot be counted as deceptive or authentic due to the bounded condition – digital space – even though the data they contain is used as sources for grounding public, sometimes political, opinion. Megalians also follow this approach to online discourse production. Since anonymous writings demand less responsibility from writers, unverified arguments poured out into the community and things that seemed plausible to participants became resources for constructing their shared opinion.

Megalians not only utilised this kind of online discourse production but also exaggerated it by inventing intentional lies when they wanted to make people outside Megalia/Womad believe something. For example, the writing style of ‘jujak’,¹¹⁷ intentional deception, is widely used by Megalians for shaping shared imagery on Megalia/Womad and developing their collective arguments. Mass media and internet rumours claim that Megalians and

¹¹⁷ The word *jujak* was derived from the word ‘jojak’, which means ‘manipulated’. This word was coined to describe happenings around a professional game player who was involved in fixed matches and ousted from the industry. *Jujak* also encompasses the meaning of the word ‘jajak’, which means ‘made up by oneself’, because of the similarity of the sound between them, especially when people raise doubts about a digital post. Thus, *jujak* is a word that is exclusively used online, referring to the digital habit of deception.

Womad users have committed: child rape, animal abuse, poisoning, accidental murder, attempted murder, abortion and eating foetuses, gay ‘outing’, sex-tape leaking, and spy-cam installation. These stories are widespread in digital space, with some scholars even including them in their academic works, believing that what was circulating online was true.¹¹⁸ Some of my interviewees, indeed, mentioned which kinds of *jujak* they created. I will not give details of the *jujak* that were mentioned in interviews because it can only sustain its intention as long as it is not revealed as fake in public. Through these rumours, as a general example, Megalia and Womad spread various messages that can be turned in their favour, including that women are no longer clinging to the position of victims, which was demonstrated by the rumours around the crimes committed by Megalians. This tactic was valuable to intensify the attention paid to them, as I described in the previous chapter.

Research about NatePann, a popular platform in South Korea that provides web boards for sharing users’ life experiences, examines how NatePann users are involved in debates incited by a post, sometimes when the post itself is suspected of *jujak* (Koo, 2018, p. 218). These users are accustomed to inhabiting digital space, where truth and lies are barely distinguishable from each other, and they also intend to play with discussions and arguments around narratives of daily life. *Jujak* text is a source of argument for users because ‘it can be suspicious, but it does not disrupt the discussion’ (p. 223) and discussing real-life dilemmas is what users enjoy in NatePann. Therefore, *jujak* is a writing style that is conditioned by digital space, which allows people to speak, argue and sometimes lie about their life experiences.

¹¹⁸ I do not want to reveal which works are conveying misinformation because it could be seen as a personal attack on the authors to taint their reputation, and correcting all the facts about Megalians is not a goal of this dissertation. However, I want to point out that academic work on Megalia and Womad frequently conveys misinformation and fabricated representations due to the participants’ intentional usage of *jujak* as well as the authors’ superficial engagement with digital culture, which means they are unable to distinguish between misinformation and what is actually happening online.

Accordingly, the feminist discussions and debates that took place in Megalia and Womad, and which emerged from this digital environment, could be irresponsible, and were not bound by their history, which means that they did not need to be coherent with previous arguments. They also did not need to be factual or supported by evidence. Megalian discussion, therefore, constructs and follows a public opinion that lacks authenticity in terms of coherence, truthfulness and historicity. If the value of authenticity is absent from a feminist discourse, what might remain? I argue that the politics attached to the present situation remains in the discussion, which shapes ready-to-hand activism. What my interviewee Jiyoona experienced below illustrates how decision-making in digital space is linked to politics.

When the Facebook page Jiyoona ran for promoting an online petition was attacked by male misogynists in November 2015, she came up with the idea of creating an account of a middle-aged man, and she started to fight with male digital users. She scolded them with statements like, ‘a real man shouldn’t speak like that’, impersonating a middle-aged man. Then, she told me, the male users obeyed her, deleting their comments and saying ‘yes, sir.’ Facebook is usually used with the real identity of a person, especially by older generations, unlike how other popular social media in South Korea, such as Instagram or Twitter, are used. Jiyoona’s tactic was viable because Facebook is really used by a middle-aged group of people. Jiyoona aimed to make the misogynists surrender and leave the page. She succeeded by using the social hierarchy between a young man and a middle-aged man. Her improvised manoeuvre was tailored to her enemies’ propensity towards being obedient to seniority in the male group, while discerning social ranks of gender and age. Performing the status and taking on the attitude by using the language of the strong allowed her to win the hierarchy game with male misogynists.

If this episode is examined through the generally shared values of feminist activism, she breached several principles of authenticity: she conformed to the unreasonable hierarchy that

could also be applied to and operate within the gendered hierarchy in South Korea; she used the method of forcing her opinion by leaning on male authority, rather than the method of persuading through nonviolent/compassionate communication; she reinforced male homosocial bonding by becoming involved in the senior-junior aspect of patriarchal relationships; and she won the battle as a conservative man, not as a feminist woman. All of this means that her triumph was not an 'authentic' triumph of feminism. Lacking authentic values, this Facebook page, which had been a mess of misogynistic trollings, was cleared of them and linked visitors to the online petition that was the very purpose of the page. She gained what she wanted by pursuing a strategy that was advantageous for the political goal in that specific situation. Likewise, the concrete decisions that people make in individual situations form a politics that tends to be attached to a specific experience within a given situation in the Megalian movement. Even though her act breached the ethical guidelines of feminist lives, its outcome had a feminist effect.

Since the ephemeral, anonymous environment of digital media is not a trustworthy space for forming a coherent feminist discourse through authentic acts that can be historicised, its feminist pursuits have to be limited to chasing goals that will be in favour with women/feminists and within their grasp. Therefore, I argue that Megalian politics revolving around issues of what is real/actual/material is constituted due to this inability of digital media to pursue ideological authenticity. This is linked to the aspect of Megalian politics that emphasises intervening in women's material reality, which I will discuss in the Chapter 8. In this section, I emphasise that 'the practical' is considered to be more important than 'the authentic' in the politics of Megalians due to the spatial condition of the digital world. It is grounded in the activism's nature as digital feminism, which led Megalian feminism to be used as a ready-to-hand strategy for women.

Megalian politics as an unreadable digital artifact

Megalian discourse has developed on the inauthentic basis of the digital age, coined and used through digitised control and operated by Megalian feminists who are inhabitants of the digital space. This situation makes Megalian politics inexplicable to people who are unfamiliar with digitally mediated communications. I find this to be the reason for the unintelligibility of digital feminism within the existing feminist circles of South Korea.

Interview participants in this project range from a just-turned-19-years-old Womad user to an NGO activist with 19 years of experience. Several of them pointed out the gap between the Megalian movement and the existing women's movement, which is run by NGOs. They suggested that activists in conventional civil-rights organisations have difficulties understanding Megalian feminism. Their statements particularly concern the changing media environment and adaptability within it. Nanome is an informant who spans this gap in the sense that she had been intensely engaged in an activist NGO for six years and then became a Megalian in 2015. She noted:

The initiative and drive of Megalians, such as grasping masculine culture and poaching from it for their own attacks, I didn't know they were DCinside customs during the early period [of participating in the movement]. I just had fun [on the MERS forum in 2015]. When I was into the forum for 'S' (a K-pop idol group) in DCinside after I began my Megalian engagement [which was in 2016], then I realised that Megalian culture originated from DCinside culture. In the forum for S, 'banging' the other forums and defending my forum, these are just part of everyday routine. Fandom culture influenced [Megalian culture] a lot. ... One day, I followed the guide for how to stream [a music

video] on YouTube. There are sophisticated rules for increasing the views.¹¹⁹ ... People work hard to discover ways to increase views, organising the song list for streaming [to fit the rules of counting], encouraging each other to participate in it and spend money on it. ... This is a kind of addiction to reactions. ... In a way, it might produce a feeling of achievement, ‘banging’ today and being beaten the next day. They, indeed, repeatedly set up an imaginary enemy [setting up an object to offend and defend], like, ‘we should make [this song of] the group be at the top [of the music chart]’. Isn’t it funny to do that, as an achievement? ... (EJ: But I think, in a way, those meaningless acts actually generated Megalia.) You’re right. These things had been piled up and exploded. *That’s why activist organisations can’t follow Megalia in my opinion.* ... NGO activists just follow the method [of doing activism] their seniors used and passed on to them. It’s the only way for them. But these Megal-originated ones defend, offend, find ways and discuss them with each other, really fast, as they train themselves through the piled-up experiences. There’s no way for the people in NGOs to understand this. (Nanome)

I cite this quotation at length, because I wish to provide Nanome’s vivid description of how digital users are skilled at working with technology through utilising the collective intelligence they have formed and, at the same time, how it is understandable that this digitally mediated process and outcome seem unintelligible to those who are not involved in it. Nanome enjoyed the MERS forum in 2015 without knowing about DCinside culture. After she experienced a DCinside-embedded fan forum for a K-pop idol group in 2016, she

¹¹⁹ Since the number of views of official music videos is included in the scoring music charts in South Korea, K-pop idol fandoms usually work on artificially increasing the number of views in order to give their idols a higher rank in the chart. This habit of deliberately increasing views on YouTube or play counts of songs in online music providers is called ‘seuming’ (which has two syllables in Korean), as an abbreviation of ‘streaming’ (which has four syllables in Korean).

discovered that its culture, which was the Megalian culture as well, was training women to be technology-savvy ‘warriors’ who were constantly engaging in ‘defend[ing], offend[ing], find[ing] ways and discuss[ing]’ how to defeat (sometimes ‘imaginary’) enemies in order to seek direct reactions to their acts and becoming ‘addicted’ to these reactions. The Megalian way of ‘doing’ activism was constituted of these elements, as an outcome of the ‘piled up experiences’ of women in digital space. While they were defeating their enemies using digital methods of responding to each other to achieve their shared goals in each situation, they were training in aggression in digital space. This was applied to ‘man-hating’ when they came into the situation of aiming to defeat misogynists.

As Nanome experienced through the art of ‘streaming’, artificially increasing the views of a music video, ‘digital warriors’ continuously and quickly set a goal and achieved it. They discovered unrevealed counting algorithms, devised skills that could go along with this and trained each other by documenting and sharing ‘how-to’ guides. This is how to become a ‘power-gamer’ in the gender war, as I also discussed when describing how Megalians do *boryeok*. Digital feminists are engaging in the gendered battlefield, while training themselves to be responsive, to be ready for battles and to prioritise triumphs, utilising their digital skills. Their practices stem from and fit into digital habits. As Nanome noticed after direct experience herself, digital users combined various techniques they had learnt and trained in as ‘everyday routine[s]’ in digital space in order to generate immediate responses, which generates achievement, and could equate with the ‘hit feel’ in battles. Indulging in a DCinside forum, her engagement in digital technology and technology-mediated collective works gave Nanome the insight that the process would be hard to understand without actual engagement. It reminded her of the activist group who follow the same way of ‘doing’ activism for 20 to 30 years, in which she had also been involved.

The Megalian movement has the particularities of a digital product, even in producing discourse and politics. Maple, who had been involved in a women's movement NGO, pointed out that the instruments of movement, media and technology have changed, and this is accompanied by changes in how activists deal with politics:

Once I was asked for an interview to provide materials for an author who was writing a book about the women's movement [based on my experience in the NGO] ... I met the author and [found that] she knew nothing [about the recent history of the established South Korean women's movement]. ... Yes, I was shocked by that. But the book was published in a flash. It's not limited to this case. The influencers who are net-feminists, they just publish books without a hitch. [They might say,] is this publication viable? If so, just write it and publish it. Then it becomes a bestselling book. ... I heard that people [in NGOs] were shocked by this trend. (EJ: Why?) We [NGO activists] generally, in our way, if a book were to be written, we'd think a lot, we'd carefully examine whether some comments may be problematic or not, ... so we think a lot until we can't publish a book, while going through that kind of tiresomeness. ... I admit that this is partially due to the inadequacy of the adaptability to changing media [of the NGOs]. ... Their [net-feminists'] way of doing activism is like, crowdfunding with feminist merchandise that make a profit, promoting their books on it, raising the issue it contains, right? They kill three birds with one stone. ... In a way, they can adopt anything like that because they don't have the heavyweight [serious] organisation. (Maple)

When discussing how NGO feminism is different from online feminism, Maple provided the example of the differences in regard to the process of publishing a book. From her observation, 'net-feminists' who adopted new technologies published books 'without a hitch',

unlike the earlier feminist writers in NGOs, who ‘think a lot’ until they ‘can’t publish a book’. She describes the media usage of net-feminists, who ‘crowdfund’ on the web with ‘feminist merchandise’ which attracts potential readers as well as making a profit when ‘promoting’ a book and ‘raising’ an issue that the book contains, which is extracted from their online discussion. The traditional medium for publicising a feminist message had been a book in feminist circles, and this has been combined with the newer medium, a digitised form of publishing that takes the form of ‘crowdfunding’ online. Unlike the conventional way of promoting a book through traditional newspapers, announcing the process of crowdfunding, attracting participants among digital users, uploading photographic evidence of the book or the merchandise it offers on social media accounts, all contribute to promoting the book and to publicising the message it contains. In this case, the multiple media engagement of net-feminists is embedded in a hybrid media system, ‘which is built upon interactions among older and newer media logics ... in the reflexively connected social fields of media and politics’ (Chadwick, 2017, p. xi). As Andrew Chadwick terms the systemic changes in the political communication environment of Britain and the USA, ‘the power relations within and between media change over time ... but the older and the newer [media] adapt, interact, and coevolve’ (p. 68), rather than just conflicting and competing. This exemplary case of feminist book publication shows that the methods of mediating political messages have changed, and NGOs could not guarantee their ‘adaptability to changing media’, as Maple says.

The different factors that net-feminists employ, as Maple indicates, involve not only changing media and who has adapted to them, but also the changing attitudes of people around generating ideas. She compares a ‘heavyweight organisation’ with ‘net-feminist influencers’ and explains that she was ‘shocked’ by the attitude to decision-making of the latter group. People who had been familiar with the approach to forming political opinions by ‘carefully examin[ing]’ all situations in order to be clear about what ‘[might] be problematic’

are surprised by the approach to raising a political argument through answering the question: ‘is this ... viable?’ to each situation, which can seem ‘lightweight’ in terms of means as well as messages. The method of crowdfunding adds the aspect of ‘immediacy’ that gives the impression that the activism reflects what is happening right now, since the achievement ratio of the funding and the reactions of crowdfunding creators are updated in real-time. In short, how the message is mediated has changed, and this has led to the message itself changing. Thus, the digital feminist method of generating political argument confused Maple, who had been engaged in an ‘heavyweight organisation’ and who ‘hopes people will engage in the feminist discussion with a thoughtful attitude’, as she herself declares.

The feminist discourse of the Megalian movement is produced and spread by the language of ‘digital natives’, which is different from that of ‘digital immigrants’ as Marc Prensky has elaborated (2001). The Megalian discourse is created by users who ‘receiv[e] information fast’, ‘like to parallel process and multi-task’, ‘prefer random access’, ‘function best when networked’, ‘thrive on instant gratification and frequent rewards’ and ‘prefer games to *serious work*’ (pp. 2–3, emphasis in original). Since Megalian politics is articulated in digital language, it is difficult for people who have not engaged very much in that sphere to understand it. In other words, it is a challenge for digital immigrants, who have to learn digital language as a second language. For instance, Nanome mentioned her astonishment when she found that senior stateswomen in the women’s movement whom she met did not know about Megalia community itself or the Megalia phenomenon, even three years after the new form of digital feminism was initiated. Pangbang also mentioned her tough experience with ‘senior activists who barely know how to use the internet properly’ when she tried to explain the situation around Megalia and Womad and share ‘what is happening nowadays’.

Of course, we need to bear in mind that Megalian activism is based on the shared experience of ‘lulz’, whereby participants feel pleasure from others’ anguish. This emotion

and the culture of enjoying it are digitally articulated, which requires that one understand the hostile digital space, particularly that found in DCinside's culture of anonymous communication, and the meaning of inhabitancy in it, which encourages users to be a 'warrior tribe' in the 'gamified' setting. Added to the anonymous environment that guarantees the inauthenticity of digital conversation, fun is also an ephemeral condition that brings participants into fleeting engagement. This means that, if fun ends, the people who were involved in the fun no longer devote themselves to the conversation that might have produced the fun, regardless of the context if it aimed discourse production, activism or the movement. If it was in relation to politics, it is irresponsible for participants to have a fleeting engagement in activism, such as, if they raise a political issue and then do not involve in enacting it by making a political intervention. However, the anonymous environment enables participants to be irresponsible since they have no name whose reputation they have to protect through responsible acts. Anonymous digital space, which digitally mediates messages and online interactions, shapes the characteristics of the politics of troll feminism, which was able to emerge precisely because its participants were anonymous female digital users.

Discourse production in the midst of battle in this situation, while 'defending, offending, finding ways and discussing between participants quickly and immediately' (that Nanome experienced by digital engagement) in order to pursue a strategy that is advantageous or 'viable' for a given situation, can hardly be 'heavyweight' (that Maple experienced by NGO involvement), considerate or thoughtful, or form *authentic* feminist discussion. In the Megalian way, 'not-heavyweight' decision-making for immediate achievements in practice creates a form of feminist discourse and politics that do not need to be authentic or responsible for their past and future, unlike the political agencies that are burdened by their

past and future. Megalian decisions are made while pursuing what is situationally good, by assessing each condition.

This feminist politics emerged based on how digital space shapes and controls ‘human association’ (McLuhan, 1964/2003), whereby online discussions arise from sources that can be either deceptive or authentic. In this sense, Megalians shape a politics that is attached to immediate needs, following the grammar of digital media, while aiming to pile up the individual achievements and reactions of others that are in their favour. It trains Megalians to become involved in, participate in and demonstrate digital feminism in direct engagements; in how it is materialised. This media, message and politics require that Megalians’ decisions should follow the practical achievements of the present because they cannot guarantee the linear progress of the overall picture of the feminist movement.

6.3. Distancing from ‘kkwon’ feminism – activist groups with names

As I discussed in Chapter 3, Megalian feminists were once intertwined with extant feminist groups. The financial support and promotional approaches of NGO-related agencies led Megalia’s users to practise political engagement as supporters of or participants in feminist NGOs during the period of the Megalia website from August to December 2015. During this period, activists from extant political groups promoted their ideas within Megalia. These group of people were called through the colloquial ‘undongwon’, *kkwon* as an abbreviated form, which means people from already-established activist groups and allies of their politics. In Megalia, *kkwon* activities were not usually problematised, because they did not disturb the general activities of users. Two of my interviewees who had participated in the Megalia web remember that ‘people who had already worked for feminist NGOs or learnt feminism from universities participated in Megalia and produced many posts’ (Seungjoo); and that a particular NGO ‘expended efforts to mobilise the users for their political events’ (Jeongah).

Neither of these situations were deemed problematic at that time. However, they became problems as Megalia users started to discern annoying aspects of the culture within these pre-existing political groups. In this section, I describe the responses of digital users to established forms of activist culture and how they shaped their own style by distancing themselves from it, thereby generated new practices and a new culture in the context of South Korean feminism by addressing the anonymity at the forefront of their politics.

Refusing to be kkwon feminists

The presence of *undonggwons* started to become intrusive when their political aims seemed to deviate from women's issues, leading to Megalians criticising the groups and degrading them by calling them *kkwonchung* (activist-bug). Specifically, Megalians 'drove the flow' of criticising activist culture from November 2015, drawing on the experiences of users who had previously been involved in political organisations and groups. In the political groups that these Megalians had experienced, according to their accounts, there were always hierarchical relationships between members, which was based on the age and gender of each member, the leadership only supported men as actual politicians while exploiting female members to support the men (Womad user 6-003, n.d.), and, in general terms, their political direction had never prioritised women's issues, under the idea that women's rights will be improved when human rights are achieved (Womad user 6-004, n.d.). These accounts may be somewhat exaggerated, but they seem viable considering the sexist culture within any South Korean organisation. The flow of criticising and insulting activist-*hannams*, on account of the fact that the heads of these groups were usually men, rose and dwindled as time passed. However, it started rising again as lesbian users in Megalia revealed how they had experienced misogyny within LGBT groups and queer activist groups (Womad user 6-005, n.d.). This led to indiscriminate insults directed against gay-*hannams* who were referred to as

‘*ttongkkochung*’ (‘butthole-bug’), leading to conflicts among users on the use of the word. As I discussed in section 3.2, the Megalia administrator at the time put an end to the conflict by restricting users’ use of the invective against gay men.

The administrator’s decision to ban invectives rekindled the flow of criticising general activist groups because the situation was interpreted that the authorities of Megalia sought to be in solidarity with the NGOs that support *gay-hannams*’ or *activist-hannams*’ rights. As one user described it:

At that time [in Megalia], a sexual harassment incident among the members of Green Party Korea was an issue and users criticised the party so they reported the advertisement post for it [that was uploaded on the Megalia board], but the post was not deleted. [...] But you know what? When posts criticising the misogynistic culture of gay men were uploaded, they were quickly deleted even though they were already on the list of ‘upvoted posts’. Moreover, some users hounded the lesbian users, who had written the [whistle-blowing] posts, calling them dicks who wanted to disturb the community (by the means of *jajimori*, which I described in section 3.2.3). The users obviously had the intention of expelling the lesbian users who had shared their experiences of damage from the gay group. [That means that] some users attacked the [female] victims of activist culture for remaining in solidarity with gay men. [...] The administrators deleted all these posts [that criticised *gay-hannams*] and said ‘don’t express your hatred of gay men by instrumentalising several cases’ while banning the use of the word *ttongkkochung*.

(Womad user 6-005, n.d.)

This Womad-shelter user, a former Megalia user, has retroactively reorganised her memories and data to align with a narrative of how the administrators of Megalia website were unfair in

terms of regulating users' activities in the space and had the inclination to promote the civil rights movement of NGOs or minor political parties. This narrative might be formed of selective evidence through her desire to criticise the Megalia administrators. Still, this reorganisation was possible because of the inadequate system of Megalia, which had no clear standard for upvoting, downvoting or regulating posts, and because of the selective reactions of its administrators, drawing users' suspicions that Megalia's administrators were allied with the political organisations. Users gathered and dug up evidence of this hidden cooperation, while revealing the feminist NGO that was involved¹²⁰ and the people who were involved in it by tracking DCinside, Megalia and Twitter. During this period of conflict and divergence in December 2015, meanwhile, a man was developing a website that replicated Megalia's website but in such a way that it revealed the membership IDs of Megalians with the intention of intimidating through identifying them.¹²¹ One side effect of the website was that Megalians could cross-check how the administrators had anonymously intervened in the communications among Megalia users. The administrators had been selling allegedly 'user-generated' merchandise, and the profits were being donated to feminist NGOs (Womad user 6-006, n.d.). Furthermore they had anonymously incited users to leave the Megalian

¹²⁰ I choose not to reveal which NGO it was here because I think it is unfair to a certain organisation to represent the narrative that Megalians configured in the purpose of criticising the general culture of political organisations.

¹²¹ On 24 December 2015, a website SaveMegal was promoted in DCinside Muhandojeon forum, which was a 'headquarters' for anti-Megalian users, and on Twitter. The site was a form of 'mirror site' that replicates the original, but it showed the membership IDs that had not been revealed in the Megalia's interface to protect anonymity. Mostly users of Muhandojeon forum delved into identifying Megalia users. The developer of the site claimed that he had no intention of doxing or intimidating Megalians, but he employed a profit model by using the worry of Megalians, whereby he charged money for deleting or hiding posts if Megalians requested him to do so to protect themselves (Womad user 6-007, n.d.). The site was deleted as the developer was identified and doxed, including his name, hometown, university and major, by Megalians (Womad user 6-008, 2018).

community, pretending to be another ordinary user, at the time when most users were disputing with the administrators over the goal of Megalian activism (Womad user 6-007, n.d.).

When Megalians realised that feminist NGOs and NGO-related people were intervening in the Megalia community, while hiding their presence and mobilising others to support NGOs under cover of the anonymous environment, they linked the disturbance based on the flow of ‘bashing *gay-hannams*’ to the activist culture in feminist NGOs. As the poster upon which this quotation featured asserts, the administrators tried to silence women who revealed the misogynistic culture of gay men, with the aim of covering up the issue. The following basic rules of the community were, according to Megalia’s administrators, not applicable when users were insulting gay men:

Do not lecture others about users’ written expressions, since they all got a compulsory education and they know what you know

Megalia is for ‘bashing’ *ssipchi* (fucking *kimchinam*), refusing to take a mature/logical way of criticising

Megalians use pejorative words about disability¹²² and they don’t fucking care [about the political meaning of using the word] (Womad user, 6-006, n.d.)

Users were angry at the double standard in applying political correctness to their activities in the Megalia community, interpreting it as an outcome of ‘gay men influenc[ing] the feminist NGOs a lot’ (ibid.). Megalians decided to refuse ‘banding with marginalised groups of people

¹²² ‘Byungsin’, which means idiot, has the related meaning of a disabled body, and so people who want to be politically correct tend to avoid using it, similar to the English word ‘retard’. Megalians had a dispute about using this word and agreed not to challenge others who used it during the early period of Megalia.

for the cause of achieving overall equality’, which was considered an orientation pursued by *undonggwons*, and instead took the approach of ‘active resistance against gendered discrimination [by those] who [had] been victims of it’, prioritising the defence of women’s rights, because ‘we prioritise women’s issues’, as the writer of the above quotation adds (ibid.).

Throughout the flow of criticising activist culture and extant feminist groups, users who were not well versed about the field gained knowledge about it, concentrating on the negative sides of the culture. *Kkwon* feminism, according to the narrative that was developed after this disturbance, urged women to be in solidarity, even when the activism in question was not related to women’s rights, while preying on women’s labours and donations. Even through the supporters of feminist NGOs were generally women, the narrative went, *kkwon* feminists in NGOs did not prioritise women’s rights in their movement, rather they positioned women’s issues down the list, after issues relating to sexual minorities, people with disabilities and animal rights (Womad user, 6-005, n.d.). What is important here is that this response of distancing Megalian activism from *kkwon* activism and creating a narrative that refused *kkwon* feminist activism, was in consequence of that Megalians had not been able to adopt the styles and agendas that extant feminist groups had provided, which led them to seek and shape their own activist culture. Megalians needed to separate themselves from the established feminist groups, which, they thought, were fuelled by their desire to participate in and support feminist activism but did not provide a politics that they sought.

Feminist sociologist Joo Hyun Cho applies Neil Fligstein and Doug McAdam’s theory of ‘strategic action fields’ (2012) in order to analyse the situation that young digital feminists make conflicts with the extant feminist groups. According to the theory, conflicts between groups of ‘incumbent[s]—who monopolise[...] the resource in the field’ and ‘challenger[s]’ of a field transform it. Accordingly, Cho understands that ‘the conflict between digital

feminists and extant feminist groups' who compete for 'political, economic and social resources that are invested into women's movement' as incumbents and challengers (Cho, 2019, p. 116) transform the field of feminist movement (p. 128). Although Megalians did not compete for the conventional resources of South Korean feminist groups which were largely gained from central and local governments, Megalians withdraw their own labours and donations in this context, separating themselves from the previous setting which they had invested resources in the extant feminist movement as consumers of marketised feminism or as volunteer participants.

Megalians justified this separation through the idea that their activism only supports women, not *hannams* (Womad administrator 6-001, 2017). Thus, they refused to support or band with any form of activism that had the potential to benefit *hannams*, including *hannams* with disability, *gay-hannams*, *hannam-politicians* or *hannam* children. The movements that benefitted *hannams*, in Megalians' definition, encompassed every activist sector of South Korean civil society. Indeed, some of the significant activities that the feminist NGOs had been involved in at that time were conducted by banding with the civil-rights organisations under the political aim of resisting against the neoliberal regime of the South Korean government (Kim, H., 2014) and people who supported 'feminism' were largely supporters of this 'progressive' politics.¹²³ This means that *kkwon* feminism, which actually referred to the general understanding of the feminism that had been circulating among South Korean feminists, including those associated with NGOs, feminist academia and social media users, came to be an important reference for Megalians to go against. Megalians refer to any person who has engaged with political agencies or supports them as *kkwon*, and this is not limited to actual activists but also includes individual allies, seeing them all as objects from which to

¹²³ I briefly mention this broad group of feminists in 1.1.

separate themselves. Eventually, digital feminists shaped their own form of activism, cutting off the interventions of *kkwon* feminists.

Woman-identified activism

As Megalians left the Megalia community, the sphere of *kkwon*-feminist influence, and migrated to Womad, the first thing they needed to clarify was that they would not spend time, energy or money on anything except advocating for women's rights. Banding together with other activist groups was ridiculed as 'taking care of Cola costs for polar bears', which means being concerned with issues that are far from a woman's own lived reality.¹²⁴ This stemmed from the shared idea that *kkwon* feminism first called women to participate in the women's movement and then mobilised them into a movement with 'mixed' agendas. For this reason, *kkwon* feminism was also called 'sseuka' feminism, which means 'mixed' feminism, by Womad users. This distinction between *sseuka* and Womad was used to emphasise that Womad users were only focusing on women's issues and refusing to support other social issues. I argue that the response to the intervention of *kkwon* feminism led this movement to become woman-identified, in the sense set out by Radicalesbians (1970), of withdrawing one's energy from men and enabling women's energies to flow back towards themselves or their sisters (pp. 3–4). This basic orientation of woman identification is based on the 'open multiplicity' (of the name of anonymous women, in this case) that does not disambiguate or assign a discrete referent to actions (Deseriis, 2015, p. 4).

Womad users needed to make a clearer distinction from *kkwon* feminist groups when they went offline, attempting to intervene in social problems by organising offline gatherings. This

¹²⁴ Since this phrase became a meme that every Womad user knows about, the Womad administrator even named a board for sharing financial status in terms of users' donations to develop a new website 'Cola costs for polar bears'. This can be found in a screenshot of Womad that was taken in May 2016.

was because the offline/public sphere was the field of conventional social movements, in which the extant activist groups should be very familiar with the grammar of ‘doing’ activism. In that context, Megalians brought to the fore their anonymity principle in order to make a clear distinction between themselves and feminists from named political groups, and to circumvent the danger of ‘mixing’ with those other feminists. Here their distinct form of activism became the activism ‘of anonymous women’.

Megalians generated offline forms of activism that erased information about who the participant was as I described in the first section of this chapter. A Courage Rally participant says that she found this aspect of discarding the group’s reputation redirected the goal of political acts:

People like me, who hadn’t participated in feminist groups before, felt left out if we visited their [*kkwon*-feminist] political gatherings because they were already connected to each other. [...] Now women respond to a movement where we can take part as an individual, as an anonymous woman. [...] The Courage Rally was successful because we *did* what the existing activist groups *did not do* using the excuse ‘it’s not politically correct’ and we excluded their intervention. (A Courage Rally participant, in the news article of Jihye Kim, 2018, emphasis added)

This is an extract from an interview with a participant at the 4th Courage Rally that appeared in the South Korean newspaper *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, reported after the rally was held in August 2018. The interviewee explains that she ‘felt left out’ from participating in the political gatherings of *kkwon*-feminist groups because she found that the other participants were already connected to each other. This builds a hierarchy between people who already know each other’s names and those who are new, while revealing that the gathering is not

merely about the present topic but is linked to a wider activism and an already-established activist community. The hierarchy between old-timers and newcomers stems from their experience and knowledge, and from time differently spent, and it makes a sociality and temporality of the activism discernible – that goes against the grammar of the digital interaction of people who are temporarily connected to each other that I discussed in the previous section. The interviewee, as a newcomer, felt as though her participation in the gathering was contributing to the, to her, unknown bigger and continuous activism that she was neither involved in nor aware of, which meant that she ‘felt left out’. This is not only about hierarchy between old-timers and newcomers or between the people who organised the gathering and simple participants, but also about the established and previously shared orientation of the activist group and the present topic that one-off participants know about.

‘A movement where [women] can take part as an individual, as an anonymous woman’ precludes the possibility of hierarchy, or at least makes it invisible on the surface, because the participants do not have names to be recognised. I say, ‘at least makes the hierarchy invisible on the surface’ rather than ‘eliminates it’, since what the principle of adhering to being anonymous stages on the scene is how it appears on the surface, regardless of the participants’ personal experiences – which I cannot guarantee. What is staged is what participants see and take as the basis for their belief on the activism by the one-off participations. Even though there could be hierarchy built into the process of organising the protest, the anonymity policy makes it indiscernible. This setting of the gathering makes it seem that women’s individual, anonymous contributions constitute the activism that they are participating in right now, and they do not need to doubt its underlying intention because their temporary gathering does not take the name of a particular political agency.

Moreover, the interviewee suggests that the fact that the activism of anonymous women ‘*did* what the existing activist groups *did not do*’ actually made the activism successful.

Political activism associated with named groups, if it wishes to remain sustainable, needs to prove its legitimacy, including its 'political correctness'. Unlike the *named* activism, which needs to shun anything that tarnishes its name, *nameless* activism can transgress the boundaries of what activism can be, the norms of activist practice in other words, since it does not have a name to defend from criticism, just as digital conversations in an anonymous environment (Bernstein et al., 2011). Megalians make this political movement into an activism of nobody as well as anybody, spreading their message without being concerned about political reputations that might be attached to a certain name and its historicity. By discarding the sustainable names and subjects of activism, Megalians were left with only a temporary agenda and activism for it. This aspect distinguishes digitally oriented activism from the activism of ordinary political groups that have names.

Due to these aspects, which are based on the notion of participation by anonymous women, the Megalian movement generated certain patterns in creating offline gatherings. Firstly, their offline activism is topic centred, because unspecified women are gathering intermittently for a particular topic. Secondly the topic does not have to seem legitimate to claim, because participants do not need to be untarnished. Thirdly, the gatherings will end once the goal of making public noise is achieved, thus they are not expected to be continuous. Fourthly, the slogans they chant at gatherings usually include hostile or insulting expressions that have never previously been imagined as being used for feminist protests, but are casually used in digital space, because they do not need to be concerned about the political reputation of the temporarily participating group. This use of digital offensiveness makes involvement in the activism more fun because of its transgressive appeal. Five, the topic or agenda each gathering claims is based on the common experiences that are shared by women who live in Korean society, because anonymous women have no specific reality except for the fact that they are women. Hence, six, and most importantly, the political gatherings limit the

entitlement to participate to 'being a woman'. In other words, the movement took 'woman' as the 'improper name' of this activism, which enabled the movement to mobilise women in general by granting them the entitlement to become actors in it.

Granting women the entitlement to be actors in the movement

This movement of anonymous women transparently advocates for women's rights. There is no background intention, no hidden engagement with other activist sectors, no connection to the political parties of either the left or the right, no unconsented mobilisation for progressive activism under the name of feminism. These are the aspects that Megalians were criticising *kkwon* feminist for, and the outcome of Megalians' efforts to distance themselves from them. The *kkwon*-distancing position was brought to the fore, each time that digital feminists created a protest. The protest organisers convinced the participants that they were first and foremost women and claimed that they were not related to political groups. When digital feminists started to prepare the Courage Rally, for instance, the protest organiser uploaded photographic evidence of her ID card, concealing all the private information except for the information that showed her female gender, along with the stickers that were used for the 'post-it note project'¹²⁵ in order to demonstrate her background of involvement in digital feminist acts (Courage Rally organiser 6-001, 2018).

The evidence functions to show that this activism is made of women's labour. This verification develops a belief that women are creating this activism because they are stakeholders in it, and beneficiaries of the goal of this movement: enhanced women's rights. The verification process is exactly the same as how female digital users develop women-only online communities and verify the female gender of members. For them, political activism is

¹²⁵ I described this Megalian practice in section 3.2.2.

an unknown field and they cannot ensure every participant's purpose for joining the activism. In particular, if an organiser of a political gathering had her own purpose for organising a protest, which could have deviated from their shared goal, the time, labour and money invested by other participants would have been spent on something other than what they agreed upon, which is interpreted as ruining the purpose of the gathering. Hence, they employ the digital habit of verification, which they had previously used to protect their online community.

In the digital environment, members' gender and users' intentions when creating a disturbance are always under suspicion because male users had made many attempts to create disturbances in women-only communities. The verification of women, of course, does not guarantee to keep the online community 100% safe from trolls and disturbances. Some male trolls even join the community by employing expedients such as buying the account of a female user. However, this process makes disturbances more difficult and, at the same time, enables users to be reasonably secure in the belief that they are alongside women who have verified that they are women. While they employ the same practice of verifying their gender in online communities, each time that a certain user should be verified as a reliable one, this habit of verification becomes a shared practice of building trust between users. In the anonymous environment of digital space, women usually know nothing about each other, thus they have used this method to create belief in women-only conversations. Following this habit, digital feminists who started to organise non-digital activism used the same approach to create belief in women-only activism. Through this verification process, this activism is trusted as a movement that only women are involved in. This guarantees that it is made up of women and for women; in other words, it is inevitably woman-identified.

The obvious orientation of this women's movement encouraged more women to join in the activism. Since the activist agenda they present is about challenging the shared gendered

reality, women who share and experience this social reality in South Korea are entitled to be the actors in this movement. This is what I find to be the factor that makes this movement popular, and shapes an activism of ‘popular feminism’. Since this movement revealed that its activist aim is to advocate for women’s rights and that it has blocked any pathway that could be used to exploit their invested resources for men’s benefit, it became a movement that women joined in order to advocate for their own rights as women, rather than for any altruistic purpose, such as political correctness, building a progressive society, or being nice and ‘woke’ (‘awakened’) to social justice.

This way of creating entitlement to political gatherings for women irritated not only the men, who were shut out of the activist position, but also some feminists, who claimed that the limitation was reinforcing the ideology of binary gender and was excluding genderqueer people. However, besides the fact that Megalian gatherings having focused on issues based on the social reality of women, rather than on individual experiences of the private domain of identity, I need to point out that the complaints about Megalians’ behaviour have simply encouraged them to shout louder than the opponents to claim their assertion and to irritate the complainers further, since it induces a reaction as well as is ‘lulzy’, as we have seen throughout this dissertation: the only reason that trolls do anything.

Since the Bwave protests that started in October 2016, political gatherings of Megalians have claimed that they are women-only by representing them as consisting ‘of anonymous women’. This was a very obvious path of distancing from *kkwon* feminism, since *kkwon* feminists held a political gathering with the same agenda, abortion rights, that men could also participate in during the same period.¹²⁶ Megalian political gatherings used the word ‘biological’ women only from the first Courage Rally protest, which was held in May 2018. This decision reflected their previous experiences of male disturbances. One Courage Rally

¹²⁶ For a detailed description of their parallel appearance, see section 3.2.3.

organiser said in an interview with *The Hankyoreh*, a South Korean daily newspaper, that ‘Male digital users warned us that they would conduct acid attacks on the protest site before the first and second protests. We want to provide a safe environment for participants, and we cannot distinguish who is a man who wants to disturb the protest from people who claim they are women [when they are not biological women]’ (Park & Shin, 2018). This concern was grounded in the physical appearances of male trolls at Megalians’ previous gatherings as well as several incidents involving self-proclaimed women and/or genderqueer perpetrators who had male bodies that had occurred shortly before that time.¹²⁷ Meanwhile, it also reflected participants’ shared perspective on gender and how they relate themselves to the concept, as one Megalian accurately points out that I will discuss below.

When a group of Megalians published a compilation of essays in the early 2018, their book was called out for being related to Womad and for being responsible for disseminating the ‘hatred’ of employing the ‘exclusionary’ politics that originated in Womad.¹²⁸ The authors gave book talks in order to promote the book and have public conversations with potential readers. At one of these events, a host posed the question: ‘how do you [or Megalians] define women?’ and one Megalian answered as follows:

I don’t care what is a woman. But I clearly know who I should ‘bash’, MEN. Which man?

The one who naturally doesn’t wash dishes at family gatherings, who is only served and

¹²⁷ These were cases that occurred during 2017 and 2018, and were noted by users in the Twitter-sphere of South Korea. I need to indirectly mention them because the victims, who had female bodies, were usually hesitant about discussing their cases, while worrying about the possibility that they might be used by people outside the queer community to give it a bad reputation, and some of the perpetrators have been known to sue people who note their cases in terms of defamation.

¹²⁸ This was shown in the complaints that were left on the Facebook page of the publishing company, If Books (2018a).

doesn't do the chores, who participates in the family ceremonies for ancestors,¹²⁹ ... who'd never be afraid of indecent assault, who looks down on and reproaches women, who'd never heard of closing their legs together, whoever has these experiences. ...because they sat on their hands while enjoying the privilege and ignoring the women who suffered. [They are] patriarchy's beneficiaries, I'll get them. (A Megalia user, in a book talk held by If Books, 2018b)

This statement shows how the abstract actors of this movement are shaped: they are not men who have been living as men, and at the same time, they are women who have been living as women in society. This is not about a definition of gender or innate gender identity; rather, it is about lived experience and what people have practised within those experiences and the surrounding environments that shape the experiences. This echoes the understanding of women as a series (Kim, R., 2017; Young, 1994) that I discussed in section 6.1.

The words above articulate various socially and culturally designated experiences of women, such as 'washing dishes at family gatherings', serving and doing the chores, being prevented from participating in the 'family ceremonies for ancestors', 'being afraid of indecent assault', being looked down upon and reproached by men and having 'heard of closing [her] legs together' that constitute women's reality in South Korean society. These are concrete experiences for women which are made up of their gendered relations to family, customs, labour, social relationships and hierarchy, sexual violence, and the body; in other words, everyday lived experience. This understanding resonates with the idea that women are situated by being sexed as the alterity, or Other, of men, which Simone de Beauvoir suggests from her phenomenological perspective (De Beauvoir, 1949/2012). In her view, women are

¹²⁹ In South Korean tradition, female members are excluded from the ceremony for ancestors, while the labour of preparation is left to them.

situated as Other by how their ‘feminine reality’ is constituted (p. 40). This can be explored by asking ‘how woman is taught to assume her condition, how she experiences this, what universe she finds herself enclosed in, and what escape mechanisms are permitted to her’ (p. 334) that examine the concrete status of being a woman. As such, how women live their gendered everyday lives create Megalians, women or ‘man-bashers’, and stakeholders in this feminist movement, which affirms that it is a movement of women.

The development of this feminist movement of women shows that existing groups could not offer what contemporary women wanted to achieve by claiming women’s rights. Hence, the aim of this movement, which fills a void within existing activism, points to the factor that led to the ‘crisis’ of South Korean feminism addressed by certain feminist scholars: feminist academia distanced itself from and lost passion for discovering the female public who sought feminist knowledge (Cho, S, 2013, cited in Hur, 2013); and feminist groups failed to propose any effective policy interventions or political strategies to address the escalation of precarity among young women (Cho, J., 2019, p. 131). Women, connected only by their collectivity of being women, are questioning specific contradictions that affect their gendered material reality, while examining their own everyday experiences. This is something that existing feminist groups had failed to do, which had led South Korean feminism to become mired in difficulties when trying to reproduce itself (Cho, S., 2000; 2013; Hur, 2013; Kang, 2013; Kim, 2011).

Megalians seek efficient and effective practices in order to lessen the impact of misogyny and discrimination against women, which they found to be urgent in order to improve their living conditions as women in South Korea. Their way of practising feminism, which largely stemmed from how they interacted in digital space rather than from forms of traditional political activism, changed how feminist activism works in contemporary South Korea and the culture shared by its participants on the activist scene. It emphasises the political aspect of

a woman-identified movement, which anyone can join if she is a woman and which, in turn, opens up the possibility of shaping an activism of 'popular' feminism.

Conclusion: The politics of women developed by 'oo's

Megaliens applied their digital rules of anonymity to their discourse production and activist participation. Digital anonymity was in keeping with the digitally originated characteristic of their politics, which was grounded in the ephemeral and in inauthentic discussion, and led Megaliens to 'chase' direct and practical outcomes. The conception of women as a series, which is discerned in the Megalian approach to mobilising participants, brings out how the gendered structure of South Korea produces the status of being women in that cultural context. Anonymous women, in this sense, came to function as an 'improper name' for the participants, enabling Megaliens to link their movement to the life of any woman, while interpellating them as actors in this movement.

The culture of anonymity clearly distinguished this movement from extant South Korean feminist movements, while enabling any woman who uses 'oo' as her nickname to join it. The aspects of anonymous participation and activism by nameless women were adopted in order to rewrite the activist grammar, inventing a new activist culture. It enabled the movement to mobilise women in general by granting them the entitlement to become actors in the movement. Thus, it opens up the possibility of a 'popular feminism', that any woman can participate in if she seeks feminist knowledge.

Chapter 7. An activism of withdrawing women's labour

Women are not 'all bark' after all. Digital feminists *actualise* their feminism, they practise it.

(Enya)

Enya's words struck me as encapsulating the central aspect of Megalian feminism, inspiring my focus in Chapters 7 and 8 of this thesis. The literal translation of the sentence 'digital feminists *actualise* their feminism' is close to 'women are making digital feminism into a pattern of life' or 'women are practising digital feminism as real-life experience'. Any activism or movement can be actualised if a participant internalises its values and reorganises her mind and body to fit those values. In Chapters 7 and 8, I focus on the activist orientation that transforms Megalians' bodies and practices, which constitute their lives and the substance of their lived experiences, in order to demonstrate their activism. As I have shown in the previous chapters, digital feminists used habits that are familiar to them as natives of digital space, which are then seized and memetically taken on by other inhabitants. In this chapter, I examine the practical forms of activism that digital feminists have created in their everyday lives in order to withdraw and refuse to provide the female labour that produces patriarchy.

If a virtual feminist goal is achieved in non-virtual life, the material circumstances that have a sexist basis create friction between women's actual practices and the structured environments in which they live. For example, a South Korean woman who decides to practise the 'ex-corset' with her style – that is, a woman who avoids adorning herself with feminine and uncomfortable 'ornaments' in Megalian discourse – would need to find a hairdresser who cuts female customers' hair as short as men's in a context in which many hairdressers refuse to do so. She would need to find underwear without unnecessary decorations from among boy's or men's selections because there is little option for that in

women's ranges. And she would have to take the risk of being disadvantaged in job interviews, as several digital feminists who have practised the 'ex-corset' have reported during the last five years. Coercion via gender norms is embedded in daily life for South Korean women, exerting forces that bind them within socially, commercially, and industrially limited boundaries that approve the public exclusion of a woman if she deviates from these norms. In this chapter, I analyse some widely shared examples of Megalians 'actualising' feminism: the 'ex-corset' and the *bihon* movements, and how these movements create friction as they are enacted in reality. Both movements refuse to serve the institutionalised participation of women in running patriarchy, while criticising the oppressive systems that target all women and attempt to corral them within the gendered order.

7.1. The 'ex-corset' movement

The 'ex-corset' movement became known to the general public as a movement that challenges beauty practices. The original meaning of 'ex-corset' was to refuse the naturalised burden carried by women in practising femininity. Initially in Megalia, users called the 'corset – following a gendered demeanour' as 'invisible corset' to highlight the fact that they had unconsciously embodied gendered norms before gaining a feminist perspective (Megalia user 7-001, 2015). The word emphasises the standardised femininity that has to be maintained by women's practices, which is tailored into a certain shape. Until 2017, the term 'corset' was applied to anything that coerced women into behaving in a way that fit into practising ideal femininity. From 2018, as the word 'ex-corset' began to be widely used by digital users to refer to a challenge to the 'beauty-corset', the meaning of 'ex-corset' was narrowed down by the language users. The idea of 'ex-corset' could take the form of activism as digital feminists uploaded examples as proof that they were practising 'ex-corset', usually photos or videos of smashing up cosmetics and cutting their hair off. In particular, the users

of Instagram and Jjukppang community collectively participated in uploading photographic evidence of ‘doing’ ‘ex-corset’, and the latter group uploaded ‘apologies’ for ‘exhibiting the corset’ and their previous activities of ‘encouraging corset-related consumption’, as reported by Yonhap News, a news agency (Hyun, 2018). According to this news article, one user of a female-dominated community uploaded a long written post that showed how her perspective had changed after learning about the ‘ex-corset’ movement, and she deleted a post about ‘seasonal colour analysis’, which had gained 500 comments and 60,000 hits that she had uploaded a year before. Sharing ‘how-to’s among users had acquired the meaning of ‘exhibiting the corset’, while this poster’s perspective changed through adopting the ‘ex-corset’ discourse. In this section, I examine how ‘ex-corset’ came to be a popular form of activism that utilises the instrument of ‘exhibiting’ feminism and feminist life.

Megalian presence in circulation

Suji, who was an active user of Instagram, explained to me that her Instagram account had been ‘a portfolio of who the person Suji is in the market for a romantic relationship’. It had to be self-policed and refined, she continued, to showcase herself and her preferences for potential partners who might visit her account. The social media account, in this case but also more broadly, is a place for displaying who the owner is as well as what they do by providing photographic evidence for potential visitors. This is referred to in South Korea as ‘exhibiting’ (‘jeonsi’ in Korean) one’s life. Digital feminists frequently use the verb ‘exhibit’ to refer to how they allow a message that is implied in digital posts they upload to be exposed to others. For some Megalians, especially those who actively use social media, ‘exhibiting’ feminism or a feminist life is a way to spread feminist messages, by showing how an actual person, herself, materialises feminism in her life. Jeongwon, an active user of the Instagram platform describes how she sends messages by ‘exhibiting’ herself or feminism on her media account:

Before, I wanted to devote myself to directly persuading people with feminist messages. But nowadays, I think it's more important to live well. ... If I live well and write something I think, then people just self-realise [feminism by seeing it]. ... Sometimes I get DMs [Direct Messages], like, this one was from a middle-school girl: 'Can I call you *unnie* [a friendly word that Korean women use to address an older woman]? I'm so grateful. I knew nothing about feminism but realised a lot while I was reading your posts one by one.' ... And my sister sent me a message saying: 'Jeongwon, my friends say they read your Instagram post about 'corsets'. One of them who wore contact lenses started to wear glasses and the other one who wore makeup started not wearing it after reading your post. They say their perspectives changed a lot thanks to your post, so they asked me to give you their thanks.' (Jeongwon)

In this quotation, 'living well' implies the meaning that Jeongwon both lives well and shows others that she is doing so while being a feminist. Visitors to her Instagram account include people who may have the potential for feminist realisation. If they do so, they send electronic messages explaining that they are 'grateful' to her for the feminist messages they received from her posts. I want to emphasise her words in the quotation that 'it's important to live well', rather than to devote energy to persuading people about feminism. Of course, Jeongwon's writing about what she thinks attached to her Instagram post directly conveys messages based on feminist discourse. Besides the literal sending of messages by writing something, her mere feminist presence on Instagram sends a message as well. Jeongwon's life is assimilated with her social media account. Like a portfolio of a feminist life, she 'exhibits' herself on Instagram, and visitors to her account read the feminist messages from her life presented there. This means that Jeongwon herself becomes material for digital

feminism, shared online as feminism in the form of a digital presence, a photograph as well as a human who is seen in digitised form. Her Instagram presence is not only a digital post but also a materialised form of ‘what a feminist life is’.

In this context, Megalians spread the message by ‘exhibiting’ their lives, while mobilising themselves as feminist materials. Any moment in their life can be proof, one page in a portfolio of feminism, by actualising an apt deployment. As the media shapes and controls how people engage with its content, the aspect of Megalians as feminist materials is clearly shown by observing how the different forms of their ‘exhibition’ are differently shaped by each form of media. Their ‘exhibition’ of ‘actualising feminism’ follows the technology that each platform affords.

How digital feminists ‘exhibit’ things differently on different platforms is obviously shown in the topic of ‘ex-corset’. Generally, in women’s online communities and Instagram, digital feminists used the practice of ‘exhibiting’ for their ‘ex-corset’ appearances. In online communities, users urged each other to avoid ‘exhibiting’ excessive forms of ‘corset’, usually photos of a very groomed appearance or ‘how-to’s of a harsh diet to lose weight. Community users focused on raising issues of ‘exhibiting’ the ‘corset’ because those communities have boards for sharing beauty tips that influence many other users, who are mostly young women. On Instagram, the hashtag ‘ex-corset’ was created by feminist users who uploaded proof of their ‘ex-corset’, such as cutting their hair or destroying their cosmetics. On YouTube, a platform actively used for sharing ‘beauty tutorials’, some beauty YouTubers declared that they had decided to stop expending labour on being pretty and showed how they looked when they were not wearing makeup, not doing ‘grooming labour’ in Megalian terms. I want to emphasise the different patterns of ‘exhibiting’ the ‘ex-corset’ by various media. Some encourage users not to upload posts related to beauty practices and to rethink their influence within communities, and others upload photographic proof of ‘ex-corset’ to allow them to be

collected under hashtags on Instagram. Some show that a person who was constructed to look ‘flawless’ with cosmetics looks different if she does not wear makeup, via video formation on YouTube. These forms of ‘exhibiting’ share ‘how-to’s of each user ‘actualising feminism’ in her life.

We can see that recording and sharing life online has become the digital habit of many female digital users. Some of them have been assimilated into their social media accounts, sometimes regardless of their Megalian engagement. My focus here is that the feminist appropriation of this habitual practice functions to visualise the process of actualising digital discourse of ‘ex-corset’. An unknown woman’s gradual change and micro-activism are recorded and shared online, displaying feminism in her own life and how it is actualising via her tangible experiences. I emphasise that the circulation of the message is more important than who the owner of the account is, even when they are settled in individualised media, such as Twitter, Instagram, Facebook or Blog, because the broader anonymous setting of digital feminism has made the messenger less important and the message more likely to be heard, as I discussed in Chapter 6. This makes a critical distinction between Megalians’ ‘exhibiting’ feminism and the self-branding acts of creative digital producers.

Researchers in Media Studies have observed the ‘self-branding’ strategies of attempting to be sellable, which are utilised by feminist creators (Duffy & Hund, 2015; Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2016; Marwick, 2013; Pruchniewska, 2018). The situation of digital users who are ‘translated ... into the form of information’ (McLuhan, 1964/2003, p. 85) uses a similar tactic to the Megalians’ sending of a message by ‘exhibiting’ themselves. However, Megalians’ content creation can be read differently from the digital strategies of branding oneself because Megalian content is usually blocked from entering into the monetising system of digital marketing schemes. I am not saying that no South Korean feminists in social-media spheres are making profits by ‘exhibiting’ themselves. Some feminists are involved in profit

making media labour by becoming feminist influencers, and therefore taking a different position from Megalians that can be understood through the analysis on digital creative producers who self-brand themselves as ‘authentic feminists’ that Urszula Pruchniewska discusses (2018). These feminists are different from Megalians since Megalians have largely rejected authenticity-building through their anonymous media participation, as I explored in the previous chapter. Moreover, they have adopted the ‘anti-social’ label on the Megalian movement and its participants. Hence, most Megalians are precluded from selling an ‘authentic feminist self’ to consumers; they are not bound to the ideal feminist figure that can be sellable. Rather, many of them use the strategy of ‘exhibiting’ as evidence that they are ‘actualising feminism’.

Megalians prioritise *what I do* rather than *who I am* in producing and circulating themselves as feminist materials, due to the culture of the space they initially inhabited, which insisted that they remain less identifiable, more anonymous. The authenticity of feminist involvement may or may not be seen in Megalians’ digital content production. Yet, it is not always important if viewers focus on the feminist materials, rather than the feminist who is uploading them. What readers can believe is what is demonstrated by actual evidence. Thus, the abstract form of feminist discourse, which stems from the virtual space digital users inhabit, gains material form via the digital participants who ‘exhibit’ the proofs they have made. What they do and how they do it while practising feminism is ‘exhibited’ online, passing on ‘how-to’s to viewers, just as they passed on ‘how-to’s for using cosmetics and wearing outfits, but outside of the digital marketing arrangement in which the beauty industry intervenes to promote its products. Since Megalian feminism emphasises changes in reality, the actual changes in each feminist become resources as well as messages to let others know what the actualised feminism is.

Pragmatics of the 'ex-corset'

Feminist researcher Aera Kim examines the meaning of feminism that is revealed in the 'ex-corset' movement through analysing interview data from young feminist women and the YouTube videos by interpreting them within the social media 'self-branding' market discourse (Kim, A., 2019). I review this article here because it deals with critical elements that I want to explore and critique in relation to the 'ex-corset' movement. From her observations, 'ex-corset' is a tool for women in their teens and twenties to learn feminist epistemology more clearly through standardised guidelines for 'proofs' of 'ex-corset' participation (p. 73). Kim accurately points out that this movement can be disseminated by its practical aspect of following specific guidelines, using the grammar of social media. However, her research frame was applied in a limited way to platforms and actors that were involved in financial strategies, such as fashion/beauty YouTubers who appropriate 'self-branding' marketing strategies in order to make profits from media labour (p. 46). This led her, in my view, to limit the scope of her observations of 'ex-corset' discourse.

Kim's conclusion contains three critical misunderstandings of 'ex-corset' discourse production that need to be rebutted. Firstly, even though 'ex-corset exhibition' appropriates the grammar of digital media that allows some users to be linked to commercialising schemes, the movement's participants cannot be interpreted under the 'neoliberal, consumerist capitalism' frame that the platform shapes (p. 72). This is because the 'ex-corset' movement and feminists who posted 'ex-corset' messages in their digital material were barely allowed to enter into the monetising strategies that the platform provides. Megalians send a feminist message that urges viewers to avoid consuming 'feminine' things and to refuse the gendered labour of grooming. These viewers are the precise targets of the advertisers who want to sell through their ads via the social media accounts of women. This 'unsellable' nature of the Megalian message within the monetising scheme that works with

the advertising industry has been demonstrated in the YouTube sphere, where Megalian content was largely blocked to make profit by the company. YouTube has been regulating any video that contains the word ‘ex-corset’ in its title, labelling it as ‘yellow dollar’ as reported by multiple feminist YouTubers.¹³⁰ The sign of ‘yellow dollar’ means the video is inappropriate for making a profit, therefore, it can have limited or no ads on it.¹³¹ According to the representative of YouTube Korea, John Lee, this kind of ‘yellow-dollar decision’ is influenced by advertisers’ desire to promote their products (Newsis, 2019). This makes people guess about the link between the ‘ex-corset’, which encourages women not to consume products related to femininity, and the yellow-dollar label, which marks less profitable videos, persuasive. Secondly, Kim’s interview participants are not defined as ‘digital creative producers’ who are targets of analysis by marketised feminism in digital space. Rather, they are described as ‘young digital users who uploaded posts about “ex-corset” on social media’ or ‘who declared themselves to participate in the “ex-corset” movement’ (Kim, A., 2019, p. 47). They are not compensated for their media participation, at least not as shown in this article. From my observations, young women encountered and learnt about the ‘ex-corset’ movement and discourse via diverse forms of digital participation, not limited to the commercialised path of following beauty gurus – workers in media labour. Finally, the dissemination of feminist discourse is neither limited to the ‘commercial platforms of social media, such as Twitter and YouTube’ (p. 73) nor did it

¹³⁰ Korean feminist YouTuber Sickern made a video about how she replaced the syllables of the word ‘ex-corset’, ‘talkoreuset’ in Korean, with syllables such as ‘talkyoreuset’, because she found that every video she uploaded that contained the word ‘ex-corset’ was regulated to be labelled with ‘yellow dollars’, and she thought it was automatically sorted out by a YouTube algorithm (Sickern, 2019).

¹³¹ This monetisation stratification is explained by YouTube help.

<https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/7561938?hl=en>

originate from them. The initiation of the ‘ex-corset’ movement occurred through discussions among users of traditional online community spaces, primarily Daum cafés. To describe this movement as ‘being popularised based on social media platforms by users who chose individualised strategies to be exhibiting and marketing themselves’ (p. 74) omits the heated debates in online communities throughout 2017 and 2018 in which many female digital users actively participated. In sum, many individual micro-activisms by research participants are located in digital media in Kim’s research, but this state of participating in activism and practising media habits does not guarantee, and cannot be reduced to, their engagement with the commercialised strategy. The prevalent consumerism in South Korea sometimes creates a delusion that equates what is popular with what is commercial, as Kim’s article does. I admit that consumerist capitalism is a critical condition for the ‘ex-corset’ movement, in the sense that it has constituted young women’s material reality by interpellating them as the principal consumers of the beauty and fashion industry. However, I argue that ‘ex-corset’ discourse has focused on suggesting ways of escaping from this standardised market for women, and is not intended to provide ‘replaceable consumption’ (p 74). The ‘ex-corset’-targeting outfit seller is a by-product of the movement, rather than the purposeful ‘outcome of the movement’ (ibid.). In order to disentangle this misinterpreted causality, I need to raise a point that is not addressed in Kim’s article: ‘ex-corset’ was derived from the ‘man-hating’ discourse that was produced by the participation of many women.

I want to focus on how digital users went about developing a discourse to challenge the social system that targets women for exploitation. As I explored in Chapter 3, digital feminist discussion in Megalia and Womad pursued triumph over men. Irritating men and making them frustrated through attacks generated women’s triumphs online, but these triumphs were limited to digital space. Since this ‘man-hating’ discourse challenges the conventional order of conforming to male authority, it is accompanied by a feminist order of non-conformity to

male society and a reconfiguration into a woman-identified perspective. However, Megalians could be ‘*all bark*’ online, as Enya’s words, cited at the beginning of this chapter. Digital activism needs to be interpreted and translated into practical actions that can be actualised in one’s real life. This is captured in Suji’s trajectory of following online discourse and applying it to her life:

I told you how I used to ‘chase’ fun, right? I think I was a bit late in applying it [online discourse] to my life because my chief intention [of partaking in digital feminism] was ‘chasing’ fun. ‘Bashing’ men and discussing feminism, they just excited me. I indulged in thinking about these things, such as the female domination of future society, so I was later in applying ideas to my perspective on the present and to my future than others were. I was just satisfied with talking about feminism. From the back end of last year [2017], I started to think a lot about how I could apply it to my life [in real]. (EJ: Did you discuss it with your friends?) Yes. Indeed, it was way funnier than talking with Yeoseongsidae users. (Suji)

As an early participant in the Megalia phenomenon, Suji followed the path of ‘chasing’ fun, having fun by irritating men, devising how to irritate them in ways that produced more fun and picturing a rosy future in which ‘man-hating’ would dominate – a world that is configured by ‘man-hating’ ideas. As I discussed in Chapter 5, the pursuit of fun is the precise momentum that constituted and sustained this activism. However, the ‘discursive triumph’ generated by the ‘man-hating’ worldview, ‘thinking ... the female domination of future society’ in Suji’s case, did not extent to influence her life experience. Meanwhile, some digital feminists tried to reorganise the topic of activism into a form that could have an impact in practice. Sometimes they won, as in the case of attacking the ‘spy-cam’ board of

Soranet and shutting down the website, and sometimes they lost, as in the case of protesting against the unfair treatment of female offenders, which could not induce any apparent change in court decisions. Throughout these experiences of triumphs and failures, while they connected virtual ideas and tactics to real-life impact, Megalians realised that society would not change directly and immediately due to their (mostly) one-off, collective actions, such as the protests or petitions that digital feminists organised. The only thing they could change immediately became a target for their online discussions: women themselves. This is why feminist ideas about women changing their own lives poured out into Megalia and Womad. Megalians continued fighting online battles, and at the same time, they changed themselves, bearing the 'fighting spirit', allowing the digital discourse to act on themselves, as Suji eventually did. Applying feminist discourse to her life by discussing it with her friends generated more pleasure than online discussions.

This orientation to seek practical change, a pragmatic approach of the Megalian movement, also applied to 'ex-corset' discourse. Even though the word 'corset' could imply various aspects of femininity, the outspoken discarding of the habits of following beauty standards reveals the meaning of 'ex-corset' through someone's look. Changing attitudes, perspectives, and discarding a gendered demeanour for the broad meaning of 'ex-corset' are at best sensed by others. However, shortened hair, a naked face and loose-fitting clothes are seen by others, while the look stands out as not conforming to gendered adornment, which imposed a strict standard that South Korean women were expected to meet. In other words, the broad 'ex-corset' discourse was developed to concentrate on the issue of beauty standards, because lookism has been prevalent in South Korean society and is a critical women's issue in their everyday life. Appearance is a significant factor in both the marriage and the job market for women, and led to one third of the female population in their twenties getting plastic surgery in 2015 (Kim, Y., 2015). Feminist claims about diversifying beauty

standards existed at that time, but they were hollow if they were not able to challenge the concrete social situation in which beauty practices were related to women's survival in the workplace and the marriage market.

If 'ex-corset' discourse were not to be hollow, participants needed to actualise it in practice. Digital feminists threw away uncomfortable clothes with unnecessary decorative details and destroyed their cosmetics. Following the idea that they had been exploited into expending time and money due to gendered norms of being self-conscious about their appearances, they experimented with breaking the connection between beauty and femininity. This strategy has become intertwined with the 4B movement because the daily practices of grooming oneself partially had the purpose of making women sexually attractive to potential or present male partners, which they could not discard until the refusal of heterosexual relationships was possible. In this context, a woman was able to accept the concept that she would be no longer a desirable woman in heterosexual relationships, since the 'man-hating' orientation of the Megalian feminism interpreted its situation of not being desired by *hannams* to be good thing for her.

Verifying 'ex-corset', visualising the change

Among the diverse interpretations of the 'corset', the liberation from the strict beauty standards could be a particularly popular movement. Bo's experience illustrates the visible and material aspects of the 'ex-corset', which encouraged the participants to intuitively follow the movement. When talking about how Megalian feminist discourse could have popular appeal, Bo told me about an episode that she experienced during her offline 'Wom-

exhibition'.¹³² Wom-exhibitions in 2017 and 2018 were held by Womad users and invited audiences to come along. Bo explained:

I think that getting people to gather offline generates some stimulations. I held two exhibitions [with Womad users]. [An exhibition]'s nothing when it's over. Unknown people just come and go. Sometimes without a single word exchanged. But [I found that] a lot changed after that. ... [For me,] something changed after the first exhibition. At that time, there were many people who wore the 'corset'. [When this kind of event is held], we see a lot [of other Megalians], right? I expected Womad bitches would all wear meditation pants and shave their hair [as had been discussed in Womad as practical forms of 'ex-corset']. But some of them wore full makeup, literally from head to toe. I, too, didn't throw away my cosmetics until the second exhibition. ... But after two weeks of the second exhibition, something had unknowingly changed, so I thought 'I should get rid of them'. I threw away my babies, [lipsticks from] Chanel, Mac, Yves Saint Laurent. (EJ: Did the change come while you were looking at the audience members?) I don't know where it came from. It came to me in multiple ways in that place. The theme of the exhibition as feminism, artworks, impressions the artworks conveyed, audiences who looked at them and people who talked about and were impressed by them. Many others would feel the same, I guess. There was an audience member who said she had taken off almost every 'corset' but couldn't cut her hair off. She said she didn't think long hair was a 'corset' and she loved to have it. When she visited our exhibition and was reading the captions on the artworks, she said, she found her long hair was too uncomfortable. If you

¹³² A Wom-exhibition is an offline form of the digital exhibition that Womad users organised to display their misandrist artwork. From early 2016, several users collaborated in Womad to exhibit their digital artwork and upload their joint work for formal and informal holidays, such as Valentine's day, a day of national exams for college education or Korean thanksgiving.

want to read artwork labels, you need to hold hair like this. [Bo pretends to hold her hair.] She held it like this with one hand and carried a bag in the other hand, and she said it suddenly felt too uncomfortable. Then she looked at others who had short haircuts and saw them reading the captions like this. [Bo keeps her hands in her pockets.] She realised: ‘oh, this is a corset. This isn’t what I like’, and cut her hair off right after the exhibition. It happened without a word. Real change comes from this kind of single experience that’s worth a thousand words. (Bo)

This lengthy quotation illustrates two different narratives of the ‘ex-corset’, that of Bo and another of a woman she met at her exhibition. Bo could not clearly explain why she threw away her collection of lipsticks after the exhibition, when they had once been her beloved ‘babies’, to which she was clearly emotionally attached. The change happened unconsciously after she held the exhibitions and met other Megalians. In her imagination, the audiences of Wom-exhibitions would all take off their ‘corsets’, but, in reality, there were many women who wore ‘corsets’ ‘from head to toe’. This gap between what she thought and what she actually witnessed or experienced might have told her something about the ‘ex-corset’, in the sense that participating in the movement entails discarding the habit that had been familiar, just as her act that ‘threw away’ her lipsticks after the exhibition suggests.

Bo linked this insight to the experience of an exhibition visitor whom she heard afterwards. This woman, who shared a similar change after visiting the exhibition, speaks of more obviously undergoing an ‘ex-corset’ experience acted on herself. In the place where digital feminists gathered, in the midst of the feminist-themed exhibition and artworks, other audience members and conversations between them, she suddenly realised that what she had denied to consider a ‘corset’ and was something she ‘loved to have’ (her long hair), was actually a ‘corset’ and was uncomfortable. This came about from her feeling uncomfortable

while reading captions, as well as comparing herself with other visitors and seeing others who had short haircuts and had two free hands. As Bo's statement: 'she didn't think long hair was a corset [...] but realised it [was] a corset' tells us, *what she thought was denied by what she experienced*. A 'corset' in this context is a beauty-corset which women wear and have literally on their bodies. The bodily experience of comfort or discomfort that came from the moment her hands were bound by this 'corset' gave her a direct insight about it, that it restricted her behaviour while practising a pattern of gendered normativity – having long hair. The visible presence of other Megalians immediately provided tangible evidence of 'ex-corset' outcomes; these women had two free hands because they did not have hair to hold. In this sense, we can see that the 'ex-corset' movement could resonate with a large number of women because it generates material experiences of transformation that they go through via their bodily experience. This is worth more than ideological examination, for digital natives who always seek direct and immediate outcomes. The outcome of the 'ex-corset' are shared by encountering physical examples of feminist women who have done 'ex-corset', as shown in this account. It can also be seen in digital presences that were uploaded as 'proofs', which are used for 'verifying' something by these young people, that change someone's virtual existence into a form that is considered actual evidence that can be used to show to others online.

The 'ex-corset' declaration of the YouTuber Gatgeonbae shows the prevalence of 'ex-corset' discourse in May 2018 when debate on the issue was heated, and demonstrates a popular interpretation of the 'ex-corset' movement:

While I wear my hair short now, I'll say my opinion about the 'corset'. The 'corset' has to be taken off even though it's tough. Only women are coerced into wearing the 'corset', so we need to take off it in order to break through the coercion. I think that's what's right and

correct. We shouldn't judge a 'corset' by personal standards. We should judge it by asking: 'is it socially imposed?' We shouldn't say 'it's okay to wear it as a way of achieving self-satisfaction'. Even though wearing it achieves self-satisfaction [for some people], we need to break through the social convention of imposing 'corsets' only on women by taking it off and not wearing it [as a woman]. ... There may be a person who can't take off the 'corset'. The fact that she didn't take it off doesn't make her not-a-feminist. Yet, she also has to gradually realise and make efforts towards 'ex-corset'. I respect all women and I don't force them to take off the 'corset'. *I just wait*. But I think that people who influence others with a single word, or who are prestigious, should take the lead in taking off the 'corset'. If it's not possible for them, they shouldn't obviously show that they're wearing it, and should not justify wearing it. The mood of justifying and popularising the wearing of the 'corset' empowers Korean society that coerces only women to wear the 'corset'. It's more important if she's not an ordinary woman, such as, if she's Gatgeonbae who influences other women. [As Gatgeonbae,] I will take the lead in taking off the 'corset' and will speak louder. (Gatgeonbae, 2018, my emphasis)

Gatgeonbae uploaded this Instagram post with a photo of her hair that she had cut off.¹³³ Her statements show how the micro-activism of digital feminists can be a way of breaking through the socially imposed coercion that targets women. If the coercive system targets women as a group, a single woman can challenge it by deviating from the system by displacing herself from the targeted area. For example, she can cut her hair off in order to displace herself from the gendered order of long-haired women through practical action. Gatgeonbae points out that wearing the 'corset' is socially imposed so that not all women can

¹³³ The photo contains the actual hair that she had cut off, not a photo of her with short hair. She did not reveal herself until she stopped broadcasting in January 2020.

take it off immediately. The frictions that women experience in their lives are different, depending on their specific life environment. Since ‘ex-corset’ is actualised by women’s individual practical acts, these differences among women should be ‘[a]wait[ed]’ rather than forced on each other. Moreover, she points out that the ‘ex-corset’ presence influences others; thus, the impact is amplified when the presenter is a person who attracts attention from others, like herself. Her perspective on the ‘ex-corset’ movement is based on the major premises of Megalian activism: concentrated attention generates exaggerated outcomes, and individual acts form collective activism. She uses the attention economy that digital media allows her to access, because ‘she is Gatgeonbae who influences other women’, even though she actually functions anonymously since she does not expose her legal name, facial photos or personal details, consistent with other ‘anonymous women’.

To explain the popularity of the ‘ex-corset’ movement, I emphasise that the ‘corset’ has structured women’s material reality in diverse ways. The standardised clothes of women have bound them to behave like a girl, move like a woman, and have encouraged them to desire such clothing. As Gatgeonbae points out, ‘it’s tough’ to change a body that has been accustomed to being feminine, and to discard the desire to be a feminine woman when one is surrounded by the compulsion of social norms. However, as feminist researcher Min Gyeong Lee accurately points out, the ‘ex-corset’ movement stemmed from activism around ‘women having changed their bodies as well as other women’s bodies by influencing each other’ (Lee, M., 2019, p. 258) – as she defines the Megalian movement. Since the familiar bodily experiences and embodied desires were reinterpreted as the path to exploiting women in order to consolidate the unequal social reality between men and women, young women decided to disengage from the system, represented by the beauty industry and which had dictated their somatic experiences and desires, as well as how they engaged with the market as consumers.

The ‘ex-corset’ movement is abstract when we say ‘we need to escape from consumerist capitalism’ when we are actually living within it. As the webcomic ‘Ex-corset Diary’ shows (see Figure 5), discussions around the ‘ex-corset’ stem from and circulate within digital space, where the people involved in the discussions live in the material situation of South Korea, which is full of ‘corsets’. The protagonist of this webcomic is a woman who practises the ‘ex-corset’ and the comic depicts the friction between the digitally formed ‘ex-corset’ discourse and the reality she is living:

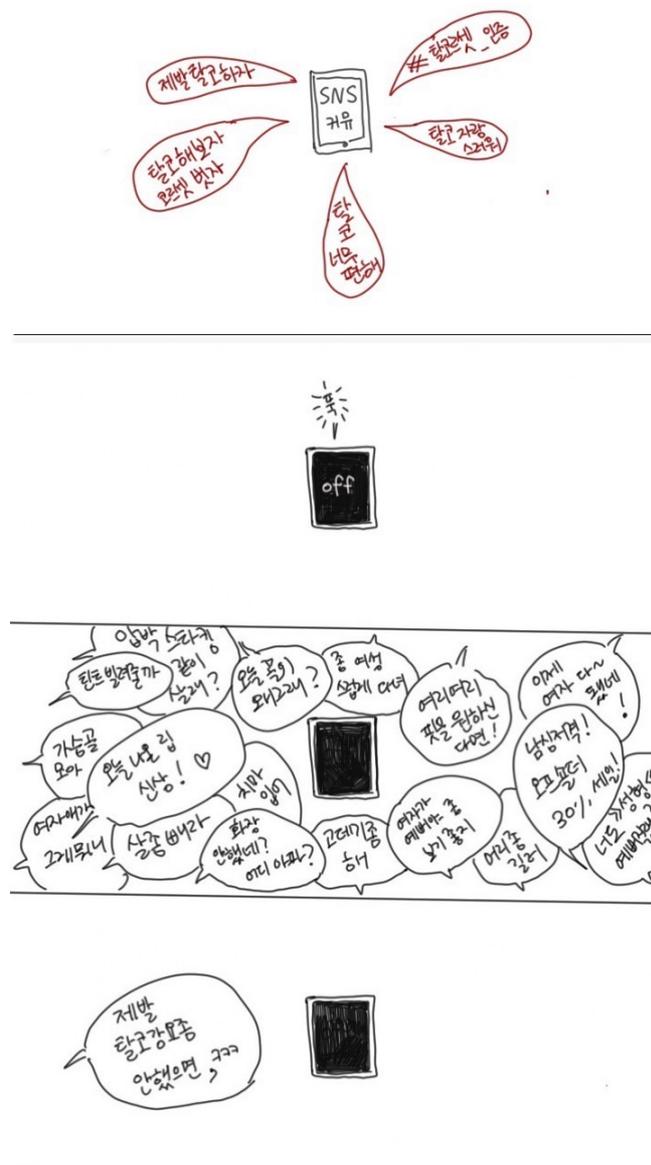


Figure 5 Ex-corset Diary Ep. 05

In the excerpt, ‘ex-corset’ messages are coming from her mobile, ‘please let’s try ex-corset’, ‘ex-corset makes me so comfortable’, ‘I’m so proud of doing ex-corset’ with the hashtag of ‘#Ex-corset_verification’. When her mobile is turned off, the protagonist is surrounded by narratives of ‘corsets’, such as ‘let’s go and get compression stockings’, ‘what happened to your skin tone today?’, ‘do you want a girly fit?’, ‘grab his attention with this outfit!’, ‘you look like a grown-up woman now, so have some feminine outfits’, ‘grow long hair’, ‘do you want to be pretty with plastic surgery?’, ‘you didn’t wear makeup today – are you sick?’ and ‘lol, wish they [feminists] wouldn’t force others to do ex-corset’.

This scene shows the reality in which ordinary young women reside in South Korea. They are constrained to engage in a female-targeting market economy by consuming products that maintain their socially assigned femininity. Their friends, acquaintances and family members, as well as the actors in the ads for products that target young women, urge them to follow ideal femininity, which is not considered to ‘force’ the ‘corset’ because wearing the ‘corset’ is an imperceptible norm in Korean society. However, the feminist discourse of ‘ex-corset’ is considered to ‘force others’. The last sentence quoted above: ‘wish they wouldn’t force others to do ex-corset’ is mocking ‘ex-corset’ participants because ‘ex-corset’ is a counter-normative idea and participants are deviating from what is considered normal. Young women are surrounded by the *corset discourse* and follow it by using *corset-related products* within consumerist capitalist society. As the word ‘ex-corset’ literally indicates, the ‘ex-corset’ movement is young women’s activism to displace themselves from the socially imposed role as ‘corset’-wearers. To actualise the discourse that was developed in digital space, young women appropriate the ‘proof’ culture that changes virtual ideas into material evidence – showing they were actually destroying the ‘corset’-related products.

The virtual idea of ‘man-hating’ and challenging the gendered hierarchy has gained the realistic and practical form of actualising ideas: the individual practices of materialising feminism. ‘Ex-corset’ is particularly practical in the sense that women can change their own somatic ‘exhibition’ in order to demonstrate that they have moved away from the position that their female gender assigned to them – feminine women who are completed by ‘corset’-related products. Since its practical impact is obvious, the ‘ex-corset’ movement attracts participants who want changes overnight, even though this generates friction in reality. The ‘ex-corset’ discourse could find a path to materialise based on the ‘corset’ practices in which young women are involved: ‘grooming labour’ and ‘exhibiting’ its outcome. Megalians have reframed the beauty practices that strive to meet the ideal beauty standards of Korean women as wasted time and unnecessary labour, driven by the idea that women’s desire has been created through social pressure and that it has been the only desire that was allowed to women, leading them to spend time and energy on beauty practices and preying on their yearning for achievement.

If the *corset* is made of women’s labour, women can *escape the corset* by going on strike. Like the traditional strikes of factory workers, women destroy their cosmetics – the instruments of their labour – as a form of sabotage and create proof that they have done so. Their own rooms and social media accounts that produced ideal femininity and ‘exhibited’ it through their own bodies become sites for sabotaging femininity and ‘exhibiting’ the process of doing so. They utilise the weapons of the female digital users, the term I borrow from the concept of ‘weapons of the geek’ of Gabriella Coleman (2017), whereby they craft their political tactics drawn from their habitual practices. In this context, I argue that this activism can be read as a strike against the system, which has operated through their unpaid work to become heterosexually desired women who are expected to be workers operating the system of gendered arrangements, the conglomerate of heterosexuality (Wittig, 1980/1992). In her

individual world, the consumerist capitalism that targets women is stopped by a women's strike, which will cause the heterosexual system to discontinue, because it has been run by her invisible labour. This means that she achieved a triumph over the system that coerces her to wear the 'corset'. The 'man-hating' activism that broke the 'glass floor' while enabling women to be in a wrong place – that I discussed in Chapter 5 –, also allowed them to deviate from the position of heterosexually desired women. The popularly shared habits of young women in digital space, grooming oneself and 'exhibiting' it, were appropriated to show how the 'ex-corset' movement can be actualised via the verification and presence of feminist women. This enabled 'ex-corset' practices to be widely shared.

In this vein, I claim that the 'ex-corset' movement had the potential to be a popular form of activism, in the same way that the culture of beauty practice has been popular among young women. Indeed, precisely that has been demonstrated by consumption patterns reported in a survey, in which 24 percent of women in their 20s answered that they had reduced their consumption of beauty products during 2018–2019, with the age group showing the biggest change among 20s to 50s (Bang, 2019). The huge involvement of Jjukppang community, which has 1.7 million members in their teens and twenties, also hints at the popularity of this movement. My interview data confirms that women in their teens and twenties are highly responsive to the topic of 'ex-corset', with interviewees sharing stories about meeting young adults who were engaged in the 'ex-corset' movement. Merida, who teaches sex education to teenagers, was surprised when she met middle-school girls who explained the 'definition of the "ex-corset"'. Jeongwon, who feels that she has removed herself from the position of 'being judged' by the male gaze through the 'ex-corset', got 'thank-you' messages on Instagram for sharing 'ex-corset' discourse from the friends of her sister, who are in high school. After Zizi deleted the 'seasonal colour analysis' content from

her blog while declaring her support for the ‘ex-corset’ movement, one of her followers left the comment: ‘she previously visited the blog for beauty tips but now for feminist content’.

‘Ex-corset’ was reported to actually be changing the consumption patterns of young women, with drops in sales of cosmetic surgery, beauty and fashion that had been considered to relate to femininity, among female consumers in their twenties, according to the consumption analysis of a credit card company reported by a daily newspaper, *The Dongah Ilbo* (Seo, 2019). During the last five years, Korean women have devised the concept of the ‘corset’, diversified the notion by applying it to women’s exploited situation, emphasised the extra labour performed by women that can be reduced by drawing back from performing femininity. In other words, the ‘ex-corset’, which was eventually said to have made an impact on the industry, created a practical outcome: what can be seen as women’s triumph on the battlefield against the system.

7.2. The *bihon* movement

As I discussed in chapter 3, *bihon* (no marriage) was recommended for women by Megalians in order to boycott Korean men as intimate partners from 2015, the early phase of Megalia phenomenon. *Bihon* was a common suggestion made by users in order to avoid *kimchinam*, who are obsessed with buying sex and spread STDs to their sexual partners (Megalia user 7-002, 2015). Collective resistance to the pronatalist government led Megalians to add ‘bichulsan’ (no childbirth), ‘biyeonae’ (no romantic relationships) and ‘bisekseu’ (no sexual relationships) to *bihon*, with the purpose of prohibiting any route to marriage and childbirth. The latter could easily happen by accident, exacerbated by the fact that abortion was illegal in South Korea¹³⁴ and the stigmatisation of single mothers was prevalent. The four words that

¹³⁴ This legal restriction was changed in 2019. For more details about the activism for abortion rights in South Korea, see section 3.2.3.

start with the sound ‘bi’, which has the meaning of ‘no’, were tied together as the ‘4B’, referring to Womad users’ orientation of boycotting men and the reproductive duty imposed on women by the nation.

The slogan 4B, boycotting marriage and birth, romantic and sexual relationships is simple but abstract. Digital feminists refined aspects of 4B to apply the slogan to their life in practice. The popularised form of 4B is the spread of *bihon* ideology and the *bihon* movement among the young generation. Women who follow *bihon* discourse were described in a Bloomberg report as ‘a growing and determined group of Korean women rejecting marriage and motherhood’ (Lee, J., 2019), four years after the Megalian movement had begun. *Bihon* movement and its orientation were reported on by international news media, including the BBC (2019), Bloomberg (Lee, J., 2019), AFP (Lee, C., 2019) and ABC (Jeffery, 2019). I interrogate this movement in terms of what 4B discourse stands for and how 4B discourse gained the shape of the *bihon* movement, citing the sociological diagnosis of the changed material reality of South Korean women. Through this interrogation, I examine how the *bihon* movement evolved through the actions of women who understood their positionality in South Korean society, which led them to claim 4B, and how young women reconfigured the meaning of marriage and family-making during their involvement in the movement.

What provoked the 4B Manifesto?

Before the Megalia phenomenon, a feminist movement called as *bihon* movement existed in South Korea and it aimed to diversify ideas around the life path and family. It sought to give individuals options to choose beyond the standardised form of getting married, rather than being an anti-marriage ideology (Park, 2008). This perspective on the *bihon* movement is quite removed from the *bihon* movement of Megalians, who adopted the ‘man-hating’ mindset, actively boycotting men. Sam, a young digital user who had been a member of

Jjukppang café but was now of Olppaem café (an online community for feminists) and said she was reading and learning about digital feminism from Womad at the time of our interview, pointed out what the Megalian movement challenges:

I've observed diverse debates [among Jjukppang café users] over the 'mirroring' strategy, splitting dating expenses, [the beauty] 'corset', for around a year. And I gradually understood why it's proper to say that something is a 'corset' and why splitting dating expenses is unfair to women. But many other women just don't admit it. They even try to justify these practices. Debates are ongoing. [...] Well, I can't miss talking about the fandom of sexist K-pop idol groups. Indeed, the issue in these quarrels, splitting dating expenses, defending sexist K-pop idols and wearing the 'corset', has the same basis [of saying], 'I can't lose men'. Dating expenses, adorning oneself, standing at the side of misogynist male stars, these things are all linked to heterosexual desire. So, I think they're all linked to [the desire of] *not losing men*. (Sam)

The phrase Sam used, 'I can't lose men' or the desire of 'not losing men', is frequently mentioned by digital feminists in interviews as well as in various online venues where young women reside. Depending on context, 'not losing men' refers to various behaviours, such as having relationships with men, supporting and defending male celebrities, being self-conscious about one's appearance so as to be desirable by men in heterosexual relationships. This general expression gives a further insight into the orientation of disengagement from male identification, which internalises the 'male-defined response patterns' (Radicalesbians, 1970, p. 3) in 4B discourse. According to Radicalesbians, the American lesbian feminist group of the 1970s, the female role as the heterosexual partners of men brings 'male-connected compensations'; thus, women are male-identified while remaining second-class in

status without fundamentally challenging the gendered hierarchy. In this male identification, women internalise male culture's definition of themselves, which leads to a form of femininity that is dependent on male approval in a context in which a 'real woman' is defined through heterosexual availability (p. 2). 'Woman identification' means the withdrawal of emotional and sexual energies from men and disengagement from 'male-defined response patterns' (p. 3). In this sense, Megalians are experimenting with 'losing men', they are withdrawing their internalised male identification, in the Radicalesbians' expression.

The male identification of women is structured throughout a woman's entire life. Lyon's statements below show how male identification is conditioned by women's lived experiences, which consist of living and being treated as a girl and a woman within institutions that teach the norms of gender and sexuality:

I had a kind of androphobia because of experiences of sexual assaults by men from when I was three years old. ... I attended a middle school only for girls and I couldn't understand why the other girls were fanatical about boys ... But in high school, I started to wear the 'corset', gain values of morality and be considerate of boys. ... It made me put myself in their shoes. I looked at myself through the gaze of how guys looked at me. I, who had been a 'man-hater', came to be considerate of men's minds. I think that we learn maternity in the coeducational system, as though we're becoming public equipment, public transport. (EJ: Which system?) Coeducation. Schools for boys and girls. Although teachers don't teach it explicitly, there's an atmosphere in the school environment that 'boys naturally do so, girls should be considerate of them'. It has that kind of culture, atmosphere or vibe. It also made me into a *moral* person. (Lyon)

Lyon's experience shows how girls are nurtured into women who are willing to understand and fulfil men's needs at the expense of themselves as public goods (like 'public equipment' or 'public transport'). For her, the coeducational system is a field where girls learn maternity, always eager to provide care and service as a mother to her male peers, in heterosexual relations. The effect of institutionalised heterosexuality made her male-identified in the sense of internalising male culture's value of women by making her 'put [herself] in [men's] shoes', which became a standard for judging herself. This structured reality for women led her to gain 'morality', which means following the socially assigned gendered desire and making an effort to embrace it, which makes her a normative woman.¹³⁵ In this context, *morality* refers to the gendered norm of caring for men as potential/possible partners. The Megalian orientation of disengagement from men enables women to concentrate their energies and resources only on women since they realised that their collective efforts had been systematically dissipated in support of men, regardless of their intentions. To prevent this dissipation, Megalians need to 'lose men' by every means possible, especially by refusing heterosexual family-making and childbearing, since they are the paths for getting involved in the compulsory institution of heterosexuality, an ideology that coerces women into subordination through colonised gender relationships that assure the 'male right of physical, economical, and emotional access' to women (Rich, 1980, p. 647).

The 4B movement suggests the exclusion of men as a form of activism in order to interrupt the system of patriarchy: the system that forces women to work spontaneously for men's good in heterosexual relations. The 'losing men' of 4B is applied to any acts of women, either the process or outcome, in order to discern what can be beneficial to men, ranging from the individual to the state level. In this context, Megalians' anti-heterosexuality

¹³⁵ I discussed how policing women under the gendered order, misogynistic censorship, works in the form of moralism in section 5.2.

is not aimed at enhancing or embracing lesbianism as a politics or a lifestyle, as Radicalesbians suggested, but at disconnecting every relation directed towards or involving men, because they realised that heterosexuality is ‘a political regime which rests on the submission and the appropriation of women’ as Monique Wittig describes it (Wittig, 1992, p. XIII). This means that disengagement from male identification in itself becomes a movement through which women escape from the system that exploits them.

Monique Wittig argues that the social differentiation process of defining female gender means the subordination of women that entails class oppression. In her understanding, heterosexuality is a social contract in which women are involved as the subordinate partner. ‘The straight mind’ (Wittig, 1980/1992) is, according to Wittig, ‘the whole conglomerate of sciences and disciplines’ that runs straight society through making ‘other’ at every level to interpret the historical situation of domination (pp. 28–29). In this sense, gendered institutions are constructed through heterosexuality, and they reproduce that heterosexuality. Lesbian existence is evidence of heterosexuality’s manifestation as an ideology, showing that involvement in and reproduction of heterosexuality are in fact not women’s nature. Her critique challenges the ‘myth of women’, which reduces the social differences of gender into innate substances, leading to the concealing of economic and political oppression – the very purpose of the gendered hierarchy, in Christine Delphy’s (1980) interpretation. Heterosexual institutions constitute the social system, colluding in creating women’s oppressed situation. Through living under this systemised heterosexuality, women learnt and practised how to treat men, in caring, defending, nurturing, tolerating and being considerate of them, and were educated that this was their nature. This eventually bound them to these gender relations of exploitation. The only way of unbinding themselves from these relations that young South Korean women could find was ‘losing men’ in practice, which is the key of the 4B movement.

Reconfiguring the meaning of heterosexual institutions

‘Losing men’, discarding any relationships that involve men and could be heterosexual, is an ambitious, unrealistic idea originating in online discourse, which could not be taken up by the general public overnight. In order to persuade people of this idea, Megalians created counter narratives to demystify heterosexuality. Just as Megalians redefined Korean men as *hannams*, an awful stereotype who should be avoided as intimate partners, digital feminists reconfigured the fundamental meanings that marriage and childbirth connote in Korean society. Megalians shared the situations of women who were involved in heterosexual relationships, from what they had experienced themselves to what they witnessed among the people around them. After they appropriated the memefying strategy of sending messages in ways that made them spreadable and comprehensible for digital users, these counter narratives took the form of counter memes. During this process, the concepts of ‘*hyeomae*’ (disgusting romance) and ‘*manghon*’ (ruined marriage) were developed.

The digital post, ‘The pictures that help you to displace yourself from “*hyungja*”¹³⁶ status’ (Yeoseongsidae user 7-001, 2017), is a photographic collection that visualises this narrative, matched with evidence from real-life stories that were shared online or reported as news articles. According to this post, if a woman has a romantic relationship with a *hannam*, she finds herself: having a low-priced meal during dates while splitting the bill; getting a marriage proposal involving shabby balloons and messages written on post-it notes on the wall, or with an inexpensive ring at an unromantic chophouse if he is in a better situation; accepting the proposal because her friends and acquaintances tell her that ‘a woman should get married if she’s reached 30’; holding the wedding at a ‘wedding hall’ that provides a

¹³⁶ *Hyungja*, which means a woman who imitates what men do, is a Megalian neologism referring to a woman who is male-identified, who has internalised the attitude of taking men’s side.

standardised service of the marriage ritual and having the honeymoon at a cost-effective place; having sex with a man with small genitals; having a baby which leads her to experience unexpected pregnancy complications, and providing domestic labour for her husband even during the last month of pregnancy, while he is buying sex with the excuse that he ‘can’t be fulfilled by masturbating’ when he is not able to have sex with his pregnant wife; being harassed on public transport because she is sitting in a seat reserved for pregnant women; being forced to have more babies by her family-in-law until she has a boy; doing household chores and childrearing alone, while being insulted by random men as a ‘mom-chung’, which refers to a *mu-gaenyeom* caregiver woman, because she has brought her child into a public space;¹³⁷ turning a blind eye to her husband when he cheats on her; finding a mobile message on her husband’s device in which he makes a joke describing her as a ‘used-one’ whom he once used day and night for having sex but who is not interesting anymore. The post ends with the sentence: ‘All examples are nonfictional’ (ibid.).

From the romantic relationship, to marriage, to the sexual relationship through to childbirth and childrearing, photographic evidence, which is considered to be real and convincing, weave a tapestry of redefined heterosexuality here. These examples show how women can find themselves in pitiable situations they did not anticipate when they became involved in the heterosexual relationship. Romantic love, and marriage as its outcome, was once depicted as the glamorous fruition of love and this idea was buttressed by the fancy products that support romantic relationships, composed of marketised dating practices and wedding ceremonies, which are normalised in South Korean consumerist culture. All of this is demystified by the Megalian discourse of *hyeomae* and *manghon*. The ideal romance is

¹³⁷ This word *mu-gaenyeom* has the connotation that a woman’s behaviour does not fit the gender norm, which I described in section 3.2.3.

impossible because the romance that most Megalians will experience involves *hannams*, who make romance disgusting, and ruin marriage.

Interview participants suggested experiences of their own that could become threads in this memetic world, whereby a heterosexual relationship is: a route to gaining unexpected STDs (Enya, Lyon); being in a passive position where you cannot refuse to have sex without a condom (Jeongwon, Garra); splitting dating expenses to be a nice girlfriend (Suji), or actively demanding to do it to be a *ganyeomnyeo* in the eyes of others (Anna); understanding and providing care labour for someone who is immature (Jiyoon); passively waiting to be chosen by one of the incompetent males (Jeongah); and internalising the masculine culture of sexually objectifying women, while applying it to oneself (Pangbang). Within their own experiences as well as what they had heard of others', their overall perspective on heterosexual relationships has changed, and this reconfigures their expectations around the heterosexual life passage.

Marriage gained new meanings, such as: something that can be achieved by deceiving women, as Jeongah asserted; mobilising women to work to maintain patriarchy, as Jeongwon interpreted, by involving them in the performance of an unfair role-play, as Sam described it, which forces women to provide unpaid labour that would be worth a large amount of money if it was counted, as Lyon emphasised. I want to focus here particularly on how they illustrate marriage in the language of *calculating* the value of their labour and contribution, which becomes an unequal sacrifice in their lives compared to their male counterparts' in South Korean culture, which entices women to become involved in it by 'deception'. This is emphasised when Lyon talks about the price of reproduction, referring to the price of a surrogate birth:

Isn't it hilarious that a surrogate birth costs 150 million won [approximately 100,000 pounds]? If someone wants a baby and no woman will bear it for him, then he needs to spend 150 million won. If we weigh this up, there should be a legal restriction that a man can't get married if he doesn't have more than 100 million. ... The importance of the role of a man in reproduction can't be equated to that of a woman. But *hannams* are under the illusion that their reproductive capacity is equal to women's. ... they still hold the idea that an active sperm conquers a passive egg and then becomes a baby; a narrative that has been scientifically rebutted. They overvalue themselves. The country where men can't critically evaluate their reproductive capacity, it's where we live. (Lyon)

In her understanding, the labour and sacrifice of women in childbirth that is worth at least the price of a surrogate birth is not recognised by South Korean men, who 'overvalue' themselves in their contribution to having a baby, or by South Korean society which allows this misevaluation. Women are deceived by the narratives overrepresenting male virility; thus, they do not claim the value they produce through reproduction. This gap between labour/contribution and the ideological and practical compensation that is created by patriarchy and patriarchy's beneficiaries, leads women to evade marriage in order to escape from the socially imposed role as someone who should sacrifice herself for the good of men and/or society. Understanding this calculation as a feminist idea echoes participants' positioning of themselves as stakeholders in feminist activism, which I discussed in Chapter 6. Megalians are people who understand feminism as an ideology that advocates women's rights and who are involved in it as its direct stakeholders: women. Patriarchy, the system that benefits men, and marriage, which reproduces patriarchy in Korean society, need to be challenged by those who are losing out by their contribution to it – women. Hence, the social reality in which women are situated tricks them into taking the loss by involving them in

marital relationships that ruin women's lives as well as riding roughshod over the meaning of fairness – setting an 'unfair game'.

This interpretation of gendered unfairness in the marital relationship is not unfounded in the South Korean situation, as evidenced by multiple sociological studies. According to sociologists Chang Kyung-sup and Song Min-young in a study published in 2010, this social situation has led South Korean women to adopt risk-averse individualisation, which the authors interpret as a gradual tendency toward defamilialisation (Chang & Song, 2010). In other words, women personally have chosen to evade marriage for averting risk in their lives, but their individual choices eventually created a phenomenon of women's collective defamilialising. This positions them outside the family system of following the normative life course. This happened, according to the authors, 'as a matter of practicality rather than ideational change', under circumstances in which the compressed development and neoliberal restructuring of South Korean society was shored up by laying the social functions and risks on families, which is 'particularly onerous to women' (pp. 540–541). The developmental state took advantage of Korean family culture, which distributes burdens via the gender ideology of Confucianism and industrial capitalism, which 'cultivate human qualities and attitudes suitable for industrial work and life' (pp. 562–563) through the gendered division of domestic and workplace labour. Chang argues elsewhere that the modernisation of South Korean society has been achieved based on family-centred or 'familial liberalism', rather than individual liberalism. This binds individuals into the family unit, according to observations of material reality that is conditioned by the market economy, citizenship and social policy (Chang, 2018, p. 194). He claims further that patriarchal family norms of reproduction are dwindling among both women and families, while the government sustains the perspective of the familial fertility model, which has led to South Korean society failing to tackle the low birth rate (Chang, 2011). Indeed, the total fertility rate, which measures the

average number of children a woman will have in her lifetime, dropped to 0.98 in 2018 and 0.92 in 2019 (Suzuki, 2020), from around 1.1–1.3 between 2001 and 2016 (Sam Kim, 2019). Aspiring to revitalise family-centred reproduction, the South Korean government tried to impose policies forcing *bihon* women to change their minds and get married and bear children (Lee, 2014). It did so by ‘reforming’ the culture of *bihon* (Seo, 2014), which the government implemented through policies in 2014, and planned to conduct a ‘harmless conspiracy’ encouraging women to consume pro-marriage media content in order to induce them to practise ‘hypogamy’ (Noh, 2017), which a government-affiliated research institution presented in 2017. These academic discussions and social situations reveal that women were deviating from the family system through practical decisions, while government institutions tried to deny it. The women started to evade the unfair sacrifice demanded of them by the family system, which politically oppresses and economically exploits them into enduring the burdens and risks of social development in South Korea.

While the government takes the perspective of familial liberalism that expects families to depend on women who sacrifice themselves to operate the system, it ignores the sociological diagnosis of national change in the family system. In this sense, women are the targets of government policies for sustaining the family system, even though they are allegedly an already-individualised group who have undergone a defamilialisation process (Chang & Song, 2010). Hence, young women created a discourse and movement that resists this exploitative system. In this context, the reality of women, that they have been responsible for familial duties due to cultural pressure and industrial exclusion that drives them back into the family, caused them to escape from the path of exploitation and to refuse to participate in the system by not joining in creating a new family. In this sense, the *bihon* movement is conditioned by the social reality of women, situated as an oppressed group within gendered family relations in the family-centred governance of the nation. It gained momentum from the

digital feminist discourse of doing whatever opposes men's benefit and 'man-hating' in Megalian discourse, with disengagement from male identification as its effect.

After what Sootaek Kang has described as the 'democratisation of the life-world', which raised collective consciousness about the legitimacy of gender equality, but did not realise it in practice (2008), heterosexual marriage and normative family-making in South Korea have become embellished as 'a matter of personal choice' rather than being forced by family pressure (Moon, 2012). The rhetoric of choice in intimate relationships, however, implies that a young woman governs herself to achieve the ideal of femininity. This will make her eligible to be selected as a marital partner by a man who is in a better economic situation in South Korean society, where discrimination against women in the workplace leads to their economic dependence on male partners (Hong, 2012). By adopting 4B discourse, Megalians start to rethink what heterosexual marriage and family-making are by collecting and interpreting data, in ways they had never done before, and by applying 'man-hating' discourse to it. Romantic relationship and marriage, which were composed of the concepts of heterosexual intimacy, normalcy, desire, ability to be desired by a partner and heterosexual 'bribery', now became *hyeomae* and *manghon*, which are packed with the ideas of loss, sacrifice, unfairness and exploitation. The 'man-hating' worldview instigates digital feminists to emphasise on calculating women's loss in these concepts since the redefined meanings stand out the fact that *hannams*, the patriarchy's beneficiaries, are involved when these concepts are manifested in practice.

The 4B claim may be a manifesto that individuals endorse, but the practice of 4B needs to be actual. As Megalians discarded the position of heterosexual partner of a *hannam* through calculating the loss that the position entails, they also calculated the loss of 'escapees' of the system. In doing so, they discover the specific contradiction that they are directly involved, and it enables them to challenge the contradiction through feminist movement. It awakens

Megalian to what they have lost in living as *bihon* women: the loss of the compensations of marriage provided by the pronatalist government, such as special housing support schemes for newly married couples (Government of Republic of Korea, 2016). In this context, Enya says that she thinks ‘even a *hyungja* is in the same [situation] as me, can find no difference with me if she remains unmarried’. Enya’s words emphasise that her reality is delineated by institutions, and that marital status is critical in differentiating the condition whereby institutional authorities divide and regulate married and unmarried women differently, giving only limited protection to women in a family. Her statements reiterate the basic notion of the Megalian movement: it is a movement of women, whose participants are those who share the gendered social reality. In this sense, a woman who does not hold feminist ideas, and Enya who does, are equally controlled by the institutional authorities and experience the same patterns of discrimination, which are produced by the impact of the institutions if they are both unmarried. This makes the situation of *hyungja* and Enya ‘find no difference’. Thus, it makes them able to act from the same orientation in order to resist the loss enforced upon them.

For most of my interviewees, *bihon* was what they had set their minds upon, and they practised it by reorganising their expectations of the present and future. They had usually had vague expectations of marriage before encountering feminist ideas, and their decision to follow *bihon* was spurred by adopting online feminist discourse. The *bihon* decision enabled them to reconfigure their life experiences: Suji stopped perceiving herself as primarily the potential partner of a man and started to find examples of *bihon* community – a community that is formed by women who refuse marriage – planning to live near her friends. Garra helps random women she meets on social media who are suffering from problems as a woman, such as unwanted pregnancy. This is how she practises woman identification and ‘bodopbo’,

which means *a cunt helps another cunt*.¹³⁸ It is possible for her because women are the group to which she feels that she belongs, for whom she wants to provide care labour, rather than prioritising members of her family or her socially expected future family, which is pre-empted by her now. Enya envisages her later life as being fascinating because she will be free from family duties and will not be trapped in the position of sacrificing herself, as she would have been if she had got a husband and children. Jeongah, who had thought about finding a ‘financially secure partner, even though he could be a bit older’, considering her insecure economic status, changed her mind to *bihon* because she found it to be the only solution for escaping ‘the position of being exploited in the family system’ while ‘being traded as a resource’.

The practical inclination of the Megalian movement takes *bihon* as a political orientation because it provides a way of escaping the ‘dicktrix’¹³⁹, in which everything conspires against women and exploits them as a battery to power patriarchal society (Jeong & Lee, 2018). For Megalians, *bihon*, not entering marital relationships, precludes them from cooperating with the heterosexual institutions that produce hierarchical gender relations. Along with their orientation of ‘man-hating’, they refuse to reproduce a system that ‘ruins their lives’ by forcing them into ‘disgusting relationships’, which is how they have learnt to redefine heterosexuality.

¹³⁸ This term originated from ‘mirroring’ and subverting the notion that women are the enemies of women, which is the stereotype that despises relationships between women in South Korea.

¹³⁹ Referencing the 1999 film *The Matrix*, Megalians compare their experiences of digital activism to the act of ‘taking the red pill’, through which they have gained a new vision of Korean society as the ‘dicktrix’.

Conclusion: Challenging a society run by exploiting women

This chapter, with its focus on practical forms of Megalian activism, may seem distanced from my more general emphasis in this thesis on the gamification of activism and the centrality of trolling. However, these practical and material manifestations of discourses follow the logic of digital inhabitants that I have explored in the previous chapters, in the sense that Megalians choose to change what they believe they can control or what can show overt and tangible change, and that they remove themselves from their position within an exploitative patriarchal system by a tactical reconfiguration of the meaning of heterosexuality. In other words, the practices of memefying ‘man-hating’ in order to interpret the exploitative system (which I examined in Chapter 4), steering attention and inducing a reaction (Chapter 5) in people who are directly involved, and ‘chasing’ direct and practical outcomes in the struggle against forces that maintain the shared material reality of (unspecified) women (Chapter 6), all together, have generated these direct activisms of the ‘ex-corset’ and *bihon*. The producers of the discourses can then practise these themselves through staging the battlefield in reality and challenging the social systems. We can see that these struggles are directed at the systems, which it was deemed an urgent task to fight against: consumerist capitalism and the family system. Both of these target precisely the group of young women in order to exploit them for the reproduction of these systems. In this context, the ‘ex-corset’ movement and the *bihon* movement are critiques of South Korean society that young women have developed by interrogating their own lived experiences. I suggest that these young women’s spontaneous inquiries into their gendered reality discovered a new and fresh, contemporary feminist agenda that extant feminist discourses did not offer. As I mentioned in both sections, the feminist discourse of diversifying beauty standards is hollow if the hegemonic ideology demanding that they meet those standards is tied to women’s survival and is maintained and buttressed by the system.

The feminist idea of diversifying family patterns and family life culture beyond the concept of the 'ideal family' does not make a critical intervention in the system, if the 'less ideal' and 'democratised' family carries out the reproductive duties of a normative family, while only diversifying the composition of family members. Hence, these women decided to go on strike to stop the systems by not contributing their part in the arrangement, by withdrawing their labour from the (re)production of patriarchy. As their contribution to operating the system has been huge, in terms of being consumers of the pink-taxed economy and caregivers for the family system, these withdrawals gain the meaning of a collective movement. Their 'strike' shows the materialist orientation of this movement. I go on to discuss this further in the next chapter, which focuses on how Megalian feminism is 'materialised'. This chapter, then, is linked to the one that follows through its emphasis on how this movement shapes a feminist politics that is based on an understanding of young women's social reality.

Chapter 8. Digital feminism materialises

In this chapter, I explore digital feminist participants' experiences of actualising or materialising feminism, as discussed in their interviews with me and in selected online posts. This materialising can be seen in the different forms of daily practice, through which feminist ideas are manifested and then spread via their physical presence. I focus first on how Megalians acted on digital feminist ideas, essentially making themselves into sites of feminist activism, where their feminist beliefs are enacted so that they can be 'exhibited' on their bodies. By describing participants as becoming mobile 'sites', I am emphasising how they affect their surroundings by spreading the worldview of 'man-hating', producing altered gender relations and disturbing and 'contaminating' the space around them. The participants reconstructed their bodies, which had hitherto embodied conventional ideas of gender relations, while transplanting the online discourse onto themselves and encouraging revised experiences based on their 'man-hating' perspective. In the second section, I examine the materialist inclination of Megalian feminism. Megalians interpret South Korean women's gendered reality through their everyday experiences, articulating their feminist discourse based on these experiences, while distancing their politics from the ideological approaches of feminism. I analyse Megalian feminism's activist orientation of intervening in life in practice. This orientation stemmed from their embodied experiences of online interaction, which compelled them to seek direct and immediate reactions and concrete changes, based on a pragmatic and practical attitude, aspects that are shared by digitally mediated activists (Postill, 2018, p. 17), and the gamifying inclination in doing activism, calculating failures and triumphs for their political interventions.

8.1. Somatic substances as sites of digital feminism made manifest

Each participant in digital feminism becomes a site on which feminist activism occurs. I choose in this section to use the words somatic and body to refer to the presence of Megalians, who occupy the physical space that is filled with the gendered order, rather than understanding them as containers of subjectivity and emotions. My interest in this thesis lies in how social reality is interpreted by the people who are involved in it and how it is challenged by their movement. Drawing on work by Simone de Beauvoir (1974), Iris Marion Young argues that the bodily existence of women is ‘conditioned by their sexist oppression in the contemporary society’, which generates a ‘particular *situation* of women’ as a source for learning how to live as women as the patriarchal culture assigns (Young, 1980, p. 152, emphasis in original). If this point of gender enforcement is to be challenged, changing the way in which bodily comportment is demarcated by gender norms becomes a form of micro activism through which participants actualise their feminist ideas, as Megalians do. I am not saying that their personal ‘doing’ of transgressive sexual and gender performances has effects on social reality. Rather, I claim that women are changing their bodies from a perspective that assumes their bodies are the very means by which the patriarchal order is produced, which underpins the structural hierarchies and social norms. I describe how participants’ bodies absorb the ‘man-hating’ idea, producing ‘man-hating’ effects and affecting the places where they are.

Absorbing ‘man-hating’ discourse

Of the 20 interview participants, 17 interviewees had been involved in Megalia or Womad to one degree or another. When asked about their specific experiences of joining a situation where people practised ‘man-hating’, many participants mentioned that they immersed themselves in reading Megalian/Womad postings.

Immersing oneself in online discussion enabled participants to absorb the new ideas and changed their perspectives, although the specific forms of practices are diverse. In Zizi's case, the immersive act was to use Megalian language herself. Zizi explained that she visited every platform she could access, which ranged from the MERS forum to online communities to Twitter, by writing as many posts and comments as possible, mostly 'man-hating' statements, after she encountered the word 'misogyny' on the MERS forum in June 2015. In these online venues, she uploaded newly generated 'man-hating' neologisms, while repetitively writing, gaining reactions and fighting against the users who opposed her words.¹⁴⁰ Garra says she first watched Gatgeonbae's video with the intention of criticising her 'mirroring', on account of the politically incorrect neologisms that Garra's friends were discussing at that time. However, she 'absorbed' it at the moment at which she watched the video of Gatgeonbae, because the video showing her yelling at men while using 'man-hating' insults provided the vicarious experience of 'poaching the power of gendered hierarchy'. This was the moment when Garra 'intuitively knew' the meaning of 'mirroring'. This also led her to visit Womad and 'absorb' its thoughts by reading the posts. I could find that interview participants frequently say 'immerse' and 'absorb' in reference to having been 'into' the Megalian discussions, which would be a major step in becoming involved in troll feminism.

Their experiences of immersion, which involves various practices including reading, leaving comments, fighting other users, led to what they had read in Megalia/Womad being enacted on themselves, as Jiyeon noted:

¹⁴⁰ I say 'users who opposed her words' rather than 'misogynists' because it was during the initial period of spreading messages of hostile 'man-hating'. Not only misogynists but also people who felt awkward about the unfamiliar ideas and behaviours of Megalians were involved in opposing these 'man-hating' words.

There was a huge resistance, in my mind, against the change when I entered [Megalia]. I didn't want to be part of this community, which was alleged to be immoral and was reviled by the public, since I thought I was a progressivist and committed to political correctness. But, you know, I read the [Megalian] posts all day so [becoming part of the community] didn't take long. Nothing on earth could be more interesting than them. I sensed that something really important was happening in my life. Obviously, I was like a *hikikomori*,¹⁴¹ could be seen as a pathetic loser who was looking at my mobile phone day and night crouching in my room. But I remember having an intuition that this time would make a huge change in my inner space and would become a great seed for my future life. After that, I became actively involved in the digital community by writing. (Jiyoon)

Such unusual experiences of immersion, with regard to reading Megalian/Womad posts, was a commonly shared experience of Megalians. Like Jiyoon, Enya and Jeongwon also described how they had fallen into reading the posts 'day and night' like a *hikikomori* from the moment when they entered the web. For Jiyoon, a 'huge resistance', stemming from a 'huge change' that affected her 'inner space' and would lead her to change her future, was taking place as she immersed herself in Megalian posts. The metaphor of falling into Megalia/Womad like a *hikikomori*, a person who does not leave her own room, tells us that Megalians swam into digital space while they shut out the outside world – not only the world outside their own room but also outside the world of 'man-hating/feminism': that is, normal South Korean society. Like being soaked in liquid, participants became immersed in online discussions until they were permeated by the eccentric ideas. Their shifts into a new system

¹⁴¹ *Hikikomori* refers to a person 'who avoids social contact' to an abnormal degree, which is a loanword from Japanese, according to the Oxford dictionary. (<https://www.lexico.com/definition/hikikomori>)

of thoughts entailed intense emotions. As Jiyeon describes her nervousness caused by the inner resistance, so Enya speaks of her bitterness and grief induced by ‘feeling betrayed by the whole world’, and Jeongwon describes her excitement when she sensed that ‘another path of thinking in [her] head was unblocked’.

Megalian discourse covers a wide range of different issues, yet it is based on the original paradigm shift: ‘man-hating’. Megalians challenge the sexist ideas that people subconsciously agree with because they are so accustomed to them. They enter the world of sexism against men, the parallel but overlapping worldview to that of sexism against women. What the absorption of ‘man-hating’ discourse brought about is revealed by participants’ changed perspectives on men. When I asked whether the relationships between interviewees and their male acquaintances, friends and family members had been affected by their Megalian experience, many of them answered that their perspectives on men, and ultimately on gender relations, had changed. Interview participants ascribe the reasons for these alterations to Korean men’s ‘inferiority’ (Jiyeon) or ‘being armed with an inferiority complex’ (Juha), ‘pettiness’ (Nanome, Bo), ‘idleness in thinking’ (Enya), ‘backwardness’ (Zizi), ‘being less evolved’ (Lyon, Jeongwon), ‘senselessness’ (Jeongah), ‘lack of intelligence’ (Pangbang) and ‘being uncivilised’ (Suji). These were all considered insufficiencies for being counterparts in any relationship. These intuitive answers with regard to changed relationships are outcomes of their paradigm shift.

The worldview that was gained by experiencing the memetic world of ‘man-hating’ makes it natural to develop a changed perspective on gender relations. Moreover, the shifted perspective provides answers for understanding ‘normal’ society, while articulating how aspects of male inferiority could be constructed and maintained as a social reality. As Nanome interprets it:

They're lesser beings to me now. (EJ: The Megalian experience influenced you to see men as lesser beings?) Yes. Lesser beings, displeasing. (EJ: Why?) Because their essence [as sexist] was completely revealed. They actively connived with or ignored the [unfair] society. So, they're lesser beings. They've never been excellent. They just took advantage of a society that is set up for them to socially achieve. I can just see that, oh, they wield the power that dicks give them. (Nanome)

As Nanome reviews the actual relationships she is involved in through the 'man-hating' lens, she could find no reason for women to be discriminated against. The socially assigned gendered hierarchy – 'the power that dicks give' – is the only factor that allows men to socially achieve, while women do not. By gaining a 'man-hating' perspective, which reveals that '[men] have never been excellent', she can see that the achievements of men are based on discrimination against women.

In this vein, Enya raises an example of the gap between the women and men in her peer group, in terms of their understanding of social reality. Enya could see that young Korean women had been seeking alternative cultural products from different cultural areas and finding ways of living outside South Korea, which young men hardly thought about. She claims that it is 'because this country provides everything for men under any circumstances'. This means that it is 'unnecessary [for men] to have empathy for others', since the male-privileged society fulfils men's needs. However, it dismisses women's needs, hence, women had to undertake more labour and contemplation to find alternative things that work for them while men are enjoying 'normal' life in Korea. In this setting, women are 'others' who cannot comfortably reside in the male-privileged society. Women seek for 'alternatives' which South Korean society does not offer, from cultural consumptions to living environments. Megalians

become the protagonists of the *Matrix* who take red-pills,¹⁴² by becoming aware that male-privileged society is not natural but artificially created for reproducing the patriarchy. This social reality is only of concern to women, as an outcome of men's gendered privilege. Men, as Enya grasps, are able to live without interrogating the world around them.

Reconstructing Megalians as sites that produce unconventional gender relations

After gaining a 'man-hating' perspective, Megalians changed their attitude towards how they treated men in specific situations, revising their behaviour in terms of what kinds of gender relations they generated through their practices. Eventually this became something that they do unwittingly. Jeongwon explains:

(EJ: Did you get different perspective on the guys around you?) That's the thing that's changed seriously. ... In Womad, users judge male bodies by fragmenting the parts ... Since I've read those messages, you know human beings are a species that learns, now I look at a random guy like, 'Wow, see that nice muscular butt'. Before, it was just a butt passing by. Now I comment on it unwittingly. I view myself as funny [to unwittingly judge other people's body parts] but I strive to boost 'man-hating' because I know I was the one who was treated like that [as an object of judgement/sexual objectification]. So, I objectify men and I no longer treat them as equal beings [to women]. (Jeongwon)

The Megalian discourse of 'man-hating' resituates men as sexual objects here. Jeongwon 'boosts' herself to assess male bodies 'by fragmenting the parts' which she 'learn[t]' from Womad, and this led her to 'unwittingly' comment on a male body part that had previously

¹⁴² This metaphor of the film *Matrix* and 'taking red-pill' is casually used by Megalians and by the interview participants, including Anna, Suji, Jiyoona and Enya.

been just ‘passing by’. As Jeongwon explains, this is how *hannams* have treated women until now. Digital feminists sensed that the daily practices of treating women as sexual objects in misogynistic culture buttressed the hierarchical gender relations. Through judging and scoring fragmented women’s body parts, and being familiar with the practice, men have objectified women, and not treated women as ‘equal beings’. Thus, Megalians have created a counter discourse against the gender norm, and they practise it. Their acts are based on an altered understanding of gender relations.

Digital feminists perform this counter-normative attitude, despite the fact that it sometimes entails behaving against one’s own personality, as Pangbang, who is a digital feminist who actively uses Twitter, describes:

Actually, I don’t usually visit male-dominated communities because of my fragile mentality. I’m even hurt by reading [misogynistic] comments on digital news. Stronger sisters just rush into them and pick a fight with [male users], right? ... But I recall what I wrote before [online] over and over, remember the painful [reactions I got] for too long a time. My personality really doesn’t help [my activism]. ... It’s just that everyone has different personalities. (EJ: But you said you used ‘mirroring’ words, didn’t you?) Yes, of course. I even paid an out-of-court settlement fee [for a legal conflict with a male Twitter user] because I was sued for insulting him. ... I was really upset by the Twitter user, so I sent him a tweet saying, ‘Your dad was dead while penetrating your granddad so he got 500 won [approximately 30 pence] for condolence money. LOL.’ (Pangbang)

Pangbang explains that the Megalian form of activism does not match her personality. Nonetheless, she became involved in it, using ‘mirroring’ words. In the interview, Pangbang looked proud of herself when she mentioned the compensation fee. It was a loss of money

which occurred after being baited by the male user's provocation, but it was also an achievement in the sense that she practised the 'mirroring' act, using outspoken language that she would never have used if she had remained in accord with her own personality. Her 'fragile mentality' would have not allowed her to use bad words online. However, the Megalian practice was easy to follow, via a form of memefication.¹⁴³ Participation in this activism is constituted of practising 'man-hating'. It does not matter what kind of person the participant is, or what she really thinks during the practice, such as whether she was struggling with a personality that opposes aggressive 'man-hating'. The important thing is that the 'man-hating' practices, which had not been used by a woman before the Megalia phenomenon, are practised by her. This means that some women who had never imagined themselves being involved in the gender war are becoming people who can participate in it, 'feminist warriors', as occurred with Pangbang.

Most women cannot become 'warriors' right after encountering Megalian strategies. Megalians practised the discourse in order to train themselves to become equal counterparts to the male misogynists, as Nanome elaborates:

Who the hell is pleased by 'jarani'?¹⁴⁴ But I make an effort to feel pleasure from it. We should think about this, that what we're intending is to become *hannams* by following this form of insanity. ... (EJ: So, there's an emotional barrier. How is it possible to get over

¹⁴³ I described the practice of memefication, which invites women to transgress their ethical barriers, in section 4.2.

¹⁴⁴ *Jarani* is a style of digital images that contain videos of real accidents, usually car accidents, which have male victims. *Jarani* is a compound of *jaji* (dick) and *gorani* (deer), which has the intention of laughing at the silliness and/or tragedy of the male victims. It was devised by Megalians for 'mirroring' *borani*, a compound of *boji* (cunt) and *gorani*, digital images that male users share in online communities to make jokes about silly women who got in car accidents.

it?) Just by becoming familiar with it. Once, I thought sexual fantasies or preferences couldn't be changed, but now I think they can be. I even think that I could be in a lesbian relationship. ... You know, the cock-cutting image is not a thing if you watch it repetitively. During the initial period [of sharing toilet spy-cams on porn sites], *hannams* wouldn't have been aroused by watching women who defecate. But their taste has been developed [by consuming spy-cam videos]. ... Now they've become men who enjoy even bestiality or gang bangs. These dehumanised tastes were not gained overnight. It took 10 years or 20 years. I think it's also possible for women. ... When I gave a presentation [about Megalia] at a women's university, an audience member raised a question about the male body, saying [that she found it] hard to sexually objectify it. I answered that 'if we repetitively, continuously stare at the male body, or penis [in a way that sexualises them], we can be aroused by them'. ... It's the same process. If we continuously watch the cock-cutting image, then it becomes funny, not that brutal [as we thought at first], just an image. (Nanome)

Nanome emphasises that repetitive practice constructs a taste or preference, pushing people beyond their emotional barriers or what has been thought to be innate. This can be applied to sexual fantasies, preferences about one's partner's gender, identifications of sexually objectified bodies or evaluations of brutality in treating the target. According to her account, these need to be changed through the Megalian method of 'man-hating' for ordinary women who would not have been pleased by *jarani*. A 'man-hating' attitude, and this way of treating men, is 'not gained overnight' but only by repeatedly practising it. Nanome points out that the 'way of insanity', such as women being pleased by *jarani* or a 'cock-cutting image' through becoming familiar with them, is what happened to men who have come to enjoy 'dehumanised' patterns of pornography. As women gain knowledge about the kinds of

pornography that Korean men enjoy, they realise that men have been training themselves with these ‘insane’ tastes. Megalians learn from what *hannams* do in order to take the position that *hannams* have enjoyed: objectifying the other gender in a dehumanising way. This training allows women to become players of ‘man-hating’ game. The construction of a sexist position, which dominates, ill-treats and looks down on the people of the other gender, seems ‘insane’ but is constituted of the banal repetition of practices, which women also can do. Their individual achievement does not fundamentally change the social reality. However, it does give women the opportunity to reconstruct their way of being a woman, in the relations between men and women, as women who are able to be equal counterparts to the misogynists in the battles between men and women. Women will gain a ‘man-hating’ perspective, becoming *hannams*, absurdly sexist in this context, by doing the same things that *hannams* have done.

Megalian participants have grown up and are situated within a patriarchal society, which constituted them as women. In other words, they have ‘become women’ (De Beauvoir, 1949/2012). Therefore, they need time, effort and training in order to revise their attitudes, because women had not been allowed to sexually objectify random men, to confront male misogynists, even in digital space, or to develop an immoral taste of sexual objectification, under the conventional gender norms. They practise the Megalian way of treating men by discarding their previously embodied way of ‘doing’ gender, which was conditioned by the conventional gender order constructed through the social and historical background of South Korea.

Normative behaviours involve a script of gendered relationships. Since relationships are composed of oneself as well as other human beings, Megalians found disparities between their renewed ideas about relationships between a man and a woman and how they practised

their relationships. They could see that they might easily be dragged back into convention.

Suji explained to me:

I had been open to relationships, and I liked them, especially with men who look the way I like. But I decided to practise *biyeonae* [no romantic relationships] from last year. My last boyfriend was just a stereotypical *hannam*, which was not a problem. The problem was that I felt disappointed in myself. ... [Before we started to go out,] I explained my stance as a sheer feminist and he reacted like ‘wow, that’s cool’ and the conversation was over. When I looked back at the situation, I realised that I was relieved by his reaction [of not refusing me for my feminist identity]. Then I was shocked by that. In that situation, I was the one who was asking his permission. [It’s ridiculous that] I was a feminist who always said ‘a *hannam* should *jaegi* (kill himself)’, but in reality, I was worried about this [*hannam*’s] reaction. ... I should’ve ‘bashed’ him and just said ‘hey, suck my cunt’ for sure as a radical feminist or not [but I couldn’t do that in practice]. It made me disappointed in myself. And I realised that it’s really important to discard [heterosexual] relationships with guys [in my life]. (Suji)

The conventional script of a romantic relationship involves a hierarchy between a man and a woman, which should be overturned from the Megalian perspective. If Suji follows the Megalian discourse, a woman dominates her partner as a man has done in relationships, demanding what she wants without caring about his feelings. However, for Suji, who declared herself a ‘sheer feminist’, it was hard to actualise the Megalian attitude in the relationship with her ex-boyfriend. She ‘asked his permission’ to retain her feminist identity while being his girlfriend. The given script for heterosexual relationships situated her in the position of girlfriend, who is concerned and cares about her partner’s reactions. Suji decided

to reject romantic relationships with guys after she had experienced the discrepancy between the way that she had confidently spoken about having relationships, or treating men, as a Megalian feminist, and what she could actually do in practice. Her disappointment was directed towards herself, rather than the *hannam* partner or the romance script. This kind of struggling with discrepancy was also found in Nanome's case:

Actually, this guy I'm still dating broke up with me for a while when I got involved in Megalia. He urged that 'you shouldn't get involved in it' so I just dumped him like, 'fuck off'. We started dating again because he apologised and pleaded, saying he would become a Megal. ... But I can see that I'm constantly striving to be a 'nice girl' in this relationship. Actually, I was worried about this when we re-started dating, because I knew I had the desire to please my partner in a relationship of loving and being loved, so I want to be nice to this guy, even though he's a *hannam*. ... The misogyny inside me is the matter that concerns me [every day]. (EJ: You mean, you're struggling with the feminine side of yourself?) Kind of. ... *Hannams* even mess up a dining table [to intimidate their partner and claim what they want] but I can't do that yet. ... I'm saying that there's an element of myself that reads his mood. ... I wanted to live as a Womad and wanted him to follow my lead [in this relationship]. Then I should be a Womad. But in this daily experience, I can't. (Nanome)

Nanome was struggling with the desire to please her partner, while betraying her belief that she should be following the Megalian way of treating a *hannam*: 'be[ing] a Womad' in her expression. Her criticism was directed towards herself, who could not 'live as a Womad' even though her boyfriend had promised her that he would be a 'Megal' and follow her feminist inclination. She set the relationship to align with Megalian discourse, whereby a

woman led the relationship and a man pleaded with her. However, she finds herself returning to the conventional form of relationship, in which a woman reads her partner's mood and lets him do what he wants.

These women's experiences and self-criticism primarily demonstrate that practising offline what they claim online is the important part of being a feminist for them. Being a Megalian/Womad means actualising the Megalian idea by changing how one acts, for example through changing one's attitudes, specifically with regard to the treatment of men – because it is based on the 'man-hating' shift. The discrepancy between 'thinking' and 'doing', however, was clearly revealed when they were involved in relationships, which implied a strict gendered script of how women should treat men. They should read men's moods, care about men's feeling, be nice girlfriends for men, not refuse men's demands. Because an alternative script has never been provided, they experimented with altered ways of having a relationship: choosing the guy she liked, which deviated from the passive role as a woman in relationships (as in Suji's case), or making the male partner passively follow the woman's lead in starting a date as well as in having a political perspective (as Nanome did). However, their experience was that these revised but compromising forms of relationships ended up producing the same conventional gender relations, in which the woman asks for the man's permission and the woman spontaneously pleases her male partner. Their criticism on the outcome, rather than the reformed script they had experimented with, reflects the aspect of Megalian feminism that emphasises what is produced in practice.

Even though bodies and relationships were thought to be areas that these women could control, the embodied script of conventional gender relations does not vanish overnight when people gain alternative ideas. The script is still carved on their bodies. Through examining and rethinking their daily practices, struggling with 'the misogyny inside me' as Nanome puts it, Megalians challenge the conventional script they are unwittingly dragged into reproducing.

The substance of a relationship is the women themselves, thus, their efforts to adopt a new script are akin to the touching up of a picture, or the editing of an existing script, which cannot be altered drastically. Sometimes they just avoid the force that drags them back to the conventional way, by removing themselves from the gendered position altogether, as in Suji's case, who has abandoned heterosexual relationships and has purged the position of being a girlfriend from her life.

Megaliens tried changing their way of treating men to produce an altered kind of gender relations that are actualised in their personal relationships. In this process, Megaliens are reforming the substance of their bodies, which have embodied the gender norm of being women and have been scripted to be incapable of violence and agency (McCaughey, 1998). They experiment with applying what they have learnt from digital space to their actual relationships, thus, the outcomes are materialised forms of Megalian ideas. As though their bodies are sites where changing gender relations are under construction, the altered perspective on gender relations is actualised within and produced from these sites. During the experiments, they discover the powerful script that they have embodied and unintentionally practise. Hence, digital feminists struggle with what is familiar, what is considered to be one's personality and what has been embodied, while taking the time to reconstruct these.

'Man-haters' affect their surroundings

Due to Megaliens' individual attempts to go against the conventional gender order, their acts created disturbances in situations of daily life. These disturbances reveal the antagonism between the naturalised gendered hierarchy and the Megalian tactic of messing it up, which makes that hierarchy visible. The practices of Megalian activism, their collective participations in 'doing', pretending and insisting on the subverted gender order, were once performed exclusively online. However, Megaliens strove to actualise their activism in 'real'

life and to generate transformed experiences of gender relations. This enables them to struggle with a situation that is constituted of the socially maintained gendered hierarchy. It leads them to become involved in the antagonism between male dominance and nonconformity to it, while creating battlefields and affecting their surroundings. In order to conceptualise this process, I use the metaphor of ‘contamination’ taken from Suji’s word, as I will discuss at the end of this section.

When asked about what has changed in their ‘real’ lives after their Megalian involvement and after attempts to rescript their gender relations, many interviewees mentioned that their experiences in public space have changed. As Jeongah explains, these changed attitudes to public space sometimes made the mood turn ugly:

I encountered so many middle-aged men who ‘gaze-raped’¹⁴⁵ me when I commuted by subway. I usually wore so-called office outfits because I was working as a secretary. Then they annoyingly stared at me in that way [because the outfit is sexually objectifying from their perspective]. I really hated it. I just ignored them before. But after I gained a feminist perspective, I started getting tensed up to struggle against them. Staring back, or saying ‘What are you staring at?’, [as though I’m saying:] ‘Do you want to fight me?’ (Jeongah)

Since it is still normal for South Korean women not to express their anger towards others in public space, Jeongah had previously not been able to react properly to the perpetrators of sexual harassment, who ‘gaze-raped’ her. Young women commonly experience the offending gaze of men in public space but can hardly confront these men due to the female gender norm that they should not create a disturbance. As Jeongah describes, once she had gained the

¹⁴⁵ Gaze-rape, ‘siseonganggan’ in Korean, is a neologism coined by Megalians that refers to the sexually harassing male gaze, which makes people feel violated.

Megalian attitude of being a woman who can ‘fight’ with men, she no longer remained passive when these situations occurred.

The idea that women’s behaviour should not be circumscribed by gender norms leads to the belief that women do not need to care about the people around them, as Bo articulated:

I have a [Megalian] friend who shaved her hair and got tattoos on her arms. ... When we hung out together, people were staring at us because the duo looked weird. Big, tattooed, blue-haired. Then we said, ‘hey, what are you staring at? Hey! What the fuck are you staring at? Look over here! Look!’ Then they looked straight ahead [to avoid confronting us]. That was funny. (EJ: You mean, you gained a different attitude, right?) Yes. I don’t make an effort to seem nice. (Bo)

Bo describes how she made a disturbance with her gender nonconforming look, synergised by her friend. Under normative ideas about women, Bo should be ashamed of her obtrusive looks and behaviour and ask for consideration, showing apologetic feelings to the people around her to ‘seem nice’. However, she made a disturbance by deviating from the norm of the space, and thought it was funny, like an internet troll who enjoys a transgressive appeal. It was funny because people were very aware of the obstructive presence, but they could not discipline her, as they had usually done to young women including Bo, due to her changed attitude. By gaining a Megalian perspective, Bo no longer ‘make[s] an effort to seem nice’; she is not concerned or apologetic about making a disturbance around herself. Her presence irritates random people, not because she intends to but because the people around her have been assimilated into the patriarchal order that does not tolerate a woman who deviates from the gender norms.

At times, Megalians intentionally made disturbances around them. Lyon delightedly described her episode of ‘man-hating on the street’ during our interview. Once, when she was with a friend in the subway station, she had shouted ‘Korean men are fucking ugly’ towards the inside of the car, while she had stood outside the car, as the subway doors were almost closed. In the moment that she was fleeing from the site, her friend saw a woman who was in the car chuckling. She called her act ‘man-hating on the street’. Unlike Jeongah’s acts of fighting back at ‘gaze-rape’, Lyon’s is not a reaction towards male perpetrators in a particular situation. Rather, she actively displeased random men, her enemies from the Megalian point of view. Her act resembles those of Megalian trolls who raise the issues of Korean men’s inferiority at any digital venue for ‘lulz’. Megalian trolling displeases male digital users and makes it clear that female digital users are now willing to fight them, unlike when misogynistic culture dominated the digital environment and women were silenced. Lyon created a similar situation in public space, which resulted in an unknown woman in the subway car showing pleasure at her act. A random attack on men might have made this woman feel pleased because public transport is a place where women suffer from the offensive behaviours of random men, such as sexual harassment and unprovoked insults.

During these episodes that occurred in public space, Jeongah did not tolerate the insulting gaze of a man, Bo did not care about the disturbance her ‘obtrusive’ presence created, and Lyon intentionally disturbed a space that offending male behaviours had previously occupied. These episodes demonstrate that the stability of public space where men and women co-exist depends on women’s conformity, tolerance and care. Just as Megalians create battlefields online by provoking others’ anger through demonstrating ‘man-hating’, Megalians’ attitudes and acts in reality are based on their transformed position, from passive victim to potential perpetrator as I discussed in section 5.2. Thus, they refuse to follow the conventional script of gender relations and its derived demeanour when dealing with men, and instead involve

themselves in disturbances. They become involved in ‘fighting’ against men who expect that women will be silent about their offensive acts or will not pick a fight with men under the gendered hierarchy.

These provocations occurred in physical space, where male bodies function as the norm and female bodies as ‘space invaders’, and where these ‘invaders’ create disturbances by inhabiting space as ‘others’ (Puwar, 2004). According to sociologist Nirmal Puwar, dissonant bodies within privileged space, which historically and conventionally has been reserved for white males in the context she explores, are ‘a menacing presence’ (p. 42). This presence is imagined to threaten how public space is organised through the conventional order, as the number and effect of such dissonant bodies are seen to be amplified while inducing anxiety. In this context, maintaining the uncomfortable culture for outsiders in the space functions to make the marginalised ‘disinvest’ their bodies from that space, and thus to less effectively inhabit it as their own space (Grosz, 2001, p. 9, cited in Puwar, 2004, p. 39). As a way of challenging this uncomfortable inhabitation, in a context in which public space is still naturally occupied by men who sexually offend against women and women are considered to be outsiders, Megalians intentionally catalyse the menace. They are not only women – space invaders – but ‘man-haters’: trolls. They create uncomfortable situations in the space of conventional order while generating the message that they will make privileged individuals feel less comfortable, thereby forcing masculine culture to be ‘out of place’ through actively aggravating the menace as if male bodies as norm could be hated and expelled from the sites. This does not make women dominate public space, but it does provoke anxiety for the – here – universal male bodies, producing ‘lulz’ that invite the group of ‘others’ to partake in the fun that trolls create.

Individual women become substances that generate gendered conflicts here, by trolling the space. The menace, threatening atmosphere, affects random people who are in the same

space. In Lyon's episode, she left the site immediately before anyone accused her for the disturbance and raised a backfire. She did so because the antagonism is over when the dissonant body leaves the situation. However, the menace-inducing body had already affected the surroundings, 'contaminating' the people around it through fun (among other emotions), as can be seen in the woman who was in the subway car and chuckled in Lyon's episode.

In a similar vein, the bodies that bear contentious ideas often 'contaminate' the areas around them, while being always ready to generate space for battlefields and enlarge the area that is implicated in the battle. Enya remembers how Suji made a disturbance in Itaewon, the downtown area of Seoul:

When I met her [Suji] after a long while, she suddenly said 'hey, the only solution to *hannam* is *jaegi*, isn't it?' in the middle of the street. It was in the middle of Itaewon. Literally everyone stared at us. Since I'd always been lurking online and secretly reading things [about feminism in the internet], I was dazed by her words, but at the same time, I thought it was hilarious. On that day she talked about Womad and said she was involved in it. So, I was curious about Womad and entered it. It completely changed me. (Enya)

Enya remembers the day that Suji first mentioned Womad because her friend created an awkward moment in public space that day in 2016. The Megalian neologisms *hannam* (Korean man) and *jaegi* (killing himself) were by now widely used both inside and outside Womad. They had been definitely categorised as words used only by 'man-haters' at this point.¹⁴⁶ The situation of gaining attention via 'man-hating' words was a dazzling experience

¹⁴⁶ I underline that this episode was in 2016 because these neologisms are not considered to be so notoriously 'man-hating' now (July 2020). As time passed, the number of people who used these words increased, and the Megalia website, which had been considered to be the only place that people used these terms at that time, disappeared from digital space.

for Enya. She had hitherto been able to encounter feminism or ‘man-hating’ discourse only in digital space by secretly reading the words of the digital users whom she did not know; however, this suddenly became a somatic reality when she was thrown into a hostile situation when ‘man-hating’ words were spoken ‘in the middle of the street’, where ‘literally everyone stared at [them]’. Suji’s act encouraged Enya to become involved in the gendered battlefield, which was clearly not limited to digital experience. Suji did not mention this episode in the interview with me, but she did say that she ‘contaminated all of [her] friends’. She explained that she had heard that her ‘friends were influenced by’ her because she was ‘openly feminist from the start of Megalia’ and that this was possible ‘because Womad is funny’. The hilariousness of ‘man-hating’, which Enya experienced that night, is arguably what made Womad – ‘man-hating’ feminism – ‘contagious’.

Sparkle, another interviewee, also generated situation in which a Megalian created a hostile situation, when she intentionally exposed her feminist identity to her classmates by choosing a feminist topic for a term paper project at university:

I’m planning to submit a term paper that deals with the topic of intimate partner violence for a storytelling class. ... When I had an interim check, the professor praised my work and shared it with classmates as a good example. I could sense that *hannamchungs* [Korean male bugs] froze while reading my work and talked in whispers among themselves: ‘isn’t she a Megal?’ So, I just asked them: ‘What? Are you guilty of intimate partner violence?’ Then, my female classmates applauded. Hahaha. Girls clapped their hands and *hannams* angrily huffed and puffed. That was so much fun. ... I intentionally did so because I hoped other girls wouldn’t feel pressured to hide their feminist inclinations as I became a shield for them. Now they outspokenly use the word *hannam*.
(Sparkle)

In this episode, the revealing of the feminist aspect of her work suddenly made the classroom into a place where *hannamchungs* came into conflict with a ‘Megal’. Sparkle did not withdraw from the battle, rather, she won the confrontation when she attacked the *hannams* by pointing out their sexist perspective on interpreting ‘intimate partner violence’ as ‘of Megal’. As I discussed in Chapter 3, the presence of an overt ‘man-hater’ under the name of Megalia and Womad created a secure space for other female groups to escape to. They could get away from being targeted as the main adversary for misogynistic attacks by male digital users, because Megalia/Womad created a ‘strawman’. The appearance of a Megalian expands the boundaries for other women to behave in feminist ways because a less extreme feminist than a Megalian is considered acceptable. This process also occurred around Sparkle in this episode, not in online communities but in physical space with actual proximate individuals. As she was confident about revealing her feminist inclinations, the boundaries of behaviour for other girls were expanded until, as Sparkle says, they could comfortably use the word *hannam*. Sparkle, as a menacing presence, invited people to become engaged in using digital feminist memes/words and reveal their own feminist orientation. In other words, her act opened up a space for her female friends, who could then become involved in the spectrum of feminist allies. Even though she was not an online ‘strawman’ but a real person in this situation. This tactic was possible because, as she added in the interview, she was in the relatively safe space of the university class for her major course that was female-dominated.

These episodes involving Suji and Sparkle demonstrate the Megalian appropriation in ‘real’ life of online feminist practices; utilising the weapons of the feminist trolls. These were strategies that Megalians learnt from the digital gender war. That war could be conducted in offline venues, with the effect of actualising what had been achieved with these weapons; the tactics that enable young women to deal with the hostile situation with young misogynists

and attract more women to become Megalians' allies by 'contaminating' them by fun. As Megalians went offline and continued to do what they had done online, their online feminism became manifested in offline venues.

This function of the digital shifting to the material is also applied to how Megalian ideas can 'go viral' in physical space. Many interview participants described how their friends and family members have changed to become feminist or feminist allies. For example, Jeongwon's sister, who had been annoyed by Gatgeonbae's videos that involved the shouting out of 'man-hating' neologisms, became a 'Megal' while sharing a room with Jeongwon and watching the videos together; and Lyon's mother came to agree with 'man-hating' discourse while discussing bad things about Korean men together with her daughter. The examples of 'man-hating' influences discussed by Megalian interviewees do not always have specific or direct causes. Besides the fact that the people who were influenced by Megalians had been living within the social atmosphere of thriving feminist discussions in South Korea since 2015, I want to point out that the friends and family members of Megalians who become 'Megal' or Megalian allies were usually individuals who shared time and space with them. Like a virus, the 'man-hating' messages 'went viral' via the presence of Megalians. In this sense, the atmosphere of the society that relatively opened to feminist ideas after 2015 becomes a condition that stimulates contamination, just as certain levels of heat and humidity are favourable to the spread of a virus. Suji's expression *contamination* implies that her friends were unwittingly influenced by her, without direct suggestions to become involved in Womad or attempts to persuade them to become engaged in the feminist movement. The proximity of Megalians made their acquaintances more prone to become *contaminated* by 'man-hating', or digital feminist discourse, as though already-infected Megalians' bodies broaden the infected area around them and invite others into the memetic world of 'man-hating'. Megalians' efforts to actualise online discourse on themselves caused the individuals

around them to become Megalians and Megal-allies, which greatly broadened the area that is occupied by feminists or ‘man-haters’, generating an expanding battleground and disturbing the conventional world of sexism.

8.2. Taking a materialist stance

As I explored in Chapter 7, the popularised forms of the Megalian movement target oppressive structures for women to challenge: the consumerist capitalism that preys on South Korean lookism in the ‘ex-corset’ movement, and heteropatriarchy with its firm basis in familism in the *bihon* movement. The strong inclination to ‘calculate’ how much they ‘lose out’ due to patriarchy stems from their understanding that *patriarchal society benefits men*. In this section, I focus on how Megalians have articulated their own feminist politics based on the worldview that ‘man-hating’ brought about, according to their understanding of a material reality that situates them in a hostile environment to women, while creating women as a classed group who have been exploited by the patriarchy and will benefit from the feminist imposition of a society. This situation is buttressed by the pragmatic approach they have taken for their activism, which distinguishes their feminism from the ideological inclination prevalent in more established South Korean feminist circles.

Discovering South Korean women’s lived reality: the ultimate basis of Megalian discourses

One day during my field trip in April 2018, an open forum was held by a group of experts in South Korean feminist activism, who had been involved in NGO activism for 20 to 30 years, and a group of young digital feminists. The two groups created the forum together to discuss the direction of the South Korean women’s movement. After the forum had been running for around two hours, it stalled when an academic panellist criticised the hostile style of Megalians that was directed even toward other feminist groups. It seemed that the academic

could not understand why digital feminists were defending this style, and the explanations of the digital feminists, which utilised examples of male misogynists, did not answer her question. Suddenly, an unknown person, who was revealed to be a young man later, came quietly into the room. His face was fully covered with a mask and a cap which was jammed under his hood. The participants in the forum, who were all women, made signs with their eyes to each other that something weird or dangerous might happen. One of the forum organisers asked him to talk to her outside the room. The forum discussion continued, but people in the room were paying attention to the loud and contentious argument that was going on between the organiser and the man outside. The other organiser went out to investigate, and then she came back to say that: 'He's refusing to uncover himself and he's claiming that it's unfair to be prevented from participating in the forum because he's dressed like that.' She also found that the man's mobile phone, which he had left in the conference room, was recording the forum discussion without notice or consent. Some participants chuckled and said: 'what a creepy boy'. But I could see that the two academic panellists, who had both been involved in feminist academia for more than 20 years, were dazed by witnessing the young-male-misogynist invader. It might have been the first time that they had actually seen the kind of man who unexpectedly appears at a feminist gathering and claims his right to threaten the other, almost-all female, participants. These academics were indirectly and temporarily experiencing the reality of young South Korean women, who have to be always prepared for threats from *hannams* and to witness their pettiness, because they are living alongside such guys and young women are the primary targets for the aggression of these young men in the gender war of the South Korean young generation. The prior discussion the panellists were having: 'Megaliens need to ask whether their "game of hatred" [which I would rather describe as 'playing games of "bashing" *hannams*'], [was] generating productive feminist discussion', was partially demonstrated by this situation, which showed

the women's participation in the 'game' was required. If young women are to live within an environment that always holds the implied potential of misogynistic threats from cowardly *hannams*, which cannot be anticipated, as in this situation, they need to embody a 'fighting spirit' (McCaughey, 1997), utilising any available means of aggression in order to defeat their enemies. It might not produce 'productive feminist discussion' within feminist circles, but it obviously produces feminist 'warriors' who can deal with the misogynists and the situations they create, generating what I understand as a situational effect of feminism – defeating and silencing the misogynists.

A man who tries to document feminist women without consent and hides himself by a mask, sunglasses, or a mascot suit, and claims he is a victim when he is asked to uncover himself, is a common and familiar figure that Megalians have encountered at their offline events many times. This kind of man has visited Megalian gatherings, claiming that he opposes 'man-hating' and that he is not a misogynist, recording videos of Megalians which he then uploaded online after the events with the intention of harassing the female participants. Some such men even bring a BB gun¹⁴⁷ to shoot the protesters, while wearing disguises like the man at the forum. These men were trolls whom Megalians frequently encountered.

The living condition of 'living alongside *hannams*' has shaped the movement and 'man-hating' discourse. This sense of *living with unbearable creatures* is found in my interview data with young women, as well as in the internet posts uploaded by female digital users, and describes their lived reality. Besides the common experiences of sexual harassment and conventional patterns of discrimination within family and society, interviewees shared their experiences on guys whom they could no longer tolerate within everyday interaction. For example, after having an uncomfortable discussion with a male friend, Enya discovered that

¹⁴⁷ A toy-like air gun that fires plastic balls.

he had uploaded a ‘losing a friend because of Megalia’ story to an online community. He had asserted that ‘it [was] an era of ‘equalism’,¹⁴⁸ rather than feminism’, claiming that feminism no longer helped to improve social equality, which Enya had rebutted with sarcasm. His story gained sympathy from male digital users, who condemned Enya and feminism itself. This confirmed to her that he could not be a friend anymore. Anna had a fight with a man online about a feminist issue, and he threatened her in real-life through attempting to hack her Facebook account to dox her personal life. Female digital users say that discussions with men around major phenomena, such as the very emergence of Megalia and the Gangnam station incident, became a ‘litmus test’ for ‘filtering out’ *hannams* in one’s life, because the men revealed their sexist perspectives while talking about these issues, for example through denying the social discrimination of women.

Through such conflicts with *hannams*, young women gained much knowledge about them and their way of thinking. This made them realise that women, until now, had been suffering because they had to relate to or live with these *hannams* and the unfair system that permitted their behaviour. The worldview that female trolls had acquired, which was thought to be created simply for the ‘lulz’ of ‘man-hating’, was revealed as to be a reality that accurately informs women about their lived environment. Since it was obvious that *hannams* would not change under a system that pampers them, the best thing women could do to avoid the damage caused by *hannams* was to disconnect from them, refusing relationships that included any *hannam*, as articulated as 4B. Megalian feminism’s orientation, a move towards opposing *hannams*, ‘man-hating’ by and large, is encapsulated in the famous Megalian adage: ‘when

¹⁴⁸ *Equalism* is an idea that Korean male digital users created as a substitute for feminism, and was alleged to have been publicly supported by Emma Watson in her UN speech in order to prevent ‘reverse discrimination’ against men by feminism, which was fabricated (Heo, 2017).

you are confused about what is right, see which side has more men supporting it and go for the opposite' (Womad user 8-001, 2017).

We can see that the Megalian movement's orientation has reflected the concrete situations experienced by South Korean women. This aspect is grounded in women's lived reality is particularly obvious when an outside observer describes it. Bwaver, who has been involved in the protest-organising group Bwave, has lived outside South Korea for longer than she lived in the country.¹⁴⁹ Now her lived space is built in another country but she has joined Bwave because she wants to support the strengthening of women's rights in Asian countries, including South Korea, since her identity in her country of residence cannot be separated from her national origin. When I asked her about the blatant 4B connotations of the Bwave slogan, she described the discrepancy between her lived reality in her current place of living and that of South Korean women:

Well, my parents also recommend that I must not marry a Korean guy ... or sometimes they just urge me to not get married. ... I have no ideology of *bihon* but I think not getting married would be better for my life. Still, I feel distance from the slogan, it tells me how I'm separated from the situation. I don't feel connected with it because the protesters who chant the slogan are people who have probably lived in South Korea and will live there, which makes it fair enough for them to have different lived experiences from me. ... They might have experienced intense discrimination against women. I'm not saying that I haven't experienced it [in my country of residence]. Rather, I say that they're facing discrimination that has accumulated over a long period of time in the space they've lived and experienced and they will continue to live within it. And I'm living here [in another country]. Indeed, here in my lived space, people around me think someone's insane if s/he

¹⁴⁹ I do not reveal which country so as to protect the anonymity of the interview participant.

says s/he is not a feminist. So, the Bwave slogan doesn't correspond with my experience.

It's shaped based on the experiences of women who feel like that. And Bwave itself is the same. (Bwaver)

Bwaver feels disconnected from the claims implied by the Bwave slogan, the refusal to be exploited in heterosexual relationships. She points out that her lived experience is different from that of women who have lived in South Korea and will continue to live in this society which entails particular forms of discrimination against women. In her life experience, *bihon* does not need to be an ideology that requires a political decision, unlike Bwave's claim, which reflects the situation of South Korean women. Her life condition is different from that of South Koreans in a legal sense, because abortion is legal, and feminist inclusivity exists in her community where being a feminist is self-evident. She understands that Bwave activism is based on the lived reality of women who inhabit South Korean society under particular forms of women's oppression that are based on concrete social reality.

Bewaver says that Bwave activism and its slogan are shaped 'based on the experiences of women who feel like that [what slogan says]'. In her understanding, the discrimination against women that has been accumulated in the space of South Korea generates shared experiences of women who have lived in that space, and shapes how they feel about it. Likewise, Megalians are the women who are living with online misogynists, male digital users, or male misogynists who have appeared in reality. This process of how 'online things' – online misogyny and misogynistic digital users – are manifested in reality, is how the online gender war was 'augmented', as I discussed in Chapter 4 by presenting the Gangnam station incident and the gendered conflicts generated by Megalians' collective action. Just as the gender war was augmented, the Megalian movement was materialised when it takes its target to problematise from the physical space. As Megalians shed the attitude of being

silenced, they were able to unveil the hostile nature of their living environment. This process of making hostility visible invited women to be counterparts to male misogynists in the gender war. The gender war was materialised because the hostile environment for women was not a particular aspect of digital space but a general aspect of South Korean society.

Articulating a feminist discourse that intervenes in social reality

Megalia/Womad functioned to produce feminist discourses grounded in South Korean women's social reality; something that was claimed by several interview participants to be the most important function of Megalian activism. This aspect of discourse production distinguishes the Megalian approach from the ways in academia, as Nanome points out:

Things are changing on a day-to-day basis. You know, female digital users nowadays upload the same post that was uploaded before 2015 and compare the comments section from that of the previous post. (EJ: To show how users' comments have changed for the same post, right?) Yes. And [I remember that] they uploaded 'how-to's for 'making a man fall in love with you' but now [I see that] they upload 'how-to's for "bashing" a man in-real'. ... Women in the general public are changing so fast that feminist circles can't keep up with them. So, feminist groups are still talking about queer things in their exclusive world within an exclusive community.¹⁵⁰ That's a problem. They think they're teaching the general public, but the public has already outrun them. (EJ: Their discussion still counts for something, but I agree that it's far from what the digital feminists think is urgent.) Megalians are discussing their ideas by disputing each other, unlike the people in

¹⁵⁰ When Nanome talks about feminist groups, the groups are represented by the people she met in person, who were NGO activists and Women's/Gender Studies graduates or who were one of these two categories. In her experience, they are linked with each other and not discrete groups.

feminist circles who learn feminism by understanding the words of their academic pundits. I know there are people who are not recklessly following the academic gurus and have their own opinions, but the level of discussion must be different because Megalians should have their own opinions and their own intentions for participating in disputes, just by getting involved in the web. (Nanome)

Nanome emphasises that Megalian discourse is founded on how young women have re-perceived their everyday lives from the feminist, or ‘man-hating’, perspective they have gained. Female digital users’ reactions to a certain internet post have changed drastically, not because the members are different people but because the same members have changed in terms of their attitude to the same article. This ‘day-to-day’ progress is possible because they learn from reinterpreting topics relating to their everyday lives, such as the desire to be in a position of being beloved by a man as a woman, and the desire to be aggressive towards a man as a woman. Nanome compares this collective change in gaining feminist knowledge to the method of learning feminism in academia, ‘understanding the words of ... academic pundits’. In her understanding, the feminist ideas in academia cannot progress as rapidly as Megalian ideas, thus academia is ‘outrun’ by Megalian discourses, because people in academia follow the opinions of a few academic pundits. As large numbers of digital users participate in online discussion, or random debates to triumph over opponents, their intellectual activities, and Megalian discourses as their outcomes, are different from the discourses that rely upon the intellectual activities of small numbers of experts in an ‘exclusive community’.

This point is also articulated by Jeongah who emphasises that the function of generating discourses was particularly productive during discussions in which the participants fought each other:

I didn't decide many things [about my political opinions as a feminist] at that time [while learning feminism in an NGO]. ... I really respect her [a famous feminist scholar] but had something where I couldn't agree with her. At that moment, I thought, oh, we have a lot of ideas in common, and we're joining in the same [feminist] activism, but we all have different opinions. We need to fight each other and should keep fighting each other. And when I watched them [Megilians] fighting, [I could see that] soon someone brought a new and fresh approach/idea [to intervene in the discussion]. I really liked that. (Jeongah)

When she was active in an NGO, Jeongah became familiar with the method of learning from experts in feminist studies, understanding their words and agreeing with them. However, her 'undecided' political opinion was sometimes different from her academic teacher's and deviated from the lesson that the expert gave, which made her think about how Megilians produced discourses. The feminist discourse production in Megalia described by Jeongah reveals the process of intensive, even combative intellectual activities engaged in by Megilians. They usually debated an issue and someone would intervene by bringing a new resource to the discussion. Then, the 'new and fresh' idea improved the argument. Through this process of the 'collective and connective work of mediated publics' (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013, in Milner, 2016, p. 15), intense debates generated discourses that were collectively developed by participants.

In this context, Megalian discourses gained their practical aspect since the discourses are forged in the midst of fighting among participants. As is clear, Megilians are basically digital users whose field of activism is digital space: the contentious battlefield for 'warrior tribes'. Even though they are 'working' in the same context of feminist discourse, as Jeongah points out, what these young women are challenging, as a form of political engagement, is different

from what scholars consider important, as an academic engagement. I am not saying that no digital feminist participants were engaged in more established feminist circles or feminist academia. I am rather saying that the spatial location of the Megalian movement, digital space – which is used by young women who have more likelihood of entwining with popular discourses of misogyny than with academic discourses, and which, more importantly, functions as a space for the battles and war that have fostered female/feminist warriors – contours its discourse to generate effective and efficient survival strategies for defeating enemies, rather than serious, academic contemplation. Megalians need to embody the ‘fighting spirit’, ‘just by getting involved in the web’ for female/feminist trolls. Hence, they are more adept at making practical decisions that can be applied to concrete situations, as their digitally mediated style of producing an argument. This does not follow what is ‘advanced’ in discussions in feminist academia, described as ‘queer things’ by Nanome. Megalian discourses are digital products that take young Korean women’s lived reality as a basis for challenging South Korean patriarchy, while interrogating the gendered exploitation in which they are directly involved.

Antonio Gramsci suggests that there is a distinction between the traditional intellectual and the organic intellectual (1971). Traditional intellectuals function to legitimise the domination of the ruling class which buttressed the social transformation taken by the class, even after the social transformation, because their positions are fixed as professions. Organic intellectuals, in contrast, function to organise a particular social class, while directing and providing political ideas and aspirations. Megalians engage in intellectual activities in order to shape a discourse that functions to interpret the new group of women. This discourse is based on their shared material reality as a group in South Korean society, whereby they are exploited into reproducing the family and consuming a pink-taxed economy – patriarchy and consumerist capitalism. Megalians seek to draw them into a political struggle.

The discourse production process of participatory culture had emerged in digital space, in which participants in online discussions were functioning as organic intellectuals while generating a counter discourse against hegemonic ideology. South Korean media scholar Sun Mi Park makes this argument by observing online discourse production during the Anti US-Beef Protest in 2008 (Park, 2009). She claims that digital media substitute for the role of the political party that Gramsci suggested functions to mediate between the masses and the intellectuals (p. 87). The method of producing discourses grounded in a specific social situation is how organic intellectuals, people who exercise intellectual activities in order to organise and operate a classed group, articulate knowledge based on the experiences of the group who are involved in the society.

In this context, this new group of young women – Megalians – have participated in the intellectual activities of producing feminist discourses through becoming ‘organic intellectuals’ themselves in online discussions, in order to produce an ideology to compete for hegemony in the gender relations that the nation-state and capitalist society uphold. As women who had witnessed and experienced the exploitation of women, both inside and outside the Korean family system and consumerist capitalism, they decided to become ‘escapees’ from the systems, while shaping their own feminist discourses based on the concrete social reality to which they belong, interpellating young women as a classed group. As a result, Megalians’ *bihon* discourse points out the pronatalist desire of nation state that exploits women’s reproductive bodies, and instigates women to disconnect themselves from the reproduction of patriarchal system. Their ‘ex-corset’ discourse encourages women to refuse to be part of consumerist capitalism, while reframing the capitalist market as it parasites on their feminine desire, thereby exploitation takes place not only through their labour, but also through their consumption (Lee & Jeong, 2021).

Differentiating Megalian feminism from ideological approaches

Megalian discourse, as an ideological form of feminism since it stemmed from online discussions, is manifested through participants' acts, as a materialised form. Nanome's claim illustrates this emphasis on putting into practice in Megalian feminism.

Feminism is not a study, it's a reflection. A self-transformation. A self-revolution. ... An early involvement in feminism doesn't make a person an advanced feminist. If I act out misogynistic behaviours, then I'm a *hannam*. If I'm aware of sexism and get involved in [feminist] activism, then I'm a feminist. Feminism as a study is bullshit. If someone gets an A for a feminist course, does that make her a feminist? ... What we're doing, 'man-hating', is a sport, not a theory. (Nanome)

In a Megalian interpretation, according to Nanome, feminism is demonstrated by the practices of participants. Practices that match the feminist idea, rather than who the actor is or how she defines herself, shape her as a feminist. Nanome emphasises this by saying that enacting 'misogynistic behaviours' makes her '*hannam*'. The possibility of being a misogynist or a feminist does not depend on gender or identification, but on engaging in *hannam*'s or feminist acts. Nanome's statement that 'man-hating is a sport' is an idea commonly used by Megalians when they emphasise that their 'man-hating' acts do not need to be legitimised or explained. The statement primarily connotes that Megalians enjoy 'man-hating' for fun and for passing time, rather than as a serious intention of feminist involvement. At the same time, it implies that 'man-hating', or feminism, is what '[women]'re doing'. 'Theory' or 'study', which does not imply any direct involvement in political acts by the participants or actual outcomes of the intervention, does not match this understanding of Megalian feminism.

The inclination of feminism towards being a form of activism that aims at practical outcomes sets the simple orientation of the movement, while criticising the popular patterns of appropriating feminism as representing someone's identity. Bo emphasises that the Megalian movement does not meet or follow any particular type of feminist 'waves' or theories because it is a political activism that aims to fight against the existing social situation. She explains:

Isn't it the logic of *sseuka*?¹⁵¹ ... We don't need to sort out people into friends or enemies before we actually encounter them. If they're revealed to be in our way, then we can 'bash' them. This is my position. Should we calculate every time [when we find someone], like, look, she stands for intersectionality, she stands for ecofeminism, aren't they too much like odds and ends? Is the title really important? Do your job. Do your feminism. A title isn't important if she does her feminism. (Bo)

When I asked what she thought about other self-declared feminists who can be found on social media, and who take different political positions, presenting themselves as somewhat feminist in the profile, Bo answered: 'title isn't important'. For her, whether the person 'is in our [Megalians'] way' during an actual encounter was more important than any title she might have. What is important for Megalians is having battles and achieving triumphs, which make them not need to sort out people who have different feminist titles 'into friends or enemies' before actual fights occur. In this vein, the habit of taking feminist titles is not something that Megalians care about. Taking diversified titles to represent oneself is 'the logic of *sseuka*', which is not the Megalian way, because 'doing' feminism, challenging

¹⁵¹ *Sseuka* means 'mixed' and refers to the feminists who are involved in extant political groups. See section 6.3 for details of Megalians' distinction from them.

gendered discrimination, does not need words to modify it. If there is a modifier attached, it means that the feminism is 'mixed' with different aims, rather than concentrating on fighting for women's rights. This 'mixed' agenda within feminism is what Megalians have distanced themselves from, as I discussed in the Chapter 6. Ideas can be examined and critiqued by themselves, but practices are examined in terms of the effect that is produced in the process of practising them. In other words, the outcome of the practices determines the meaning of activism, rather than a theoretical exploration of the practice.

Bo's comment about *sseuka* in terms of how the habit of taking different titles is irrelevant to the practical enactment of feminist ideas in one's life resonates with how Maple, employed at a university, talks about the young campus activists who declare themselves to be 'intersectional':

They judge anything in pursuit of political correctness. ... If someone uploads a post, then they comment on it by picking out 'this is discrimination against someone, someone and someone'. They might be familiar with this internet culture of intersectional criticism, which has led them to take the logic of avoiding every discrimination as the best way to evade criticism directed towards themselves, as though they can be completely flawless and judge everything. The thing is, it doesn't work for dealing with practical reality. ... This stems from the internet culture, which doesn't involve eye contact or face-to-face encounters, which is happening in reality now. [For instance,] for me [in dealing with a victim of sexual harassment], it's really simple. [I just ask] 'What made the victim say that s/he was victimised?' But this group of young activists become judges, saying 'this [part of the victim's claim] is reasonable, while this is not', utilising the minority issues and political correctness they learnt online. ... You know, recently many people have been engaging in the habit of describing themselves with diverse names for identities. (EJ: Like,

somewhat-gender, some-binary, somewhat-sexual, right?) Yes. I searched sometimes, well, what is genderless? [Because] I've met some perpetrators who brought in their identities [to excuse their act]. [I thought like,] okay, I can see you're adept in expressing and practising your sexuality, but why did you touch others [without consent]? ... [Feminist criticism] was not applied even to this basic level of self-reflection. It seems like material being is here and conscious being is far over there. This is what I've recently felt weird about. (Maple)

In this quotation, Maple shares the insight that internet culture, which does not involve tangible contacts among participants, encourages 'intersectional criticism' to become disconnected from reality. The 'judging' culture was thriving in this intangible environment, in Maple's understanding, because online interaction does not involve a tangible object to make 'eye contact or [have a] face-to-face encounter' who can be read in a concrete situation. She points out that young activists' culture of judging and criticising something in line with various minority issues formed the orientation of online politics, which is pursued in intersectionally 'flawless' ways.

As Maple describes, when she dealt with a sexual harassment case, she was concerned with 'what' created a victimised experience and 'why' the perpetrator did it. The explanations of perpetrators who brought in their gender identifications as individuals (for example, as gender queer) in order to explain how their cases were different from the stereotypical composition of a male perpetrator and a female victim were not relevant considerations for her. The perpetrators' complex identities did not explain the behaviour of which they were accused, which was grounded in reality, involved a tangible victim, and had actually happened in-real, in a concrete situation. What Maple dealt with was 'material being': a perpetrator and the victim's experience. Bringing in the 'conscious being' of the perpetrator,

as gender queer, sexually ‘other’ and queer-positioned identities that are the products of feminist studies, seemed ‘weird’ to Maple as a means to evade charges of sexual harassment. She understood the idea of diverse gender and sexuality as having been appropriated in this case to dilute the meaning of a ‘touch’, which the perpetrators claimed needed to be read from an ‘intersectional approach’ in terms of understanding sexual minority identities. However, to her, the perpetrators’ acts were ‘really simple’ to read as sexual harassment at the ‘basic level’ of a feminist perspective. In this context, the ‘intersectional criticism’ had failed to understand or solve the problem in question: a case of sexual harassment that actually happened, since it led people to cling to the ideas that they had gained from digital space, which are disconnected from understanding practical reality.

This tendency of applying ‘intersectionality’ merely for ‘conscious’ matters is also addressed when my interviewee Seungjoo talks about the extant South Korean feminist movement. She claims that: ‘intersectional feminism [in South Korea] is being understood as a discipline, is not generating an activism that interprets women’s lives’, partially because ‘the extant feminist activists lost interest in [understanding the] class differences [among women]¹⁵² while devoting themselves to institutionalising “gender-mainstreaming” [in public policies]’. Her claim suggests that the appropriation of intersectionality by South Korean feminist groups did not function for them to critically understand specific women’s experiences, which cannot be grasped by ‘doctrinal manifestations of a single-axis framework’ generated from theories and politics that are ‘predicated on a discrete set of experiences’, which function Kimberlé Crenshaw puts forward in her critical use of the notion (1989, p. 140). Sticking to ‘a discipline’ for thinking in an intersectional way, apart

¹⁵² As South Korean society has largely been mono-ethnic, class could be the social factor among the systemic axes that intersectional criticism commonly raises (such as race, gender and class), but it had not been applied in developing feminist activism. Seungjoo brought this up as a problem.

from the particular social conditions in which the discipline is applied, in turn, led its application to become unhinged from concrete social reality. This echoes Toril Moi's criticism of the tendency to avoid 'exclusionariness' among intersectionality critics, which renders 'feminist theorists unable to pay philosophical attention to the particular case, and thus unable to provide the kind of concrete, feminist analysis that helps to make women's lives intelligible' (2015, pp. 191–192).

In this situation, the discrepancy between the groups that have their basis in the digital or the physical, the 'conscious being' or the 'material being', generates different groups of people who take the ideologist or the materialist perspective. Ironically, those who I explore as 'digital feminists' in the Megalia phenomenon follow the materialist approach for developing their feminist politics, interpreting concrete material reality in the question of how it is gendered/stratified in exploitative relations (Delphy, 1980, p. 26). I argue that this is because they embody the online interaction, as media researcher Min-ji Jang points out (2016), which means they seek direct, immediate, visible and tangible reactions stimulated by what they do. Since they prioritise what is practical and efficient, they pursue specific interventions in political situations rather than seriously discussing the meanings of certain practices. More importantly, Megalians adopted the perspective on gender relations that the 'man-hating' shift offered: they are fighting against 'team *hannam*', South Korean patriarchy and its beneficiaries as I discussed in the previous chapters. This gamification of 'doing' feminism, in terms of setting concrete enemies and specific goals of battles, reveals that team Megalian and team *hannam* are different teams and they are in a conflicting relationship, which members cannot be in the same team as long as they are under the rule of this game – South Korean patriarchy – that permits the group of men to exploit the group of women. This Megalian perspective shaped in the battlefield tells us that, as Delphy accurately points out in her materialist feminist perspective, the two groups, men and women, 'are bound together by

a relationship of domination; nor can they even be considered together but independently of this relationship' (1980, p. 26).

This materialist orientation was more clearly revealed when Megalians coincidentally worked together with a lesbian feminist group who sought to challenge the specific contradictions of lesbian lives in South Korea and took a separatist notion from queer politics. The lesbian group found that the 'intersectional critique' and 'privilege-checking' in the queer community made the discourse in it be apolitical and unhinged from reality.

Suppho, a local lesbian feminist group, has its base in a big city in the Southern part of South Korea. They decided to distance themselves from what is designated as queer politics in South Korea when they discovered that 'Seoul-centred' queer groups were raising the topic of the spontaneous sex work of 'queers', based on the liberal perspective of advocating the idea of individual autonomy in sex work, at a conference that was held in 2016. Moreover, the atmosphere of 'privilege-checking' in the queer community hindered lesbians from sharing experiences based on their lesbian identity, because they had to avoid 'exclusionary' concepts of woman and homosexual that the lesbian identity implied. This made Suppho members lose interest in mingling with the queer community.

One of the members in Suppho works for an NGO that helps female sexworkers, who are still working in the violent and dangerous environment of brothels in her local city. She struggles with police who refuse to receive sexual assault reports from the sexworker women, since police suspect women's 'spontaneity' of involving in the dangerous situations, since they might 'spontaneously' take the job, which makes them ruled out from women who can be protected by the law. She asserts that sexwork in South Korean context cannot be discussed outside of the structural conditions that work together: the institutional authorities that are hostile to these female workers, the precarious working environment that sometimes put them in danger and the gendered economic pressure that drives marginalised women to

enter the sex industry. In her understanding, detaching the idea of ‘sex work’ from the concrete field that these women are situated in cannot be a topic of feminism that her lesbian feminist members of the group agree with. The ‘spontaneous sex work’ that queer groups discussed was unrelated to the sex industry, whose exploitative system feminist activists, including the Suppho member herself, had been struggling to dismantle for over 20 years.

Julia Penelope, a lesbian philosopher, argues that the achievement of the ‘lesbian perspective’ needs to be separated from being women and being gay, so as to avoid energy being absorbed by the interests of other identity politics which lead to the erasure of lesbian politics (1990, p. 104). This applied when Suppho members needed to separate themselves from queer groups who constructed a liberal sexwork discourse largely based on the cases of sexwork of people who had male bodies. As lesbian feminists, Suppho members claim that the structural arrangement of the sex industry that attracts marginalised women is the ‘topic of women’s rights’, a matter of feminist interrogation, which cannot be diluted by the ideological discussions that are separated from ‘the actual field’. In this context, Suppho members found they could band with Womad users on certain topics, even though Womad users and their allies in the social-media-sphere were considered to be against the LGBT rights.¹⁵³ Suppho members actually found that this was possible, as Megalians in the Twitter-sphere participated in the hashtag activism, which Suppho members also joined in, that publicised the issue that minors enter the sex industry via social media. They got the hashtag ‘not sexwork, but sexual exploitation’ ‘trending’ on Twitter in early 2018 together. While working with the controversial group, Suppho members found that Megalians are diverse and dispersed, composed of heterogeneous individuals, but always ‘women-centred’. They could

¹⁵³ This representation was largely generated by social media users who support ‘progressive’ politics because Womad users harassed any *hannam*, including gays and transgender people in politically incorrect ways.

see that ‘Womad users would be better interlocutors, when we want to discuss the politics of South Korean lesbians’ than queer groups, as one of the Suppho members says. Megalians’ woman-identified politics, which had been shaped by 4B and refusals of heterosexual relations, made its material basis similar to that of Suppho group, eventually allowed both groups to share political orientation on a certain topic, which was discursively opposed to the queer groups who take an ideological approach on sex work, even though Megalians do not explicitly pursue lesbianism.

What distinguishes the materialist from the ideologist approach here is how people think of feminism, whether in terms of enhancing diversity and diversifying representation or intervening in social contradictions through political activism. For Megalians, ‘doing’ feminism means inducing tangible reactions to their acts; something they seek both online and offline, and which led them to challenge gendered society via political interventions in social reality. Their political interventions are not limited to focusing on the cultural construction of women and the feminine while neglecting the material analysis of social life, something that Stevi Jackson criticises within gender studies after the ‘cultural turn’ (2001, pp. 285–286). Megalians prioritise the practical outcomes of feminist interventions, and how acts materialise their idea. Hence, their discourses frequently deviate from theories of feminism within scholarly communications, such as intersectionality critiques. This has led to criticism that Megalian feminism cannot be justified. However, Megalians practise feminism in ways that they have found to be practical within the social reality in which they live – the physically manifested battlefield between men and women – while assessing their living conditions and understanding the attendant inequalities by means of their situated knowledge, rather than in terms of legitimacy from a general perspective or academic knowledge, because they seek triumphant experiences induced by their own feminist enactments.

Conclusion: The ‘man-hating’ shift made gendered oppression challengeable

In this chapter, I have been exploring how Megalians participate in a context in which ‘digital feminism materialises’ through joining in the movement that can be interpreted as fit into the materialist understanding of feminism. In the Megalian movement, the ideas that have been developed online are carried and refracted by participants, before eventually manifesting physically in order to intervene in social reality. Megalians utilised themselves as feminist materials, by interpreting themselves as substances to be mobilised for the movement. In this way, their nature as digital inhabitants shaped this movement, leading it to take a materialist orientation based on the exploitative situation they articulated. Megalians have moved towards a society in which their ‘doing’ of feminism or ‘man-hating’ can transform the gender relations they are involved in through the materialisations, rather than the legitimisation, of feminist ideas. This aspect defines the movement, which is composed of an activism of practices, as it augments digital artifacts such that they become physical outcomes.

Since this feminist phenomenon emerged in the midst of a battlefield – space for ‘warrior tribes’ in which participants are engaged in constant warfare – how Megalians understand the gender relations could be based on their identification of who the enemy is and what they need to attack. This gaming logic, setting targets to attack and goals to achieve, encourages them to ‘do’ activism by defeating their enemies and seeking triumphs – practical outcomes. In this chapter, I have explored how it allowed Megalians to ‘do’ feminism by utilising themselves to actualise feminist ideas through their bodies and presences, which I call materialisation, and by struggling to make effective interventions into women’s practical reality, while understanding themselves to be bound to a classed group. This sets the concrete goal of their activism: the triumph of the exploited. In this context, the Megalia phenomenon reveals what young women are challenging: a system that binds women to their gendered

position in order to exploit them as a dominated group. This is the social reality that pushes these women to jump into the feminist movement.

Chapter 9. Conclusion

In this thesis, I have explored the rise of a new style of ‘doing’ feminism in South Korea that has been driven by the fun entailed in ‘man-hating trolling’, making the activism gamified, which I termed troll feminism. In the introduction to this thesis, I posed three questions: ‘What were the circumstances that led to troll feminism emerging in South Korea in 2015?’; ‘How was this feminist movement practised?’; and ‘How does this digital feminism materialise in reality?’. I answered these questions by exploring Megalians’ lived experiences and culture in relation to the digital and physical spaces they inhabited as they participated in the movement. I argued, firstly, that the troll feminism of digital space spontaneously emerged as Megalians problematised the social contradictions experienced by young South Korean women, through making themselves into the counterparts of misogynistic male trolls. Secondly, that female trolls utilised the ‘playful’ digital habits of seeking attention and inducing reactions through appropriating digital offensiveness, which resulted in gamifying their activism. And thirdly, that participants in the movement applied the weapons of trolls to challenge the gendered reality in South Korea, especially as it pertains to the exploitation of the group ‘women’.

Troll feminism emerged in South Korea as a response to the intensified online misogyny and hostile digital culture. This offered grounds for female trolls to fight against misogyny, which eventually developed into a movement that actively intervened in the discrimination against women. It spontaneously emerged in a context in which extant South Korean feminist groups could not offer feminist discourses that these young women found helpful. The initiation of trolling in 2015 made the hostile environment of the ‘battlefield’ of the gender war visible, where it had previously been imperceptible because female digital users were silenced by the domination of misogyny and anti-feminism in digital space. As the hostility between men and women became visible and female trolls achieved more and more triumphs,

digital space became a battlefield on which female digital users could train themselves to become feminist ‘warriors’, whose ability to fight began to make political interventions in South Korean social reality.

Megalian activism was practised through tactics appropriated from digital habits that were largely taken from the culture of male misogynists. These included: memefying their ‘man-hating’ discourse to create tools with which to distress others; baiting others’ misogynistic desire with trolling to steer attention and induce reactions towards the issues they generated; and acting en masse through the strategy of anonymity in order to evade responsibility for their acts while creating an activism that could be more widely participated in by unspecified/random women. The movement was gamified through the trolls’ habit of producing ‘lulz’, which generate the ‘hit feel’ of a game, in a context in which their enemies had become obvious on the battlefield through the disturbances that female trolls generated. The gaming logic sets targets to attack and goals to achieve, which encourages Megalians to ‘do’ activism by defeating their enemies and seeking triumphs, while giving them sense of achievement in the gender war.

In my analysis, Megalians are materialist in two senses. First, as digital natives, they sought practical and direct actions that have material effects. Second, their activist orientation is largely based on everyday experiences of young women in South Korea that are situated in their gendered reality. Hence, their tactics were applied in order to challenge the material reality experienced by young South Korean women, especially with regard to the problems that Megalians found urgent in terms of women’s exploitation. Consumerist capitalism and the family system that had been kept going by women’s labour were challenged by Megalians within practical forms of activism: the ‘ex-corset’ movement and the *bihon* movement. These forms of activism stemmed from the Megalian inclination to prioritise practical and direct outcomes, which follows from and is tied to the logic of digital natives. This constitutes their

materialist approach to participating in the movement, since they perceive women to be a classed group experiencing gendered oppression, within an unfair hierarchy between men and women that needs to be toppled by the oppressed.

Troll feminism was able to evolve into a popular feminist movement because its success in winning – defeating misogynists – was shared across the whole network of female digital users. It created the notion that this movement was for *any female digital user*, whether she had participated in trolling or not. This created the concept that the beneficiary of Megalian feminism was *any woman*. Megalian trolling, which had offered a feeling of triumph to any woman in digital space, affectively connected female digital users, and invited them to become stakeholders in this movement. In this context, the notion of ‘feminism for its stakeholders, women’, allowed Megalians to address the general exploitation of women, since these women not only reside in digital space as female digital users but are also living out their physical reality within South Korean society.

The gamification of ‘doing’ feminism clearly reveals what women need to fight against is gendered reality that they are living within, since, in the logic of the game, the game environment determines the specific goal, the enemies who should be defeated and the concrete situation or context of the battle. Beyond the appropriation of new media, digital offensiveness and the collective experiences of ‘lulz’ among participants in the Megalian movement, it was Megalians’ materialist understanding of gender relations – that is, how material reality is gendered and stratified in order to bind women into exploitative situations – that allowed Megalian feminism to make a critical intervention into the South Korean women’s movement. In contemporary South Korea, the system (that women need to challenge in order to win the game from the Megalian perspective) asserts itself to maintain the gendered hierarchy, with the aim of exploiting women. The system that wants to maintain the status quo, and the people who benefit from it, are defending themselves against

Megaliens' attacks. As the gamification makes this combative situation visible, the fact that *hannams*, Megaliens' enemies, are the crusaders of patriarchy, reveals that the system Megaliens are struggling against is patriarchy. This relation between the beneficiaries/protectors of patriarchy and the challengers to it was not discernible from the perspective that does not interrogate the structural hierarchy that produces gender relations, women's oppression and gendered hostility in South Korea, or from the standpoint that refuses to become involved in a gender war while trusting in the harmonious relations between men and women. It can, however, be picked out and challenged from the perspective that identifies antagonism as the backdrop of the feminist movement and takes the standpoint of a 'warrior tribe' on the battlefield. This is the approach that troll feminism takes, and it can be interpreted as the subject matter of materialist feminism.

After this 'trolling' turn of digital feminism in South Korea, young women endeavoured to redefine their present and future, and to reorient their life plans. Their attempts to seek future triumph from a long-term perspective have been diversified by individuals into: banding together with anti-government political groups to support the former president Geun-hye Park, whom Megalian supporters defined as a symbolic figure due to the gendered/unfair forfeiture of her political power; joining in with or developing activist organisations of young/digital feminists and working together with the extant feminist NGOs and progressivist political parties; producing feminist or *bihon* YouTube channels and creating collaborative content between them; publishing books and magazines and setting up publishing companies for Megalian readers and authors; opening specifically 'ex-corset' online stores for consumers who practise 'ex-corset'; forming feminist or *bihon* groups, both online and offline, and holding events; forming self-help groups to become 'expatriates' in order to escape from the South Korean patriarchy and/or to become 'ambitious cunts' in order to achieve social authority or power; forming overtly lesbian communities in order to develop

groups that oppose heterosexuality while excluding male members; and forming a new political party that focuses on women-centred issues. These attempts to reorient their present and future are, of course, in addition to their habitual activisms that aim to ‘troll’ the spaces that are organised through the conventional orders: practising ‘ex-corset’ and sharing ‘ex-corset’ tips for other women; getting hashtags or keywords ‘trending’ on Twitter, Instagram and the Naver search engine; going *boryeok* and forging *boryeok* groups to secure regular collective actions; leaving post-it notes in public space – in toilets, on public transport and at bus stops; discovering newly generated forms of gendered crimes and ‘doxing’ male perpetrators; targeting and bullying sexist men while creating and circulating memes about them in order to persistently distress them; attracting people’s attention by breaking taboos and violating norms; overtly demonstrating Megalian pleasure in performing these vicious acts; and organising online/offline gatherings to protest against judicial institutions, all of which are still ongoing until the time I write this conclusion chapter (September 2020). The diversification reveals that many more women are participating in feminist-orientated actions/activisms/activities and expending their time, energy and labour on them as they seek different variations of ‘doing’ feminism that they can join. Arguably, these popular engagements by young women demonstrate the rise of popular feminism in South Korea.

As I emphasised in Chapter 1, the transnationality of the Megalia phenomenon arises in terms of users’ technological involvement in participatory media. In this sense, this analysis of the Megalia phenomenon provides one way of understanding the trolls’ playful abuse of the internet, and also the activisms that stemmed from troll communities and trolling habits. At the same time, it provides an example of interrogating how digitally mediated activisms operate, based on the shared aspects of spatial conditions and space-originated strategies or tactics of activisms, such as data activisms or digital feminist activisms in the social-media-

sphere, in which global users are increasingly connected and mutually learning practices of ‘doing’ activism.

Indeed, what can be interpreted as the politics of trolling has been already globally observed in the cases of digital feminism that use the discourse of ‘misandry’ in ‘networked feminist humour’ (Ringrose & Lawrence, 2018) and that utilise internet memes for feminist laughter (Rentschler & Thrift, 2015). The Megalia phenomenon is the most prominent example of utilising people’s mediated affect of ‘lulz’, which has been considered to be purely ‘of trolls’, not ‘of feminists’, for its feminist movement, merging them into ‘troll feminism’. The emotion of ‘lulz’ temporarily binds together the participants in a fleeting sensation of fun, and sometimes mediates the public to join in with a collective action in the pursuit of generating more fun. In the Megalia phenomenon, it bound together female digital users to become a ‘warrior tribe’ who fight against misogyny, which was their specific enemy that they had called out from contemporary South Korean society. In this sense, my interpretation of gamifying the activism provides a new perspective of materialist feminism specifically for exploring the activist culture of digital feminism that calls out the sexism and misogyny conducted by digital feminists worldwide, especially when they look into what creates the momentum of feminist activisms and what makes them work as popular feminism.

I expect that more and more people have engaged, and will engage, in the mediated affect and ‘game feel’ of ‘doing’ activism, which is digitally stimulated but somatically experienced. This is because digital space came to be a crucial site for generating their lived experiences and this leads digital space to become a field for movements to emerge and be shaped. It makes it clear that people who are interested in contemporary or future digital feminist movements and who want to understand them need to examine them not merely through digital texts and technological arrangements but also through the digitally mediated response patterns and reactive emotions of digital users. All of these aspects shape the

movement, and thus it cannot be understood unless observers succeed in grasping these aspects simultaneously, as I have struggled to do in this project.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 Information Sheet and Informed Consent Form for Interviews

Information Sheet

THE UNIVERSITY *of York*

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Dear participant

My name is Euisol Jeong and I am a PhD student in the Centre for Women's Studies at the University of York. This is a study of how people experience gender discourses within online communities. Before you decide whether to participate in this research, you should carefully review this information sheet and consent form. It is very important for you to understand why this research is being conducted and what the research activities involve. Your interview data will be used for writing my PhD dissertation and in subsequent academic publications. If anything in this form is unclear or if there is anything that you want to ask, I will give you a

detailed answer. Your signature on this document confirms that you have been informed about the study, and that you consent to participate in this research.

1. The Background and Objectives of the Study

This is a research project investigating how people experience gender discourses within online communities. As digital communication has increased through media platforms like *Ilbe*, *NatePann*, and Twitter, discourses around gender, including misogyny, sexual discrimination, dating and family relationships, have been proliferating and expanding in online communities. Previously, ‘misogyny’ was a terminology that only scholars used. However, it recently became a public issue due to a series of events, including the comedian *Jangdongmin* scandal in 2015, that were to presage ‘gender wars’ over digital space in Korea. Online community users have been vehemently debating misogyny and feminism, especially when *Megalia* was launched in May 2015. This debate intensified when the murder at *Gangnam* station occurred, and the voice-actor scandal of a game company broke last year. While online gender wars and subsequent gender discourses have led to much discussion on the longstanding problems of gender inequality in South Korea, our understanding is limited about how this online-based activism and related phenomena are actually making changes in young women’s lived experiences and Korean society at large. If you agree to share your lived experiences of this phenomenon, it will be extremely helpful in enhancing our understanding.

2. Research Participants

I hope to recruit 20 interviewees who have participated in online communities. Activists who have directly participated on the board for MERS disease, *Megalia* and *Womad* or active posters who produce or share content on gender-related topics, such as misogyny, feminism and sexual discrimination/crime, will be ideal participants.

3. Personal information and protection of privacy

Upon your agreement to participate in the research, your confidentiality and anonymity will be secured. With this premise, I can ask for the following information: your age, address, political beliefs or association, online communities you have participated in and in which you are currently participating. Sensitive personal data, such as political opinions, membership of a trade union, etc., might come up during the interview and you will be asked if you consent to me using that data both during and after the interview. Your personal information will be used for research and will be managed according to the Data Protection Act. Your interview data – audio recording and transcript – will be completely anonymised when your interview is transcribed and stored. Your personal information will be kept separately from your interview data to make sure you cannot be identified by the information present in the interview data. I will make every effort to protect your privacy during the research. When the research findings are made public in the PhD dissertation and subsequent academic publications, your name and other identifiable information will not be used and all data will be fully anonymised.

4. Research Method

The interview will be conducted at a date and time of your convenience and in a place where you feel comfortable, decided by you. It will consist of a 1–2-hour face-to-face interview. You will first be asked a series of basic questions about your personal background, such as your age and where you live. Then, you will be asked to share your stories about experiences of online communities, the changed atmosphere after 2015 sensed in online communities, your motives for participating in activism or posting about women's issues in online communities, and your experience of this. You can freely tell me about your feelings and

experiences. The interview will be audio-recorded. The recorded data will be transcribed by myself and will not be shared with any other person. What you say may be quoted directly. However, any information that could identify you will be omitted. I may request an additional follow-up interview and this will be conducted, if you consent. If you would like to receive the interview transcript, it will be sent in digital format via email. I will share the summary of my research findings and will ask for your opinion on my analysis.

During the interview, the researcher or participant might bring up sensitive topics (e.g., sexual activity, drug use, criminal activity, etc.). You have the right to request me to delete any interview data that involves sensitive topics. You can refuse to answer any question or stop the interview at any time, if you think the conversation or circumstances of the interview are inappropriate or uncomfortable. In terms of sensitive topics, I will ask you at least twice, during the interview and after the interview, if the content can be used in publications or not: during the interview or when I send you the transcript and/or summary. After receiving the transcript, you can request me to delete any of your statements that might make you feel uncomfortable if they were published (e.g., sensitive topics, or information that may be identifiable by a third person). If I find that you are in need of support during the interview, I will make efforts to help you and will provide hotline numbers after the interview.

5. Withdrawal from the research

You can withdraw from the research process both during and after the interview. If you want to withdraw, please let me know immediately. You can withdraw your consent to research participation for any reason and you will not be penalised for this decision. Your decision to withdraw can be made at any time until the end of data collection and the interview analysis process (1 December 2018). In this case, the audio recordings and transcript will be immediately discarded in a secure manner and will not be used for research.

If you have any questions about this study or any problems during the study, please contact the researcher. If you want to contact someone else or get information about this research but not from me, you can also contact my supervisor or my head of department. This research gained ethics approval from the Economics, Law, Management, Politics and Sociology (ELMPS) Ethics Committee of the University of York.

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Consent Form for Participants

Title: Emerging gender politics in South Korea through digital experience

- I have read and understood the information about the project, and discussed the project with the researcher in charge of the study. Yes No
- I consent to participate in the project. Yes No
- I understand that the researcher's collection and processing of information will be conducted in a manner that does not violate the Data Protection Act and data will be anonymised. Yes No
- I agree to my interviews being recorded by an audio recording device. I understand that the recorded data will be transcribed and stored in a secure manner. Yes No
- I understand that I will be informed about sensitive topics that might come up during the interview and that I can decide whether the conversation can be used for research or not. Yes No
- I understand that I can withdraw from the research for any reason before the cut-off date supplied by the researcher, and that I will not be penalised for my withdrawal. Yes No
- I realise no financial inducements will be given for me taking part in the research. Yes No
- My signature confirms that I have received a copy of this consent form, and I will keep the copy until my research participation is completed. Yes No

After interview participation:

- I wish to be sent a digital copy of the transcript via email.
- I do not wish to be sent a digital copy of the transcript via email.

Participant's Name:

Signature:

Researcher's Name:

Date:

Appendix 2 Interview questions

1. Basic information and experience of Megalia/Womad

- a. How/where/when did you first hear about Megalia/Womad?
- b. Can you describe your experience and feelings when you encountered Megalia/Womad for the first time?
- c. How did you respond?
- d. Did you talk about Megalia/Womad with your friends? If so, how did your friends respond and feel?
- e. What is your relationship with (Korean) feminism? In what way did you hear about or engage with feminism (before Megalia)?
- f. Has your perspective on family/gender role/intimate relationships/marriage/childbirth been influenced by experiencing the Megalia/Womad communities? If so, how?
- g. Which of these perspectives has changed most significantly as a result of this experience?
- h. Do you identify with feminism or feminist ideas of the Women's Movement more broadly?

2. Online community experience and Megalian influence in online communities

- a. How would you describe your online community experience in general? Please tell me about details from your earliest experience.
- b. Do you feel as though you particularly belong/are attached to any specific online community? If so, how has your sense of self/identity been affected by your experiences in online communities?
- c. Did those community members share feminist issues before the Megalia phenomenon emerged?

- d. Did those community members experience any conflicts related to the ‘gender wars’ around the women-only community Yeoseongsidae and the TV show Moohandojeon between 2014 and 2015? If so, can you describe/explain that/those conflict/s?
- e. Did they further disseminate/repost information about Megalian conflicts, such as the protest at Gangnam station and the voice actor who lost her job due to wearing a shirt with a feminist slogan on it?
- f. What is their (community members’) overall stance with regard to Megalia and Womad? What do you think about that, do you agree with them or not?

3. Experience of online misogyny and online ‘gender wars’

- a. What is the most significant experience of gender discrimination that you can recall from your early life?
- b. What are your thoughts about the gender awareness of Korean men of your age group?
- c. Have you experienced misogynistic situations as a Korean woman? If so, what kinds of incident/people’s attitudes/behaviour/event did you experience and recognise as misogyny?
- d. Have you heard of online misogyny? If so, what do you think about that phenomenon? Can you describe your experiences of online misogyny, if you had them? How did they affect your everyday life?

4. Feelings and emotions about participating in activism

- a. What is your experience of Ilbe and other male-dominated communities?
- b. What do you think of their discourse about women, such as *kimchinyeo*?
- c. Have you ever directly responded to misogyny online and/or offline? If so, how?
- d. How did you feel when you were participating in ‘mirroring’/ the objectification of men/‘man-hating’, as digital users term it? Was it awkward/pleasurable etc?

- e. Did the experience of participating in ‘mirroring’ strategies affect your perspectives on and attitude towards the men whom you meet online/offline?
- f. And did it influence your attitude towards being a woman? If so, how?
- g. And did it influence your perspective on gender relations in Korean society?

5. Opinions on controversial issues

- a. What are your thoughts on Megalia/Womad’s discourse?
- b. What are your thoughts on the violent words and expressions that Megalia/Womad use?
- c. Is there anything that Megalia/Womad has done or said that makes you uncomfortable?
- d. What is your opinion on Megalia/Womad’s deriding of dead people or male gay and transgender people?
- e. What do you think about the group of activists who are involved in NGOs and political parties?
- f. In what ways does anonymity influence your online behaviour?
- g. What do you think of the ‘intersectional feminism’ that users of social media describe?
- h. Do you think there are limits to what it is possible to say/express on Womad/Megalia?