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Perceptions of Gender, Victimhood, and Democracy in Korean Antifeminist
Online Forums

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Judith Aspöck BA BA

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Univ.-Prof. Dr. Petra Dannecker M.A.

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Abstract

This thesis examines antifeminist discourse on South Korean online forums with a particular focus on constructions of victimization, gender roles, democracy, nation and future. The analysis' timeframe starts after the martial law declaration by former president Yoon Suk-Yeol in December 2024. While multiple studies have researched the worldwide growing trend of antifeminist, populist, and anti-egalitarian movements in the Western hemisphere, the scholarly focus on Asia has been relatively sparse. Analyzing gender discourse in Korea is especially critical as the country has one of the biggest gender-pay gaps, lowest fertility rates, and some of the highest ideological differences between young men and women. Employing Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) grounded in Foucault's discourse theory, and Butler's notion of gender performativity, this study investigates the online gender discourse on the internet forums *DC Inside* and *Ilbe*. The findings reveal a discourse characterized by rigid binaries and enemy constructions: Korean men are depicted as the ultimate victims, while Korean women, especially feminists, are blamed for societal decline and national betrayal. These constructions are sustained by violent, misogynistic, conspiratorial language and visuals, that reduce women to sexual and reproductive functions. While masculinity emerges as ambivalently militarized, burdened by neoliberal demands and national duty, femineity is demonized and infantilized. The findings also show that Korean antifeminist online discourse directly intersects with international populist mobilization by referencing to religious beliefs and right-wing politicians. The discourse was embedded locally through references to Korea's authoritarian past, which was idealized as a nostalgic utopia. In summary, the study shows that Korean antifeminism functions as more than just misogyny but serves as an ideological projection and argumentation tactic that normalizes authoritarian ideology and rhetoric.

Diese Arbeit untersucht den antifeministischen Diskurs auf südkoreanischen Online-Foren mit Fokus auf Konstruktionen von Opferrollen, Geschlechterrollen, Demokratie, Staat und Zukunft. Die Untersuchung beginnt mit dem Zeitpunkt der Kriegserklärung des ehemaligen Präsidenten Yoon Suk-Yeol im Dezember 2024. Während sich in der westlichen Hemisphäre bisher zahlreiche Studien mit dem weltweit wachsenden Trend hin zu antifeministischen, populistischen und anti-egalitären Bewegungen befassen, fanden diese Thematiken in der wissenschaftlichen Auseinandersetzung in Asien bisher weniger Beachtung. Die Analyse des Geschlechter-Diskurses in Korea ist besonders daher wichtig, da das Land einen der höchsten Gender-Pay Gaps, eine der niedrigsten Geburtenraten und einen der größten ideologischen Unterschiede zwischen jungen Männern und Frauen aufweist. Die Kritische Diskursanalyse (KDA) auf der Grundlage von Foucaults Diskurstheorie und Butlers Begriff der Geschlechterperformativität wird verwendet, um den Diskurs auf den Internetforen *DC Inside* und *Ilbe* zu untersuchen. Die Ergebnisse zeigen einen Diskurs, der durch starre Binäritäten und Feindkonstruktionen gekennzeichnet ist: Koreanische Männer werden als die ultimativen Opfer dargestellt, während koreanische Frauen, insbesondere Feministinnen, für den gesellschaftlichen Niedergang und den Verrat am Vaterland verantwortlich gemacht werden. Diese Konstruktionen werden durch verschwörerische, gewalttätige und frauenfeindliche Sprache, als auch Bilder, aufrechterhalten, welche Frauen auf ihre sexuelle und reproduktive Funktion reduzieren. Während Männlichkeit durch militärisch ambivalente, neoliberale und nationale Ansichten konstruiert wird, wird Weiblichkeit dämonisiert und infantilisiert. Die Ergebnisse zeigen auch, dass der koreanische antifeministische Online-Diskurs direkt an internationale populistische Rhetorik anschließt, indem er sich auf religiöse Überzeugungen und rechte Politiker bezieht. Der Diskurs wurde zudem lokal verankert, durch Verweise auf die autoritäre Vergangenheit Koreas, die als nostalgische Utopie idealisiert wurde. Zusammenfassend zeigt die Studie, dass koreanischer Antifeminismus nicht nur Misogynie beinhaltet, sondern auch als ideologische Projektion und Argumentationstaktik fungiert, welche autoritäre Ideologien normalisiert.

Korean Translation, Romanization & Citation

This work focuses on South Korea therefore the analyzed online comments, as well as various cited media, have originally been written in Korean and were then translated and/or romanized into English. The romanization of Korean means the use of the Latin script to transcribe the Korean language. This paper will largely base the romanization of Korean characters from the Korean alphabet (한글; *Hangeul*) on the official rules set out by the National Institute of Korean Language as suggested by the Korean government in 2000 and Huh's (2017) paper "How to romanize Korean characters in international journals":

The basic principle of this regulation is as follows: first, romanization is based on standard Korean pronunciation; second, symbols other than standard Roman letters are avoided to the greatest extent possible. This method does not precisely reflect the pronunciation of Korean characters, but does reflect reciprocal transliteration between Korean and English. Therefore, vowels are transcribed using a set of characters shared with English. Additionally, consonants are transcribed in a fixed form, except ㄱ, ㄷ, ㅂ, and ㄴ. (Huh, 2017, p.81).

Another unique feature of the Korean language is the reversed order of surnames and given names in comparison to the Western hemisphere (Jung Ha-Won, 2023). Korean names are usually written with the surname first and given name last (eg. 김민호 → Kim Min-Ho → Kim is the surname and Min-Ho is the given name). Korean given names are often comprised of two syllables, which will be connected with a hyphen (eg. 서지영 → Seo Ji-Young). Within this thesis, exceptions for the romanization are made for names that are well known in the Western hemisphere such as the names of Korean politicians (eg., 박정희 → Park Chung-Hee or 윤석열 → Yoon Suk-Yeol) or Korean companies that are using their own official romanization (e.g. 삼성 → Samsung or 현대 → Hyundai) (Jung Ha-Won, 2023). All Korean to English translation is done by the author unless otherwise stated. Additionally, the author wants to note that while APA (American Psychological Association) in text citation is used, Korean given names will often be added to citations to not confuse authors, who have the same surname and have published in the same year, with each other and make it clear which exact source was cited. This stems from the fact that, according to Statistics Korea (2015), the three most common Korean surnames Kim (김), followed by Lee/Yi (이) and Park/Bak (박) alone are held by around 50% of the Korean population.

1. Introduction

This paper investigates antifeminist discourse in South Korea with particular focus on the understanding of victimization and discrimination by investigating the online discourse on the internet forum websites *DC Inside* and *Ilbe*. The research seeks to provide insights into the underlying factors shaping gender discourse and activism in South Korea, as well as the urgent need to understand the complexities of gender politics in South Korea amidst significant socio-cultural challenges. Factors such as the country's declining fertility rate, low gender equality index and stark gender-based voting patterns underscore the importance of examining antifeminist movements as key actors in shaping societal transformations and policies related to gender issues. Additionally, the prevalent use of feminism as an insult and a political ideology, particularly by the far-right, highlights the polarized nature of gender discourse in South Korea (Jung & Moon, 2024, Chan, 2023, Kim Jin-Sook, 2021). The time frame for this thesis is inspired by the online discourse after the declaration of martial law by then South Korean President Yoon Suk-Yeol in December 2024. In the late evening of the 3rd of December 2024, then President Yoon Suk-Yeol unexpectedly declared martial law in a televised address to the nation. Following this the Republic of Korea Army Special Warfare Command tried to block proceedings of the National Assembly as the martial law declaration forbid political gatherings and protests. Despite this, all 190 legislators present in the National Assembly unanimously voted to lift the martial law measure (Lim et. al., 2024). On 14 December, the Assembly went further, impeaching Yoon after 204 of its 300 members supported the motion. The declaration of martial law triggered weeks of nationwide protests, with Seoul at the epicentre of the political crisis (Yeung et. al, 2024). According to Faraoun (2024) and Jung (2024), these demonstrations were driven largely by young women in their 20s and 30s, who have emerged as central figures in South Korea's democratic resistance. In their perspective papers Jang Bo-Ram (2022) and Faraoun (2024) argue that Yoon's political presidential campaigns and policies were largely focused on antifeminist rhetoric: Examples include the pledge to abolish the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, claiming men are treated as "potential sex criminals", blaming the country's low birth rate on feminism and denying systemic gender discrimination despite statistical evidence (Jang Bo-Ram, 2022; Faraoun, 2024).

Therefore, this paper will present research from political science on the broadening political gender divide worldwide. Additionally, the construction of gender itself will be theorized from

a gender studies and feminist studies viewpoint with Butler's (2002, 2004, 2025) philosophy at the core of the research. Next, existing academic research on the gender discourse from a political, economic, social and historical point of view will be presented, with a particular focus on East Asia and South Korea. This basis of existing research will then help situate the phenomena in the Korean online discourse within the broader scientific knowledge. To get an extensive insight into the discourse on Korean online antifeminist forums, critical discourse analysis (CDA) according to Jäger (2015) will be applied to help understand how the discourse on gender constructs and maintains power relations in regards to ideologies and norms in Korean society.

1.1 Problem definition and research objective of the thesis

In recent years, the political divergence between men and women has widened significantly on a global level, especially among younger demographics (Burn-Murdoch, 2024). The Financial Times published statistics on political ideology in various countries worldwide, that show that young women aged 18 to 24 increasingly lean towards left-leaning ideologies, while young men aged 18 to 24 tend towards centrist or right-wing positions. This trend shows a growing ideological gap between young men and women across various countries and continents, which is especially visible in South Korea. In South Korea, the disparity between conservative men and liberal women is particularly pronounced, reaching around 50 percentage points, which is the highest difference in all countries examined. In comparison, Germany and the United States show a 30-point gap. Burn-Murdoch argues that a new global gender divide is emerging (Burn-Murdoch, 2024). Recent South Korean elections reveal this distinct gender-based ideological divide: According to Gong (2024), exit polls from 2022 show that nearly 59% of Korean men in their twenties voted for Yoon Suk-Yeol, whereas just 34% of women in the same age group voted for him, making young Korean women the least supportive group for Yoon within all gender and age groups. Young Korean men and women have therefore persistently differed in their party support by 15 to 30 percentage points in major recent elections (Gong, 2024). Additionally, it must be noted that the demographic landscape of East Asia, notably Korea, is witnessing a significant decline in fertility rates. South Korea has consistently maintained the lowest fertility rates globally, setting new records each year. In 2023, Korea's fertility rate stood at a staggering 0.72, their lowest statistic yet (Reuters, 2023). In 2024 even more alarming figures were recorded in the capital city of Seoul, where the rate plummeted to 0.59 (Loh, 2024) while the country wide birthrate managed to rise again to 0.75 for the first time, after eight

consecutive years of declines from 1.24 in 2016, despite various attempts by the Korean government trying to reverse the trend (Lee & Yi, 2025). Jones (2019) underscores the multifaceted challenges contributing to this phenomenon, ranging from labor market uncertainties to soaring housing costs and the immense financial burden associated with child-rearing. Gender disparities further intensify these challenges, as women struggle to adapt work and familial obligations in environments unsupportive of family life.

Furthermore, the future of the Korean feminist women's movements is uncertain given Korea's history and the presence of active anti-feminist groups, Kim Jin-Sook (2023) notes. Historical and cultural factors, including the influence of Confucianism and the prioritization of economic development over social progress, pose a major challenge to questioning and combating traditional gender roles and relations (Kumar, 2024). These obstacles to progress towards gender equality are also identified by Koeval's (2022) research, which shows that neo-Confucian ideals continue to have an impact in South Korea despite their diminishing direct influence. For example, neo-Confucian ideals continue to reinforce sexism¹ in areas such as law, language and sexuality and therefor hinder gender equality. Despite economic progress, South Korea falls far short in tackling gender inequality, according to Ignaczak (2023), who also points to the increasing rejection of feminism in the country.

It should be noted that this thesis was inspired by earlier research of the author for a seminar paper called “anti- and pro-natalism in South Korea: feminist and anti-feminist social media discourse on women, nation and family“, that was produced during the research seminar “materialism and post-/decolonial feminist debates and care“ and originally written in German in 2024. While the general topic of antifeminism in South Korea stayed the same and shares various sources, the overall goal and focus of this paper have changed.

1.2 Antifeminism as an Inter- and Transdisciplinary Issue

As this thesis will be a case study on the gender divide in a global context it will be implementing an inter- and transdisciplinary approach applying research theories of political studies, gender studies, social science, communication science and make use of the linguistics of Korean studies to critically analyze the political and social gender divide in South Korea.

¹ *Sexism* is „a system of oppression that privileges men over women through everyday practices, attitudes, assumptions, behaviours, and institutional rules and structures“ (Felber et al., 2017, xxvii).

Additionally, knowledge on historical and current developments on gender need to be viewed from an inter- and transdisciplinary perspective to understand the underlying structures of inequality. In this study, a critical feminist and post-structural approach is used to analyze how language reflects the society's discourse on gender issues within South Korea.

Gender discourse lies at the crossroad of various disciplines, and it is therefore especially important to view it from an inter- and transdisciplinary view. Interdisciplinarity, emphasizes the integration of methods, theories and insights from multiple fields to generate a collective understanding of a globally relevant phenomenon or group of people (Raento, 2019). Woodward and Woodward (2015) describe gender studies itself as an exemplary interdisciplinary field, emerging from the interplay between feminist theory, activism and empirical research, which goes beyond biological reductionism and essentialism. Additionally, the authors argue that “a focus on gender generates different and often innovative methodologies as well as a plurality of theoretical approaches, which are directed at making sense of inequalities” (Woodward & Woodward, 2015, p.4). Wood & Ridgeway (2010) further argue that gender itself is a contested category constantly reconstructed through social and cultural norms and that “contemporary research findings on gender demonstrate that gender can only be understood adequately through multiple levels of analysis” (Wood & Ridgeway, 2010, p.335). The two researchers therefore call for an empirical and theoretical interdisciplinary approach on gender to try and understand gender inequality and gender norms. Another approach to research gender discourse is a transdisciplinary one. Klein (2014) describes the origins of transdisciplinarity as a response to the fragmentation of knowledge and culture. Originating from the first international seminar on interdisciplinarity in 1970, transdisciplinarity was conceptualized as the creation of “a common system of axioms for a set of disciplines” (Klein, 2014, p.69) that is designed to produce overarching conceptual frameworks that exceed the limitations of individual disciplinary perspectives. Transdisciplinarity operates as a critical tool that interrogates the structures of disciplinary knowledge production and the role of the university in society. Other new paradigms historically aligned with transdisciplinarity such as post-structuralism, feminist theory, cultural critique and sustainability approaches (Klein, 2014). Together, transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches provide complementary perspectives that enable scholars to navigate complex topics such as gender and global phenomena by critically analyzing knowledge productions and norms.

Understanding antifeminist discourse within recent global development therefore requires an interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approach. As McEwen & Narayanaswamy (2023) point out, anti-gender actors increasingly frame their positions using development language, linking family, economic and social arguments to challenge LGBTQIA+ ²rights, reproductive rights and comprehensive sexuality education, often through transnational networks and professionalized knowledge production. This anti-gender and antifeminist rhetoric acts as a powerful rhetoric tool shaping global structures of inequality which necessitates insight from interdisciplinary studies that view global interconnections of social, political, cultural and economic perspective. One of those approaches is that of development studies which combines research-oriented approaches to studying historical and contemporary structures of inequality in global contexts (Curriculum Internationale Entwicklung, 2012). From a development studies' perspective, the global resurgence of antifeminist discourse is to be understood as a part of broader global socio-political transformations, including the rise of authoritarian populism, the rollback of democratic institutions and the reproduction of gendered and class-based hierarchies (Khan et al., 2023; McEwen & Narayanaswamy, 2023). By analyzing the discourse on gender that antifeminist and anti-gender actors generate, by direct attacks on gender equality, LGBTQIA+ rights and feminism, the underlying dynamics, argumentation tactics and knowledge sources can be understood. These dynamics are especially relevant to development studies, which is concerned with critically examining institutions, actors and discourses that contribute to global inequalities. Antifeminism research therefore directly aligns with development studies' goals by interrogating how gender ideologies and antifeminist movements intersect with neoliberal ideas of gender, nationalism, economy and family – fields that are central to development theories.

In recent years, Korea has seen a surge of antifeminist rhetoric along with a further politicization of gender, as global right-wing movements increasingly instrumentalize anxieties about family values, national identity and demographic decline. This is particularly visible in South Korea, where fertility rates have consistently been amongst the lowest in the world and intense socioeconomic pressures have fuelled a backlash in which feminism is portrayed as an enemy to men's status and national identity (Kim Jo-Eun, 2023; Soo-Hyun, 2024). The rise of online male-centered communities and the political success of antifeminist rhetoric used in South Korea's political landscape in recent elections, mirror a broader global trend in which

² LGBTQIA+ is an acronym used to encompass diverse sexual orientations and gender identities, standing for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, and the "+" represents additional identities that are not explicitly listed (UCSF LGBTQ Resource Center, n.d.).

authoritarian populism mobilizes gender as a tool of control and securing votes amongst young male voters, echoing tactics used in the US and European states (Lee Soo-Hyun, 2024; Burn Mur-Doch, 2024; Butler, 2025). Lee Soo-Hyun (2024) indicates that conservative antifeminist campaigns during the 2022 presidential election further fuelled this by creating a gendered division among young Korean women and young Korean men. Antifeminist rhetoric used by politicians exploited young men's anxiety about economic insecurity and Korean traditional family expectations, which made Korean young men especially susceptible to right-winged populist sentiments used in the political campaigns (Lee Soo-Hyun, 2024).

As Michel Foucault (1978) argues, power operates not merely through repression but through the production of knowledge and discourse, particularly around sexuality and the body. Similarly, Judith Butler's (2002, 2004, 2025) theories of gender performativity and normativity provide crucial tools for analyzing how societal discourses produce normative heterosexual, patriarchal³ identities, marginalizing all non-conforming people. In this context, Butler (2025) describes antifeminism as not simply a backlash but a productive political force that demonizes the concept of "gender-ideology" and feminism as one condensed code for a radical, destructive agenda aimed at dismantling traditional norms around sex, family, and national identity. Gender therefore gets turned into a central object of fear, distortion and political manipulation by right-wing and anti-gender movements around the world. Butler describes the act of turning gender into a singular enemy of projected fears like this: "for gender to be identified as a threat to all of life, civilization, society, thought, and the like, it has to gather up a wide range of fears and anxieties – no matter how they contradict one another – package them into a single bundle, and subsume them under a single name" (Butler, 2025, p.5). By linking their normative ideas on feminism and gender with tactics of nationalism and militarism, antifeminist movements also directly challenge liberal democratic ideals under the guise of protecting tradition and the restoration of social harmony (Butler, 2025).

It is therefore essential to critically analyze the intersections of gender, authoritarianism and political discourse in South Korea. This analysis wants to help understand why gender remains a frontline of contestation in modern global discourse and politics. To fully grasp the gendered political and ideological shifts occurring globally and in South Korea, it is important to situate them within the broader structures of neoliberal capitalism and globalization. Koo Hagen(2019)

³ *Patriarchy* describes "a dynamic system of power and inequality that privileges men and boys over women and girls in social interactions and institutions" (Felber et al., 2017, xxvi).

argues that since the 1990s, South Korea's transition from a so called "developmental state"⁴ into a globalized neoliberal economy has profoundly altered social relations, labour markets and the role of the state. Recent events have also led to heightened economic precarity, job insecurity, intergenerational inequality as well as gender inequality (Sabitkyzy, 2023).

In addition, communication science offers methodological tools for examining how these discourses are constructed, circulated and contested in public life. From digital misogyny⁵ to the framing of gender and nationhood, communication studies can help to understand the rhetoric argumentation tactics used by antifeminist actors in the public sphere (Dorer et al., 2023). Within development studies, communication science thus becomes a tool to trace how antifeminist online spheres use rhetorical, linguistic and visual aids to shape the public gender discourse in South Korea.

1.3 Research question and subquestions

Ultimately, understanding the antifeminist backlash in South Korea requires a trans- and interdisciplinary approach that bridges knowledge from development studies, political science, gender studies, communication studies, Korean studies and feminist theory. By applying a critical social science approach like the qualitative critical discourse analysis (CDA) tool and Foucault (1978)'s argumentation that argues that power is not only operated through repression but through knowledge production and discourse that is dynamic, the research questions aim to understand the underlying and dynamic discourse on gender and antifeminism. Following Foucault's theorizations, gender is not seen as a peripheral issue but a central issue around which power is constantly contested and renegotiated, as well as knowledge and norms are built. Lombardo (2023) supports this argument by saying that "the politics of knowledge plays a central role in the far-right project of attaining cultural hegemony for authoritarian purposes" (Lombardo, 2023, para.18). She further discusses the relationship between democracy and antifeminist rhetoric by stating that opposition to gender equality, feminist policies and queer rights is a crucial factor in worldwide democratic backslidings. This shows how gender discourses have become spheres in which authoritarian nostalgia and backsliding unfold.

⁴ *Developmental state* is a theoretical term and framework coined by Chalmers Johnson used to describe "states which follow a particular model of economic planning and management" (UNESCWA, nd, para.1). The term and the developmental state model theory are contested within development studies.

⁵ *Misogyny* can be understood as the hatred of women (Felber et al., 2017, xxvi).

As Butler (2025) states, power works most subtly when it is naturalized, when the social becomes framed as biological or when systemic inequality is cast as personal failure to not fit in, to quote Butler in an earlier work “the norm is actively conferring reality; indeed, only by virtue of its repeated power to confer reality is the norm constituted as a norm“ (Butler, 2004, p.52). It is therefore imperative for scientists to foreground gender not only as an added variable but as a constitutive structure of power, that is contested, constantly renegotiated and shaping every part of life from private to institutional.

Against this backdrop the research question for this research is the following:

Research Question

1. What does the online discourse in South Korean antifeminist forums on gender look like after the martial law declaration?

Sub-Questions

1. How do Korean antifeminist online-forums mobilize language and discourse on the idea of gender roles, victimization and discrimination?
2. How do Korean antifeminist online-forums construct the idea of gender (men/women; masculinity/femininity)?
3. How do Korean antifeminist online-forums view feminism/feminists?
4. How do Korean antifeminist online-forums understand the notion of nation, democracy, society and future?

2 State of research and historical context

To help understand the antifeminist discourse in South Korea, it is important to situate it within the broader existing gender studies. Various scholars worldwide have done case studies similar to the one of this thesis, within a different geographical area, timeframe or platforms. For example, Eslen-Ziya & Bjørnholt (2023) analyzed men's rights activism and anti-feminist resistance in Turkey and Norway using the concept of countermovement by investigating mass media and social media content in a qualitative comparative analysis. As a result, the authors argue that "men's rights groups in Turkey and Norway share many of the same concerns, but while men's rights activists in Turkey challenge gender equality and defend the traditional family, in Norway, men's rights activism is a masculinist co-optation of the gender equality discourse" (Eslen-Ziya & Bjørnholt, 2023, p.213). Similarly, this thesis wants to investigate the language used in the gender discourse and the main concepts and ideologies used by South Korean users in antifeminist online forums to argue. The Norwegian scholar's research shows that antifeminist online spheres must be further studied and analyzed within the geographical and historical context of the specific regions to further understand the global antifeminist discourse by identifying similarities and differences.

One way to view this discourse is through a critical discourse analysis. An example of this is Huang's (2023) work on the silencing and expelling of feminists via anti-feminist discourse online in China. By applying critical discourse analysis (CDA) the author identified four strategies for the demonization and depoliticization of feminism on Chinese social media: 1) feminists were viewed as deviant women 2) as betraying the nation 3) as connected to islamists and 4) called "fake feminists". Huang (2023) further argues that Chinese online-antifeminism deflects public awareness away from feminist issues such as structural gender inequality in China but instead creates a binary antagonism between antifeminists and feminists. By attacking and silencing feminists on social media, Chinese online-antifeminist users therefor strengthen and solidify existing patriarchal hegemony in the country. The researcher notes, that this further restricts discussions on gender inequality issues in China and poses substantial challenges to Chinese feminists and women in general. The authors Sagredos & Nikolova (2022) also used CDA to analyze gendered conflicts in Greece, in their case on online discourse on the video-platform *Youtube*. They claim that "the discursive negotiation of gender ideologies in anonymous, asynchronous and polylogal discussions is a highly polarised and antagonistic discourse activity" (Sagredos & Nikolova, 2022, p.169). In addition, the authors found that

most Youtube comments fell under two opposing categories a) those that sustain the gendered aggression and patriarchal discourse or b) those that challenge it. This further proves the need to investigate the anonymous and asynchronous discussion of antifeminist online spaces to further explore the polarized gender discourse on there.

To understand the local, social and historical context of South Korea existing academic research can help provide resources and comprehension. Jung Han-Wool (2023) notes that anti-feminism is continuously spreading online among Korean young men of whom a lot identify themselves as a social minority or direct “victims” of female power. Jung Han-Wool identified the following attributed as common features that are at the forefront of Korean antifeminism: 1) encompassing and situational behavioral characteristics (e.g., overindulging violent or degrading internet contents & verbal aggression) 2) relational and epistemic traits (e.g., ostracism, attachment insecurity, pseudo-rationalism), and 3) the implementation of group-level tactics (e.g., provocative interactions, polarization). Another study done by Kim Jo-Eun (2023) investigated Korean men’s antifeminist ideals and their marital desires. The author identifies two dimensions of those ideals: 1) support for male superiority (e.g., the idea that men deserve greater power in society than women) and 2) perceived victimhood (e.g., the argument that Korean men are actually discriminated due to feminism). The study also shows that “support for male superiority predicted more positive attitudes toward marriage (...) on the contrary, male victimhood predicted substantially less favorable attitudes toward marriage and marital intention“ (Kim Jo-Eun, 2023, para.1). The author further suggests that one of the guiding reasons for young men’s marital disinterest in South Korea is the perceived male victimhood due to feminism. In another work Kim Young-Mi (2021) investigated the two Korean feminist online forums *Megalia* and *Womad*. She argues that online platforms can also act as a domain for challenging pervasive misogyny in Korean society but frequently encounter various challenges. The researcher identified “mirroring strategies” as the main strategy used by Korean online feminists to fight against sexism and to directly combat misogynistic Korean online forums such as *Ilbe*. Kim Young-Mi further explains that, Korean feminists on *Megalia* and *Womad* frequently used misogynistic words used by antifeminist groups as a preset e.g., “kimchi-nyeo“ (김치녀; kimchi-woman → which is a word used to describe Korean woman who judge men by their economic ability) and then mirrored the word to turn it into a word that criticizes men e.g., “kimchi-nam“ (김치남; kimchi-man → which is a word used to describe a Korean man judging women by their appearances) (Kim Young-Mi, 2021). Jeong Eu-Soil (2020) also investigated Korean online spheres, in particular the digital practices of *Megalia*

users. She proposes the theory of so called “troll feminism” to describe the counterattack of Korean feminists used against Korean antifeminists in online discourse. Similarly, to Kim Young-Mi (2021), Jeong Eu-Soil (2020) also identified various misogynistic words used by the antifeminists. Both works were used as aid to this thesis to help understand the vocabulary used in Korean antifeminist and feminist online spheres. The exploration of Korean antifeminist online discourse in South Korea is crucial due to the significant gap in existing research on antifeminism and the direct attacks on women and feminists, as noted by various authors who call for more scholarly attention on the topic (Jung Eu-Soil, 2020; Kim Young-Mi, 2021, Kim Jo-Eun, 2023; Jung Han-Wool, 2023).

2.1 Militarism, Authoritarianism & Emergence of Korean Nationalism and Democracy

Modern South Korean history has been profoundly shaped by a recurring tension between militarized authoritarianism and a resilient, often youth-led democratic resistance. To this day martial law has been declared at least 16 times in South Korea since the country was founded in 1948 (Lim et al., 2024). Martial law has been declared during times of war like the Korean War, but it has also been issued by South Korean leaders who were using it as a tool of power against political opposition and demonstrations (Duster, 2024). The following historical retelling will be mostly based on Holcombe’s (2017) book chapter 12 “Korea since 1945” (p.330-349). From its post-liberation foundation in 1948, South Korea's political life unfolded under the shadow of both Cold War geopolitics and internal demands for legitimacy, stability, and national identity. As Holcombe (2017) explains, the Cold War’s first hot conflict ignited in Korea with the Korean War raging from 1950 to 1953 which separates North and South Korea to this day. Technically the war never ended – as a ceasefire was signed in 1953, but no peace treaty was ever signed to officially end the conflict – the Korean Peninsula is technically still in a state of war. Its legacy therefore lingered long after the Cold War’s ideological fire cooled off elsewhere. The trauma of division, the devastation of war, and the insecurity of a permanent standoff with North Korea made national security and militarization central pillars of South Korean governance. Although formally a constitutional democracy from its inception, the Republic of Korea’s early decades were defined by authoritarian rule (Holcombe, 2017).

President Syngman Rhee, who led the First Republic (1948–1960), wielded power through coercive means and electoral manipulation. Despite his nationalist credentials, Rhee's long exile

in the United States and his Western orientation made him seem alienated from the Korean people. His regime ended abruptly in 1960 when allegations of election fraud ignited a wave of mass student protests, culminating in the *April Revolution* (or *April 19 Movement*, 4.19 혁명). These demonstrations were triggered when police murdered a local high school student and then opened fire on students that protested afterwards, killing nearly 200 people. The killings spurred public outrage, drew in university professors and forced Rhee into exile. It was an early sign of the uniquely powerful role Korean students and civil society would play in the country's political transformation. Yet the democratic opening that followed Rhee's fall was short-lived. In May 1961, Major General Park Chung-Hee led a military coup, citing political instability and the threat of communism. Park suspended the constitution, banned political activity, censored the media, and concentrated power in a Supreme Council for National Reconstruction. Thus began a 32-year period of nearly uninterrupted military rule – first under Park, then under his successors – during which South Korea experienced both ruthless authoritarianism and astonishing economic transformation (Holcombe, 2017).

Park Chung-Hee, educated in a Japanese military academy and a veteran of the Japanese imperial army, built a developmental state modeled on Meiji Japan. Drawing on Confucian values of order, hierarchy, and national discipline, Park combined state-led industrialization with an iron-fisted political regime. Economic planning boards, government-controlled credit, and close cooperation with emerging *chaebols* (재벌 meaning: 'rich family' or 'financial clique') that are often used to describe large industrial South Korean conglomerates run and controlled by an individual or a family that often consists of multiple diversified affiliates e.g., Samsung, Hyundai, LG fueled decades of rapid industrial growth. However, Park's ambitions were not purely economic as he sought to build a wealthy nation with military self-sufficiency, viewing economic strength as inseparable from national security and independence. His Yushin Constitution of 1972 institutionalized this vision of technocratic authoritarianism, giving the president unchecked power under the guise of Confucian-style moral leadership and so called national *yushin* (유신; meaning "revitalization"). Despite Park's economic successes, his regime grew increasingly repressive. Political dissent was crushed, opposition parties marginalized, and civil liberties curtailed. The public, especially students and intellectuals, became the main force of opposition (Holcombe, 2017).

When Park was assassinated in 1979 by the head of his own intelligence agency, the brief power vacuum again raised hopes of democratization. However, in May 1980, General Chun Doo-

Hwan seized power in yet another military coup. Chun imposed martial law, shut down universities, suspended the National Assembly, and brutally suppressed protests. The most notorious episode of Chun's rule was the Gwangju Uprising – or later often called Gwangju Massacre – in May 1980, where student protests in the southwestern city escalated into a full-scale civilian revolt. For several days, Gwangju was effectively controlled by citizens until special forces were deployed and violently retook the city, leaving at least 191 civilians dead. The massacre became a defining moment of modern Korean history, remembered as both a national trauma and a symbol of democratic resistance. In the years that followed, student movements, labor organizations, and civil society continued to pressure the regime, making South Korea's democratization as much a product of grassroots mobilization as of negotiation and persistence. By the mid-1980s, South Korea's transformation from a war-ravaged agrarian society to an industrial powerhouse was complete, but political freedom lagged behind. Students once again took the lead. In 1987, amid rising protests and international attention ahead of the Seoul Olympics, the government feared a repeat of Gwangju. A brutal crackdown was avoided when Chun's designated successor, Roh Tae-Woo, conceded to public demands and announced a return to direct presidential elections. Though Roh Tae-Woo won with less than 37% of the vote, the 1987 democratic reforms marked a decisive turn in South Korea's political development (Holcombe, 2017).

This long arc from authoritarianism to democracy was accompanied by the emergence of a distinctly Korean nationalism – a reaction both to colonial subjugation under Japan and to dependence on the United States during the Cold War. Though Park's developmental model was influenced by Japan, his regime banned Japanese cultural products, enforced Korean language education, and promoted national sovereignty. Christianity, linked historically to both anti-Japanese resistance and democratic activism, also played a major role in shaping Korea's civic identity. According to Holcombe, this nationalism often fused Confucian ideals of virtuous rule with a yearning for modernity and global recognition. The democratic transition culminated in the election of Kim Young-Sam in 1992, the first civilian president in three decades. His presidency, while reformist, retained Confucian undertones, emphasizing harmony, duty, and moral leadership. The reckoning with the authoritarian past continued with the arrest and conviction of Chun Doo-Hwan and Roh Tae-Woo for their roles in the 1980 coup and the Gwangju massacre. In 1997, Kim Dae-Jung's election marked the first peaceful transfer of power to the opposition—a milestone in Korean democracy (Holcombe, 2017).

The deep scars of military rule and martial law remain deeply engraved in Korea's collective memory, Asia Media Centre (2024) argues. This was made painfully clear in 2024, when a new declaration of martial law, though very short and contextually different, evoked strong public reactions and comparisons to Korea's authoritarian past. For many Koreans, especially the older generation as well as student activists, the term "martial law" is not abstract political tool but directly recalls the trauma of the Yushin constitution, the Gwangju massacre, the censorship of the press, and the long fight for democratic freedoms in South Korea. As such, its reappearance triggered a wave of public protest and civil discourse and acted as an "uncomfortable reminder of a darker history" (Asia Media Centre, 2024, para.19).

2.2 Women's fight for equality in South Korea

Moon Sunny (2022) explores the evolving construction of gender roles in Korea from the Joseon dynasty, which spanned from 1392 to 1910, focusing particularly on how Korean women navigated oppressive systems in South Korea. Moon Sunny and other scholars (Seth, 2019; Chung Seung-Eun, 2024) trace the historical roots of gender inequality in Korea to the neo-confucianism patriarchy of the Joseon dynasty where the social and family system strictly enforced rigid gender segregation. The gender segregation was not only culturally institutionalized but also further established through legal means such as a *gender segregation law*, which served to maintain male dominance. This *gender segregation law* infused every aspect of the daily life in Joseon times from the private home to public spaces. Women were largely confined to domestic duties, while men were expected to handle affairs outside the household (Moon, 2022). Social and cultural laws in the Joseon time additionally prohibited women to participate in various social events such as riding horses and even playing games, such as the game "go". It was also custom for houses to have two entrances, one only for men, another only for women, with the kitchen being a physical separation between each gender's quarters (Seth, 2019). Women were expected to obey men unconditionally and could be divorced for committing any of the "seven sins" (칠거지악; *chilgeojiak*), such as disobedience towards in-laws, inability to bear a son, adultery, jealousy, genetic disease, talkativeness, and kleptomania (Kim Yung-Chung, 1976, as cited in Moon, 2022). These patriarchal norms were deeply embedded in slogans and concepts such as a sayings going "wise mother and good wife" (현모양처, *hyeonmo yangcheo*) and "men's superiority over women/men are honoured, women are abased" (남존여비, *namjon yeobi*). Those common concepts framed women's value through male-defined roles and lived on as a concept in the 20th century. Through rituals and institutional

power, society reinforced a strict gender hierarchy, limiting women's political, economic, and social agency (Moon, 2022).

Moon Sunny (2022) further argues that cracks in this structure emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries through social movements. One of those movements was the religious *Donghak Peasant Revolution* (동학농민혁명), which elevated women's role in the family as the head of the family, which was unheard of at that time and focused on the equality of people regardless of their social class or sex. It further improved access to education for women, challenging traditional roles. Additionally, Moon Sunny (2022) notes that the growing influence of Christianity and missionaries elevated women's role in society, which emphasized gender and class equality. According to her, in the 20th century, exposure to western feminist ideals and resistance to Japanese colonialism further influenced Korean women. This early feminist movement of the 20th century and anti-colonial activism expanded women's participation in national and civic life (Moon Sunny, 2022). Kwon In-Sook (1998) on the other hand, analyzed these Korean feminist movements of the 1920s and rejects the sentiment that western feminism emancipated Korean women. She concludes that focusing solely on Western domination overlooks the complex changes experienced by colonized societies. According to the scholar's research, the *New Women's Movement* in 1920's Korea emerged at the intersection of Western imperialism and Confucian patriarchy. While Western influence offered some Korean women tools to resist traditional gender roles, it also further reinforced patriarchal norms within Korean nationalist agendas. This duality reflects ongoing tensions in *Third World Feminism*⁶/*Postcolonial Feminism* between embracing Western feminist ideas and resisting their imperialist roots, and between rejecting tradition as oppressive versus reclaiming it as cultural identity (Kwon In-Sook, 1998).

Following the exploration of women's roles and struggles through Korea's early and Joseon-era history, shaped by Confucian patriarchy and evolving social structured, one of the darkest chapters in Korean women's history lies in the 20th century: the systematic sexual slavery imposed by the Japanese military during the colonial period. The term "comfort women" refers to a system of military sexual slavery organized by the Imperial Japanese government between 1931 and 1945 (Columbia Law School, n.d.). Historians estimate that between 50,000 to 200,000 women and girls, many as young as twelve, were forced into military brothels where

⁶ *Third World Feminism*, or nowadays called *Postcolonial Feminism*, is a movement and theory developed by women from the Global South in the 1980s to critique Western feminism's focus on white, middle-class women and to emphasize how gender oppression intersects with colonialism, race, class, and global capitalism (Mishra, 2013).

they were subjected to repeated sexual violence and abuse by Japanese soldiers. While women from across East and Southeast Asia were victimized, around 80% of the victims were from Korea (Columbia Law School, n.d.). The term “comfort women,” a euphemism coined by the Japanese military, has been criticized for masking the true horror of what survivors endured. Many scholars now prefer “military sexual slaves” to emphasize the systemic and violent nature of the institution (Kim et al., 2019). Japan’s imperial expansion into East Asia – colonizing Taiwan in 1895, Korea in 1905 and annexing it in 1910, and establishing a puppet regime in Manchuria in 1932 – coincided with the expansion of these so-called “comfort stations.” The first was set up in Shanghai in 1932, and stations later followed wherever the Japanese military was deployed (Kim et al., 2019). Survivors remained largely silent until the early 1990s, when some began to publicly share their experiences and demand accountability. Their activism spurred global awareness, and Japanese historian Yoshimi Yoshiaki’s discovery of official documents in 1992 confirmed that the Japanese military had established and operated these brothels. In response, Prime Minister Miyazawa issued an apology, and in 1993, Chief Cabinet Secretary Yohei Kono acknowledged that many women were recruited against their will and that the Japanese military was both directly and indirectly involved. Despite these acknowledgments, the Japanese government has never accepted full legal responsibility, nor has it provided state reparations, an issue that remains deeply contentious in international relations (Columbia Law School, n.d.).

Nelson and Cho (2016) argue that the trajectory of feminism and women’s rights in South Korea since 1945 reflects a complex negotiation between state power, civil society, and global influence. In the immediate post-liberation era, the women’s movement was split. On one side were state-supported organizations that promoted women’s rights within a nationalist and developmentalist framework, often appealing to middle-class values. On the other, political and labour movements included women but typically subordinated gender issues to broader democratic or class-based agendas. By the 1980s and 1990s, feminist activism in South Korea had diversified. Grassroots organizations, legal advocates, and academic feminists began pushing for legal reforms, such as the revision of family law, anti-sexual violence legislation, and the institutionalization of gender equality. This period also saw a growth in feminist scholarship, which introduced critical perspectives on gender that considered class, globalization, and neoliberalism. The two researchers emphasize that contemporary feminist activism in South Korea addresses a wide array of issues such as the impact of neoliberal economic reforms on women’s labour, the rise of LGBTQ+ visibility, challenges faced by migrant women in international marriages and the contradictory role of religion, especially

evangelical Christianity, in both enabling and constraining gender roles. Despite legal and formal gains for women's rights, the societal prejudice continues to marginalize non-normative expressions of gender and sexuality (Nelson & Cho, 2016).

Scholars have noted the growing trend of digital platforms as tools for gender discourse, notably Yin & Zhang (2024). In their paper on the role of social media in shaping feminist movements in Asian cultural contexts the scientists examine how digital platforms serve both as tools for empowerment and as arenas of conflict, highlighting issues such as online bullying and the digital divide. They emphasize that social media is often used for the creation of online communities. Kim Jin-Sook (2021) also noted that in the 2010s, South Korea witnessed a resurgence of feminist activism through digital platforms. The *#MeToo movement* gained momentum in 2018, leading to public accusations against prominent figures and increased awareness of workplace harassment and systemic sexism. This movement marked a shift toward what Kim calls the revitalization of feminist activism in South Korea since 2015. She situates this resurgence within the broader socio-political context, noting factors like the diversification of social movements, women's precarious status, and rising misogyny. The study highlights the role of digital media in expanding feminist discourse, with movements like *#iamafeminist* and the establishment of Korean feminist platforms like *Megalia* (Kim Jin-Sook, 2021).

2.3 Current sociopolitical situation in South Korea

On 3rd December 2024, then South Korean President Yoon Suk-Yeol declared martial law during a televised address to the nation. On 4th December, 190 legislators of the Korean National Assembly unanimously passed a motion to lift martial law, despite attempts by the Republic of Korea Army Special Warfare Command to prevent the vote. On 14th December 2024, Yoon Suk-Yeol, was impeached by the National Assembly and suspended from office, following the passing of the impeachment bill with 204 of the 300 members voting in favour. On January 15th, 2025, Yoon was detained by prosecutors, becoming the first sitting president to be arrested. While he was released after 52 days in prison, Yoon was unanimously removed from office by the Constitutional Court on April 4th 2025, citing serious violations of the Constitution (Korea Herald, 2025). A snap presidential election was held in South Korea on 3 June 2025, following the impeachment and removal of President Yoon Suk-Yeol. Under the South Korean constitution, an early election must be conducted within 60 days of a presidential vacancy, which brought the vote forward from its originally scheduled date of 3 March 2027

(Kim Hyung-Jin & Kim Tong-Hyun, 2025). The election marked only the second snap presidential election in South Korea's history. The first such election occurred in 2017, after the impeachment of President Park Geun-Hye. Park had been impeached on 9 December 2016 amid a massive corruption scandal and was later sentenced to 24 years in prison in 2018 on charges of abuse of power and coercion (Fermin-Robbins, 2018). In the 2025 snap election, Lee Jae-Myung, *Democratic Party (DPK)* nominee and former opposition leader, emerged victorious. He defeated Kim Moon-Soo of the former ruling *People Power Party* and Lee Jun-Seok of the newly formed New Reform Party. The 2025 snap-election thus became a historic moment, underscoring both the constitutional mechanisms that ensure democratic continuity in South Korea but also the deep fissures within Korean society (Lee Jae-Mook, 2025; Kim Jung, 2025).

Yoon's declaration of martial law in December 2024 led to widespread mass protests in the whole country, in particular Seoul, for weeks after the initial declaration. Chan Mo-Ku (2025) argues that the resistance of President Yoon Suk-Yeol's 2024 martial law declaration in South Korea was shaped by the ethical disobedience of military personnel and the collective memory of past authoritarian rule, especially from the 1980s. Kim Ye-Jin (2025) affirmed this by adding that the public's swift reaction, rooted in collective memory of the 1980s dictatorship and pro-democracy movements, especially the Gwangju Uprising, fuelled mass mobilization. Veteran activists helped to stir the protests, while younger generations, inspired by both historical and recent struggles, joined in creative forms of civic resistance. Kim Ye-Jin (2025) then argues that the memory of past authoritarian trauma served not only as a warning but as a powerful catalyst for action.

Lee Jae-Mook (2025) interprets South Korea's 2025 presidential election as both a referendum on presidential abuse of power and a test of democratic resilience. With turnout reaching 79.4%, the highest since the 1997 election that marked Korea's first democratic power transition. Lee Sang-Hyun (2025) additionally notes that the 2025 election did reveal strong civic commitment of the South Korean population but also further entrenched polarization, fuelled by symbolic and moralistic language used by politicians and supporters (Lee Sang-Hyun, 2025). A key finding of Lee Jae-Mook (2025) concerns the sharpening generational and gendered divides. Among voters in their twenties and thirties, men leaned conservative toward the antifeminist politician Lee Jun-Seok, while women strongly favoured progressive candidate Lee Jae-myung. This gender cleavage reflects broader tensions in South Korea around feminism, labour competition, and male victimhood as examined by Koo Bon-Sang (2023) and Roh and Kim

(2025). They argue that the gender divide in Korea is shaped less by deep structural divisions than by political mobilization over selective issues such as the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family (Koo Bon-Sang, 2023; Roh & Kim, 2025). Lee Jae-Mook (2025) argues, that if sustained, this polarization could become a lasting structural cleavage in Korean politics. Additionally, the researcher adds, that the martial law declaration in 2024 and following 2025 presidential elections expose deep fissures within Korean society – ideological, regional, generational and regarding gender. The election also unfolded right in the middle of democratic fragility: both the Economist Intelligence Unit and V-Dem downgraded Korea from a “full” to “flawed democracy” (EIU, 2025; V-Dem Institute, 2025). While Kim Jung (2025) calls South Korea’s democracy “both resilient and fragile” and stresses the unusually frequent impeachments and impeachment tries as evidence of instability, Lee Jae-Mook (2025) concludes that the unusually strong voter participation signals cautious hope for democratic renewal.

The gendered crevasses on democracy were especially visible during the protests calling for Yoon Suk-Yeol’s impeachment, directly after the martial law declaration. According to Faraoun (2024) and Jung Ha-Won (2024) these mass protests were led primarily by young women, particularly those in their 20s and 30s, who have emerged as key actors in South Korea’s democratic resistance. The protests, often dubbed the “light stick revolution” (Jung Ha-Won, 2024, para.17), saw women using colourful k-pop concert light sticks as symbols of democratic resistance. Their visibility and numbers were not a spontaneous response but the culmination of long-standing feminist struggles in South Korea (Faraoun, 2024). Protesters denounced Yoon’s authoritarian measures, antifeminist rhetoric, and rollback of gender equality policies. Notably, Yoon had attempted to abolish the *Ministry of Gender Equality and Family* and remove gender equality content from school curricula – moves that resonated with anti-feminist sentiment, particularly among young male voters (Faraoun, 2024; Jung Ha-Won, 2024). 400,000 protesters gathered during the peak of the protests on December 14th, 2024, calling for Yoon’s impeachment. Jung Ha-won notes, that more than 35 percent of the crowd were teenage girls and women in their 20s and 30s. Male participants of the same age group, on the other hand, only made up about 10 percent of the crowd, which further shows the gendered political divide in South Korea. It must be stated though, that in December 2024 surveys showed general overwhelming public support for Yoon’s impeachment (75%) and even for his arrest (70%) (Jung Ha-Won, 2024). While the protests brought together a diverse coalition, including feminists, LGBTQIA+ activists, labour unions, farmers and migrant rights groups, gendered issues such as misogyny and gender conflict remained present. Women

activists reported being marginalized or objectified even within progressive movements. Critics of former first-lady Kim Keon-Hee also invoked misogynistic tropes, further illustrating how sexism persists in political discourse, even amid demands for democracy (Faraoun, 2024). Both Faraoun (2024) and Jung Ha-Won (2024) argue that the impeachment marked not only a political turning point but also a critical moment in the fight for gender justice.

This is also noted in recent statistics and questionnaires about the martial law situation in South Korea. Kim Hanna's (2025) working paper investigates the deep gender divide in political values and democratic commitment among South Koreans. According to her, the martial law crisis became a catalyst for exposing sharp contrasts between young women and men in their civic engagement and political orientations. The paper shows that, young women emerged as the most politically active group. Korean women in their 20s made up 19.1% of all demonstrators, nearly double their demographic share, while young Korean men's participation hovered near the national average. Women in this age group also showed the strongest support for opposition leader Jae-Myung and were the most opposed to the impeached President Yoon, revealing a significant gender-based polarization in electoral preferences (Kim Hanna, 2025). Beyond partisanship, Kim Hanna (2025) highlights a structural divide in democratic values. A large majority of women in their twenties (80.9%) and in their thirties (86.5%) affirmed democracy as always preferable, whereas only 62.6% of men in their twenties and 64.2% of men in their thirties agreed. Additionally, notable 23.6% of Korean men in their 20s and 21.1% of Korean men in their 30's expressed conditional support for dictatorship, making them one of the most authoritarian-leaning groups in the study, only beaten by Korean men in their 70s with 27.4% of support for dictatorship. In comparison young Korean women show the least support for dictatorship as a preferred systems of governance throughout all age and gender groups, with 9,1% in their twenties and 4,6% in their thirties. Kim Hanna concludes that this gendered divergence signals more than just electoral differences but reflects a broader shift in democratic commitment. Kim Hanna warns that this growing gendered political divergence poses serious risks for the future of South Korea's democratic institutions. While Korean young women appear to be emerging as a vital and mobilized constituency in defence of constitutional democracy, the political apathy, disengagement, and rising authoritarian tolerance among Korean young men threaten to undermine democratic resilience. Particularly concerning are the erosion of institutional trust and the decline of civic participation among men, which Kim interprets as indicative of a broader legitimacy crisis in South Korean democracy (Kim Hanna, 2025).

Kim Jong-Cheol and Chae Su-Hong (2025) support the arguments made by Jung Ha-Won (2024), Faraoun (2024), and Kim Hanna (2025) regarding the ideological polarization following Yoon's martial law declaration, the erosion of democratic norms, and the role of young women as key agents of resistance. In addition, Kim and Chae (2025) further argue that although the martial law moment was short-lived, it catalysed two sharply divergent political currents: the mobilization of far-right forces and the rise of the so called *2030 women* as a distinct progressive bloc. The far-right resurgence is framed as an emotional backlash by older conservative men who perceive their declining social dominance as an existential crisis and for whom this draws on authoritarian nostalgia, with the *Taegeukgi Rallies/Force* (태극기 집회 or 태극기부대; meaning "national flag crowd" which is a reference to the national flag of South Korea being swung at protests) at the forefront. The *Taegeukgi Force* can be described as a group that is "primarily made up of people who are in their mid-60s and older, male, Christian, from conservative regions, and lower-middle class, had long been viewed as marginal, clinging to outdated ideologies" (Kim & Chae, 2025, para.7) but has since gained renewed visibility under Yoon's tacit endorsement. This group of the far-right often constructs ideological "enemies" such as pro-China or North Korea sympathizers and labour unions, branding themselves as the "patriotic liberal right." They prioritize ideological consistency over factual accuracy and often promote conspiracy theories like rigged elections. Additionally, a new key demographic shift involves young Korean men in their 20s and 30s, who increasingly support right-wing causes, often driven by perceived grievances against feminism. Despite continued gender inequalities in Korea, these men feel socially marginalized due to military service and economic pressures. Their resentment has been politically weaponized by conservative parties, leading to an alliance with older generations (Kim & Chae, 2025).

The *2030 women*, Korean women in their 20s and 30s, in contrast, represent a qualitatively new protest culture that blends digital fluency, aesthetic performance (e.g., K-pop-inspired protest rituals), and intersectional solidarity. Kim and Chae (2025) claim that this group of *2030 women* does not merely resist patriarchal and authoritarian structures; the *2030 women* also proactively construct alternative civic imaginaries – evidenced by their solidarity with labour unions, farmers activists, LGBTIA+ rights and disability rights. The scholars emphasize that this shift towards far-right politics fits in with the dangerous global trend of populist movements around the world but positions Korean *2030 women* as a new political force that could unite various progressive movements. Nevertheless they warn that "in a society where the myths about masculinity and ethnonationalism are so deeply ingrained, we could see a dangerous

normalization of witch hunting as hatred and fear of women and immigrants spread” (Kim & Chae, 2025, para.25). Thus, they emphasize the emergence of a bisected civic identity in post-martial law Korea: one nostalgic and exclusionary, the other future-oriented and inclusive. Kim & Chae (2025) argue that this divergence marks not just a political crisis, but a profound contest over the very meaning of democracy in Korean society today.

This gendered gap and generational divide has been identified long before the martial law declaration. Even before the martial law was announced by then President Yoon Seok-Yol, misogyny and anti-feminist sentiment have played a big role in political election tactics in Korea. In their paper Jenkins and Kim (2024) explore the role of misogyny and anti-feminist sentiment in South Korea’s 2022 presidential election, highlighting how gender backlash became a crucial political cleavage. The study focuses on how former chairman Lee Jun-Seok of the *People Power Party* (국민의 힘; *meaning the Power of Nationals*; abbreviated PPP), now leader of the newly formed *Reform Party* (개혁신당), mobilized male grievance, particularly among young men, by voicing opposition to feminism and gender equality. Through their survey, Jenkins and Kim (2024) find that misogynistic attitudes – defined by them as devaluation of women, distrust, and viewing women as manipulative – are positively associated with support for Lee Jun-Seok, though not with presidential vote choice. The scholars argue that such support therefore represents symbolic identification rather than electoral behaviour. They call for further research into the causal mechanisms linking misogyny and political behaviour in South Korea, as well as the role of local elections and policy preferences, other possible political manifestations of antifeminist sentiments.

Jung Kyung-Ja (2024) supports the argument made by the authors in her paper on how gender conflict has been strategically used in South Korean populist politics, particularly by conservative parties such as the *People’s Power Party*. The study found that during the 2022 presidential election misogyny and anti-feminist rhetoric was used to mobilize discontented young men, portraying them as victims of feminism. According to the researcher, these strategies mirror those of global right-wing populism but were tailored to South Korean issues by focusing on specifically Korean issues such as mandatory male military service, low fertility rates, and the abolition of the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family. Her paper places this phenomenon within broader theoretical frameworks of populist research. Jung Kyung-Ja notes that populist politicians in the US and in European countries often utilize antifeminism as a key strategy to gain voters by building on men’s perceived victimhood and exploit and manipulate emotions and grievances like anger towards specific groups such as women or immigrants.

Jung Kyung-Ja (2024) then traces the origin of South Korea's "gender wars" back to the 1998 Asian Financial Crisis, which further set neoliberalism in motion and intensified social pressures on youth, especially young men. Within this highly competitive and neoliberal society Korean men, disillusioned by socioeconomic struggles and traditional gender expectations, use misogyny as an outlet and blame women for their struggles rather than neoliberal economy itself. Many have found community in those shared experiences in Korean antifeminist online spaces. Feminist backlash to this misogyny also gained momentum, most notably through the emergence of *Megalia* and the broader feminist "reboot" in the mid-2010s. Although former President Moon Jae-In leveraged this feminist movement rhetorically, his lack of substantive policy follow-through disillusioned many, especially young men. According to Jung Kyung-Ja (2024) this vacuum, as well as the growing gender conflict among young Korean people in general and rise of antifeminism in mainstream politics directly aligned with the rise of the conservative and antifeminist politician Lee Jun-Seok. By capitalizing and intensifying this growing gender conflict amongst young people, the PPP managed to effectively mobilize young Korean men during the 2022 campaign for their conservative through antifeminist rhetoric (Jung Kyung-Ja, 2024).

2.4 History of Anti-Genderism Worldwide

The historical roots of antifeminist and anti-gender sentiments are closely intertwined with the advancements of women's rights. UN Women (n.d) state that the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing "marked a significant turning point for the global agenda for gender equality" (UN Women, n.d., para.2). The conference has produced the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action which was adopted by 189 countries. The European Parliament calls the strategic goals across twelve critical areas the "most comprehensive global policy framework for the rights of women" (European Parliament, 2021, para 2) and UN Women acknowledge it as the "world's most comprehensive, visionary plan ever created to achieve the equal rights of ALL women and girls" (UN Women, 2025a, para 1). In response to such advances, a transnational anti-gender movement began to form in the mid-1990s (McEwen & Narayanaswamy, 2023). Rooted in opposition to women's sexual and reproductive rights, LGBTQIA+ rights and comprehensive sexuality education (CSE), Mc Ewen and Narayanaswamy (2023) note that these actors often frame themselves as "pro-family" or "pro-life," positioning gender equality as a threat to traditional values and the "natural family". Anti-gender mobilizations have since gained traction worldwide by employing a shared network and discourse of strategies that transcend national contexts that are consecutively inspiring and

strengthening conservative political voices and movements across the globe (Graff & Korolczuk, 2018; Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018; Strube, 2021; Van Klinken et al., 2023). They often target academic fields such as gender studies, with governments in Brazil, Poland, and Hungary attempting to dismantle such programs (McEwen, 2020). Similarly, CSE programs have been restricted or discredited across Africa, Europe, Asia, and Latin America (McEwen & Narayanaswamy, 2023). Historical legacies of colonialism also shape anti-gender narratives. For instance, the British Empire imposed anti-sodomy laws across its colonies, embedding heteronormative⁷ and patriarchal legal codes that persist today (Asante & Hanchey, 2021). McEwen and Narayanaswamy (2023) proclaim that contemporary anti-gender actors frequently exploit this anti-colonial rhetoric, paradoxically reproducing colonial-era ideologies of rigid gender binaries.

The U.S. Supreme Court's 2022 overturning of *Roe v. Wade* represents another major setback for women's rights with consequences beyond the state borders according to McEwen & Narayanaswamy (2023). The original 1973 ruling had affirmed abortion as a constitutional right, protecting reproductive autonomy. As Coen-Sanchez and her colleagues (2022) note, its reversal not only strips millions of Americans of these protections but such national decisions have global repercussions, legitimizing efforts to roll back reproductive freedoms and weaken commitments to gender equality. The ruling has intensified anti-gender sentiments, strengthening networks that oppose women's rights and LGBTQIA+ rights. This, they say, illustrates the fragility of hard-won protections and illustrates how national decisions can have global consequences, emboldening anti-gender actors worldwide (Coen-Sanchez et al., 2022). Similarly, Graff and her colleague (2018) argue that the 2008 global financial crisis created fertile ground for right-wing populist movements that linked social and economic insecurity to gender and sexual rights, positioning heteropatriarchy as a stabilizing force. Central organizations such as the Center for Family and Human Rights (C-Fam), International Organization of the Family (IOF), World Congress of Families (WCF), and the UN Family Rights Caucus play pivotal roles in institutionalizing anti-gender advocacy within international policymaking (McEwen & Narayanaswamy, 2023). These groups strategically co-opt UN frameworks, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), to legitimize anti-rights agendas (Cupać & Ebetürk, 2020).

⁷ *Heteronormativity* describes „a system that institutionalizes heterosexuality as the standard for legitimate and expected social and sexual relations” (Ferber et al., 2017, xxv).

According to Mc Ewen and Narayanaswamy (2023) the concept of “anti-gender” therefore refers to organized resistance and preemptive opposition directed against women’s sexual autonomy as well as broader gender and sexual diversity, particularly visible over the last decade. Conservative actors, often with overlapping agendas, have mobilized terms like “gender” and “gender ideology” in their efforts to safeguard a heteropatriarchal social order. As a result, the notion of an “anti-gender movement” has become widely used to describe the transnational network of groups and individuals seeking to maintain hierarchical structures of sex and gender across political, economic, cultural, and social domains (McEwen & Narayanaswamy, 2023). Kováts and Põim (2015, as cited in McEwen & Narayanaswaymy, 2023) capture this dynamic through their metaphor of gender as the “symbolic glue” that allows anti-gender actors to frame it as the sole reason for everything they perceive as problematic about globalization and liberalism. Importantly, these mobilizations cannot simply be seen as reoccurrences of the past but represent entirely “new forms of mobilization against gender and sexual equality” (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2017, p.253, as cited in McEwen & Narayanaswamy, 2023) that often share common shared discourses, repertoires of action, and organizational patterns that appear across diverse national contexts and that want to reassert heteropatriarchal norms in political, cultural, social and economic life (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2017).

2.5 The role of the Catholic Church in Anti-Gender Sentiments

Various scholars (see Strube, 2021; Adamiak, 2021; McEwen & Narayanaswamy, 2023; Butler 2025) have argued that Christian critiques of gender theories play a central role in anti-gender discourse. In 1995 Pope John Paul II praised women’s roles in family and society, while Vatican councils continued to defend heteronormative family models (Pontifical Council for the Family, 2000). In 2016 Pope Francis warned against “gender ideology,” which he claims denies the natural complementarity of man and woman, erodes the anthropological foundations of the family, and reduces identity to an individualistic choice subject to change (Pope Francis, 2016a, as cited in Strube, 2019). While in Poland Pope Francis declared that “in Europe, America, Latin America, Africa, and in some countries of Asia, there are genuine forms of ideological colonization taking place. And one of these – I will call it clearly by its name – is [the ideology of] ‘gender’” (Pope Francis, 2016b, after Strube, 2019, pp. 136-137). Marschütz (2021) critiques this Catholic stance, arguing that despite the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World/Gaudium et Spes*’s call for openness to “the signs of the times”, which former Pope Ratzinger kept referencing to and publications by the Vatican such as “Male and

Female He created Them: Towards a Path of Dialogue on the Questions of Gender Theory in Education“, Catholic gender critique frequently refuses dialogue, portraying “gender” as inherently negative (Marschütz, 2021). He argues that this resistance is further reinforced by conservative Catholic authors such as Kuby (2012), who cast Judith Butler as a “chief ideologue of gender theory” (Kuby, 2012, p.81, as cited in Marschütz, 2021). Even the Catholic Church itself keeps referencing Butler indirectly or directly, for example the former *Pontifical Council for the Family* which is now called the *Dicastery for the Laity, Family and Life* who calls Butler’s Book *Gender Trouble* “one of the main works of gender-ideology“ (Burggraf, 2007, p.289).

In a case study, Chołuj (2021) illustrates how the notion of “gender” has been politicized in Europe. Although introduced to international policy discourse through the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the term remains ambiguous in public debate (United Nations, 1995). Chołuj (2021) argues, that since most people only associate “gender” with sex and gender relations, it becomes vulnerable to political manipulation as visible in the Polish context. Through political discourses an ideological confrontation was constructed between a Christian understanding of the family and LGBTQIA+ people. This had tangible effects at the local level: municipalities and districts in Poland voted by majority either for or against the LGBTQIA+ charter. In 2019 this then led to the declaration of self-declared “LGBT-free zones“ of municipalities, districts, cities in order to signal their distance from the so-called “LGBT ideology” (Adamiak, 2021). By 2020 almost 100 municipalities and over a third of Poland declared itself a “LGBT-Free Zone“ (Ciobanu, 2020). Chołuj (2021) further argues that in countries with histories of political instability, where family and tradition provide key sources of security, interventions in gender norms are often cast as anomalies, pathologies, or even threats to the integrity of society and the family (Chołuj, 2021).

3 Theoretical framework

This chapter takes a closer look at the theoretical embedding of gender discourse for this thesis, drawing on theories from social science, political science, gender studies, feminist studies, masculinity studies and communication studies. These theoretical approaches provide a framework for a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics and challenges of gender discourse worldwide and in South Korea.

3.1 What is Anti-genderism?

Strube (2021) considers *anti-genderism* as both a right-wing intellectual strategy and an expression of group-focused hostility. According to the researcher anti-genderism merges prejudices with veiled authoritarian political programs and through this creates a powerful mobilizing dynamic (Strube, 2021). Paternotte and Kuhar (2018) stress that “gender ideology” is not an academic field but a political construct invented to oppose feminism, LGBTQIA+ activism, and critical scholarship on gender and sexuality. In anti-gender rhetoric, gender therefore functions as a matrix for policies promoting sexual and reproductive rights, same-sex marriage, adoption by non-heterosexual families, reproductive technologies, gender mainstreaming, sex education, and protection from gender-based violence (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018 after Strube, 2019). Similarly, Graff and Korolczuk (2018) argue that anti-genderism has developed into a coherent ideological framework with both conceptual structure and moral sensitivity. However, as Adamiak (2021) notes, opponents of “gender ideology” collapse diverse intellectual traditions into a single category, avoiding nuanced analysis of the political and academic projects they reject.

3.2 Theorization of Gender, Sex & Antigenderism according to Butler

This thesis is largely based on Judith Butler’s understanding of gender and sex. Their⁸ theoretical works in “Gender Trouble“ (originally published in 1990, revised 2002), and their revised theorization on gender in their book “Who is Afraid of Gender?“ (2025) provide the foundation for this research. Of particular importance are above all the theoretical

⁸ Judith Butler identifies as nonbinary and uses singular *they/them pronouns* in English. An example sentence would be “*they* have first published *their* book “Gender Trouble“ in 1990“.

considerations and philosophical constructs on gender performativity and antigender discourse in Butler's (2025) book from pages 1–92, which are summarised in the following chapter.

Butler (2025) examines how the term gender has become a central object of fear, distortion, and political manipulation by right-wing, anti-gender movements around the world. Butler begins by explaining that feminists have long distinguished between “sex” as biologically, and “gender” as socially and culturally constructed within context dependent environments. However, anti-gender ideology collapses these distinctions and treats gender as a dangerous monolith, as it is seen as a threat to the traditional family, to societal order, and even to civilization itself. Butler further argues that in many conservative religious and political communities, particularly within Catholic and Evangelical contexts, gender is seen as code for a radical, destructive agenda aimed at dismantling traditional norms around sex, family, and national identity (Butler, 2025)

Butler's (2025) main theorization on gender stems from an adaptation of the theoretical and philosophical formulations by Jean Laplanche (Laplanche, 2002, as cited in Butler, 2025) on psychoanalytic theory on psychosocial phenomena. Laplanche argues that fantasy is not just creation of mind but an organization of desire and anxiety that follows certain structural and organizational rules, drawing on both unconscious and conscious material. Butler adapted this to the idea of gender that is constructed by anti-gender and right-winged movements. Butler proclaims, that gender has become a *phantasm* – an imaginary force that condenses numerous social anxieties: fears of migration, the loss of patriarchal power, the decline of white Christian nationalism, and challenges to heteronormativity. These fears are bundled together under the name gender, erasing the actual conditions and complexities behind them. Butler describes this political landscape as a so called *phantasmatic scene* past – a psychosocial structure in which desires, anxieties, and fantasies are organized to support destructive ideologies. This structure is not rational or coherent; it relies on projections, contradictions, and moral panics. The *phantasm* of *gender* becomes a justification for violent policies and social regression, all while presenting itself as moral defence. According to Butler, this phantasmatic construction serves authoritarian ends by being instrumentalized for authoritarian, fascist and anti-egalitarian goals. This phantasmatic construction of gender is further mobilized by anti-gender movements as fear to restore a mythical patriarchal past – one in which gender roles were fixed, sexed identities were immutable, and family structures were hierarchically ordered. The movements against gender, Butler contends, are not simply reactive but driven by a wish to reinstate patriarchal authority, racial purity, and rigid gender norms. This constructed wish calls for a

return to a dream-like past that never truly existed but is portrayed as “natural” and morally correct. Importantly, Butler sees the anti-gender movement as deeply fascistic in character. It externalizes blame, targets vulnerable communities, such as women, LGBTQIA+ people, migrants, and strips them of rights under the guise of protecting moral or national order. This strategy depends on anti-intellectualism and a rejection of critical thought, casting all progressive inquiry as dangerous ideology. In this sense, the movement resists not only gender diversity but the very act of thinking critically about power and identity (Butler, 2025, pp. 1-24).

One of Butler’s (2025) key arguments is that anti-gender ideology is not opposed to gender per se—it promotes a very specific, rigid gender order and violently opposes alternatives. Its goal is not the elimination of ideology but the imposition of a singular, authoritarian one rooted in patriarchy, heteronormativity, and nationalism. Butler further critiques how sex assignment is often treated as a neutral fact, when in reality it is a cultural and institutional process that continuously imposes imagined futures onto children. This process is ongoing and shaped by norms, which act upon us repeatedly and form us in ways that are both embodied and social. Nevertheless, Butler insists that because this process of the construction of gender is repetitive and unstable, it is also open to disruption and reformation (Butler, 2025, pp. 29-91). Similar to other scholars (Strube, 2021; Adamiak, 2021; McEwen & Narayanaswamy, 2023), Butler (2025) supports the argument, that since the 1990s, anti-genderism has spread through the political right worldwide and has been particularly fuelled by political Christian actors.

Hark and Villa (2015) describe antigenderism as the linkage of aggressive rhetoric against sexual minorities to broader right-wing populist goals of undermining liberal democracies. Anti-genderism serves as both a symbolic link within the right-wing spectrum and as a strategic tool for self-trivialization, cross-milieu networking, and emotionalization in the context of a “politics of fear”. It is a central theme for digitally active anti-feminist masculinists and so-called “men's rights movements,” as well as for an emerging “religious right.” Anti-genderism therefore functions symbolically and strategically to unify right-wing actors, normalize extreme views, and mobilize emotions across different social milieus. It is a key theme in both emerging religious-right movements and anti-feminist “men’s rights” groups. Anti-genderism goes hand in hand with antifeminist movements, actors and sentiments, “gender” simply has become a tool to rally against (Strube et al., 2021).

3.3 Antifeminism

To look further into the gap between the diverging gender ideologies in South Korea, this thesis wants to delve into the online spheres of antifeminist groups. It is important to note that antifeminist groups are not a heterogenic group. For this paper a broader definition will be used to define antifeminism itself. According to the Heinrich Böll Stiftung and Gunda Werner Institute (n.d.), which specializes on feminism and gender democracy, antifeminism can be defined as the following:

“Antifeminism means fighting or rejecting feminist concerns and positions across the board, actively and often in an organized manner, be it as an individual in Internet discussions, be it in parties or other groups. Antifeminism is a central way of thinking and ideology in right-wing populism, the extreme right and other anti-democratic phenomena. It acts as a bridge to the center of society and contributes, among other things: to normalize right-wing and anti-diversity attitudes, attitudes and resentments. In doing so, it weakens social cohesion and undermines democracy.”(Heinrich Böll Stiftung, n.d., translated verbatim from the original German)

Seitenova and her colleagues (2024) support this in their report on interlinkages of antifeminism and antidemocratic developments. The scholars argue that as antifeminism is increasingly brought into mainstream politics on a global scale, it acts as a tool for right-wing nationalistic and populist institutions and actors to unite various antidemocratic movements and place their ideologies within broader societal debates. They report that antifeminism therefor aims for the establishment of alternative political orders that directly challenge human rights and democracy. Hence antifeminism is at the crossroad of political power and social hegemony. Within antifeminist discourse, the online sphere plays an increasingly important role. UN Women (2025b) say that the so called “manosphere” which can be understood as “a loose network of communities that claim to address men’s struggles – dating, fitness or fatherhood, for example – but often promote harmful advice and attitudes” (UN Women, 2025b, para.2) has continuously encouraged narrow definitions of what it means to be a man and promoted hate, abuse and misogyny. The manosphere acts through community building, a victimhood narrative and emotional manipulation and especially attracts young men who feel isolated. According to a study done with UN Women, “two-thirds of young men regularly engage with masculinity influencers online” which use “extreme language (...) [that] not only normalizes violence against women and girls, but has growing links to radicalization and extremist ideologies” (UN Women, 2025b, para.3). Seitenova and her colleagues (2024) therefore argue that the study of antifeminism and effective political and financial support of civil society is

deemed crucial for the preservation of human rights, the promotion of gender equality and due to the potential threat of antifeminist rhetoric for democracy.

Thus, this paper will investigate the discourse on social media platforms by looking at the language used in those online “manospheres”. One tactic that has been analyzed by various scholars such as Rothermel (2020a) is so called “victimization” – a tactic used by antifeminist communities appropriating feminist practices of consciousness-raising to construct a shared sense of victimization, the researcher stresses that this tactic is however incomplete and instead of being liberating the tactic leads to violence, othering and exclusion rather than liberation from the constructed victimhood. Rothermel (2020a) analyzed the affective-discursive dynamics in antifeminist communities in the United States and India with a qualitative media analysis to further understand the current polarization of gender knowledge in the public discourse. Rothermel argues that the delegitimization of feminism is a central aspect of antifeminist construction of victimization and finds three major tactics used by users in online forums: 1) Feminism is depicted as the “ultimate other”, which is responsible for the practices of suffering of victimization that lead to suffering and pain, often reinforced through events of violation of bodies, such as “war”, “terrorism” and the “holocaust” 2) repeated invocation of depicting feminists as “male-hatred” and “manhating” 3) the continuous associating with power where society and governance is labeled as “gynocentric”, under “radical feminist” and “gender biased”. This triple tactic is used to justify experiences of victimization by differentiating between those who suffer (men) and those who profit (women and feminists) (Rothermel, 2020a).

Aigner and Lenz (2019) understand antifeminism as a direct countermovement to feminism, gender equality, and emancipative policies. The researchers state that the core of the antifeminist values is the conservation or restoration of social, economic, and political differences based on sexes. According to Perini (2021), “feminists and anti-feminists have opposing claims to a range of positions on sexuality and reproduction. Importantly, regulation and control of female reproductive health was always a historic purpose underlying the establishment of patriarchal forms of male superiority globally” (Perini, 2021, p.26). Aigner & Lenz (2019) have further identified in their research that antifeminism can manifest itself in various forms, including 1) male-centred antifeminism, which seeks to reassert *hegemonic*

*masculinity*⁹ 2) family-centred, family-centred antifeminism, which aims to restrict reproductive rights and restrict sexual and gender diversity 3) antigenderist, which attacks gender research as unscientific and ideologically determined and 4) ethnic antifeminism, which attacks feminism as a threat to traditional gender norms. By looking at existing research on German-language antifeminism, the scholars have also found similar ideologies and strategies employed by various antifeminist actors, such as the reassertion of *hegemonic masculinity*, the discursive perpetrator-victim reversal and the use of hate speech (Aigner & Lenz, 2019). Another example of antifeminism in German speaking online spaces is Claus' (2014) work, who has identified the central strategy of masculinist actors as the assertion and re-establishment of *hegemonic masculinity*, while feminist actors are often imagined as altered antagonists who require the existence of antifeminists to reinforce their own identity. Ganz and Meßmer (2015) have found, that the assumption that boys and men are disadvantaged in society is often used by antifeminists to justify a generalized male victim status, while ignoring structural inequalities such as income inequality and underrepresentation of women in decision-making positions. In earlier work, Möller (1999) found similar results: Möller identified that, the discursive strategy of perpetrator-victim reversal can be seen in the media treatment of sexual harassment, where even the accusation of sexual harassment by women becomes an "actual aggressive act" aimed at punishing innocent men.

Globally, modern antifeminism (Blais & Dupuis-Déri, 2012) follows a similar trajectory, particularly among younger generations. The scholars have found that in "developed countries", young men express egalitarian views in some domains, such as support for gender equality in the workplace, but simultaneously claim that feminism disadvantages men. This aligns with findings in South Korea where research on antifeminism documents widespread antagonism among young men toward women (Jung Han-Wool, 2023). Furthermore perceptions of male victimhood correlate with reduced interest in marriage, as marriage is increasingly viewed as a feminized and oppressive institution (Kim Jo-Eun, 2023). The researcher also highlights that South Korean modern antifeminism is shaped by unique local factors, including the nation's military conscription system, which some men perceive as an unfair burden unacknowledged by feminist advocacy. Despite these contextual differences, Korean antifeminism shares core characteristics with global trends, such as framing feminism as biased and emphasizing men's

⁹ *Hegemonic masculinity* refers to a pattern of behaviours and views within society which normalizes the dominance of men over women. The concept of *hegemonic masculinity* came to prominence through the work of Raewyn Connell (1995).

victimization, which reflects broader shifts in antifeminist discourse in postindustrial societies (Kim Jo-Eun, 2023).

Lee Soo-Hyun (2024) examines how modern sexism and economic insecurity among young men contributed to the success of anti-gender politics and right-wing populism in South Korea's 2022 presidential election. Her article highlights the significant swing of young male voters toward conservative candidate Yoon Suk-Yeol, who capitalized on gender issues to divide a previously progressive young voter base. The study further identifies modern sexism, characterized by the denial of discrimination against women and resentment toward gender equality measures, as widespread among young men across socioeconomic backgrounds. This sentiment, combined with economic insecurity in a dualized labor market and traditional gendered marital expectations, fostered the perception among young men that women were competitors for scarce economic resources. As a result, Korean men viewed gender equality policies as reverse discrimination, despite not rejecting gender equality as a democratic principle. Lee Soo-Hyun (2024) argues that economic challenges, such as soaring housing prices and unstable employment, have intensified young Korean men's frustration over their inability to achieve "normal" life goals like marriage and home ownership. This toxic anxiety made them receptive to anti-feminist rhetoric and populist messaging, enabling the conservative party to mobilize support through promises such as abolishing the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family (MoGEF) and addressing perceived male disadvantages. Lee Soo-Hyun's research situates this phenomenon within broader patterns of right-wing populism globally but emphasizes that Korea's unique context, such as its low immigration rate, allowed gender issues rather than anti-immigrant sentiments to dominate the populist discourse. The researcher's study therefore challenges traditional explanations that tie right-wing populism to cultural conservatism or religious ideology, instead emphasizing the role of economic precarity in shaping Korean young men's attitudes (Lee Soo-Hyun, 2024).

3.4 Hegemonic Masculinity

One of the theoretical core concepts for this work is Connell's (1995, 2005, 2016) concept of "masculinities" and so called "hegemonic masculinity". Connell's concept of "hegemonic masculinity" is based on Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony. According to Gramsci, "the social inequalities of capitalism are maintained, for the most part, not through force but through the majority's willing participation in a hegemonic (dominant) culture that sets limits on what ideas and values are seen as normal and sensible" (Groff, 2025, para.4). Connell took this

theorization and reformulated it for social behaviors and expectations of men that “function to maintain their dominant social position over women” which have historically included attributes that are constructed as achievable goals and norms for men such as “strength, aggressiveness (and sometimes violence), competitiveness, achievement, self-confidence, and emotional control” (Groff, 2025, para.5). Jewkes and colleagues (2015) argue that while masculinities are constantly constructed, diverse and dynamic, hegemonic masculinity is typically constructed and embodied through heterosexuality and as “not gay” and “not female” (Jewkes et al., 2015, para.5). While *hegemonic masculinity*, is typically embodied by white, strong, successful, heterosexual men (Connell, 1995, 2016), it has distinct characteristics in South Korea shaped by its historical and cultural background (Ma et al., 2021). According to Ma and her colleagues (2021) masculinity in South Korea is heavily influenced by mandatory military service, which reinforces a strong, authoritative male image. This, combined with economic policies promoting male leadership in multinational companies (재벌; *Chaebol* as they are called in South Korea), has solidified a form of *hegemonic masculinity* rooted in Confucian ideals. These ideals establish a strict family hierarchy where the man, as the breadwinner, holds the highest authority. This system places significant burdens on men, who face long working hours and heavy workloads, while women struggle to find employment due to societal expectations that they prioritize domestic roles. Confucian principles historically subordinated women in Korea, reinforcing gender inequality and maintaining male dominance in both family and work settings. Ma and her colleagues (2021) claim that masculinism is the stepstone to power in the Korean society and has become the indispensable impetus of the post-developmentalism modern South Korea. The scholars add that this foundation of power is only reserved for those who meet the societal standards of Korean patriarchal norms. These norms, derived from Confucian ideals, have shaped a mercantile capitalist society that emphasizes a traditional masculine image. Similarly other scholars such as Koh (2008) argue that East Asian Confucianism is often seen as the "enemy of feminism" which also established a historical and geographical subordination of women.

The role of *hegemonic masculinity* is thus not to be underestimated in populism research. Turner (2024) argues that there are factors in sociological theories on modern development of radical populism that have been neglected in scholarly research such as gender politics, decline in fertility rate, feminism, marriage and reproduction. According to Turner (2024) radical changes to these pillars lead to an eroded social citizenship, traditional roles and status of men which further fuels the anger of men at the changing balance of power between the sexes and makes

them more susceptible towards populism. Turner even goes further by arguing that the issue of fatherhood as a defining characteristic of men and masculinity is understated or absent in masculinity studies and that this presents a serious challenge of the traditional role of men as workers, husbands and fathers. Thus, he argues, the turn to right-winged ideology is an expression of that underlying resentment following a sense of status loss. The concept of losing something such as the unquestioned authority of a husband supposedly also speaks towards support of conservatism (Turner, 2024).

Recent scholarly research shows that Korean hegemonic masculinities have undergone various changes over the past few decades, leaving Korean men caught in between various shifts and contradictions. Chung (2024) explores how hegemonic militarized masculinities in South Korea have changed and are being challenged in the neoliberal era. The researcher notes, that military conscription has historically been central to defining South Korean manhood, reinforcing hierarchical gender norms and legitimizing the marginalization of women and civilian men. Chung's study, based on qualitative interviews with former conscripts, shows that many participants continue to reproduce militarized masculine ideals by drawing on military symbolism and asserting superiority over others, particularly female soldiers. However, the researcher observes, that neoliberal values – such as individual success, emotional expressiveness, and the emergence of the “new man” – have led to significant internal conflicts. According to the paper, many former conscripts report pressure to succeed economically while having to simultaneously embrace softer, less aggressive forms of masculinity that conflict with traditional hypermasculine military norms. Another finding of the study is, that some participants expressed a shift in attitudes toward female soldiers after working alongside them, suggesting that direct experience can challenge entrenched beliefs (Chung, 2024).

This dynamic reflects broader societal tensions between military and civilian gender expectations, which often blur rather than reinforce boundaries. Christensen and Kyed (2022) note that the military institution is often discursively constructed as a key “masculinity maker” and compulsory military service considered a rite of passage that turns “boys into men” (Christensen & Kyed, 2022, p.1). The two scholars argue that the relationship between masculinities, warfare and the military as a social institution is such an important field of inquiry for feminist research and critical masculinity studies. Kwon In-Sook (2001)'s call for a deeper feminist analysis of South Korea's male compulsory military service supports this. Military conscription has been mandatory in South Korea since 1957, requiring all Korean male citizens aged 18 to 35 to complete military service. As of 2025, the length of service varies by military

branch, ranging from approximately 18 to 21 months (Military Manpower Administration, n.d.). Kwon In-Sook (2001) contends that conscription is not merely a policy of national defence but a foundational institution shaping what it means to be an "authentic" South Korean citizen, in particular a South Korean male citizen. The researcher notes that mandatory service in Korea constructs and reinforces critical social identities – citizenship, nationhood, masculinity, femininity, motherhood, and fatherhood – interweaving them with the idea of the South Korean nation-state. Her feminist perspective reveals how conscription embeds militarism into the everyday political and cultural life of the country and is especially important when researching gender discourse in contemporary South Korea.

Tizzard (2025) also explores the shifting landscape of Korean masculinity and argues that Korean masculinity is often “contradictory” and that the modern Korean men exist within a “double stereotype”: internationally admired as stylish and sensitive yet domestically criticized as patriarchal and emotionally repressed. The evolution of South Korean masculinities reveals a complex changing negotiation between historical legacies of militarism and new, globally marketable identities. Elfving-Hwang (2011) traces the emergence of *kkonminam* (꽃미남, literally “flower“ + “handsome man“ meaning “flower-like men”) as a distinct masculine archetype in contemporary Korean popular culture that emerged in the 1990s. Unlike the hypermasculine, militarized figures of the 1990s – characterized by stoicism, loyalty to the state, and physical aggression – *kkonminam* men embody sensitivity, aesthetic refinement, and an investment in self-presentation through grooming, fashion and sometimes even cosmetic surgery. While these “soft” masculinities appear to break from hegemonic ideals, they remain entangled with disciplinary practices of bodily control and resonate with transnational East Asian aesthetics, such as Japanese *bishōnen*, which embodies an androgynous man. *Bishonen* gained popularity in the 1970s in Japan through pop culture and rock bands. (Elfving-Hwang, 2011). Azizah and Dwiyaniti (2021) extend this discussion by demonstrating how South Korea strategically incorporates soft masculinity into its public diplomacy and economic branding. In particular, K-Pop serves as both a cultural export and a vehicle of *soft power*, projecting an alternative model of masculinity that contrasts with dominant Western hypermasculine ideals. This carefully curated image enhances South Korea’s global visibility while simultaneously driving economic diplomacy, especially in sectors such as cosmetics and fashion that align with the *kkonminam* aesthetic. In this sense, soft masculinity is not merely a cultural phenomenon but a state-managed resource that reconfigures masculinity as a form of national capital (Azizah & Dwiyaniti, 2021).

Elfvig-Hwang (2011) and Azizah and DwiYanti (2021) both show a dynamic transformation of Korean masculinity which has shifted from a militarized hegemony tied to the authoritarian past toward a commodified, globally resonant form of soft masculinity. Yet, this shift is not simply a linear replacement; rather, it reflects the coexistence of older militarized tropes with newer, hybridized masculinities that circulate through *Hallyu*¹⁰ and are strategically mobilized by various South Korean actors in politics and media. The intersection of cultural production, economic diplomacy, and soft power highlights how masculinity itself has become central to Korea's rebranding on the world stage. The tension between militarized tropes of masculinity, *kkonminam* masculinity and hybridized masculinities have left many men struggling to locate themselves within conflicting ideals.

By drawing on Connell's (1995) concept of *hegemonic masculinity*, Tizzard (2025) illustrates how hegemonic ideals have shifted over time in South Korea – from the obedient soldier of the postwar era to the self-sacrificing salaryman of industrialization, and now to the soft, sensitive man commodified through K-pop and Korean dramas. However, each ideal has excluded many men who don't conform, rendering them invisible, weak, or undesirable. By examining old Korean movies, Tizzard investigated how expressions of masculine vulnerability have been historically suppressed but characters in movies from the 1990s are not always portrayed as patriarchs but often precarious labourers, punished simply for voicing frustration, which according to Tizzard, is a recurring theme for Korean men throughout modern history. He also analyzes the intersection of neoliberalism with gender historically and argues, that as Korea transitioned to neoliberalism, the masculine ideal transformed from obedience to competitiveness. Men were now expected to constantly self-optimize by being stylish yet stoic, entrepreneurial yet romantic. Failure to meet these contradictory expectations, especially for men from rural or working-class backgrounds, results in societal marginalization. From Tizzard's perspective the mental health crisis among Korean men further highlights this marginalization. Men are consistently overrepresented in national suicide statistics, particularly among youth and the elderly. Tizzard contends that these figures contradict the assumption that men uniformly benefit from patriarchy. He indicates that many suffer silently, unable to express emotional distress due to social norms that equate masculinity with endurance and invisibility. Tizzard also critiques the commercialization of soft masculinity through K-pop and beauty industries. While South Korean men are the world's top consumers of skincare products, this

¹⁰ *Hallyu* or *Korean Wave* is the “the increase in international interest in South Korea and its popular culture, esp. as represented by the global success of South Korean music, film, television, fashion, and food” (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d., para.1).

trend reflects a burden of constant self-presentation rather than empowerment. Compulsory military service further interrupts male adolescence, reinforcing rigid expectations of service and sacrifice. He also addresses the backlash against feminism and the rise of online anti-feminist communities in South Korean online spaces. He attributes this to young men's alienation from gender discourse that frames them as privileged, despite their own lived experiences of precarity and anxiety. These men, he argues, are not villains but confused and unheard individuals navigating an unforgiving system. Tizzard therefore urges society to move beyond simplistic binaries and to recognize both the privileges and pains of Korean masculinity (Tizzard, 2025).

3.5 Political science and Populism research

The broader topic of growing antifeminist sentiments and rhetoric can be situated within the scope of populism research. One way to help understand the widening discrepancy between political ideology between men and women worldwide, is the theory of the “radical right-wing gender gap”. The theory of the ‘radical right-wing gender gap’ aims to explain the discrepancy between the sexes in terms of their political orientations, particularly in relation to radical right-wing and populist movements. Various research suggests that men are more likely to identify with radical right party ideologies than women (De Vaus & McAllister, 1989; Mayer, 2015; Spierings & Zaslove, 2017). Givens (2004) then came up with the term of the “radical right gender gap” for this phenomenon which she bases on survey data and regression analysis on the complexities of the gender gap. Ralph-Morrow (2022) reviews the statements of other scholars, that 1) the radical right is unappealing to women because women favor strong welfare states and women possibly see radical right ideology as antifeminist 2) men are attracted to radical right protectionism and xenophobia because of occupational threats. Ralph-Morrow (2022) disapproves this thought as she argues that masculinity plays a role in shaping the ideology and appeal of these political organizations. She finds fault with the undertheorizing of masculinity within political science, where men are “de-gendered” and an implicit assumption that only women have a gendered identity dominates. Mayer (2015) emphasizes that the gender gap in radical right-wing movements is often prevalent due to the rejection of feminist values. Radical right-wing movements call for a return to traditional family structures in which men dominate and women are restricted to domestic roles which many women do not agree with. Spierings and Zaslove (2017) as well as Ralph-Morrow (2022) argue that this dynamic is particularly pronounced in populist movements in which masculinity is celebrated as a symbol of strength and authority.

This is particular to the research of antifeminist discourse in South Korea, as scholars have shown that this political gender gap is especially prominent in South Korea and has been used as a political tool in the latest presidential election, Gong (2024) notes. Gong mentions that South Korean men and women have consistently shown around 15 to 30 percentage points' difference in their support of the main political parties. Another scholar, Chan Mun-Yee (2023), further examines the emergence of the *idaenam movement* (이대남, Korean men in their 20s) and the associated gender polarization in the context of South Korea's recent presidential elections. The study highlights that among *idaenam* activists, feminism is viewed as a hegemonic force. These Korean young men interpret gender dynamics through the lens of perceived reverse discrimination, believing that policies in South Korea that are aimed at promoting female workforce participation are instances of unfair competition. Chan Mun-Yee further adds that “the perceived structural injustices and unfulfilled promise of meritocracy, along with the fiercely competitive nature of contemporary society, compounded by the influence of neoliberalism and the overarching context of modernity, contribute to feelings of ontological insecurity among young men in their twenties” (Chan Mun-Yee, 2025, p.226). This insecurity is one of the leading drivers into supporting right-wing populist ideologies and rhetoric, which promises these young men stability through the reinforcement of traditional gender norms. The researcher highlights that neoliberal ideology, characterized by free-market capitalism, limited government intervention, and individualism as a core social principle, shapes these young Korean men's perceptions of fairness. As several other authors have already notes, Chan Mun-Yee also reports that Korean young men often see policies like mandatory military conscription as unfair which results into increasing resentment towards feminism. Younger male antifeminist activists feel directly victimized by feminism and believe that reservation quotas and similar policies undermine meritocratic principles. Chan Mun-Yee (2023) concludes that populism could serve as an awakening to underlying social issues and the *idaenam movement* could be viewed as a form of political resistance by young men, advocating for youth-specific policies and providing a platform for emotional support amidst societal challenges.

While these findings help shed a light on the complexities of the gender radical right gap in South Korea, it must also be noted that unlike Chan Mun-Yee (2023) who argues that “when viewed without the gender lens, [the *idaenam movement*] reveals a deeper sense of uncertainty and discontent with the social structure” (Chan Mun-Yee, 2023, p.255), this paper argues that issues like those highlighted by Chan Mun-Yee cannot be viewed in isolation from gender dynamics or a “gender lens”. According to Haraway (2013), gender struggles are deeply

embedded in societal power structures and historical practice is embedded in power structures, and therefore nothing in society exists outside of the gender lens as our society itself is gendered. This perspective suggests that the Korean men's antifeminist movement's grievances and perceived injustices must be understood within the broader context of gender relations and power.

Another political science theory that aims to explain antifeminism as a political movement is the *countermovement theory*, which explains how social progress and social movements often lead to a reaction in the form of a countermovement. Blais and Dupuis-Déri (2012) argue that men are in crisis due to the feminization of society and that masculinist movements are in open opposition to feminism and are therefore the result of the dynamics of a countermovement. Thus, the rise of feminism and advances in gender equality would have led to anti-feminist counter-movements. These counter-movements often arise as a reaction to the perceived loss of privilege by certain groups, often men, who feel threatened by the feminist movement as well as by gender mainstreaming in politics. From an international perspective, Eslen-Ziya and Bjørnholt (2023) illustrate how men's rights activism and anti-feminist resistance in different countries, in this case Turkey and Norway, occur in similar ways in response to feminist advances. These movements seek to defend traditional gender roles and undermine feminist efforts, often through organizing in online communities and political campaigns.

3.6 Feminist communication studies and the role of social media

Feminist communication studies offer a valuable approach to analyze the landscape of antifeminist discourse in South Korea. This approach, rooted in feminist theory, aims to deconstruct societal and scientific norms that perpetuate gender asymmetries (Dorer, 2023). By challenging fixed, binary constructions of gender, Dorer notes that feminist communication and media studies seek to critique and transform these asymmetries through interdisciplinary. Theoretically the field often draws on the work of post-structuralist theorists like Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, who highlight the fluidity and constructed nature of gender identities. Commonalities among feminist theoretical approaches include a critical reflection of society and science, interdisciplinarity, and the recognition of gender ideology's impact on all areas of society. Feminist theory also emphasizes the need for interdisciplinary knowledge and the effects of gender ideology on all areas of society. Post-structuralist approaches, such as Foucault's discourse analysis, provide a framework for understanding how language constructs

reality and perpetuates gender norms (Dorer, 2023). Feminist media research increasingly faces challenges, including changing public spheres and rising right-wing populist movements that question and actively fight against achieved gender equality policy (Thomas, 2023).

Social media additionally plays a crucial role in the dissemination and amplification of gender discourse, both online and offline, as argued by Wei Xue & Rose (2022). Social media platforms, such as wikis, web blogs, microblogs, and social networks, have become instrumental in the antifeminist discourse as they are user-centred and participatory, encouraging participation, exchange, networking, and self-expression (Wei Xue & Rose, 2022). In the context of South Korea, social media and online platforms are particularly important for analyzing antifeminism given Korea's exceptionally high internet and social media penetration rates. As of January 2025, 97.4% of the South Korean population were internet users, totalling 50.4 million individuals, and 94.7% of the population actively used social media platforms (DataReportal, 2025). These figures highlight how integral the internet is to everyday life in South Korea, creating a unique digital environment where social attitudes, including those surrounding gender, are both reflected and shaped. Furthermore, social media can be considered as a "laboratory of a new cultural struggle" where positions in discursive partial public spheres reinforce each other and become radicalized (Ganz & Meßmer, 2015, p.59). In this context, feminist issues are no longer only discussed in niches but visibly in broad public spheres, requiring feminist positions and content to be constantly defended, justified, and legitimized (Carstensen, 2023). Right-wing populist parties and organizations have also recognized the benefits of social media for mobilizing their causes, using platforms such as websites, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, *blogs*¹¹ and *vlogs*¹² to address supporters and voters (Pajnik & Sauer, 2017).

Social media has become a key battleground for gender discourse. By examining online internet discourse, this paper can help to gain insights into the language used by antifeminist groups and develop a better understanding of the complex dynamics at play in online gender discourse. South Korea's digital spaces—particularly anonymous online communities have become breeding grounds for *cybermasculinity*¹³, misogyny, and political extremism as noted by various authors (Kwon In-Sook, 2001; Park Geun-Hong, 2013; Bae, 2024; Moon Min-Young, 2024). Park Geun-Hong (2013) describes the platform *Ilbe*, a far-right online community in

¹¹ *blog* is a regularly updated website, web page or social media account (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.).

¹² *vlog* is the abbreviation of the word "video" + "blog" so a video version of a *blog*, where a person or group regularly posts short videos (Oxford Dictionary, n.d.).

¹³ *Cybermasculinity* refers to "the phenomenon of male online users continuing to sexualize and objectify people of marginalized gendered identities" (Kwon Jung-Min, 2011, p.223).

South Korea, as a particularly toxic place, which strives mostly on antifeminism, regionalism, anti-liberalism, and a rejection of democratic norms while loosely having a nationalistic ideology. *Ilbe* users, also known as "*Ilbe* bugs/insects" (일베충, *Ilbe-Chung*), often post extreme and offensive content, ranging from glorification of authoritarianism to mockery of the dead and rape victims, demonstrating a form of expressive nihilism. The author argues that *Ilbe* is thus less ideologically consistent and more a symptom of youth disillusionment, economic precarity, and generational backlash (Park Geun-Hong, 2013).

Lee Ho-Jeong (2021) also examines the online platform *Ilbe* by analyzing the development and cultural dynamics of the alt-right online-community in South Korea. This study situates *Ilbe* within the broader context of digital *alt-right movements*¹⁴, which have predominantly been studied in Western contexts and demonstrates how such movements manifest in Asia. Through an online contextual analysis of 1,628 high-engagement posts and 9,102 related newspaper articles, the study traces *Ilbe*'s evolution from a digital space for provocative humor to an influential alt-right community, and ultimately, to a forum predominantly characterized mainly by misogyny and hate speech. *Ilbe* originated as an offshoot of the popular Korean forum *DC Inside* and fostered a culture of exclusivity, particularly by actively banning female users and promoting male-dominated "loser culture" (Lee Ho-Jeong, 2021, p.275). Users on the platform often frame themselves as victims of societal disadvantages, employing narratives of "imagined exploitation" to justify their opposition to perceived enemies, including feminists, liberals, and non-conservatives (Lee Ho-Jeong, 2021, p.275). The study highlights how *Ilbe* users employ memes and visual content to spread their messages, framing their participation as a humorous game where upsetting others is viewed as a form of victory. The researcher notes that this humorous and antagonistic culture actually masks deeper ideological tendencies, including the promotion of conservative politics and the demonization of liberals, who are often labeled as "commies" or "North Korean spies" (Lee Ho-Jeong, 2021, p.276). A notable finding of the scholar is the clear shift in *Ilbe*'s thematic focus over time. While the platform initially centered on political criticism, it has, since 2017, become overwhelmingly centered around misogyny and sexually explicit content. She notes that this reflects a broader societal backlash against gender equality movements in Korea. Despite the pervasive hostility, the study identifies a sense of camaraderie and empathy within the online platform, though this is strictly confined

¹⁴ *Alt-right*, an abbreviation for "alternative right", is a „right-wing ideological movement characterized by a rejection of mainstream politics and by the use of online media to disseminate provocative content, often expressing opposition to racial, religious, or gender equality“ (Oxford Dictionary, n.d., para 1).

to its members. According to Lee Ho-Jeong (2021) *Ilbe* therefore exemplifies how participatory digital cultures can simultaneously foster community and amplify hate.

Kwon Jung-Min (2011) on the other hand, focused her scientific paper on the Korean online forum *DC Inside*, one of Korea's most trafficked websites. She investigates the website for the performance of *cybermasculinity* – a concept first introduced by Hall (1996) as a “new” form of masculinity that has emerged with the Internet. Hall identified several configurations of its deployment such as “conversational dominance”¹⁵, “textual harassment”, “heterosexism”¹⁶, “physical hierarchies”, and the “talking penis”¹⁷ (Hall, 1996, p.154, as cited in Kwon Jung-Min, 2011). In her paper Kwon Jung-Min (2011) identified that the platform fosters *cybermasculinity* through practices such as conversational dominance, textual harassment, heterosexism, and objectification, often under the guise of parody culture. The researcher emphasizes that while *DC Inside* has sometimes promoted democratic debate, its inherently toxic gender dynamic, especially in specific forums such as the Composite Gallery, reflect an exclusionary culture where women and LGBTQIA+ individuals are continuously sexualized, ridiculed and mocked. The anonymity of the platform enables its users to express misogynistic and homophobic attitudes without having to take accountability. She further warns that these attitudes risk spilling over into offline social behaviour. The researcher therefore cautions that parody culture, when used to violate personal rights, contradicts its original critical intent. While acknowledging that *cybermasculinity* is only one facet of *DC Inside*, Kwon Jung-Min (2011) concludes with a call for transformation: the platform's wide influence should be leveraged to foster gender equality, rather than perpetuating regressive masculinities.

Another critical insight into South Korea's highly digitalized society comes from Moon Min-Young (2024). In her paper, Moon investigates how the fact that South Korea is a highly digitized society has contributed to the dual rise of digital sex crimes and online misogyny, and how social media platforms have served both as a site of harm and a powerful tool for feminist mobilization. The article highlights that various new digital sex crime forms have enabled perpetrators to commit increasingly sophisticated forms of gender-based violence while mostly

¹⁵ *Conversational dominance* within Hall's (1996) understanding describes the “silencing of female conversational partners” by employing online tools to exert control eg. by ignoring or dismissing women's responses and applying aggressive argumentation tactics (Hall, 1996, p.154).

¹⁶ *Heterosexism* is a “system of oppression that privileges heterosexual people through everyday practices, attitudes, behaviours, and institutional rules through the promotion of heterosexuality as natural and normal” (Ferber et al., 2017, xxv)

¹⁷ *Talking penis* refers to a tactic within Hall's (1996) concept of *cybermasculinity* where “men mention their phallus as a means of asserting their masculinity (...) [and] through the ritual of the talking penis, men transform a biological organ into a symbolic marker by which in-group status is maintained” (Kwon Jung-Min, 2011, p.218).

staying anonymous online. One form is the spread of so called “*molka*” (몰카, short for 몰래 카메라) which is the Korean term for hidden cameras or miniature spy cameras that are secretly and illegally installed, often in order to capture voyeuristic images and videos. In addition to this, there is a growing problem of *deepfakes* and *deepfake porn* in South Korea and worldwide. *Deepfakes* are images, videos, or audio that have been edited or generated using artificial intelligence. They may depict real or fictional people and are considered a form of synthetic media (Kalpokas & Kalpokiene, 2022). *Deepfake pornography*, or simply fake pornography, is a type of synthetic pornography that is created via altering already-existing photographs or videos by applying deepfake technology to the images of the participants. The use of deepfake pornography has sparked controversy because it involves the making and sharing of realistic videos featuring non-consenting individuals and is sometimes used for revenge porn (Dickson, 2019).

Moon Min-Young’s (2024) findings are further supported by Bae (2024), who notes that South Korea is facing a growing crisis of digital sex crimes, with a disproportionate focus on women, especially celebrities, minors, and teachers. She argues that the use of AI-generated deepfakes has become rampant, with 53% of worldwide deepfakes being South Korean female celebrities (Security Hero, 2023) and the trend is spilling into non-celebrity targets like students and family members. Bae (2024) notes that fake images are often shared in large Telegram groups, one reportedly with 220,000 members, and sometimes sold with personal details like phone numbers and social media usernames. Despite strong digital infrastructure, South Korea’s progress on gender rights and digital protections has starkly lagged behind according to the researcher - the infamous *Nth Room* case in 2019 being one example of that. The *Nthn Room Case* of 2019 is a criminal case that involved blackmail, cybersex trafficking, and the spread of sexually exploitative videos via the Telegram app between 2018 and 2020 in South Korea. The number of confirmed victims was at least 103, including 26 minors. The *Nth Room* exposed massive exploitation of minors, but only 28% of the digital sex offenders on the case were indicted in 2021, showing huge systemic enforcement gaps. Bae (2024) further notes that although a *Digital Sexual Crimes Task Force* proposed legal reforms in 2020, these were abandoned following the 2022 change in administration under President Yoon Suk-Yeol. Bae (2024) explains that platforms like *Telegram* and *DC Inside* are implicated in distributing these synthetic, sexually exploitative images. She argues that half of deepfake victims in Korea are South Korean celebrities, though non-celebrities—including minors and teachers—are also increasingly affected and Korean online antifeminist spheres play a big role in this. This sexual

abuse thrives in online environments like *DC Inside*, where anonymity and technological proficiency intersect with a lack of regulations. Thus, Bae (2024) argues, digital misogyny is no longer fringe but has long become mainstream, further facilitated by advanced tools and cultural complicity.

Hence Moon Min-Young (2024) stresses that the spread of spycams, deepfakes, and encrypted apps like Telegram enable perpetrators to commit increasingly sophisticated forms of gender-based violence. The *Nth Room* scandal, which involved the exploitation of minors and the monetization of non-consensual sexual content, exemplified the scale and organization of these crimes (Moon Min-Young, 2024). Social media and online platforms also played a critical role in normalizing misogyny in male-dominated communities like *Ilbe*, where slurs such as *kimchi-nyeo* (김치녀; a derogatory term for Korean women) became widespread. These digital spaces contributed to a hostile online environment and even inspired offline violence, as seen in the *2016 Gangnam Station murder*: In 2016, at the Gangnam subway station in Seoul, a 34-year-old Korean man stabbed a woman he had never met before, to death, and later claimed that he killed her out of his hatred for women as he had been ignored and humiliated by women throughout all his life. Although the police later argued that the incident was not a hate crime against women, many feminists argued this incident was deeply rooted in misogynistic ideology promoted online and clearly a *femicide*¹⁸ (Moon Min-Young, 2024).

However, Moon Min-Young (2024) argues, these same digital tools have also empowered digital feminist activism. Online communities of women, such as those who formed *Megalia*, initially emerged from forums like *DC Inside* and began using satirical language and mirrored slurs to expose the hypocrisy of platform moderation and public discourse. While often labeled as misandrist, *Megalia* succeeded in achieving real-world impact: it helped shut down *Soranet*, Korea's largest illegal pornography site, and reframed public narratives around misogynistic violence (Moon Min-Young, 2024). Social media also facilitated large-scale feminist mobilization in South Korea. In 2018, digital feminists organized the largest women's protest in Korean history, triggered by gender-biased law enforcement. These protests, organized anonymously through platforms like *Daum*, drew over 110,000 participants, highlighting the deep distrust in governmental institutions and the power of decentralized online organizing. Despite government efforts like the 2017 *Comprehensive Countermeasures Against Digital Sex Crime*, enforcement has been inconsistent. Moon Min-Young criticizes both technical

¹⁸ *Femicide* is a term for the intentional murder of women or girls because of their gender (WHO, 2012).

challenges (such as evasion through encrypted platforms and overseas servers) and political setbacks, including anti-feminist rhetoric by President Yoon Suk-Yeol, who promised to abolish the Ministry of Gender Equality and cut support programs as part of his appeal to disgruntled young men. Still, Moon Min-Young identifies emerging avenues for reform, such as partnerships with tech companies to enforce the “*right to be forgotten*”, which was announced in May 2016 by South Korea's Communications Commission (KCC) and allowed citizens to request search engines and website administrators to restrict their own postings from being accessible publicly (KCC, 2016). Other emerging avenues for reform were international cooperations through the *Budapest Convention on Cybercrime* and targeted legal advocacy. Moon Min-Young therefore urges Korean feminist groups to engage international human rights frameworks and reframe digital sex crimes as global human rights violations, amplifying pressure for systemic change (Moon Min-Young, 2024).

As the various scholars (Kwon, 2011; Lee Ho-Jeong, 2021; Moon Min-Young, 2024; Bae 2024) have pointed out, South Korea's digital space thus acts as both a symptom and amplifier of broader social tensions regarding various social topics, especially gender discourse. The authors also note that various platforms such as *Ilbe* and *DC Inside* further reinforce and spread misogyny and antifeminist sentiments. Social media platforms being amplifiers for broader social tension can also be seen by recent statistical data of hate speech after political events. Moon Joon-Hyun (2025b) reports that there has been a dramatic surge in online hate speech and extremist rhetoric in South Korea following the declaration of martial law on December 3, 2024. Government data showed nearly 3,600 posts flagged for removal across major internet platforms during this time of political upheaval and President Yoon Suk-Yeol's process of impeachment. Within three months, regulators removed a year's worth of harmful content, with *DC Inside* accounting for nearly 60% of the hate- or discriminatory posts, and *Ilbe* accounting for nearly 40% of the rest of the postings that had to be removed. *DC Inside* became the epicentre of this digital radicalization during the political tumult after the martial law declaration, with some of its “galleries” (forums) like the *US Politics Gallery* and *People Power Party Gallery* seeing explosive growth – from 2,547 posts in November 2024 to over 330,000 in January 2025. His report also connects online rhetoric to real-world action, citing evidence that *DC Inside* users posted court building maps and plans ahead of the right-winged January 19, 2025, riot at Seoul Western District Court in support of the former president Yoon (Moon Joon-Hyun, 2025b). This stresses the need to look further into gender discourse on *DC Inside* and *Ilbe*, as hate-speech and misogyny are particularly rampant on these online forum platforms as Kwon Jung-Min (2011) and Moon Min-Young (2024) have already noted.

4 Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach to explore the discursive antifeminist dynamics, cultural narratives, and socio-political meanings surrounding the gender discourse on South Korean online forums. For this study the internet forums *DC Inside* and *Ilbe* will be analyzed.

The decision to use qualitative methodology is grounded in a broader understanding of development as a form of social change, rather than a geographically or economically bounded concept (Dannecker & Englert, 2014). As such, development research is defined by its analytical focus on social processes, questions, and theoretical frameworks, rather than specific locations. Dannecker and Englert (2014) emphasize that the core aim of qualitative research lies in understanding, rather than merely explaining phenomena in the positivist tradition. Drawing on Weber's (1972) notion of "methodically controlled understanding of others" (translated from German, original: *Fremdverstehen*), the goal is to generate context-sensitive interpretations of social practices, discourses, and interactions that could not be fully captured through standardized and quantitative means (Arbeitsgruppe Bielefelder Soziologen, 1973; cited after Dannecker & Englert, 2014).

The study's qualitative research design is rooted in post-structural critical discourse analysis (CDA). Post-structuralism combines various theories and concepts that have a criticism of structuralism in common: linguistic and social structures are no longer understood as fixed, predetermined, closed, statistical totality, but are interpreted as dynamic processes of meaning construction (Dorer, 2023). A feminist reinterpretation and further development took place within the framework of the post-structuralist approaches of Jacques Derrida's and Michel Foucault's discourse analysis as well as Jacques Lacan's neo-psychoanalysis. According to Dorer (2023) their post-structural theoretical philosophies emphasizes that "language does not express reality but produces meanings" (trans., Dorer, 2023, p.15). The system of language is therefore the place and mode in which reality is constructed in a continuous process by means of assigning meanings and labelling practices. According to post-structuralist approaches, masculinity and femininity are not fixed identities, but fields of meaning constituted by language. With his discourse analysis, Foucault provided the linguistic turn and the socio-theoretical framework for how subject construction and symbolic order intertwine and further lead to the normalization of the binary idea of gender (Dorer, 2023).

This methodological orientation aligns with the nature of the research topic: the rise of digital far-right antifeminist subcultures, gendered discourses, and political radicalization in Korean online spaces. These are complex, culturally embedded phenomena that require interpretation of symbolic practices, meanings, and shifting social norms – processes best accessed through qualitative explorations (Flick et al., 2006; Mayring & Fenzl; 2019; Jäger, 2015). This is further supported by the studies of Lee Ho-Jeong (2021) who has uncovered that since 2017 the platform *Ilbe*, which used to be a place for political criticism, has overwhelmingly turned into a misogynistic platform with sexually explicit and degrading content. Moon Min-Young's (2023) research further shows that Korea's highly digitalized society has led to dual rise of digital sex crimes and online misogyny. Furthermore, qualitative research allows for a reflexive approach, which is particularly crucial when working within feminist and postcolonial theoretical frameworks. Following Denzin and Lincoln (2003) and Haraway (1991, 2013), this study recognizes that the researcher is not outside of the field of investigation but part of the meaning-making process. Thus, subjectivity is acknowledged and critically reflected upon, not seen as a limitation, but as a methodological asset, provided it is made transparent and systematically integrated into analysis.

4.1 Critical Discourse Analysis according to Jäger

This thesis employs Jäger's (2015) approach to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to qualitatively examine social media content. Qualitative methods are well-suited to exploring the complex social dynamics at play, allowing for a nuanced analysis of the ideologies and meanings embedded in antifeminist discourses in South Korea. Jäger's (2015) CDA is a method of qualitative social and cultural research focused on analyzing texts, images, and symbolic representations. Its objective is to uncover how discourse shapes social reality and reinforces power relations. Rooted in Foucault's theoretical understanding of discourse, CDA is inherently interdisciplinary and context sensitive. According to Foucault, discourses are regarded as "battles" and "not just as mere reflections of social conditions" (trans. Foucault, 1994, as cited in Jäger, 2015, p. 33). CDA according to Jäger (2015) assumes that social sciences and humanities are never purely descriptive or objective, even if they claim to be. All research, even the seemingly most neutral, takes positions, whether consciously or unconsciously. Scientific work and its methods are embedded in social contexts and influence the construction of social reality. A supposedly value-free and descriptive approach reinforces the status quo and contributes to existing power structures being perceived as self-evident and unchangeable (Jäger, 2015). CDA according to Jäger (2015) emphasizes that social reality is always

interpreted through knowledge, which in turn is based on specific discourses. Power structures play a central role in this. Discourses influence how knowledge is generated and communicated, thus creating a reality that is permeated by power and ideology. Every scientific discourse is therefore always political and influences the interpretation and representation of reality (Jäger, 2015).

Jäger (2015) notes, that for Foucault (1994), discourse is not only a linguistic practice, but also a form of power that influences the actions and thoughts of individuals and groups. Discourses structure our knowledge and determine what is considered ‘true’ and ‘false’. They are not mere reflections of social conditions, but active forces that shape and change social realities. Discourses arise from the diverse endeavors of people in a society to position themselves and assert their interests. Discourse is not to be equated with ideology or society but represents an essential component of social reality. Individuals act within discourses and are simultaneously entangled in them. Discourses are not static, but dynamic and change over time. This change is the result of power struggles in which various actors attempt to assert their positions and gain hegemonic influence (Jäger, 2015).

Jäger and Zimmermann (2019) describe Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as a qualitative approach to social and cultural research that draws not only on linguistic phenomena but also incorporates tools from a range of disciplines within the humanities and social sciences. These disciplines, the authors argue, are always political – whether they acknowledge it or not. Even supposedly descriptive science contributes to reinforcing the status quo by presenting it as natural and unquestioned. According to CDA, knowledge is therefore never neutral. Scientific understanding is always shaped by the life experiences, education, and social context of the researcher. Researchers inevitably take a position, even if unconsciously, when interpreting social realities. Thus, science must acknowledge its positionality and the historical, cultural, and political contexts in which knowledge is produced. The two scholars cite Foucault to emphasize that the goal is not to pursue “truth” in a universal sense, but to examine the rules and power structures that define what is accepted as true. Foucault's insight reframes the intellectual's task: it is not about separating science from ideology, but about understanding how truth is linked to power and how it operates within political and economic systems (Jäger & Zimmermann, 2019).

Thus, CDA is inherently political, but this does not imply relativism, the two scholars state. Concepts and theories still require clarity and rigor, even if none can claim absolute, timeless

validity. CDA rejects value-neutrality and instead promotes reflexivity about how knowledge is constructed and used. CDA is interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary, engaging with a wide range of content: academic, political, media, and everyday discourse. Because of this flexibility and contextual orientation, CDA can be situated within cultural studies, characterized by its theory-driven, interventionist, and cross-disciplinary nature (Jäger & Zimmermann, 2019). According to Jäger & Zimmermann (2019) CDA is deeply concerned with the triad of discourse, power, and society. Therefor CDA-analysis is a crucial tool to help understand underlying norms and knowledge structures that shape social reality on gender in South Korea. The discourse on gender is dynamic and constantly renegotiated by political, social, public and economic events and actors. Butler (2024) supports Foucault (1991)'s argument on discourse by saying that since the process of the construction of gender is repetitive and unstable, it is also open to disruption and reformation (Butler, 2025).

4.2 Application of CDA in the context of South Korean social media analysis

The primary source for the qualitative CDA for this paper will be online platforms due to several reasons. Firstly, Chen and Gong (2023) note that online feminism has emerged as a new form of feminist expression, where young women worldwide utilize social media and other digital platforms to confront misogyny, sexism, sexual harassment, and rape culture, which are perpetuated by patriarchal ideologies. Social media provides a space for these expressions and challenges to be voiced and shared widely (Chen & Gong, 2023). Simultaneously, antifeminism and misogyny online have intensified globally over the last decade, bringing substantive challenges to feminist identification and activism according to multiple scholars (Kim Jin-Sook, 2017; Jacobs et al., 2020; Chen & Gong, 2023). Secondly, online spheres have become influential as agenda setters for political ideologies which is especially important when examining antifeminist online language and rhetoric. As Nagle (2015) writes, “expressions of misogyny previously unthinkable in the public sphere now appear anonymously on popular social media platforms, such as Twitter“ (Nagle, 2015, p.1). This anonymity allows individuals to express anti-feminist sentiments without fear of retribution, contributing to the normalization and spread of these ideologies (Barker & Jurasz, 2019). Therefore, online platforms are crucial for analyzing the Korean antifeminist discourse. Online platforms such as *DC Inside* and *Ilbe* offer a variety of publicly accessible data for analyzing the dynamics of contemporary gender discourses in South Korea.

4.3 Sampling

4.3.1 Selection of Social Media Platforms for Sampling

This study focuses on the Korean online forum platforms *DC Inside* and *Ilbe*. This decision was grounded in both preliminary research and a body of academic literature that identifies these platforms as key sites for the articulation of anti-feminist discourse in South Korea (Kwon Jung-Min, 2011; Choi Yoon-Ah, 2021; Eo Ki-Seon, 2022; Moon Joon-Hyun, 2025a). These platforms are not only among the most active male-dominated online communities in South Korea, but they also serve as online spaces where misogynistic, nationalist, and anti-progressive sentiments are produced and circulated.

DC Inside (디시인사이드), originally founded in 1999 as a digital photography forum, has since evolved into one of South Korea's largest and most influential internet communities. While it initially hosted diverse political and subcultural discussions, *DC Inside* underwent a political shift over the past decade, with many of its users—especially young men—now gravitating toward right-wing and anti-feminist positions (Yi Yong-Seok, 2023). As Choi Yoon-Ah (2021) and Eo Ki-Seon (2022) have documented, certain *galleries*¹⁹ have become notorious for misogynistic discourse, the mockery of sexual violence victims, and the propagation of anti-feminist ideologies. This transformation makes *DC Inside* a particularly valuable platform for analyzing how antifeminist discourses are constructed and circulated in Korean online male-dominated environments. Moon Joon-Hyun (2025a) further notes that *DC Inside* often acts as a barometer for public sentiment among disaffected young men in South Korea, who increasingly see feminism as a threat to their social and economic standing. Consequently, the platform provides a crucial window into the gender politics of contemporary South Korean digital culture. Kwon Jung-Min (2011), in her analysis of *DC Inside*, explicitly challenges the idea that the internet functions as an inherently democratic space. Her findings reveal that the Composite Gallery was marked by near-total male dominance, the sexual objectification of women, and the ridiculing of non-normative gender and sexual identities such as homosexuals and eunuchs. Although *DC Inside* has at times functioned as a site of democratic political engagement, its subcultural practice of parody is often weaponized to

¹⁹ *Gallery/Galleries* (갤러리/러리) in the context of *DC Inside* refers to user-created forums organized by theme (eg. politics, music, etc.).

justify misogyny and hate speech under the guise of humour and free expression (Kwon Jung-Min, 2011).

Similarly, *Ilbe* (일간베스트 저장소), a platform created in 2010 as an offshoot of *DC Inside*, was included in this study due to its extreme ideological positioning. While smaller in user base compared to *DC Inside*, *Ilbe* is infamous for its overtly misogynistic, ultranationalist, and anti-progressive content. Its user culture is more ideologically homogeneous and consistently antagonistic toward feminist movements, often resorting to explicit hate speech, violent fantasies, and pornographic imagery (Lee Ho-Jeong, 2021). As such, *Ilbe* represents a more radicalized corner of South Korea's anti-feminist online ecosystem and provides insight into how fringe discourse intensifies beyond mainstream conservatism (Lee Ho-Jeong, 2021).

Together, *DC Inside* and *Ilbe* offer a strategic contrast: the former as a massive and diverse digital public sphere where antifeminist sentiments are embedded across a variety of galleries and user ideologies; the latter as a more ideologically consolidated and extreme website where antifeminist discourse is explicit, aggressive, and central to the platform's identity. Sampling from both websites allows for a view of how anti-feminist narratives manifest differently across the broader spectrum of South Korean digital spaces – ranging from mainstream conservative to radical right-wing subcultures.

4.3.2 Sampling Challenges and Platform-Specific Methodology

Before the actual sampling and discourse analysis, extensive preliminary work was undertaken to familiarize the researcher with the structure and logic of Korean online platforms. After various research *DC Inside* and *Ilbe* were chosen as the platforms to be investigated. Despite some ideological overlap, these platforms differ in their structure, user culture, and technical features, all of which profoundly shaped the research design. Unlike algorithmically curated platforms such as *Twitter* or *Instagram*, both *Ilbe* and *DC Inside* operate as decentralized forum-based systems. Rather than presenting content in a clear chronological or popularity-based order, posts on these sites are embedded within themed *galleries*, each focused on specific topics (e.g., *idols*²⁰, politics, humour). This means users access content either by navigating directly to galleries or by using keywords, both of which are affected by non-transparent algorithms. The

²⁰ *Idol* (아이돌) is “a professionally trained Korean entertainer who debuts under a major entertainment agency, either in a music group or as a solo act” (Toyryla, 2025, para.1).

lack of consistent tagging, limited filtering options, and the unpredictable visibility of content required the researcher to conduct numerous trial runs to understand how each platform functions and how content circulates within it. Trial runs were performed at different times of day, days of the week, and during politically noteworthy periods. Various search terms (e.g., “feminist,” “victim,” “woman,” “family”) were tested to examine the relevance and type of content returned. This process revealed important differences in how each term yielded results. For instance, while “woman” (여자/여성) or “victim” (피해자) produced an overwhelming number of diverse posts (e.g., idol fan content, family photos, news coverage), more ideologically charged terms like “페미” (femi) or “페미니즘” (feminism) reliably returned antifeminist discourse. Conversely, narrower terms such as “출산 반대” (anti-natalism) were too specific and did not yield sufficient data aligned with the research objectives.

DC Inside presented distinct methodological challenges. As one of South Korea's most widely used forums, it hosts an incredibly diverse set of galleries ranging from pop culture to political discourse. While galleries such as 반페미니즘 갤러리 (anti-feminism gallery), 페미혐오 갤러리 (feminist hate gallery), and 반페미자유우파 갤러리 (anti-feminist liberal right gallery) were explicitly devoted to antifeminist rhetoric, misogynistic discourse was also found across more general-interest and even politically liberal galleries. The platform's lack of transparent ranking systems and inconsistent chronology made systematic sampling difficult. "Most popular" posts are not necessarily those with the most comments or upvotes, and keyword searches do not return a clear overview of relevant content but rather a fragmented list of galleries. Moreover, posts are buried quickly without any reliable way to surface or track content over time. This made replicability impossible and required the researcher to adapt dynamically, continually adjusting the sampling approach through exploratory browsing and keyword testing. Importantly, the presence of antifeminist discourse within nominally liberal or centrist galleries revealed that misogynistic ideology on *DC Inside* is not confined to explicitly conservative spaces. Gender resentment frequently surfaced even in discussions with otherwise progressive or democratic leanings, particularly in response to feminist activism, gendered policy, discussions of military service or dating culture.

Ilbe posed an entirely different set of challenges. From the outset, the site is full of unmoderated pornographic content. Upon opening the site, users are immediately confronted with degrading, often animated or auto-rotating images of women in explicit sexual acts, most frequently in the style of manga or manhwa. These depictions commonly involve penetrative sex or forced oral

sex and are embedded persistently across all areas of the screen, appearing regardless of the gallery visited or keywords used. This visual saturation, more akin to a pornography site than a community or political forum, profoundly shapes the site's ideological environment. An earlier attempt to conduct structured sampling on *Ilbe* was suspended due to the intensity and frequency of this content. Even when navigating non-sexual galleries or using neutral search terms, pornographic material remained omnipresent. In the appendix some exemplary screenshots of these sexual images that are all-pervasive on the site can be found in the chapter 11 "screenshots of exemplary sexual pornographic imagery on *Ilbe* and most popular search terms" at the end of the thesis. For data protection reasons, all images depicting real people have been removed. The images were excluded from this chapter on purpose so readers can decide whether or when to look at them, but it must be noted that they are integral to understanding the visual elements of the site.

There is a list of the most searched keywords on *Ilbe* visible on the right top corner. The keyword "19", a reference to age-restricted adult content, is consistently among the top search terms. Other top-ranking search terms almost always involve gendered or sexualized keywords such as "woman", "female", "married woman", or the names of female Korean or Japanese celebrities. The keyword "Japan" appears frequently, reflecting both the sexualization of Japanese women and the aesthetic influence of Japanese pornographic *manga*²¹ on *Ilbe*'s visual and meme culture. Critically, even neutral keywords like "woman" often led to highly disturbing content, including rape fantasies, violent memes, and degrading slurs. These posts appear with alarming ease, even in galleries unrelated to gender. This normalization of misogynistic, sexually violent content forms a hostile digital environment in which gender hatred is systemically embedded. *Ilbe* posts often include personal accounts of romantic rejection, incel discourse, and resentment toward women, sometimes combined with discussions about plastic surgery, dating strategy, and male victimhood. These narratives reinforce a sense of grievance centred around masculinity and sexual entitlement. Posts frequently express homophobia, particularly targeting prominent gay public figures like Hong Seok-Cheon, who was the first ever publicly out gay celebrity in South Korea. His coming out in the year 2000, led to exclusion from media channels and the loss of various professional opportunities, as well as stigma, harassment and social isolation. Hong Seok-Cheon is often called the "godfather of the LGBTQ+ community" in Korea and continues to advocate for

²¹ *Manga* is "a Japanese genre of cartoons and comic books, drawn in a meticulously detailed style, usually featuring characters with distinctive large, staring eyes" (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d., para.1, nr2).

minority rights while still being confronted with harassment and homophobia (Kwon & Pyo, 2025). *Ilbe* posts also often reinforce internal hierarchies of Korean masculinity (e.g., Daegu men vs. Seoul men) and incorporates U.S.-based antifeminist rhetoric around "alpha" and "beta" males. Simultaneously, foreign women, particularly Japanese or Southeast Asian, are idealized in contrast to Korean women, further weaponizing racial and nationalistic tropes. Together, the sheer volume and ideological consistency of *Ilbe*'s misogynistic content reveal a tightly interwoven ecosystem of gender hatred, pornographic normalization, racial hierarchy, and militaristic nationalism.

4.3.3 Platform-Aware Critical Discourse Analysis

Given the complexities of both platforms, the researcher adopted a methodology grounded in critical discourse analysis (CDA) that went beyond textual content. Articles and comments were not viewed in isolation but were examined within the broader context of the platform specific design and structure and algorithmic visibility. Rather than treating each post as a self-contained artifact, the researcher interpreted them as part of a wider discursive ecosystem, shaped by interface design, search logic, and visual culture. Initial insights were thus drawn not only from language use and the ideology mentioned in the comment itself but also from how discourse is visually framed, algorithmically surfaced, and socially circulated on the Korean websites. This contextual perspective was essential for embedding the linguistic analysis within the broader discursive logic of each platform. Given the violent, graphic, misogynistic and dehumanizing nature of much of the content, particularly on *Ilbe*, the researcher took deliberate steps to safeguard mental well-being throughout the project. Regular breaks were scheduled, and strict personal boundaries were maintained regarding what content would be saved, quoted, or directly analyzed. Wherever possible, user anonymity was respected, and no personally identifiable information was collected. Furthermore, this research emphasizes the necessity of platform-specific methodologies. Traditional sampling methods used on more structured platforms like Twitter (e.g., scraping public hashtags or chronological data) are ineffective in the chaotic, unmoderated environment of these forum cultures.

Additionally, it should be noted that the original research plan and thesis topic underwent slight changes due to the unforeseen declaration of martial law in December 2024, which occurred during the researcher's research stay abroad. Witnessing this historical event firsthand shifted the focus of the study, bringing previously minor themes to the forefront and opening up new

avenues for inquiry within the evolving discourse. The complex interplay of gender, society and politics was particularly visible then.

4.3.4 Sample Approach, Size, Time and Selection Criteria

For a detailed CDA analysis of social media comments online, the event-based approach is particularly useful because it allows for the examination of influential events that shape the direction of the online discourse. Jäger (2019) indicates that a *discursive event* is usually based on an actual event. However, *discursive events* are possible where this is not the case. Whether an actual event becomes a *discursive event* depends on how it is disseminated, primarily through the media. Whether a result becomes a discursive event depends on the respective political dominance and conjunctures and thus on the field of sayability that is open for a certain topic in a society at a certain time. A special sign of a discursive event is the strong influence it generates on the further course of the discourse to which it belongs (Jäger, 2019, p.41). In the context of social media, *discursive events* can be seen through trending topics, an influx of online posts and even the surge of hate speech. As argued earlier, Moon Joon-Hyun (2025b) reports that there has been a dramatic surge in online hate speech and extremist rhetoric in South Korea following the declaration of martial law on December 3, 2024. The thesis will therefore focus on the gender discourse after the martial law declaration on South Korean online forums. Thus the following selections on time frame, sample size and selection criteria were made:

Time frame

This thesis argues that the declaration of martial law in Korea, the subsequent removal of the president and the subsequent new elections represent several discursive events that have had a strong influence on various discourses in Korea, including the discourse on gender and feminism. Therefore, an imaginary time-space span for the thesis was created, from 3 December 2024, the day of the declaration of martial law by Yoon Suk-Yeol up to 3 July 2025, which is one month after the 2025 presidential snap election that happened on 3 June 2025. The month after the election was also chosen as there were various discussions on the results and gendered discourse after the results, not only in the weeks and months leading up to the election.

Sample size

The study uses a purposive sampling strategy to select a diverse and representative set of texts. The sample size for the detailed analysis includes twenty posts from antifeminists forums in total, ten posts from *DC Inside* and ten posts from *Ilbe*.

Selection criteria

For the detailed analysis various selection criteria for the comments must have been met to be selected, these are the following:

1) Depth of content

Comments must be between 5 and 100 lines long to provide sufficient depth of content for analysis. Shorter comments consisting of only two lines or a meme were very common, but these were excluded from the structured analysis as they do not provide sufficient content for the analysis, and the goal is not the quantity of comments but to find articles with sufficient depth for the critical discourse analysis.

2) Independent opinion

Comments that only contain screenshots of newspaper articles, other people's comment or links without additional comments of their own are excluded because there is no textual basis for a critical discourse analysis.

3) Relevance to the topic

Explicit reference had to be made to the main topic of gender to ensure that the comments are relevant to the research question.

4) Community endorsed

As the online forums are often flooded with comments that many people do not even see or read, the comments chosen for the detailed analysis had to have received some kind of "community endorsement". For *DC Inside*, comments had to have at least 100 views and 10 likes to be considered for the analysis. On *Ilbe* the view counts were not visible and comments received less likes in general, as there was less traffic on the site than on *DC Inside*. In addition to that, many comments were not fully visible to the public; one could only see a preview but then they were locked and only available to registered users. Considering these differences, comments on *Ilbe* had to have at least 5 likes and/or 5 comments.

4.4 Methodological steps of CDA according to Jäger

According to Jäger (2015) the CDA analysis steps include identifying frequent patterns and analyzing their effect and the rhetorical tools used to produce those effects. For the textual surface, the main topic and subtopics should be identified, along with the use of visual elements such as illustrations, font and pictures. In terms of linguistic and rhetorical elements, attention should be paid to collective symbols, assumed prior knowledge, norms and values, nouns used, structures of order, the author's language, binaries used, grammar, mood, and tense. It is also

important to examine the use of subjunctives and commands, verbs, adjectives, and strategies of argumentation such as comparisons. Furthermore, the text should be analyzed with respect to its underlying understanding of society, internalized images of human beings, representations of the future, normality, and truth claims.

Jäger (2015) further emphasizes the importance of an adjusted structural and detailed analysis, depending on the research question and source material. After the structural and detailed analysis, a final comprehensive analysis of the typical discourse fragment is necessary. All previous steps only serve as a foundation for presenting the discourse fragments. He then argues that meaning is not created by a single text but by the discourse as a whole, as it moves through time and space and continually impacts individuals and societies. Through this process, the statements of a discourse become anchored in both collective and individual consciousness. Jäger (2015) stresses to always keep in mind that his proposed CDA structure for the analysis is not a fixed outline to be rigidly applied but guiding questions that may or may not be relevant depending on the material. Following the research questions of this thesis, as well as the need for a structured analysis adjusted to the material, a version that focuses more on the gender discourse as well as the social and historical context of South Korea was applied. Additionally, Jäger's (2015) proposed structural analysis is based on the analysis of newspaper articles, whereas this work examines online forum posts. Since the form of the analyzed comments differs from newspapers, various proposed categories such as (column, type of text, etc.) were redundant but on the other hand other points were added such as (gallery name). Within the detailed analysis categories suggested by Jäger (2015) the categories on "content-related ideological statements" were changed to fit the research questions of this thesis. They were directly based on the research questions to help understand underlying gender discourse on the ideas of masculinity & femininity, antifeminism & feminism, society & democracy, as well as future & past.

The CDA analysis model of Jäger is meant to serve as a tool to support critical engagement with discourse fragments, not as a replacement for deep, reflective analysis. One should therefore always avoid a mechanical approach and not fall for a fetishization of scientific objectivity (Jäger, 2015). Although the method is empirical and aims at objectivity, it also provides a foundation for critical reflection. During the whole process it is important to interpret actively during every step and keep notes, as these will then further prove valuable when transitioning from material preparation to the overall discourse fragment analysis. The final

analysis of the entire discourse strand is constructed with close reference to the results of the structured and the detailed analysis. The aim here is to present the essential content-related and formal characteristics of the discourse strand as meticulously as possible before a critical analysis of the entire discourse strand can take place (Jäger, 2015).

4.4.1 Structural analysis

As Jäger's CDA is divided into several phases of analysis that are run through in order to decipher the discursive structures of a text or medium, the structural analysis forms the first central in identifying and organizing the discourse elements. Here are the categories of the structural analysis based on Jäger's (2015, p.96) CDA proposal for the structural analysis but adapted to Korean online forums:

- Date
- Author (anonymized number)
- Title of the post
- Gallery/forum name
- Political self-image
- Reason for post
- Illustration and graphic design (picture, photo, caricature, meme, font, highlighting)
- Content summary
- Topics + subtopics
- Statements
- (Actual) discourse position
- Collective symbolism
- Normalisms
- Particular anomalies
- Preliminary remarks on the analysis
- Is the article a candidate for the 'typical' detailed analysis?

In this phase, the material is systematically analyzed in order to gain initial insights. This involves examining which statements are present in the text, which positions are represented, and which symbols and metaphors are used. After this initial analysis, the material is edited to further investigate the meaning of the identified elements. The articles for the detailed analysis are then selected on the basis of these findings.

4.4.2 Detailed analysis

The detailed analysis goes deeper into the structure of the discourse and looks in detail at the ideological and rhetorical elements of the text. The analysis steps of the detailed analysis inspired by Jäger (2015, 98) and adjusted to this thesis' CDA gender context are the following:

- Text surface
 - Illustrations and graphic design
 - Topics addressed
- Linguistic-rhetorical means
 - Argumentation strategies
 - Logic and composition
 - Collective symbolism and imagery
 - Vocabulary
 - Style
 - Actors
- Content-related ideological statements
 - Image of man/woman; male/female; masculinity/femininity
 - Construction of victim/enemy
 - Understanding of feminism and/or antifeminism
 - Understanding of society
 - Understanding of nation/nationhood
 - Understanding of democracy
 - Understanding of future and past
- Final overall analysis of typical discourse fragments
 - What message do the discourse fragments convey?
 - Which target group is addressed?
 - What ideology is represented?
 - What is the discursive context of the statements?
 - What is the relationship to hegemonic discourses?
 - To what extent is reference made to discursive events?

4.5 Language Barriers, Translation and Limits in Cross-Cultural Qualitative Research

Conducting qualitative research across linguistic and cultural boundaries introduces complex methodological challenges. Language is not merely a tool for communication; it is a medium through which meaning, ideology and social norms are constructed and conveyed (Mumby, 1989). As Van Nes and colleagues (2010) argue, translation in research becomes a layered interpretive act that can lead to a loss of meaning. Since this study involves Korean texts that will be translated and published into English there are some challenges that arise from this. As Dewi (2025) states: “Language is never neutral, it is always tied to the social situation, cultural setting, and power relations that take place between speakers. In this perspective, language does not only function as conveying messages, but also as a cultural and social identification tool, as well as a human thinking tool to structure reality“ (Dewi, 2025, p.10). In addition, Polkinghorne (2005) notes, people often rely on metaphors and narratives to communicate the complexity of lived experiences, elements that are often deeply embedded in cultural contexts and are difficult to translate with full accuracy. Translation, therefore, does not only involve finding linguistic equivalents but also involves an interpretive act in itself (Polkinghorne, 2005). The danger of losing culturally nuanced meaning is especially pronounced when moving between languages with significantly different structures and idioms, such as the ones that were used in the research for this thesis – English, Korean and German.

It must be noted that English continues to serve as the dominant language in international scientific communication (Bahji et al, 2022). According to Bahji and colleagues (2022), although only approximately 7.3% of the global population are native English speakers, and fewer than 20% are proficient in the language, nearly 75% of all scientific publications are written in English. The researchers note that this overwhelming predominance has historically and effectively established English as the *de facto* lingua franca in scientific research and publishing (Bahij et al., 2022). This dominance creates both opportunities and limitations. On one hand, publishing in English ensures wider accessibility and impact. On the other hand, it risks marginalizing non-English linguistic and cultural perspectives. While the researcher is aware of this, this study was intentionally conducted and published in English to maximize accessibility across international audiences, to avoid being linguistically isolated within Korean or German-speaking academic communities and also to bring the South Korean online antifeminism into a broader international academic discussion.

However, this decision required careful navigation of linguistic and cultural interpretation. Van Nes and her research partners (2010) suggest that ideally a native translator should be hired throughout the whole study to mitigate the loss of meaning but the scientists also acknowledge the additional high costs of a professional translator. As this master thesis was conducted with very limited resources and time, it was not possible to hire a professional native-speaking translator. Still the risk of losing meaning was mitigated by the researcher's working knowledge of Korean, regular consultation with native speakers, and a three-month research stay in South Korea. The author's research stay abroad, which was done in collaboration with the University of Vienna and Seoul National University, provided invaluable access to local libraries and opportunities for exchange with Korean scholars working on gender, feminism, and antifeminism. During this time, the researcher engaged in formal and informal discussions with native speakers, attended conferences, and held conversations with local scholars, all of which contributed to a deeper cultural and linguistic understanding of the subject matter. This approach was intended to enrich the analysis and counterbalance potential blind spots.

Van Nes and her scientific colleagues (2010) emphasize that qualitative research hinges on the faithful interpretation of meaning. When language differences are involved – as in this case of Korean and English – researchers must take extra care to preserve the integrity of participants' voices or in this case the integrity of the anonymous website comments. The researchers note that, translation, though imperfect, is a necessary and interpretative act that makes transnational and transdisciplinary knowledge alliances possible. They further specify that the risks of meaning being "lost in translation" must be carefully managed, but they do not justify a retreat into monolingualism. Thus, while translation and cross-linguistic work require methodological awareness, Van Nes and her colleagues (2010) note that they are indeed indispensable tools for ensuring accessibility of qualitative research. Despite the interpretive risks posed by translation and linguistic divergence, engaging in cross-linguistic qualitative research remains essential, especially in global transdisciplinary and development-related contexts. In their eyes, if researchers only work in their own language or their own geographical location, it would greatly limit our knowledge and perspectives. This would lead to closed-off areas of knowledge where ideas are limited by language, field, or region which goes against what transdisciplinary development research aims for. Working exclusively in one's native language and region can result in the oversight of critical perspectives and the reinforcement of knowledge boundaries shaped by language, discipline, or geography. As Novy and Howorka (2014) emphasize, transdisciplinary research relies on the integration of diverse knowledge systems to address

Image 1: 200 most commonly found words in the CDA, visualized via MAXQDA.

The critical discourse analysis of comments from selected *DC Inside* and *Ilbe* galleries reveal a consistent thematic focus and ideologically loaded content that is quite reflective of the far-right and antifeminist digital subculture in South Korea.

5.1 Textual Surface

5.1.1 Authorial Identity and Textual Surface

The authors of the examined posts were all anonymous, typically identified by usernames that were either random combinations of letters or slang-based aliases. Some of these usernames contained abbreviations or expressions such as “I want to die” (죽고싶) or “Hell Joseon” (헬조선) – a satirical and widely used term referring to the oppressive societal pressures in Korea, drawing a symbolic parallel between modern Korea and the historical Joseon Dynasty. These usernames set a nihilistic or sarcastic tone from the outset, establishing an anti-establishment and pessimistic self-image. Though authors remained formally anonymous, many articulated their political identities explicitly. Posts were often made in right-wing or antifeminist subforums and expressed clear ideological affiliations, particularly with conservative parties such as the People Power Party (국민의힘). Some users directly stated their support for conservative figures or used visual references such as images of Donald Trump or Vladimir Putin. These postings frequently revealed a deep frustration with the political status quo and hostility toward certain social groups, most notably feminists and Korean women, who were the primary targets of the analyzed rhetorical attacks.

5.1.2 Main Themes and Discourse Topics

A wide array of dominant topics and subtopics emerged. Frequently recurring main topics included:

- Gender and anti-/feminism
- Socio-cultural issues
- Politics and ideology
- International relations
- National identity
- Social anxiety
- Economic issues

- Generational conflicts
- Crime, Law and Morality

Subtopics under gender and feminism included the topics of Korean women, feminism, sexuality, virginity, dating, gender roles, patriarchy, and female bodies that were central to the discourse. These topics were often treated in derogatory or objectifying ways, especially in the context of antifeminist rhetoric. Within politics and ideological comments, discussions prominently featured electoral politics, the *People Power Party*, the *Democratic Party* (often portrayed as an enemy), election fraud conspiracies, dictatorship, and references to global political figures or systems (e.g., communism, liberalism). Socio-cultural issues included themes such as marriage, divorce, economic inequality, prostitution, pornography. Additionally, generational conflicts were addressed throughout various posts and very common. The posts often framed modern liberal values, such as gender equality or LGBTQIA+ rights, as causes of moral and national decline. The idea of national identity often came up, in comparison to other countries and international relations. The comments often showed strong anti-Chinese and anti-communist sentiments, along with support for Russia and Japan in opposition to the Ukraine, the U.S. and Taiwan. The commentary often reflected a conspiratorial and polarized worldview. anti-Western attitudes were also frequently expressed, often in conjunction with nationalist or pro-authoritarian sentiments.

5.1.3 Key Actors and Symbolic Figures

Across the comments analyzed, various actors and symbolic references reappeared in the discussion of gender in Korea. These actors are often viewed from a binary perspective, either in complete favour or constructed as enemies so one could say they appear as friend or foe in the discourse. Some of them are symbols of progress, others nostalgic icons or constructed as scapegoats.

Through the analysis various generational actors emerged as key figures in this discourse. Generational identity plays a particularly central role in the Korean antifeminist discourse. Age categories such as “20s,” “30s,” “40s,” and “50s” are invoked not merely as demographic descriptors but as symbolic positions in a moral and political timeline. Each generation is imagined as representing a different degree of national loyalty and cultural authenticity. The construction of the so called “2030” generation, meaning the 20- to 30-year-old people in Korea, plays a crucial role in this discourse. This adheres to the political differences of the political views of 2030 Korean women and 2030 Korean men. This thesis also supports the findings of

other scholars (Burn-Murdoch, 2024; Gong, 2024; Kim Hanna, 2025; Kim & Chae, 2025) where Korean young men feel continuously alienated from women, politically and socially. The CDA of this thesis showed that, commenter on *DC Inside* and *Ilbe*, portray young Korean 2030 as both victims and defenders, betrayed by a system that privileges women. In contrast, 2030 women are often portrayed as the causal reason for society's decay. They are denounced for rejecting traditional roles such as marriage and motherhood, indulging in sexual freedom and discriminating against men for political and economic gain. This gendered generational divide is not simply descriptive; it directly shows a political fracture. Young men in their 20s and 30s are frequently depicted as natural conservatives or reactionaries, whereas young women are associated with liberalism, feminism, and the *Democratic Party (DPK)*. This creates a stark binary in which age and gender combine to symbolize the broader cultural war: one between national renewal through discipline and masculinity versus decline through liberalization and female autonomy. Older generations, particularly those in their 40s, 50s, 60s are often remembered nostalgically and portrayed as embodying sacrifice, patriotism, and traditional family values. Their historical memory, especially of authoritarian rule under Park Chung-Hee, becomes a nostalgic urge for return to this authoritarian era.

Among the most frequently demonized actors are feminists, who are not treated as political actors but rather as existential threats. They are constructed as ideological “cancer” eroding the foundations of the family, gender harmony, and national unity. Feminism is rhetorically continuously aligned with communism, further heightening its position as an internal enemy. It must also be noted that there is a distinction made between foreign women & feminists and Korean women & Korean feminists. Through this distinction Korean feminists and Korean women are isolated and targeted as threats to the Korean nation and constructed as enemies. In that way Korean women & Korean feminists are seen as particularly bad and morally corrupt. Examples that are drawn include the comparison to other countries and the argument is made that those other countries have achieved “real equality” unlike Korea, where men are discriminated against. Similarly, *the Democratic Party* and “leftists” are accused of being feminized, weak, and treasonous – portrayed as forces that promote false equality, sell out national interests, and destabilize traditional hierarchies. In contrast, the Right, and especially *the People Power Party (PPP)*, are framed as potential restorers of order and masculine authority, although occasionally criticized for lacking the resolve to fully purge the system of its liberal and feminist contaminants.

Political figures within this discourse operate as archetypes rather than mere individuals. Park Chung-Hee is idolized as a symbol of national development, and patriarchal strength – a leader who embodied order and masculine energy. Vladimir Putin is idealized as an anti-feminist strongman, embodying authoritarian resolve and traditional gender norms. Donald Trump similarly serves as a symbol of anti-political correctness and resistance to feminist ideas. By contrast, figures like Lee Jae-myung from the *DPK* or former president Park Geun-Hye from the *PPP* are depicted as corrupted, feminized and tainted by progressive ideologies or excessive accommodation of feminist demands.

References to foreign countries are made frequently. “Advanced” Western nations such as Sweden or Germany are cited as models to follow. Conversely, Russia also emerges as a positive model: nationalist, orthodox, disciplined, and proudly patriarchal. The appeal of authoritarianism is evident here. China and North Korea are reconstructed as national enemies. The use of international comparisons thus functions symbolically, presenting South Korea as standing at a crossroads: between decline via feminism, LGBTQIA+ rights, immigration or survival through authoritarianism, antifeminism and control.

A number of recurring figures emerge as symbolisms such as the South Korean book *Kim Ji-young, Born 1982*. The book was written by Cho Nam-Joo and the storyline centres on ordinary female experiences in South Korea growing up with everyday sexism with a Korean housewife who becomes a stay-at-home mother to look after the children and suffers from depression and the expectations of Korean society towards women and mothers. By portraying sexism from a young age onwards in everyday conversations, the book managed to connect to hundreds of thousands of women and became an international bestseller. Since its publication in 2016, the book has been labelled a feminist novel and gained further attention after the #metoo movement gained momentum in Korea (Im, 2018). In the Korean antifeminist discourse, the name of the book has become a metaphor for Korean feminism itself. It is used to generalize and mock the collective experiences of Korean women, in particularly the women from that generation. *Kim Ji-Young 1982* is functioning as a condensed symbol of Korean feminism and everything that is wrong with it.

Male celebrities such as Cha Eun-Woo and Kim Soo-Hyun were also instrumentalized. Cha Eun-Woo, a member of the K-pop boy group Astro, is often regarded as the quintessential embodiment of South Korea’s contemporary ideals of male beauty and masculinity (Jaidane, 2024). Within the K-pop system, the designation of the “visual”, the member presented as the

face of the group, underscores the industry's entanglement with cultural lookism, where physical appearance is closely linked to personal and professional value (Wong & Yoon, 2021). Kim Soo Hyun, a famous Korean actor, in 2025 was accused of a former girlfriend's family of having had sex with her as a minor and having groomed her. This accusation came to light by the family after she died by suicide (South China Morning Post, 2025). The idealization of these Korean male celebrities therefore glorified either their masculine Korean beauty ideal (Cha Eun-Woo) or in Kim Soo-Hyun's case, allegedly having had a sexual relationship with a minor. This, in addition to the militarized and authoritarian masculinities of politicians like Putin and Park Chung-Hee played a big role in the construction of masculinity in the antifeminist discourse.

Concepts like virginity, marriage, and female youth also operate as moral and national indicators. A woman's virginity, marital status or her age becomes representative for her worth and value. Women over 30 are frequently depicted as worthless, especially if they are virgins, unmarried and childless. All of these could be interpreted as selfishness, corrupted morality and wasted fertility. Even Nazism and Nazi Germany are invoked symbolically on *Ilbe* in particular, not as cautionary history but as comparative tools to use their tactics for a new form of ideological totalitarianism or to legitimize fascist authoritarian orders to fight against antifeminism. More details about the symbolism and examples will be presented in the following chapters.

There are also various religious references made within the antifeminist online discourse. Christianity, Catholicism, Shinto and the Church are used as sources of national morality, control and tradition to reinforce a symbolic order grounded in sacrifice, hierarchy, and anti-feminist values. In contrast, Islam is usually presented negatively as the ultimate "other," representing unassimilable backwardness or extreme gender oppression. Paradoxically, several commenters cite Islamic gender restrictions as admirable and argue that Korean women enjoy too much freedom, and several elements of Islamic patriarchal structures should be applied to South Korea too to fight against feminism and to put women in their place. Arguments are made that other countries use religion to "control harmful femininity" but only Korea has no mechanism to control "harmful femininity" (Article 2 CDA, Pos. 16-19).

5.1.4 Gallery Contexts and Community Dynamics

Much of the analyzed content was originally posted in politically charged galleries, in particular on *DC Inside*, that shape the far-right and antifeminist Korean online discourse. These galleries

often made references to political alignments explicitly or implicitly, references to other galleries, often had their own terminology and group identity and showed similar argumentation logics. Some of the most popular galleries found for antifeminist discourse on *DC Inside* were antifeminist galleries such as:

1) The *Anti-feminist Liberal Right Wing Gallery* (반페미자유우파). The username of the manager of the group can be translated directly into “eradicate Korean feminists“ (한녀페미척결) and the description of the gallery is the following:

“The camouflaged feminists belonging to various right-wing galleries are trying to silence opinions only on feminist issues, talking about priorities and dispersing firepower. To be clear, feminists are the “core” supporters of the Democratic Party and are the ones who must be actively defeated. You can freely curse not only feminists but also all representative leftist groups such as Korean women from Jeolla-do. The division is your fault.” (DC Inside, 2025a, Anti-feminist Liberal Right Wing Gallery Group Description, trans. from Korean)

2) *Anti-Feminism Gallery* (반페미니즘 갤러리) where the group description is “until the day feminism is eradicated“ (DC Inside, 2025b).

3) *Anti-feminist, Anti-Political Correctness Gallery* (반페미반 pc 주의 갤러리) which describes itself as “A haven for those tired of indiscriminate feminism and PCs (political correctness²²)“ (DC Inside, 2025c).

The group pictures of these galleries are the following:



Image 2, 3, 4: Group Pictures for Antifeminist Galleries on DC Inside.

²² *Political correctness (PC)* refers to „a set of attitudes and behaviors that are intended to avoid giving offense to particular groups in society, especially those that have been historically marginalized“ (Sribniy & Soloviova, n.d., para 1).

The imagery used is very clear: The rejection of feminism is shown by the crossed out feminist symbol. The crossed out feminist symbol is very clear in its image language – wishing to put a stop to feminism. The second image shows a pictogram of two hands shaking hands beneath the “antifeminist gallery” slogan, which could be interpreted as a further symbol of group cohesion & strengthening of the group identity to those that are part of it. The last group image depicts an image that was probably taken from US right-winged online spaces or was directly inspired by US politics. This shows that there is a clear and direct connection to global antifeminist rhetoric and tactics. Rothermel’s (2020b) research supports this as collective identity building frequently combines imagery from global-local dynamics such as fragmented local fears with the rhetoric of a global antifeminist backlash and transnational movement. The picture depicts a demand for “Liberty, Guns, Bible & Trump” with the first letters forming the acronym LGBT. The mirroring of the word LGBT in a supposedly funny way shows direct mirroring tactics by far-right antigender rhetoric. In a way this image therefor acts as a form of humor and humiliation while simultaneously depicting wishes or demands from the far-right movement. This image therefore shows some of the main components and actors within antigender and antifeminist discourse: 1) the overall discussion of human rights and liberties 2) the imagery of a gun takes this argument further by including the right to defend oneself, it acts as a dual symbol for individualism as well as an militaristic and nationalistic component, that is ever present in antifeminist rhetoric online 3) the bible shows the interconnection with church, which played a big role in antifeminist and antigender sentiments historically as noted by Butler (2025) and 4) Trump is depicted directly, a popular figure within antifeminist discourse online not only in the US. These antifeminist galleries on *DC Inside* were used for the spread of misogynistic narratives and antifeminist mobilization. Commenters frame feminism as a cultural and moral threat to the nation and the future by employing hate speech, mockery, personal attacks, and conspiracy theories. The galleries serve as a base for memes and communal rhetoric aimed at discrediting Korean feminism and Korean women.

Other common galleries where antifeminism was situated in were political party galleries such as the following two galleries that kept getting posted in or referenced to in other comments. The most mentioned one is the *U.S. Politics Gallery/Mijeong Gallery* (미국 정치 갤러리) whose group description is “free Korea” (DC Inside, 2025d). According to Namu Wiki (2025a), this gallery originated from a forum on pandemic management, anti-Chinese sentiment and Christian conspiracy theories. This gallery is known for its pro -Russian, anti-Ukraine and pro-North Korean sentiments. Within this gallery a various and striking amount of conspiracy theories and fake news are rampant. After 2024, it became a major hub for far-right discourse

merging with various other groups as discontented users from other banned and restricted forums moved to this global politics gallery. Within the group election fraud narratives on the U.S. South Korean elections and conspiracy theories on martial law and geopolitical issues are rampant. Additionally, the gallery is known for spreading religious extremism and apocalyptic worldviews (Namuwiki, 2025a). As this thesis has shown, misogynistic, sexist and antifeminist rhetoric was found numerous within gallery posts. Another popular gallery for antifeminist rhetoric was the *People Power Gallery* (국민의힘 갤러리): According to NamuWiki (2025b) this gallery became the most influential political gallery following the martial law declaration. It is focused on election-related conspiracies, attacks against the *Democratic Party* and right-wing rhetoric. The gallery gained public attention in Korea after threats of violence were made against politicians, personal information was spread, calls for direct violence was made, as well as death threats were made.

These galleries serve as hubs for right-winged Korean online users and often accommodate ideologically extreme users, particularly after internal moderation conflicts in other forums. Antifeminist sentiments, misogyny and sexism were common rhetorics used to display the dissatisfaction with the current situation in South Korea. The galleries also have become a refuge for users dissatisfied with censorship in other forums, eventually uniting multiple far-right groups under a common platform. These galleries also demonstrate how digital communities on *DC Inside* have evolved into political and ideological battlegrounds, reinforcing far-right narratives through repetition, peer validation, and anonymity by moving the discourse from one gallery to the next. The interaction of antifeminism, nationalism and conspiracy-thinking within these spaces plays a central role in shaping the online discourse in Korea.

5.2 Linguistic-rhetorical means

5.2.1 Argumentation strategies and logic

The comments analyzed demonstrate quite a coherent and consistent pattern of rhetorical and linguistic strategies. These strategies perform crucial functions in ideological shaping and influencing the emotions of the reader. A strategy often used is the construction of an absolute binary worldview while asserting monologic “truths” and delegitimizing all kinds of disagreement. Dorey (2025) argues that the construction of such binaries by right-wing populist actors helps to identify “enemies within” or “alien others” against whom “the people” or “the

majority” can then be mobilized to defeat them. This then serves as a further legitimization of authoritarian policies and to construct nationalistic and militaristic symbols who can help defeat “evil” (Dorey, 2025). The discursive area produced in the investigated comments of this thesis is not only antagonistic and gendered but also aligned with authoritarian, patriarchal, and nationalist ideologies. Across the examined posts, a distinct pattern of ideologically loaded language, binary reasoning, and manipulative logical structures emerges, revealing not only a misogynistic worldview but also a broader socio-political vision rooted in authoritarianism, essentialism, and exclusion which supports the findings of several scholars (Jung Kyung-Ha, 2024; Kim Hanna, 2024; Kim & Chae, 2025; Perini, 2021). The comments employ a logic that combines emotive assertion, generalization, and deterministic causality, which allows for the presentation of subjective opinions as incontrovertible truths. The dominant and most frequent rhetorical means, argumentation strategies, vocabulary and logic found in the CDA are now presented with illustrative examples drawn from the analyzed data.

A striking feature of the examination on gender discourse is the repeated use of definitive, absolutist statements. The authors frequently utilize assertive verbs such as “is,” “are,” and “will be” to present opinions as empirical truths, thus removing any ambiguity and foreclosing space for alternative interpretations. Examples include: “they are,” “women are,” or “it is going to be” (Article 4 CDA, Pos. 48-51). The vocabulary is also rooted in binary constructions: men vs. women, right vs. wrong, truth vs. lies, strong vs. weak, national vs. foreign. Some examples: “men prefer” vs. “women dislike” (Article 1 CDA, Pos. 78–79), “for men” vs. “for women” (Article 6 CDA, Pos. 34–36) or “women are inferior animals” (Article 7 CDA, Pos. 27), “treat women like livestock” vs. “treat women equally” (Article 6, CDA, pos. 28–29). Such binary frameworks reinforce the idea of fixed “natural” gender differences, casting men and women as inherently antagonistic. These simplifications and binaries are not just descriptive but deeply ideological: they naturalize hierarchy, gender roles, and nationalist sentiment, presenting them as biological “natural” or social truths (Butler, 2024; Dorey, 2025).

A recurring argumentative strategy in the analyzed comments is the usage of normalisms. Link (2006) defines the term normalism as “the totality of all discursive procedures through which “normalities” are produced and reproduced in modern societies” (Link, 2006, cited after Jäger, 2019, p.87). In doing so, Link draws on Foucault, who conceptualizes normality as historical categories of modernity (Link, 2006, cited after Jäger, 2019). In the comments various of such normalisms were found which portray something as natural, traditional, or common-sense in

order to delegitimize any alternative perspectives. Normalisms as a rhetorical mean frames one certain way of being or living as the default and/or only socially acceptable way, thereby dismissing any other options of perceived “normality”. For example, statements such as “women are“ (Article 1 CDA, Pos. 80) and further arguing that “this is simply a non-debatable issue. denying this is a matter of ability“ (Article 1 CDA, Pos. 85-86) or “men have much stronger sexual desires“ (Article 6 CDA, Pos. 36) rely not on evidence but on a presumed consensus rooted in conservative gender roles. This strategy effectively erases any differing opinions and realities outside of what is considered “normal”, “natural” or “socially acceptable”. The language used is also often highly derogatory and dehumanizing, examples include language like “년들” (derogatory term for women), “페미 종자” (feminists as parasitic “seeds” or “scum”), “지랄이야” (“raving mad”), “개소리” (“bullshit”) etc.

Commenters frequently asserted intellectual superiority, positioning their views as self-evidently correct while dismissing others as emotional, irrational, or propagandistic. Pereira (2008) argues that the frequent use of the assertion of intellectual superiority in the construction of gender and the association of women and lower levels of I.Q. is transformed by constructing an apparent causal relationship through linguistic rhetorics - just as the ones found in this thesis. Statements like “anyone who denies this should just get lost” (Article 1, Pos. 76–77), “this is really the truth” (Article 1 CDA, Pos. 93), “not simply a matter of feelings” (Article 14, CDA, pos. 21) or simply stating “facts” (Article 10 CDA, Pos. 26) are signs of rigid truth claims, often paired with an authoritative tone. Such declarations aim to end any discussions by asserting a monopoly on truth. The construction of truth and untruthfulness is a popular rhetoric in populism, which aims to construct an in group of people, who are right and an out group, of those that are wrong. Hamelers calls it the “populist constructions of alternative truths that resonate with common sense and the experiences of the ordinary people“ (Hamelers, 2020, p.104). The logic is often framed in absolutes, eliminating nuance and enforcing a totalizing view of reality. Claims are made as if they are self-evident or “factual,” with no room for counterargument. Statements like these delegitimize alternative viewpoints as irrational, closing off discussion. This is reinforced through vocabulary such as “impossible”, “never”, and “absolutely” (Article 1, CDA, pos. 99, 104, 109).

In the examined antifeminist online comments, humorous elements and memes were found in great quantities. Bellè (2025) notes that this is a common rhetoric tactic within the populist radical right or far right, who frequently resort to jokes, irony or humour in relation to major

markers of ideology and identity such as gender/sexuality. She further argues that humoristic elements at the expense of women or gender minorities are used as a process of remodulation of gender, ideology, and sexism between micro and macro levels of politics. The performance of gendered, sexualised, and racialised humour is used to convey political belonging and a way to express domination, authoritarianism, hierarchy, and exclusionist values without declaring them explicitly in text format. Additionally, it is a way to be able to “speak the unspeakable” and talk about a perceived change or crisis Bellè (2025). Within the analyzed comments, humor was used regularly as a rhetorical tool within these comments, often in the form of mockery and sarcasm. Users rely on laughter cues like “ㅋㅋㅋ”, which can be compared to English “hahaha” or “lol (laughing out loud)” or extended forms “ㅋㅋㅋㅋ”, etc. to signal mockery and diminish the credibility of opposing views. Comments such as “blah blah blah!!!” (Article 1 CDA, Pos. 70) or “do you really put your hand on your heart and think that way? lol” (Article 1 CDA, Pos. 71) function both to ridicule differing perspectives and to affirm group solidarity among like-minded users through performative contempt. The vocabulary is also deeply derisive, reducing people or groups (especially women, liberals, or foreigners) to insults or caricatures “이 씨발년들” “fucking bitches” (Article 15, CDA, pos. 8). The word “한녀”(han-nyeo), which is a derogatory slang for Korean women, was found in nearly all the comments investigated. The word originated in the gender discourse in Korean online space. As Kim Jo-Eun (2021) notes, in the 2010s 김치녀; kimchi-woman was used by antifeminist users to describe Korean woman who judge men by their economic ability. Within feminist Korean online spaces such as *Womad & Megalia*, this then led to the creation of the mirrored word 김치남/kimchi-man, which is a word used to describe a Korean man judging women by their appearances. Additionally, Korean online feminists gave new meaning to the word 한남/han-nam, which originally only meant Korean man, and used it to show contempt for Korean men and to describe Korean men as misogynist, unintelligent and unattractive. The word gained such notoriety that its usage has been censored in mass media (Kim Jo-Eun, 2021; Yang & Lee, 2022). This then further led to the usage of the mirrored word 한녀/han-nyeo by Korean antifeminists to describe contempt for all Korean women. It must also be noted that the usage of both 한녀/han-nyeo and 한남/han-nyeo, which originally just meant “Korean women” and “Korean men”, now triggers a warning message, when typed into search bars such as Naver News. The warning message indicates that both are an inappropriate expression to use, which further proves the perception of the gendered derogatory expressions. Additionally, this shows how the language discourse is at the crossroad of the discussions on gender.

Another example of the language used in the comments, would be “애새끼들이 장난감 사달라고 떼쓰는 거마냥” – comparing women protesters to whining children (Article 20, CDA, pos. 14). This language frames women as irrational, emotional, and childlike, while simultaneously invoking anger and mockery. It serves to both dehumanize the "other" and emotionally bond with like-minded readers through shared contempt. The logic of the comments also often infantilizes and delegitimizes women by portraying their political actions as childish or baseless: “Like children whining for toys” (Article 20, CDA, pos. 14) or “They probably couldn’t even give a real reason for impeachment” (Article 20, CDA, pos. 19). This rhetoric is used to strip women of political agency by mocking their intelligence and intent, again reinforcing the idea that rationality and governance are male domains. Many posts use a simplistic cause-and-effect structure to make sweeping generalizations, blaming social decline or national failure on a particular group (usually women or liberals): Deterministic statements like “This is the result of feminism / democracy / women’s rights to vote” (Article 4, CDA, pos. 42; Article 7, CDA, pos. 26) or “the misfortune... brought upon yourself” (Article 11 CDA, Pos. 20) position feminism, democracy, or liberalization as the inevitable causes of societal decay. It turns social anxiety into blame and creates a scapegoat, that is usually female or foreign.

Some comments employ nationalist or developmentalist language, invoking authoritarian models of progress which supports Sanders and Jenkins’ (2022) and McEwen and Narayanaswamy’s (2023) findings. Examples of this language include: “Russia is a true patriotic right-wing state”, directly emphasizing “nationalism, anti-feminism, and male superiority” (Article 19, CDA, pos. 12) or even outright saying “Fascism is the ideology that can unite Korea” (Article 18, CDA, pos. 26–27) The vocabulary here connects masculinity with state strength and femininity with national decay. Leaders like Putin are shown as icons of strength and rationality; the image of his masculinity stands for national renewal. Some of the most extreme vocabulary suggests not disagreement or reform, but extermination, removal, or domination as solutions such as “Shouldn’t we eliminate all Korean women?” (Article 16, CDA, pos. 14) or “We have to take away their voting rights or kill them all” (Article 15 CDA, Pos. 20). This is the vocabulary of militaristic violent language, this type of vocabulary is often used in fascism, it constructs women not only as ideological opponents but as existential threats to the nation. The frequent use of violent language in regard to women’s bodies, especially on the platform *Ilbe*, through sexualized violence, death and rape threats is alarming and outright dangerous but very common within antifeminist discourse. Various other scholars have found

similar results by examining incel, alt-right, populist and antifeminist online discourse (Berthelsen, 2021; Heritage & Koller, 2020; Nagle, 2015).

Rhetorical questions were used in the comments to cast doubt and imply the absurdity of alternate views without inviting dialogue. Examples include: “Then what are we going to do?” (Article 4 CDA, Pos. 51), “Do these women...” (Article 20 CDA, Pos. 16), and “Is there really a country...” (Article 6 CDA, Pos. 26). First-person narration was used quite often, especially after saying extreme or controversial ideas. This could be seen as a tactic to normalize a discourse, lend authenticity and to get emotional support to the speaker. Statements such as “This is how I live my life” (Article 1 CDA, Pos. 114) or “Personally...” (Article 18 CDA, Pos. 40) often frame the said as personal opinions. Additionally, generalizations were seen even more often in the comments. Generalizations are like “Everyone knows” (Article 1, Pos. 102), “99% of them will choose” (Article 1, Pos. 82), and “They all” (Article 4 CDA, Pos. 54) seek to universalize individual perspectives and build on the construction of normalisms. Comparisons to other nations or historical regimes were made quite frequently. These serve to naturalize certain norms, values or warn against perceived decline. For example, distinctions are drawn between “Islamic” and “advanced countries” (Article 6 CDA, Pos. 28–30), while other comments offer comparisons such as, “This can be understood in a similar context to...” (Article 14 CDA, Pos. 22). These comments show a very clear idea of modernization and development and build a civilizational hierarchy which various scholars contest in their writings. Scholars like Mohanty and Said critique modern development theory for embedding eurocentric and gendered hierarchies. Mohanty (1988) argues that Western feminist discourses often homogenize “third world women” as passive victims, producing a civilizational hierarchy that reinforces Western superiority. Similarly, Said’s (1978) concept of Orientalism highlights how development narratives portray non-Western societies as backward and in need of Western guidance, naturalizing inequality and justifying intervention. Therefor modernization and development frameworks are not neutral but structured by power, gender, and cultural bias, perpetuating the “othering” of non-Western people and women within global discourses. Their criticism and theorizations draw on Foucault’s discourse insights on power and knowledge as the idea of modernity and development is also constructed through discourse, just like gender is.

Othering and the construction of in-groups and out-groups was a popular argumentation tactic seen in the comments. The concept of *othering* refers to the process by which a dominant group

constructs an identity for itself by positioning another group as fundamentally different, inferior, or alien. Its roots can be traced to Hegel's *"Phenomenology of Spirit"* (1970), where the "master-slave dialectic" illustrates how self-consciousness emerges through recognition of, and opposition to, an Other. Building on this framework, de Beauvoir (2018) famously theorized Woman as "the Other" in relation to Man, arguing that patriarchal structures position women not as autonomous subjects but as defined in opposition to male normativity. This gendered othering exemplifies how systemic inequalities are sustained through asymmetrical relations of recognition. Within this thesis the continuous construction of women as "the Other" is very visible through various arguments that are being made by the antifeminist commenters. Beyond gender, othering also plays a central role in the construction of national and cultural identities as various scholars have theorized. For example, Brons (2023) notes that out-groups are discursively produced through processes that mark them as "different" and often threatening, thereby reinforcing the cohesion and dominance of the in-group. The analyzed comments showed that users made a differentiation between an in-group (rational, male, nationalist) and out-group (irrational, female, liberal) but also an outgroup that is foreign. Examples include contrasts such as "treat women like livestock" vs. "treat women equally" (Article 6 CDA, Pos. 28–29) or references to "those kids" (Article 19 CDA, Pos. 40). The rhetoric used also often included imperative forms, often threats or scolding directives. For instance: "You should have..." (Article 11 CDA, Pos. 19), "Don't make a sound," or "You brought this upon yourself" (Article 11 CDA, Pos. 17–20). These statements are used to shame, discipline, or intimidate perceived opponents or readers who acted wrongly.

Nihilistic expressions conveying hopelessness or resignation, such as "No answer" or "No answer overall" (Article 1 CDA, Pos. 116, 123) were often deployed to dismiss further debate or dismiss liberal ideas and paint a dystopian future. Some comments move beyond critique into the realm of ideological suggestions, proposing radical, sometimes very violent, "solutions." These include: "The wisest way is..." (Article 1 CDA, Pos. 119), "Exterminate them" (Article 15 CDA, Pos. 20), or "Fascism is the ideology that can unite Korea" (Article 18 CDA, Pos. 26–27). These proposals reflect a fantasy of authoritarian redemption premised on the elimination of liberal or feminist elements.

5.3 Content-related ideological statements

5.3.1 Image of Masculinity and Femininity

5.3.1.1 *DC Inside*

The comments extracted from *DC Inside* paint a consistently misogynistic and ideologically rigid picture of gender, grounded in binary thinking and are emotionally charged with dehumanizing metaphors. Across the analyzed articles, femininity is portrayed as inherently immoral, biologically manipulative, hypersexual, and politically dangerous. In contrast, masculinity is depicted as rational, burdened, sacrificial, and increasingly victimized by social change. This discursive construction of gender serves to reinforce a totalizing worldview in which any advancement by women is understood as a direct threat to men.

A recurring theme is the sexualized framing of women as uncontainable and morally compromised. Virginity, in particular, becomes a symbolic battlefield for gendered morality. Commenters claim that it is “impossible” for women to remain virgins today, citing the supposed intensity of female sexual desire: “Everyone knows how great women’s desires are” (Article 1 CDA, Pos. 78). Virginity is framed not as a personal choice, but as a moral obligation and a measure of a woman’s worth. Once a woman is no longer a virgin, some argue, “why should men have to take care of even more responsibility and stay monogamous?” (Article 1 CDA, Pos. 78). Here, the purity of women is directly tied to the responsibilities expected of men, positioning female sexuality as both morally suspect and causally linked to male burden. Various scholars such as Mc Arthur (2022) have claimed that the concept of women’s virginity itself, is a result of historical construction and not just an unhealthy way to view sexuality but actively hindering women’s equality. The scholar argues further by demanding the complete abolishment of the idea of virginity from popular discourse to reach gender equality as it is harmful to the cause.

The comments’ essentialist view is further entrenched through biological determinism. Women’s romantic and economic behaviors are described as hardwired and selfish: “Women are doing selfish (economic) upwards marriage... because it is their biological instinct” (Article 1 CDA, Pos. 109-110). Such claims naturalize misogyny by removing women’s agency and portraying all feminine behavior as the product of instinctual manipulation. In addition to this, in other comments, the depiction of women shifts from merely untrustworthy to subhuman, inferior or animal-like. Commenters refer to women as “zombies” (Article 5 CDA, Pos. 45),

“are *NPC*²³s,” (a reference to non-playable characters in videogames) (Article 5 CDA, Pos. 28) and “crippled animals” (Article 7 CDA, Pos. 27, 30), stripping them of individuality and rational capacity. These metaphors serve to delegitimize female agency and to morally justify exclusion from the public sphere. Even seemingly mundane behaviors by women are ridiculed: “Don’t think there’s anything really right about what a girl does lol” (Article 5 CDA, Pos. 46), further cementing the idea that women are incapable of sincere or ethical action. This essentialist and dehumanizing portrayal extends into political and ideological terrain. Women are seen as a homogenous group aligned with feminist and leftist ideologies, regardless of their individual beliefs. One commenter insists that “even among pure-blood Korean women... parasitic ones who want to continue ruling as a new noble class exist” (Article 9 CDA, Pos. 22-23), while another author commands readers to “think of all Korean women as feminists” (Article 10 CDA, Pos. 25). The term “feminist scum” (“페미 종자”) appears repeatedly, used to signal not only ideological disagreement but moral contamination. Women are presented as having hijacked democracy and victimhood discourse to advance themselves at the expense of men. Korean women and Korean feminists were specially demonized in the analyzed comments with regards to women elsewhere being viewed as superior.

In stark contrast, masculinity is constructed as morally upright yet under siege which would show similar results as Ganz and Meßner (2015), Lee Soo-Hyun (2024) and Kim Jo-Eun (2023). Men are portrayed as bearers of responsibility and reason – burdened by a society that demands everything from them while giving little in return. Marriage, for instance, is depicted as a site of male sacrifice: “For a man, marriage is a responsibility and sacrifice” (Article 1 CDA, Pos. 69-70). This idea intensifies into claims that Korean men are treated “like livestock” while being forced to take on “responsibilities at the level of a master” while “Korean women are given almost noble-level rights, but all the responsibilities are placed on men” (Article 6 CDA, Pos. 31-33). The result is a vision of masculinity as selfless and victimized, unjustly overburdened by both cultural expectations and exploitative women. This feeling of being a victim also shows up in politics, where not standing up against feminism is seen as losing one’s manliness. One commenter asks, “If you don’t come out [to the protests in support of Yoon Suk-Yeol], what are you going to do about your masculinity being castrated?” (Article 8 CDA, Pos. 22), blending political inaction with sexual shame. Kemp (2013) shows how the penis,

²³ The word *NPC* is an abbreviation for “non-player character” and describes “a character who does not represent and cannot be controlled by a player (...) in role-playing and video games” (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d., para.1).

when phallicized within Western capitalist discourse, becomes the central and exclusive marker of male sexuality, pleasure, and status. Masculinity is therefore tied to the preservation of the phallus: to lose it, or to be symbolically castrated, is to lose one's social legitimacy as a "man" and risk feminization. Castration, whether literal or metaphorical, signifies exclusion from masculine subjectivity. In Kemp's (2013) terms, symbolic castration can lead to the ultimate erasure of the masculine self: one becomes a symbolic "woman". This logic underpins the example from Article 8 CDA, where political disengagement is framed as "castration." Not attending protests is equated with forfeiting masculinity, blending political inaction with sexual shame. The threat of symbolic emasculation works to discipline men into participation, showing how the cultural logic of penis/castration operates not only in sexual discourse but also in political mobilization.

Within the comments, dating and marriage are further depicted as economic traps, wherein male labor is undervalued. One particularly telling comment argues that "an unemployed woman is seen as equal to a man earning ₩4 million a month" (Article 10 CDA, Pos. 32), expressing deep resentment at what is perceived as women's unearned value. This supports Han Wool-Jung's (2023) findings, that many young Korean men think society is unfavorable to men in regards of marriage, dating, employment and law enforcement. Perhaps the most extreme expression of hegemonic masculinity appears in the recognition and appreciation of Islamic patriarchy. One commenter praises Islam for preserving patriarchal control over women: "The only solution is Islam, which has maintained discrimination against women and patriarchy" (Article 7 CDA, Pos. 35). This is accompanied by an outright romanticization of child marriage, rape of a minor and sexual control: "In Islam, you can have sex with young girls, even middle and high schoolers, and get married" (Article 7 CDA, Pos. 36). The comment praises a strict, controlling kind of masculinity as the best way to be a man, showing a strong wish to bring back traditional male power. This feeling is both personal and cultural. The same user writes, "Kim Soo Hyun is a real man" (Article 7 CDA, Pos. 36), using his name as an example of strong, traditional masculinity. Kim Soo-Hyun's name, who was accused by a former girlfriend's family of having had sex with her as a minor and having groomed her. This accusation by the family came after she died by suicide (South China Morning Post, 2025). The linkage of Kim Soo-Hyun's name and the earlier mention of "In Islam, you can have sex with underage minors" therefore connects manliness, masculinity and patriarchy with rape of minors, which is even painted as an ideal form of Korean masculinity. The commenter is praising male dominance over women and wants to push back against modern changes in gender roles such

as age of consent, child marriage, etc. Such comments elevate authoritarian masculinity to an ideal while expressing longing for a return to patriarchal order.

Underlying these perceptions of femininity and masculinity lies ideological rhetoric that views gender relations as a battlefield: every gain by women is interpreted as a loss for men. Men are burdened with responsibility and robbed of authority; whereas women are elevated as a class but portrayed as morally bankrupt. “Women’s rights are given at almost aristocratic levels while all responsibility is put on men” (Article 6 CDA, Pos. 31) claims one commenter, capturing the general sense of injustice and resentment. Even judgments of appearance are gendered: “You shouldn't judge a woman's appearance, but it's perfectly natural to judge a man's appearance” (Article 10 CDA, Pos. 31), a complaint that reflects the belief that social standards are unfairly biased in women’s favor. In sum, these comments construct gender in highly polarized terms. Femininity is seen as inherently threatening – hypersexual, deceitful, biologically manipulative, politically corrupt, and ultimately subhuman. Masculinity, in contrast, is imagined as noble yet persecuted, overburdened yet undervalued, and increasingly under existential threat. These discourses not only reflect but actively produce a reactionary ideology, rooted in patriarchal nostalgia, cultural decline, and a fantasy of restored male dominance.

5.3.1.2 *Ilbe*

In the Korean far-right online forum *Ilbe* the views on women and feminists are even more extreme. Gender roles are depicted through a mixture of violent misogyny, nostalgia for authoritarian masculinity, and fear of modern liberal values. Across various comments, *Ilbe* users construct an image of society where women are dangerous, manipulative, or disposable, while men are either victims of feminism or idealized as authoritarian saviours. The discourse on gender shows a deep reactionary desire to reverse democratic gains, suppress women, and restore a patriarchal, militarized national order.

One major theme in *Ilbe* comments is the dehumanization of women, particularly young Korean women, who are all generalized as feminists. They are for example referred to as “이대녀” (Ewha Woman’s University girls) or in this comment as “flower-headed feminist daughters — the 2030 pussy girls” (Article 12 CDA, Pos. 23) which is supposed to symbolize progressive women in Korea. As Choi Jeong-Yoon (2024) and Rougié (2024) state, women’s universities in South Korea, founded in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, historically provided one of the few avenues for women’s higher education in a patriarchal and Confucian society where

women didn't have access to higher education. Ewha Women's University being the oldest and most popular one has become symbolic to represent liberal and feminist women. However, recently Korean women's universities have become one of the focal points in the country's intensifying gender discourse. The recent protests at Dongduk Women's University against proposed co-education illustrate this dynamic: while students defended women-only spaces as vital for safety and empowerment, critics framed them as discriminatory, further fuelling anti-feminist backlash. Similar mobilizations at other women's universities (Sungshin, Kwangju, Duksung, etc.) highlight the symbolic and practical elements of these schools in debates over gender equality (Choi Jeong-Yoon, 2024).

The language used to describe women in the analyzed comments is not only crude and dehumanizing but also laced with a desire for punishment or erasure. For instance, one author writes, "women should be treated like dogs and never have been given the right to vote" (Article 15 CDA, Pos. 14) and "we have to take away their right to vote or exterminate them" (Article 15 CDA, Pos. 12). Such comments not only reject democratic participation for women but frame their very civic presence as a threat to the survival of the nation. This militarized, eliminationist rhetoric positions women not merely as second-class citizens but as a threat that must be neutralized. In comments such "At this point, shouldn't we just exterminate Korean women?" (Article 16 CDA, Pos. 14), the suggestion is not symbolic – it reflects a violent fantasy of national purification through the erasure of women deemed politically or culturally unfit. As Ging & Siapera (2019) note, gendered online hate from antifeminists often includes harassment tactics such as: doxing (sharing private information with malice), impersonation, hateful speech, extortion and intimidation, rape, lynching and death threats. Women are framed as "the cancer of the country" (Article 16 CDA, Pos. 15) and blamed for moral and demographic crises by having bad personalities ("성격 그지"), not bearing children ("애도 안 낳고"), and supporting the liberal *Democratic Party* ("대다수 한녀들이 민주당 지지"), all of which are cast as failures of gendered and patriotic duty (Article 16 CDA, Pos. 15-18). In this logic, political dissent and reproductive autonomy are framed as threats to the very survival of the nation. Women become scapegoats for everything seen as wrong with modern Korea. These are not isolated outbursts but form part of a broader narrative that view Korean women, in particular Korean feminists, as existential threats. Comments such as "I consider these bitches to be our enemies, just like North Korea" (Article 15 CDA, Pos. 16) explicitly frame women as enemies of the Korean state, on the same level as North Korea, by

drawing the direct comparison. This kind of language places women and feminists on the same level as geopolitical threats, implying that they must be dealt with through force, not dialogue.

The discourse on *Ilbe* also calls for the reversal of feminist gains and the reestablishment of male dominance. The sarcastic reference to “sweet Korean men,” (Article 16 CDA, Pos. 18) portrays men as overly passive, suggesting they have failed to act decisively to restore patriarchal order. One commenter proposes dismantling laws that promote gender equality and criticizes democratic values as harmful. Japan’s historical gender suppression is even held up as a positive model: “If they had just stuck women's rights to the bottom and done a little bit of everything like Japan, it wouldn't have come to this point” (Article 16 CDA, Pos. 19-20). Here, modernity is not associated with equality, but with the control and subjugation of women. The call for authoritarian male leadership is clearest where Vladimir Putin is idealized. A commenter describes critics of Russia as “idiots who don’t know shit” (Article 19 CDA, Pos. 10) dismissing liberal views. Putin is celebrated not only as a political figure but as a masculine ideal – strong, stoic, and nation-building. His image is used to symbolize the kind of authoritarian masculinity *Ilbe* users admire. Feminism, by contrast, is seen as weakening the nation, and as a solution, values like “anti-feminism, male supremacy” (Article 19 CDA, Pos. 13) are offered as the solution to this problem. Russia is directly painted as an ideal by saying “Nationalism, pro-Christianity, anti-feminism, anti-PC, male supremacy, etc. Russia is a country that has all the right-wing stances” (Article 19 CDA, Pos. 13-14). The fantasy of restoring traditional gender roles is also explicitly mentioned. In an imagined future where “fascism could unite the left and right in Korea” (Article 18 CDA, Pos. 26-27), “2030 women” are painted as the only demographic that would oppose the fascist-nationalist vision. Men across age groups are called to unite and rebuild national identity around authoritarian, patriarchal values. Fascism is seen not as a threat but as a cure.

Generational divide also played a role in the discussion on gender within the analyzed online comments. Older *Ilbe* users in their 60s express disdain for the younger generation's tastes in beauty and masculinity. Younger users, the “2030s”, supposedly admire idols like Cha Eun-Woo, with soft features and large eyes, but older users reject them as “manufactured” and “unnatural.”. Cha Eun-Woo has been highlighted as the archetype of this role, with media emphasizing his “perfectly symmetrical” features and conformity to dominant beauty standards, notably achieved without surgical modification. Such portrayals reinforce the privileging of flawless skin, symmetry and polished appearances as central markers of male desirability (Jaidane, 2024). This contemporary ideal contrasts with earlier models of Korean masculinity

as users on *Ilbe* comment. In the 1990s, actors such as Choi Min-Soo (born 1962), celebrated for leading roles in both television and cinema, exemplified a militarized, tough form of masculinity. Similarly, in the 2000s, figures like Jang Dong-Sun (born 1972) embodied a stoic, resilient archetype. As Elfving-Hwang (2011) argues, the hegemonic masculinity of the 1990s was defined by militarized attributes, reflective of Korea's socio-political climate. By the 2000s and beyond, however, the rise of *kkonminam* ("flower-like men") marked the emergence of a hybrid masculinity—one that maintained traces of strength and discipline but was increasingly characterized by softer, aestheticized, and meticulously groomed appearances. Commenters claim that older male generations on *Ilbe* prefer rugged figures like Choi Min-Soo or Jang Dong-Gun. These preferences reflect broader anxieties about changing gender norms. On *Ilbe*, even when users speak about supposedly ideal traits in men and women, the standards reflect a profound ideological difference in how each gender is framed. In the examined comments, men's attractiveness is centred around their characteristics, their actions and their face, whereas the conversation on ideal women is almost entirely sexualized, objectified, misogynistic, degrading and focused entirely on body type and breast size such as "older Koreans usually don't like women with big breasts" (Article 13 CDA, Pos. 28). In a lot of the analyzed comments, women are continuously portrayed as commodities.

It is also crucial to mention that these attitudes do not occur in a vacuum but are embedded in the sexualized visual design of *Ilbe* itself. Even while analyzing the textual and ideological content of the discourse of the comments itself, one cannot ignore the omnipresent pornographic imagery on the website itself that continuously constructs women as sexual objects by persistent advertisement for pornographic manga-style aesthetics and portraying submissive women with big breasts in tight clothes, often in school uniforms with childlike features and flushed cheeks. This consistent sexualized imagery unrelated to the topic could lead to a normalization of women as sexual objects and the commodification of the female body. Nagle (2015) similarly found that contemporary online anti-feminist movements often share interest in anime and manga culture and regularly rely on sexualized representations of women as a way of undermining feminist arguments. This trend of using pornographic anime/manga/hentai imagery of women is common amongst far-right online groups. Far-right meme cultures globally deploy similar aesthetics, including in the Russo-Ukrainian war, where women are portrayed through sexualized manga-style features (Fossberg & Fangen, 2025). The fact that these pornographic images on *Ilbe* infiltrate all forms of content on the site must also be considered when investigating the construction of masculinity and femininity on *Ilbe*. One could write a whole thesis on just the imagery used on the site. While not a main point of this

textual and ideological discourse *Ilbe*'s visual pornographic elements must also be understood as an element of ideological and discourse production. Through the repetition and continuous embedment in the website's interface it shapes the discourse itself.

5.3.2 Victim and Enemy construction

As already mentioned above there was a consistent victim construction of Korean men being victimized by societal injustice while Korean women are cast as primary enemies of the nation. Most comments did not make a distinction between Korean women or Korean feminists, rather it was argued that all Korean women are feminists as a very common argumentation tactic. Men were portrayed as socially and economically disenfranchised, burdened with military service, accused with sex crime allegations, discriminated against by divorce laws, workplace discrimination and deprived from their own sexuality, having been censored from porn and prostitution access, and all Korean women were allegedly all feminists. Additionally, the argument that Korean men are unjustly treated by legal institutions is repeatedly made by various commenters. This victimization narrative is reinforced through recurring phrases like “기울어진 운동장” (“slanted playing field” meant to symbolize unfair favour for women) and statistics meant to dramatize gendered discrimination, such as the claim that “men’s conviction rate is 99%” (Article 6 CDA, Pos. 30). However, official statistics and scholarly research challenge this “male victimization” narrative. Sexual assault rates in South Korea rose from 30.8 per 100,000 in 2008 to 75.4 in 2023, while arrests have remained relatively stable at 20,000 - 21,500 annually (KOSIS, 2024; Statistics Korea, 2025). Underreporting remains a critical issue: victims weigh the social and personal costs of reporting - stigma, retraumatization, and low chances of conviction - against potential justice (Allen, 2007). Patriarchal norms and rape myths exacerbate this, even among police officers (Lee, Lee & Lee, 2012), and courts often discredit victims’ psychiatric records while treating defendants’ records as mitigating evidence (Park Joo-Hyun, 2025). Methodological flaws further distort official statistics. Administrative data frequently apply hierarchy rules, recording only the most serious offenses, thereby undercounting stalking, online abuse, and repeated victimization (UNODC, 2025). Femicide is especially underreported, despite evidence that up to 80% of cases are perpetrated by intimate partners (UNODC, 2025). According to Kim Da-Sol (2017) another survey supports this finding, reporting that 79.9% of Korean men admitted to abusive behaviour toward girlfriends, including sexual harassment (37.9%), psychological abuse (36.6%), physical violence (22.4%), sexual assault (17.5%), and injuries (8.7%). Human Rights Watch (2023) highlight that South Korea’s legal definition of rape, which requires “force or intimidation”, further excludes cases

without overt violence, structurally underestimating sexual violence and femicide. Overall, the evidence indicates that claims of widespread legal bias against men obscure the broader realities of systemic underreporting, institutional bias and restrictive legal frameworks that disadvantage victims, particularly women.

In contrast to the construction of men as victims, women are depicted as sexually immoral, parasitic, and politically over-empowered while not fulfilling their duties as bearing children. Yun Ji-Yeong (2019, cited after Penda, 2023) supports this finding as she found that South Korean women are often reduced to sexual objects or their ability to “breed” in order to continue the family lineage. She finds, that women’s value is therefor directly and exclusively lied to their bodies by antifeminist rhetoric. Within the examined antifeminist comments, Korean women and feminists are described not merely as individual antagonists but as a collective threat to national integrity, often likened to “cancerous” or “communist” forces. Feminism is framed as a leftist ideology that has allowed women to benefit from the state while evading traditional obligations, such as childbirth or familial loyalty. This binary antagonism should be viewed within the broader international ideological context as the analyzed comments continuously blamed liberal democracy and recent elections for empowering women and marginalizing men.

The *Democratic Party*, “the left“, “leftists“ or “leftist communists“, are described as enemies from within, complicit in a kind of national betrayal. In the more extreme comments analyzed, this logic culminates in fascistic, authoritarian, dictatorial or eliminationist rhetoric, with explicit calls for the extermination of Korean women, calls for one-party dictatorships like during the Park Chung-Hee era, the current authoritarian Russia or an explicit call for a fascist state like Nazi Germany where one “removes as much Nazi stuff (expansionism, mass genocide, etc.) as possible“ (...) (Article 18 CDA, Pos. 41). These direct calls for autocracy, dictatorship and fascism can be found numerously on *Ilbe*, while the comments on *DC Inside* mostly blamed women directly and mostly did not explicitly call for a fascist state but still used authoritarian, fascistic and patriarchal argumentation rhetoric, nonetheless. The construction of male victimhood plays a major role as an argumentation tactic that justifies authoritarian fantasies for the comments found both on *Ilbe* and *DC Inside*. Additionally, other enemies that were constructed were Chinese people and the Chinese state, communists and North Korea. Anti-Chinese rhetoric and anti-communist rhetoric is very commonly found in South Korean antifeminist online spheres. In the analyzed comments, The West is constructed as an institution

that gave women voting rights which ultimately led to the corruption of Korean society. Media is blamed for being biased towards women. As political enemies the Political Left and *Democratic party* were seen as puppets of feminist policies and therefore as national betrayers. Park Geun-Hye, former president and PPP member, is also constructed as a feminist national betrayer in the analyzed comments.

5.3.3 Understanding of Society and Nation

On *DC Inside*, society is perceived as in moral and cultural decline, largely due to the rise of feminism, sexual freedom, and Western liberal values. The analyzed comments blame the shift to liberal "free love and free sex" society as the source of widespread societal misery, not just in Korea but globally, suggesting that the erosion of traditional sexual and gender norms is a global phenomenon. There is also a deep intergenerational contempt, particularly for women in their 20s–30s. These groups are often described as degenerate, entitled, and corrupted by feminism and media. Within the analyzed comments, the book and the main character of "*Kim Ji-young, Born 1982*" becomes a symbol of collective female moral failure, representing a generation of Korean women portrayed as manipulative, privileged, and socially destructive. In this worldview, only young Korean men and high schoolers, those not yet "tainted", are seen as mentally or morally right members of society. Society is viewed as fragmented, hostile, and misandrist, with legal, media, and cultural systems all favouring women. This generates a belief that men are under attack, not just by feminists but by the entire Korean society that has betrayed them and the nation. On *Ilbe*, society is depicted even more radically: not just in decline but as something that should be destroyed and rebuilt from scratch. Feminism is not just seen as a threat but it is presented as the main ideological enemy that must be eradicated for the nation to survive. In this context, patriarchy, hierarchy, and discipline are seen as necessary for rebuilding a healthy and patriarchal society. The ideal society imagined by *Ilbe* users is often authoritarian, fascistic, and inherently anti-democratic, rooted in male dominance and the suppression of all oppositional groups and voices such as women, feminists, leftists, communists, LGBTQIA+ people and other minorities. Liberal democracy, multiculturalism, and feminism are portrayed as foreign impositions that have corrupted Korean society. There is also a nihilistic tone, with many commenters expressing a desire to see the country collapse as a form of revenge for perceived injustices.

On *DC Inside* "nation" is understood and constructed through a comparison with other international countries and actors, often used to highlight Korea's perceived failures. Korea is

seen as exceptionally unjust toward men, with more women's rights and fewer protective systems for men than any other “developed” country. In contrast, countries like Japan, the U.S., or even Islamic nations are idealized for preserving traditional gender roles or controlling female behaviour through religion (Christianity, Islam, Shinto) or legal conservatism. There is a strong belief that national stability depends on patriarchal order – with the rise of feminism interpreted as a national mistake and even a threat to sovereignty. For example, some comments argue that giving women the right to vote was a national error that will ultimately lead to Korea's downfall or conquest by other nations (e.g., Islam, China, North Korea). The nation is also presented as failing its male citizens. The legal system and the state are viewed as corrupt, weak, or indifferent to male suffering, while women are portrayed as disloyal citizens undermining the nation's strength from within. *Ilbe* imagines the nation as a masculine, militarized, and authoritarian entity. Russia is cited ideal as a model of statehood and comparison is drawn to Park Chung-Hee's authoritarian era – both are seen as symbols of strong, anti-feminist, and disciplined national power. The ideal Korean nation, according to this vision, is not democratic or diverse but unified through ideology, strength, and patriarchy. There is a clear fusion of nationalism and masculinity: the nation is imagined as a male body: powerful, aggressive and orderly. Feminism, democracy, and liberalism are seen not just as social problems but as existential threats to national survival. In this context, exclusion, especially of women aged 20 - 40, is not a flaw, but a requirement for building the ideal future. Additionally, *Ilbe* users often express a complete loss of faith in the current nation-state, seeing it as corrupted beyond repair. Their vision of the nation includes a longing for collapse, authoritarian resurrection, and retribution against perceived internal enemies, especially feminists, progressives, and older generations.

5.3.4 Understanding of Democracy and Future

The understanding of democracy in the comments reveals a deeply cynical, anti-feminist, authoritarian, and patriarchal worldview, rooted in disillusionment with liberal democratic values. On both websites, democracy is criticized for enabling the perceived enemies, women, feminists and the political left, to destroy the nation from within and not taking action against it. *DC Inside* comments show a rejection of democratic pluralism, especially when it comes to anything regarding women's rights, gender or minority rights. The understanding of democracy in the antifeminist online forum is that the current state and society are currently weakened and feminized. The comments argue that the present-day democratic system in Korea has allowed women too much freedom, which is associated with civilizational and national decline. The

strengthening of women's rights is not seen as progress but as a fatal mistake that must be undone in order to strengthen social order and the nation. Alternative systems of power are painted in positive light and favoured. The call for authoritarian, religious or traditional patriarchal structures, depicts the ideal idea of the state having tight control over women. This is seen as necessary to correct the current liberal democracy in Korea. Male suffering is emphasized as a political cause, and concepts like "citizens' right to resist" are ironically repurposed for their own political agenda – like the right to protest and resist against the impeachment of Yoon Suk-Yeol. Some comments propose even more extreme ideas like completely stripping women's voting rights, supporting military-based enfranchisement, or even lowering the age of marriage to fix national problems, revealing regressive, anti-democratic, and gender-authoritarian fantasies.

On *Ilbe*, the rejection of democracy is even more explicit, violent, and nihilistic. Many comments outright favour or call for dictatorship or fascism over democracy. Liberal pluralism is depicted as weak, fake, or corrupted and incapable of maintaining national coherence or masculine values. Democracy is framed as something that empowered the wrong people: Korean women, who are considered irrational, inferior, and politically dangerous. Some authors explicitly fantasize about the disempowerment of Korean women, the extermination or mass violence against them. Many comments suggest that democracy, by prioritizing inclusion and equality, has undermined both masculinity and the nation. Therefore, a return to hierarchy, purity, and authoritarian strength is proposed as the only solution. Fascism is rationalized not as violent or oppressive but as a practical solution of left and right by offering welfare for men and social unity while eliminating feminist, liberal, and LGBTQIA+ influences. Some posts display a total loss of faith in Korea's political future, fantasizing about collapse and revenge against feminists and progressives. This shows an apocalyptic and cathartically loaded idea of the future of Korea.

On *DC Inside*, users articulate a polarized and gendered vision of the future. In some posts, the future is presented as a space of radical individualism and disengagement, where traditional structures like marriage and family are abandoned. The message there is that men should stop caring about women or societal expectations and simply pursue personal satisfaction. In contrast to that, other articles offer a more ideological view, offering only two future paths for women for example: either accept a patriarchal system where men are dominant and protective, or face suffering and chaos. This binary worldview is delivered with sarcasm and disdain, ridiculing liberalism and gender equality as unrealistic or hypocritical ideals. On *Ilbe*, the tone

of the analyzed comments is far darker and more extreme. In some posts the future is imagined as a dystopian collapse marked by mass suicide, drug abuse, and societal decay if liberal democracy continues on the way it is right now. However, this is not portrayed as tragic – instead, it is a source of cathartic pleasure and revenge, especially against feminists and progressives (Article 12 CDA, Pos. 25-26). Elsewhere (Articles 19 and 20), users outline a vision for Korea's future that mimics fascist or authoritarian models like modern-day Russia. These comments idealize strong, patriarchal leadership, suppressing women's rights, liberal values, and democratic freedoms in favor of nationalism, male supremacy, and social order. In this worldview, the future is painted as a binary path that Korea could take: either authoritarian revival or total collapse, with no space for compromise, equality, or pluralism.

6 Conclusion and Final Thoughts

This study set out to examine the discursive construction of gender, victimization, and national identity within Korean antifeminist online communities, focusing on *DC Inside* and *Ilbe* after the martial law declaration in December 2024. The analysis demonstrates that these platforms not only serve as digital spaces for misogynistic expression but also as arenas where broader political, economic, and cultural anxieties are expressed and dynamically constructed. Antifeminist rhetoric in South Korea is not an isolated phenomenon but is deeply intertwined within global currents of populism, authoritarianism, and anti-gender mobilization by applying similar argumentation tactics, drawing on common symbolisms and fears. At the same time Korean antifeminists draw upon highly specific local history of dictatorship during Park Chung-Hee's authoritarian rule, neoliberal development and context specific political discourses such as the martial law declaration by Yoon Suk-Yeol and his antifeminist policies. Throughout the analysis a stark political ideological divide was constructed between young Korean men and young Korean women, which various scholars (Gong, 2024; Kim & Chae, 2025; Kim Hanna, 2025) have already noted. This constructed political divide created a symbolic ideological canyon along which young Korean men were portrayed as saviours of the nation and young Korean women as selfish enemies not adhering to their gender role and thereby betraying the Korean nation.

This thesis discovered that Korean antifeminist discourse on gender regularly references international politics, particularly the symbolic figures of Trump, Putin, and broader political East–West tensions, while simultaneously situating itself in Korea's own authoritarian past. This dual orientation of global and local anchoring highlights the transnational

interconnectedness of antifeminist rhetoric while underscoring its historical embeddedness in South Korea's trajectory of militarization, developmentalism, and neoliberal restructuring. Nostalgia for Park Chung-Hee's dictatorship, authoritarian rule and his perceived societal order was commonly found in the analyzed comments. Authoritarian actions such as the declaration of martial law by Yoon Suk-Yeol and restrictions on women's authority were constructed as needed actions to correct contemporary "disorder" within Korean society. This reflects a broader trend of authoritarian longing observable in global populist movements and within antifeminist movements (McEwen, & Narayanaswamy, 2023; Sauer, 2024; Sanders & Jenkins, 2022; Wodak, 2022). At the heart of antifeminist discourse lies a contest over the meaning of modernity, developmentalism, neoliberal capitalism, and the nuclear family model structure. The analysis of the antifeminist gender discourse in Korea showed very clear normative, traditional expectations of gender and nation. Men are portrayed as sacrificial protectors of the nation, while women are constructed as obstacles to the nation's progress. The imagined future is bifurcated: either a dystopia of a feminist-driven collapse or a utopia of restored order under authoritarian control. This binary construction reveals a profoundly illiberal orientation in which democracy is associated with weakness and authoritarianism with salvation. This is why Lombardo (2023) argues that the study of antifeminism is crucial due to its potential threat to democracy and human rights and its central role in right-wing movements to shape societal norms and values.

A key theme emerging from the analysis is the binary logic that structures both the antifeminist discourse on gender and politics: men versus women, feminism versus antifeminism, democracy versus authoritarian order. These binaries function not merely as rhetorical strategies but as epistemological frameworks that reduce social complexity to absolute truths and ultimate enemies. The construction of binaries defines "others", that do not adhere to what is perceived as "normal" or "right", as enemies. These constructed antagonists included women, feminists, leftists, LGBTQIA+, liberals and all those who disagree with antifeminist rhetoric. Such discursive binaries normalize authoritarianism and, in the case of *Ilbe*, even fascism as legitimate political alternatives. This normalization of authoritarian ideology through gendered antagonism illustrates how antifeminist sentiments are embedded in populist rhetoric such as authoritarian and fascist language, demands and fantasies. This directly connects to the warnings of scholars like Kim & Chae (2025) and Kim Hanna (2025) who analyzed the deep ideological gender divide of young Koreans in political values and democratic commitment after the martial law declaration. They note that the normalization of misogyny and political apathy could lead to concerning societal shifts in regard to democracy.

Korean masculinity emerges as both hegemonic and precarious. The antifeminist gender discourse on the platforms *DC Inside* and *Ilbe* creates a narrative in which men are constructed as the ultimate victims by being burdened by military service, economic expectations, shifting cultural norms and accusations of sexual misconduct, while simultaneously being portrayed as the sole guardians of the Korean nation's survival. This duality of strength and victimhood reveals how hegemonic masculinity is being renegotiated in digital antifeminist discourse, combining authoritarian nostalgia with resentment directed against women. Korean masculinity has undergone dynamic changes and renegotiations in the last decades from a strictly "hard" militarized masculinity to a perceived, more "soft masculinity" (Elfvig-Hwang, 2011). But this thesis has shown that the ideal Korean man constructed on antifeminist forums still possesses clearly militarized ideals, even if the outwardly beauty ideals have changed to a softer form of masculinity.

In contrast to the constructed masculinity, women and femininity are constantly portrayed as the "ultimate other" or othered, as de Beauvoir (2018) argued. Korean women are depicted as the root of social and moral decline, subject to sexual objectification, being whores for losing their virginity and sleeping around and completely devalued when they are unmarried or childless past the age of thirty. Simultaneously, foreign women, particularly white or Japanese, are hypersexualized. The intensity of hatred directed specifically at Korean women and Korean feminists underscores the centrality of the domestic gender conflicts within the country. By positioning Korean women as the ultimate enemy, antifeminist rhetoric provides a powerful and dangerous foundation for the erosion of democratic values within Korean society.

The discursive language observed on *DC Inside* and *Ilbe* is marked by misogynistic, homophobic, and racist language that infantilizes, sexualizes, dehumanizes, and calls for violence against women, all commonly found in far-right antifeminist spaces (Berthelsen, 2021; Heritage & Koller, 2020; Nagle, 2015). These linguistic patterns are accompanied by degrading imagery, often pornographic, AI-generated or memes, which reduce women to sexual, reproductive or domestic functions. The language operates in a deterministic and absolutist mode, positioning antifeminist discourse as the repository of "ultimate truth." This further shows that populist rhetorical tools and argumentation tactics are used in order to normalize authoritarianism as a solution and options opposing liberal democracy.

Symbolic figures play a central role in consolidating antifeminist meaning making. Perceived feminist symbols such as the book *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* are demonized, while authoritarian

political figures like Putin, Trump and Park Chung-Hee are celebrated as masculine idols to follow. In contrast, feminists, Korean women, especially in their twenties and thirties, leftists and liberal politicians are portrayed as naïve, corrupt, feminized, weak or destructive. The Yoon-Suk Yeol's presidency, martial law declaration and the subsequent 2025 presidential election further revealed how antifeminist discourse has been instrumentalized in mainstream politics. Candidates such as Yoon Suk-Yeol and Lee Jun-Seok positioned gender backlash as a core campaign theme, legitimizing antifeminist grievances and translating digital resentment into electoral votes (Jung Kyung-Ha, 2024; Kim Hannah, 2025). This underscores how online antifeminism is not confined to subcultural spaces but actively shapes political conflicts such as gender discourse and directly influence voting behaviour.

The methodology of Jäger's (2015) CDA served as a useful tool for analyzing Korean antifeminist discourse by allowing for a nuanced examination of how gender is constructed through discourse and helped identify the underlying logics of victimization, enemy-construction and authoritarian longing. The qualitative approach, flexibility and adaptability of CDA was especially useful for the analysis of the language, arguments, imagery, symbolism, knowledge and ideology construction. While CDA offered powerful tools for uncovering the construction of gendered discourses and knowledges it also required continuous adaptation to the empirical material, which turned out to be more challenging than anticipated. The forums *DC Inside* and *Ilbe* both proved to function chaotically, decentralized, and visually disorganized and much less structured than for example *X/Twitter*.

The process of this study was also characterized by practical challenges that shaped the findings, while highlighting the complexity of investigating highly politicized topics such as gender and antifeminism. It additionally raised questions on the researcher's approach with hostile online environments such as antifeminist, alt-right and incel forums. One of the challenges faced was the sexualized and degrading imagery on *Ilbe*, whether through advertisements for pornographic manga or posted by the commenters themselves. This aspect was underestimated beforehand and proved to be a constant visual distraction from whatever textual analysis was undertaken. While the visual elements were included in the analysis, they were not the focus. Therefore, future analysis should focus more on the imagery and its usage on *Ilbe*. Another challenge was proposed by the topic itself. Researching antifeminism, anti-gender discourse, and authoritarian populism additionally carries specific risks, stigmas and vulnerability for researchers. Scholars who have engaged in research on antifeminism and alt-right spheres report being targeted, harassed, and even threatened (Barber, 2021; Llanera, 2022; Maasanari,

2018). The harassment and attacks on scientists lead some to even withdraw from this line of work altogether as a security measure, which was identified through various talks with researchers on Korean antifeminism during the research stay abroad for this thesis. This just further proves the vital need for more research on antifeminist discourse on gender in online and offline spaces. This study was conducted with awareness of these risks, but the lack of support mechanisms for scholars dealing with hostile online communities remains a serious concern as Gelashivili and Gagnon (2024) has also noted. They point out that researchers of far-right online spheres face significant challenges to ensure their emotional and physical safety and criticizes the lack of guidance, support and resources from institutions. Additionally, the stigmatization of gender-critical research in both South Korea and abroad, as noted by Butler (2025) further aggravates the precarity of scholars in this field. This not only constrains and threatens individual researchers but could also be seen as a major risk to the knowledge in the field on gender discourse, a field which urgently needs further research.

This thesis is bound by several limitations. First, the empirical focus was restricted to only two specific online platforms, *DC Inside* and *Ilbe*. While central to South Korea's antifeminist discourse, they do not represent the full range of digital or offline arenas where discourses on gender are produced. The qualitative approach and sample size also limit the findings. CDA offered a useful tool for interpretative depth into the analysis of the construction of gender roles, victimization rhetoric and understanding of democracy. On the other hand, it cannot offer scopes of quantitative research such as broader representativeness of Korean antifeminism altogether. Second, the analysis examined only online discourse. In South Korea's highly digitalized society, online platforms play a crucial role, yet the relationship between online rhetoric and offline practices remains unclear. How antifeminist narratives circulate in political rallies, media or everyday life of Korean people would require further exploration. Third, the approach was primarily descriptive and interpretive. While it revealed how masculinity, femininity and nation are constructed, it did not provide solutions for addressing the gender divide or for countering the normalization of misogyny and authoritarian ideas. Additionally, broader questions such as how antifeminism affects democracy and society remain unanswered and should therefore be further investigated. Finally, the study's temporal range was limited. A systematic, longitudinal perspective could shed light on how antifeminist discourses develop over time, particularly in moments of crisis in comparison to regular political times. These limitations underscore the need for future research that expands in scale, incorporates offline contexts, and moves beyond description toward analyzing consequences and potential responses.

As for future research, several discursive, theoretical or methodical adaptation and extensions on this topic could be made. One could be a larger scale quantitative analysis of *DC Inside* and *Ilbe* to examine thematic frequencies and discursive patterns systematically. Further studies could also benefit from the development of customized tools such as gallery-specific sampling models, to better capture and investigate antifeminist discourse within South Korea's digital public sphere. Another possibility for future investigations could be a mixed-method approach of analysis of antifeminist and feminist discourse e.g. the inclusion of interviews of political activists, protestors, YouTubers, politicians or online commenters. Those future projects could also further explore the intersections of Korean antifeminists with authoritarianism and populism. Another potential for future studies would be comparative perspectives. One of those being a direct comparison of Korean feminist and antifeminist rhetoric. While this research first started with this the initial idea, the methodological issues of making comparability possible proved to be greater than initially thought, nonetheless it could provide valuable insights into the rhetorical and ideological differences. Another possibility lies in the intersection of demographic issues such as aging society and fertility rates or a direct country comparison of South Korean antifeminist online spaces with e.g. European antifeminist spheres.

In conclusion, this study has shown how South Korean antifeminist discourse constructs a binary worldview in which women especially feminists are cast as enemies of the nation, while authoritarianism is reframed as a solution. These narratives draw on local history of militarization and neoliberalism yet are deeply entangled with global currents of illiberal populism and antifeminist mobilization. The result is a rhetoric that is simultaneously nationally specific and globally resonant, shaping masculinity as both dominant and victimized, and normalizing authoritarian tendencies. Examining these dynamics is not only crucial for understanding South Korea but also for grasping how gendered backlash movements fuel broader authoritarian and populist projects worldwide making antifeminism one of the most urgent research topics of our time. The global surge of populism underscores how antifeminist and antigender movements are increasingly central to illiberal and authoritarian ideologies and rhetoric on both a global and local level. This thesis therefore calls for more research on gendered discourse in South Korea.

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8 List of figures

Image 1: 200 most commonly found words in the CDA, created on MAXQDA for this research.

Image 2: *DC Inside*. Antifeminism Gallery. 반페미니즘 갤러리.
<https://gall.dcinside.com/mgallery/board/lists/?id=antifeminism>

Image 3: *DC Inside*. Anti-feminist liberal right-wing gallery. 반페미자유우파 갤러리.
<https://gall.dcinside.com/mgallery/board/lists/?id=antifemifreespeech>

Image 4: *DC Inside*. Antifeminist, Anti-PC Gallery. 반페미반 pc 주의 갤러리.
<https://gall.dcinside.com/mgallery/board/lists/?id=nofeminopc>

9 List of analyzed CDA articles (detailed analysis)

DC INSIDE

- 1) **MODERN MARRIAGE SYSTEM COLLAPSE**
- 2) **WOMEN'S LACK OF MORALITY**
- 3) **PATRIARCHY PROTECTED WOMEN**
- 4) **AGEISM**
- 5) **HATRED ON RIGHT-WINGED FEMINISTS**
- 6) **KOREA HAS BEST WOMEN-RIGHTS IN THE WORLD & WORST MEN RIGHTS**
- 7) **ISLAM WILL RULE THE WORLD BECAUSE OF FEMINISTS**
- 8) **CALLING ON MEN TO PROTEST**
- 9) **WOMEN HATRED ALSO OF RIGHT-WINGED WOMEN**
- 10) **ALL KOREAN WOMEN ARE FEMINISTS**

ILBE

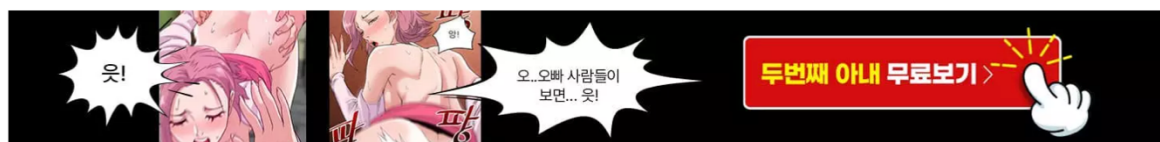
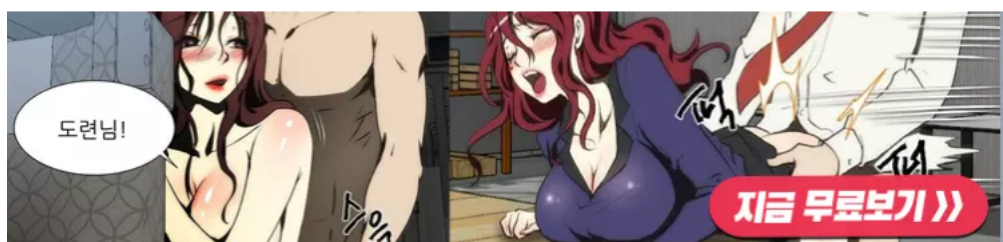
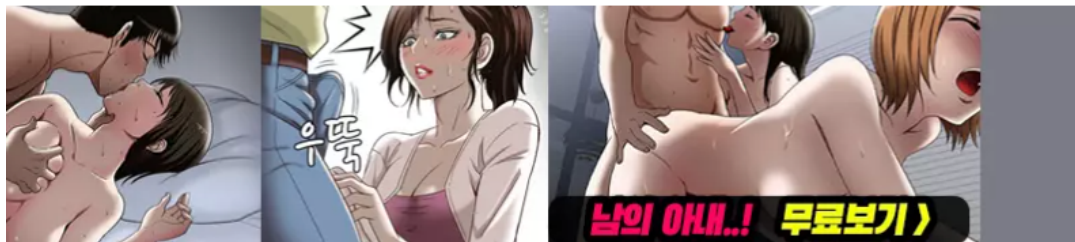
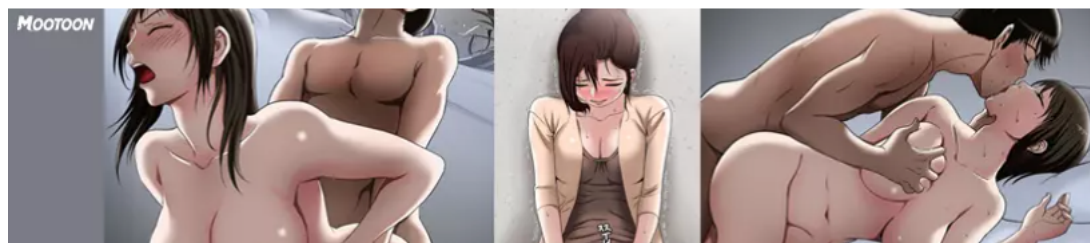
- 11) **2030 BASTARDS ARE RUINED BECAUSE THEY VOTED FOR LEE JUN-SEOK**
- 12) **DICTATORSHIP WOULDN'T BE SO BAD**
- 13) **WOMEN/MEN TYPE OF YOUNG PEOPLE AND OLD PEOPLE**
- 14) **WHY WOMEN HAVE WEIRD ATTITUDE TOWARDS INTERNATIONAL MARRIAGE**
- 15) **FEMINISTS ARE OUR ENEMIES LIKE NORTH KOREA**
- 16) **EXTERMINATE ALL WOMEN**
- 17) **PARK GEUN-HYE CREATED FEMALE SUPREMACY IN KOREA**
- 18) **FACISM CAN UNITE LEFT AND RIGHT IN KOREA**
- 19) **RUSSIA IS A TRUE PATRIOTIC COUNTRY**
- 20) **DO WOMEN EVEN KNOW WHY YOON SUK-YEOL SHOULD BE IMPEACHED?**

10 Examples of MaxQDA as tool for CDA

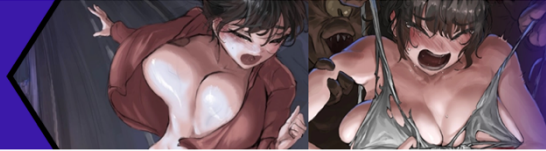
 Detailed Analysis	1460
 Topics Addressed	83
 Illustration & Graphic Design	12
 Argumentation Strategies	59
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 Style	37
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 Image of Man/Women; male/female; masculinity/femininity	141
 Understanding of feminism/antifeminism	82
 Understanding of victim/enemy	90
 Understanding of Society	110
 Understanding of Nation/Nationhood/Nationality	103
 Understanding of Democracy	55
 Understanding of Future/Technology	60
 Message conveyed through discourse fragments	45
 Target group addressed	22
 Ideology represented	58
 Discursive Context of Statements	45
 Relationship to hegemonic discourse	42
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 Topics Addressed	16	I consider these bitches to be our enemies, just like North Korea
 Understanding of victim/enemy	17	I really want to beat up these fucking bitches who are so serious and red
 Image of Man/Women; male/female; masculinity/femininity	18	Looking at the presidential election today, these bitches shouldn't vote
 Understanding of feminism/antifeminism	19	They're brainless bitches
 Argumentation Strategies	20	We have to take away their right to vote or exterminate them.
 Vocabulary		
 Understanding of Democracy		
 Understanding of Society		
 Understanding of Nation/Nationhood/Nationality		
 Understanding of Future/Technology		
 Message conveyed through discourse fragments		

11 Screenshots of exemplary sexual pornographic imagery on *Ilbe* and most popular search terms



웹만화
무료보기



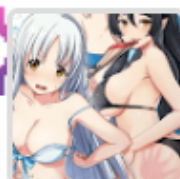
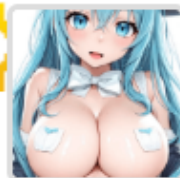
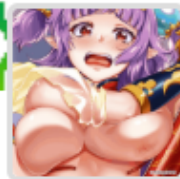
미확인 생물체에게
습격당하는 여경찰

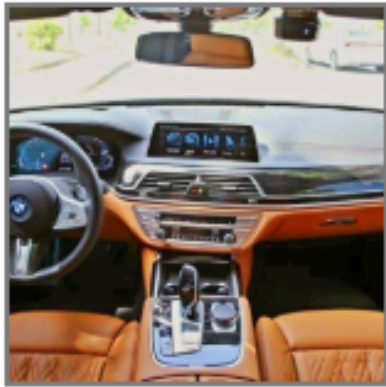


내 안에 신령님
무료보기



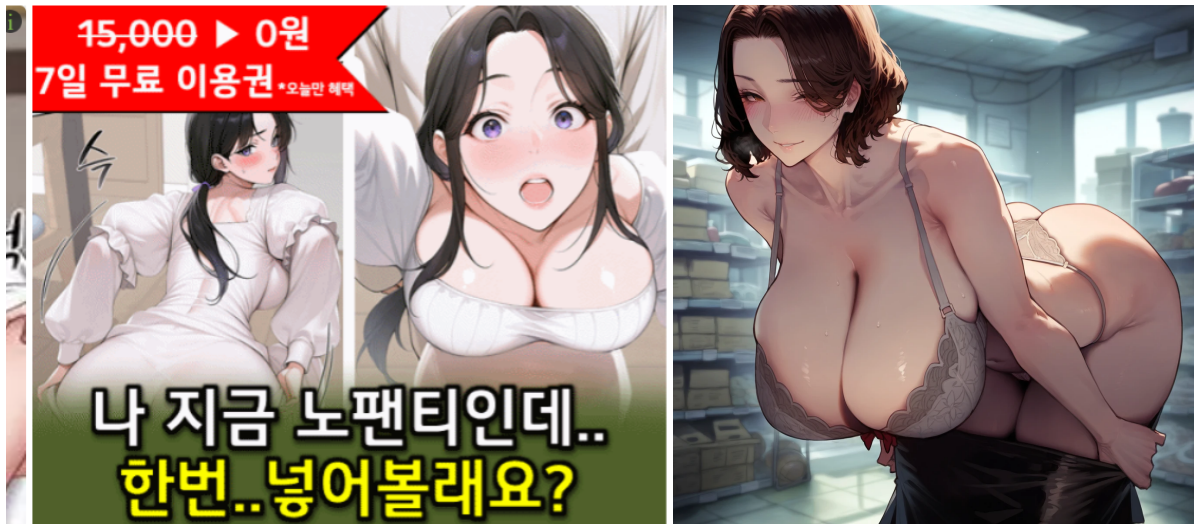
무료 웹게임



A large anime-style illustration of a woman with long, straight blue hair and bangs. She is wearing a white, form-fitting top with a low-cut front. She has a blushing expression and her hands are clasped near her mouth. A speech bubble above her head says "기분 좋아?" (Are you feeling good?). There are also smaller speech bubbles with the word "하아" (Aah) around her. At the bottom of the image is a large red banner with white and yellow text. The text reads "7일 동안" (For 7 days) in white, "무제한무료" (Unlimited free) in yellow, and a large white double arrow pointing right. To the right of the arrow, the text "+ big" is visible, and below it, "small" is partially visible.

하아 기분 좋아? 하아

7일 동안 무제한무료 >> + big small



실시간 인기검색어		
1	19	—
2	하지원	—
3	이스라엘	↑ 1
4	미시	↓ 1
5	카리나	—
6	유부녀	—
7	사나	—
8	여자	↑ 1
9	타케헤	↑ 1
10	전라도	↓ 2
내가 봤던 글		

Real-time popular search term		
1	19	—
2	Ha Ji-won	—
3	Israel	↑ 1
4	Micro	↓ 1
5	Karina	—
6	married woman	—
7	Sana	—
8	female	↑ 1
9	Takehe	↑ 1
10	Jeolla-do	↓ 2