Digital Feminism and Affective Splintering:
South Korean Twitter Discourse on 500 Yemeni Refugees

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This article examines Korean Twitter discourse surrounding Yemeni refugees in South Korea. Sequestered on Jeju Island since their arrival in 2018, the 500 refugees have prompted enormous public debate in Korea, which has until recently defined itself in terms of a mono-ethnic identity. Grounded in the literature on Korean digital feminism, this article conducts a thematic analysis from a corpus of more than 8,000 Korean-language tweets. The refugees and their situation are found to be appropriated by different segments of South Korean society to make broader arguments about gender, nationalism, and economic insecurity. This article finds that prorefugee and antirefugee arguments draw on identical themes to draw opposite conclusions predicated on their different understandings of "Koreanness" in increasingly multicultural South Korea. The article suggests the notion of "affective splintering" to make sense of the lack of cohesion among individuals within superficially ideologically aligned groups, such as conservatives or digital feminists. Similarities and differences with Twitter discourse on refugees from other contexts are discussed.

Keywords: refugees, South Korea, Twitter, digital feminism

This article examines how different South Korean (hereinafter Korea) publics have reacted to the arrival of the 500 Yemeni refugees on the Korean island of Jeju. Specifically, this article analyzes Twitter discourse surrounding the Yemeni refugees to explore how the issue is appropriated by different groups to discuss broader issues in Korean society around gender, nationalism, and economic insecurity. Research on the Korean case can contribute to the literature on issues such as refugee discourses, digital publics, and

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digital feminism, particularly by extending understandings primarily based on European or North American cases. In addition, this research contributes to understanding how ostensibly coalesced groups "affectively splinter" online. The article begins with a brief overview of recent Korean history and digital feminism trends, followed by the study's theoretical and methodological background. Next, we examine the results and discuss their implications, including the notion of "affective splintering," which we define as instances where groups perceived as coalesced fracture because of diverging sentiments, and no new alliances take their place. Then, we note limitations of the study and discuss the study's theoretical implications. Though this research was inductive, it was centrally guided by the following research question: How and why do Korean Twitter users voice support for or against the Yemeni refugees, and what does this voicing illustrate about the contested notion of Koreanness today?

Korea Today

In 1953, Korea was impoverished, following decades of Japanese colonial rule and a bloody, fratricidal war with the North. The Korean economy struggled to take off after the war (Lie, 2000), remaining an underdeveloped country into the 1970s (W. B. Kim, 2004, p. 317). Today, however, Korea ranks highly on global metrics of national development. In 2016, Korea's economy was the 12th largest—by total GDP—in the world (World Bank, 2020), and its cultural exports are proving incredibly popular not only in Asia but increasingly around the world (Jin & Yoon, 2017). It also boasts the highest level of tertiary enrollment among member states of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD; 2019) and is a world leader in the field of information and communication technology (Curran, 2019; International Telecommunication Union, 2016). With its transition from a poor, agrarian society to a prosperous and urbanized one, Korea also experienced political transformation, from authoritarian dictatorship to democracy.

During this transformation Korea remained—in the public imaginary at least—an ethnically homogeneous country, the most salient feature of which "could arguably be encapsulated in the prefix *mono*" (J. Shin & Kim, 2017, p. 2). However, beginning in the early 1990s, and especially after Korea's bailout from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) during the 1997 Asian financial crisis, the Korean government adopted a purposefully global outlook, subsumed under the neologism *segyehwa* ("globalization"), which actively sought to advance Korea's standing in the world stage (N. H. J. Kim, 2015, p. 6; G. W. Shin, 2003). The state's focus on *segyehwa* roughly coincided with a recalibration of the status of women in Korea society. Sumi Kim (2008) argues that "the feminist movement spread widely from the early 1990s" (p. 394). Thus, although men have traditionally been regarded as the breadwinners in Korea's patriarchal society, this notion was challenged in the aftermath of the IMF bailout (J. Kim, 2017, p. 808; S. Kim, 2008, p. 395). Still, Korean women's participation rates in the labor market remained low compared with other OECD countries, and even in the mid-2000s, the female-to-male earnings gap—at approximately 40% for full-time employees—remained the highest in the OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, n.d.).

During the mid-2000s, *damunhwa* ("multiculturalism") emerged as a buzzword to describe the changes in Korean society, including an increasing number of foreign residents. The rise of *damunhwa* discourse was accompanied by the expansion of Korea's Internet infrastructure, which in turn helped facilitate the rise of some feminist groups (Jeong & Lee, 2018). In light of both the rise of multiculturalism

and feminism in Korea both demographically and discursively, Koreans themselves have been forced to also reflect on what constitutes Koreanness.

There is evidence of a pervasive nostalgia in Korea, perhaps best exemplified by the election in 2012 of Park Geun-Hye, the daughter of the dictator who ruled through most of the ethnically homogenous 1960s and 1970s. In light of the changing discursive boundaries of Koreanness in what has been a traditionally patriarchal Confucian society, it is perhaps unsurprising that the Yemeni refugees have sparked widespread debate. They number so few as to place no realistic strain on Korea's economy, and represent only a fraction of the 1.48 million foreigners in Korea in 2017 (Statistics Korea, 2018), but they have nonetheless prompted vehement reactions. Particularly surprising has been the fact that much of the antirefugee rhetoric has been supplied by women and young people (Park, 2018), themselves largely responsible for Park Geun-Hye's impeachment and the election of the succeeding progressive president, Moon Jae-in. This article offers insights into why some women, and in particular some digital feminists, seem to have reacted so negatively toward the refugees, what broader social issues are imbricated with/reflected by their online reactions, and what types of connections/solidarities are formed or broken through this discourse.

Digital Feminism in Korea

Digital feminism in Korea has a long history, dating back to female-centered online communities in the 1990s, which grew along with the increasing popularization of the Internet (Jeong & Lee, 2018). Generally, however, misogyny hung over the Korean Internet, one explanation for which is often linked to "masculine anxieties and anger about economic insecurity . . . projected onto 'selfish Korean women'" (Jeong & Lee, 2018, p. 708). Amid this cloud of misogyny, female users sought to interact and socialize in female-dominated—although not specifically feminist-oriented—online communities (Jeong & Lee, 2018; D. Kim, 2020). In 2015, feminist movements started to spread and expand within, among, and beyond these female-dominated online communities, exemplified by "Megalians," who attempted to criticize rampant misogyny through "mirroring," which refers to the act of switching females and males in misogynistic speech acts (Jeong & Lee, 2018; D. Kim, 2020).

There soon appeared even more diverse and devoted feminist groups, such as Womad, which, according to Koo (2019), leans more extremist than Megalia and has been noted for the way its activities align closely with trolling and toxic gender essentialism. Though female-dominated online communities had been central to the past and current developments of feminist digital discourses, pushbacks and protests were not limited to these online communities. J. Kim (2017) examined in depth the #iamafeminist hashtag that gained widespread popularity in Korean Twitter in 2015, noting that "hashtag feminism can promote feminist politics by resisting misogynistic and patriarchal discourse" (p. 805). These previous studies of digital feminism in Korea, on subjects ranging from #iamafeminist to Megalia and Womad, note that participation has not been exclusive to particular online spaces, but has co-occurred alongside and in tandem with off-line activism (Jeong & Lee, 2018; D. Kim, 2020; Koo, 2019). Yet, along with the rise of feminist discourses, there has been contestation over the morality of the movements, as well as over what feminism is. We contribute to the aforementioned scholarship by considering how digital feminism intersects with other sociopolitical issues—in this case, those invoked during discussion around the Yemeni refugees.

This brief review of digital feminism in Korea explicates the degree to which the terrain over contemporary (digital) feminism in Korea is shifting and contested. Just as the discourse of *damunhwa* has sparked widespread introspection and debate over what it means to Korean in a globalizing, multiethnic society, so too has the divergent evolution of digital feminism added further context for long-standing questions about what it means to be a woman in Korea today, and to be Korean more broadly. That is, Korean women must simultaneously navigate their positionality as women within a patriarchal society and also as Korean citizens in a society undergoing significant demographic, social, economic, and political change.

Twitter and Refugees

Though the issue of the refugees was also discussed in Korea's mainstream news media, Twitter was chosen as the site of investigation because it allowed us to review a wide range of discourse expressed by many individual citizens. Twitter is frequently recognized as a place where publics form and interact. Warner (2002) elaborates on five conditions that define a public: (1) self-organized, (2) a relation among strangers, (3) both personal and impersonal, (4) constituted through mere attention, and (5) the social space created by the reflexive circulation of discourse. Embrace of fluid, diverse perspectives in Warner's definition suits the current networked media environment where strangers and familiars can organically gather to discuss.

Online social platforms like Twitter collapse/converge the public and the private, creating "both opportunities and challenges for pursuing publicity, privacy, and sociality" (Papacharissi, 2012, p. 1990). Through their discursivity, social media platforms can call into being "affective publics" (i.e., "networked publics that are mobilized and connected, identified, and potentially disconnected through expressions of sentiment"; Papacharissi, 2016, p. 310; see also Ojala, Pantti, & Laaksonen, 2018). We were curious whether such formations would be fostered through Twitter discourse around the refugees, especially given that we identified in the data sometimes similar/shared rhetoric toward the refugees espoused by traditional oppositional groups (i.e., patriarchal/traditional men and feminists).

Twitter has previously been identified as a particularly rich site for analysis of discourse on refugees. Rettberg and Gajjala (2016) document the practices around the hashtag #refugeesNOTwelcome in response to the influx of Syrian refugees to Europe. They note that criticisms of refugees often revolve around masculinity, with male refugees portrayed as both dangerous to the women in the host country and also as having abandoned the women in their own country (p. 180). Likewise, Nerghes and Lee's (2018) analysis of tweets finds that refugees in Europe are alternatively framed as either deserving "refugees" or undeserving "migrant." Kreis (2017) also explores Twitter discourse around refugees in Europe. She connects the antirefugee discourse with "the rise of an ideology of White dominance and superiority as well as nationalism and right-wing populism in Europe" (p. 511).

Our case differs in important ways from the cases above. For one thing, unlike many previously examined cases in the literature on refugees, Korea is neither a European, nor a White nation. In fact, Korean discourse on refugees has been directly informed by Korea's ambivalent positions vis-à-vis its uncertain status in relation to the "advanced" West, reflecting Korean policy makers awareness of Korea's ambivalent position as an "advanced," or "Western" nation (see N. H. J. Kim, 2015, pp. 731–732). Also,

unlike countries such as Germany, which accepted more than 500,000 Syrian refugees (McCarthy, 2018), the 500 Yemeni refugees in Korea are so a small number that it is not plausible to argue that their presence places an economic strain on the state. Finally, Korea has not seen a swing to the right in recent years. In fact, the legislative act through which the Yemeni refugees are allowed to stay was first instituted by the aforementioned Korean president, Park Geun-Hye, who was considerably farther to the right than the current president, Moon Jae-in. These differences add nuance to the situation and indicate that any discussion about the refugees will be imbricated with broader societal concerns unique to Korea.

Method

To make sense of the complex and conflicting discourses deployed on Twitter around the Yemeni refugees, this article draws on thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is "a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Though it is sometimes subsumed under other methodological traditions, it has also been recognized as "a method in its own right" (p. 78). We chose thematic analysis because we are concerned not only with documenting/categorizing the different types of discourse surrounding the refugees but also seek to interrogate these discourses to understand their connections to broader issues in society. Thematic analysis works "both to reflect reality and to unpick or unravel the surface of 'reality'" (p. 81). Thus, it extends beyond simply a quantitative exercise in identifying and counting themes, and includes identifying latent themes that reflect underlying attitudes and ideologies that motivated the creation of the data under analysis (p. 84).

Identification of themes within the data was based on the six-phase steps outlined by Braun, Clarke, Hayfield, and Terry (2019). Thus, we familiarized ourselves with the data, generated initial codes, looked for themes, reviewed and refined the themes, defined and named the themes, and then conducted a final analysis.

Data Collection and Presentation

Using DiscoverText, data were collected from July 4–8, 2018. This time period was chosen for data collection because it coincided with a high level of news coverage about the refugee situation. However, news coverage of the situation remained high, such that the period we chose featured a higher (but not the highest) amount of discussion over the refugee issue. We chose a relatively short period for data collection so that we could analyze the entire corpus of tweets which featured the Korean language terms for "Yemen" and/or "refugee." While searching using hashtags might have provided a more focused group of tweets, it would also have meant we were getting only the "tip of the iceberg" in terms of tweets on the topic (Bruns & Moe, 2014, pp. 24–25). In addition, searching first with keywords allowed us to identify hashtags that were (or were not) being deployed by users. Using these two search terms was general enough to capture most of the conversation about the refugees, while also specific enough that few of the tweets were not explicitly about the refugees in Jeju Island. Indeed, within the corpus we analyzed, when mentions of other refugees (e.g., in Europe) appeared, the tweets still focused on the Yemeni refugees. In some cases, we also examined users' profiles and previous tweets to clarify our understanding of their identities and motivations.

The example tweets are taken from a corpus of more than 8,000 tweets, identified below by sequential letters from A to Z, and then repeating again from AA to ZZ (thus, the first tweet example is denoted as #a

and the last as #dd). As much as possible, tweets are presented in such a manner as to preserve their original form, with the result that awkward-looking line breaks and grammatical errors are maintained in translation.

Findings

Our data reveal that the refugee issue was often conflated with, or co-opted, to address various concurrent or emerging social issues/change. Tweets that mentioned the Yemeni refugees often included commentary about hot-button social issues such as feminism, progressive politics, multiculturalism (*damunhwa*), economic precarity, intergenerational conflict, and religion. Importantly, where an individual Twitter user stood on other social issues could not always be extrapolated from that user's stance on the Yemeni refugee issue, and vice versa. For example, some economically liberal feminists expressed antirefugee sentiments, while some conservative, nationalistic men expressed prorefugee sentiments. The refugee debate thus reveals surprising cleavages within Korean society.

In general, while some tweets expressed the user's opinion on the specific, actionable policy debate around whether or not Korea should accept the Yemeni refugees, many tended to discuss other broader social issues through the lens of refugees and public opinion on them.

Women

The broad theme of "women" was identified as the most frequently appearing theme in tweets featuring the terms "Yemen" and/or "refugee." Appearing under this broader theme of "women" were tweets on a range of issues, written from various perspectives, such as apparently conservative men and avowedly feminist women. What these sub-themes shared in common was the practice of placing the issue of the Yemeni refugees into conversation with various debates around women in Korean society. These subthemes are made up of the following overlapping but mutually exclusive categories: safety of women; the urgency of women's rights; antifeminism.

Tweets primarily concerned with advocating for women in Korea overwhelmingly included digital feminist slang that signaled the user's feminist orientation. Space elides a full discussion of digital feminist slang terms (see Jeong & Lee, 2018; D. Kim, 2020; Yoo, 2015), but we chose to underscore digital feminist slang terms in the tweets because they function as critical clues to reading the satiric, political undertone in tweets that superficially can be interpreted as simply sexist or unrelated to feminist arguments. For instance, consider the following tweet:

> K . . . There's no rape culture in Christianity . . . Women's rights are not as *jotchang* as
> they are in Islam. (#a)

At face value, the above tweet can be read as only expressing the user's Islamophobia. However, the use of the digital feminist slang *jotchang* (which translates roughly as "dick-mushing") suggests that the user's intention in contrasting Christianity and Islam may be to address issues about women's safety and rights, and might extend beyond the merely bigoted positioning of a "superior" Christianity and an

"inferior" Islam (a thorough explication of the role of religion in these discourses lies beyond the purview of this article).

In the example tweets, we minimized interpretative editing in our translations to best reflect the original tweets; possible incoherency, unintuitive formatting, or unnatural flow in the examples presented in this article reflect the original content. Feminist slang terms are underscored.

Safety of Women

As alluded to above, a common subtheme in the tweets was the issue of women's safety, which was often deployed in the context of normatively suggesting that Korea should not have admitted the refugees. These tweets frequently expressed prejudice toward Muslim men and the women's fear of "Taharrush," a term used to describe group sexual violence as well as a widely publicized case of sexual assault in Cologne, Germany, during New Year's Eve 2015 (Abdelmonem, Bavelaar, Wynne-Hughes & Galán, 2016). Consider the following tweet.

> People who are saying we should accept refugees are saying so knowing about Taharrush, Islam's ill tradition of group raping women, right? Refugees swarming by to drag female passers-by to rape and disappear casually. . . . You are advocating for them with knowledge of this, right? (#b)

This type of tweet opposed granting entry to the refugees by underscoring the hypothetical threats that the supposed "traditions" of the predominantly male Muslim Yemeni refugees pose to Korean women's safety. Somewhat differently, other tweets primarily expressed the user's anger toward Korean society's patriarchal indifference to domestic sexual assaults and used the refugee issue primarily to make this broader point:

> Top 1 bullshit by jerks that say we should welcome refugees: "Korean men already commit many sexual crimes anyways—don't pick on refugee sex crimes. We should let the refugees in." You fucktards, are these words or crap. If we follow this [logic] that means we will have refugee sex crimes on top of already overflowing Korean men sex crimes, meaning that the overall number of sex crimes will go up. (#c)

Although the fear toward the possibility of sexual assaults by refugees is similar to the cases above, this user connects it with crimes committed by Korean men. That is, this case illustrates how fear for women's safety is not simply an iteration of fear toward an unknown Other (although the two are often positively related), but a fear toward male sex crimes in general. It is the present status of women's safety in Korea that prompts the user's frustration, and the 500 refugees are merely brought in to make a larger comment about male sexual violence toward women. This difference, while nuanced, is nonetheless important as it goes beyond a dichotomous/binary framing of Korean versus Others, and reframes the issue with Korean women on one side, and both Yemini and Korean men on the other.

Interestingly, while many of the Tweets used digital feminist slangs to signal the user's affinity with Korea's nascent digital feminist movements, others implicitly condoned a traditional and xenophobic patriarchal perspective by aligning women's safety issue with national security concerns. The following tweet typifies this case, and was from a highly nationalistic account whose profile argued for "the eradication of pro-North Koreans and pro-Chinese . . . [and] freedom reunification and powerful nation Korea." It reads:

> The end of Middle Eastern refugees that sexually harassed Russian women! #refugee #sexualharassment #taharrush #Islam #Muslim #femaleoppression #punishment #condemnation #punish #trueeducation #protectnation #deportrefugees #opposerefugees #blockMuslimentry. (#d)

The user's profile description and conflation of the potential threat toward women's safety with the nation (indexed through the hashtag #protectnation) act together to indicate the user's strong nationalist perspective. The lack of digital feminist slang is in line with this reading, and suggests that while "women" are superficially central to the tweet, they are being used, like the refugees in the tweets above by digital feminists, to further a broader argument. Therefore, although the user uses the hashtag #femaleoppression, it is to stress the Otherness of Yemeni refugees. In other words, it is possible to infer that the focus of the user's support for "deport[ing] refugees" and "block[ing] Muslim entry" is the "protection" of Korea, and that women, through their domestic embodiment of the nation, are used as a rhetorical device with which to propound nationalistic sentiment.

The Urgency of Women's Rights

The need for continuous attention and support for the ongoing efforts to improve women's status in Korea was another prominent subtheme. Tweets from this subtheme often expressed users' disappointment in the perceived disinterest of the government and the public in women's rights issues:

> News was talking about "Korean people's xenophobia towards Yemeni refugees" lol. Has "misogyny" ever made the news even once so far. (#e)

> [In regard to public fear over a possible serial murderer targeting women] WTF. Let go [the accused] because there was no victim? . . . When Korean men are scary as well. Even scarier because the refugees came in, too. . . . So our feelings are not even feelings? (#f)

Tweets like the above tended to prioritize the legitimacy and urgency of the women's rights issues over that of the refugees. Although some connections to other refugee controversy-related themes appear, the critical topic is the issue of misogyny. Tweet #f in particular only indirectly expresses the user's attitude toward the refugee controversy. The digital feminist slangs further allude to the users' order of priorities.

Consistent with the prioritization of the women's rights movement, some of the tweets showed adversity toward only male refugees. They argued that refugees' "misogynistic customs" could be applied to Korea if it accepts the refugees, and users expressed their concern that this could set back ongoing efforts to improve the status of women in Korea:

> What's funny is that with things like this or in stories where women are persisting in difficult situations, people say oh wow, amazing~ and shower themselves with self empowerment; but when it comes to refugees . . . they say crossing the borders is difficult and only men can do it, yes yes I agree with you. (#g)

> If we don't have the right to send back refugees only consisting of men, I think we don't have the duty to allow them in as well. (#h)

These two tweets problematize the overrepresentation of males within the overall population of Yemeni refugees in Korea. The first tweet sarcastically comments on double standards, and the second tweet exemplifies the argument that users are not opposed to refugees in general, but specifically male refugees. Some users' relative prioritization of the domestic women's rights movement was further illustrated in tweets that negatively discussed the hypothetical situation in which Korean male refugees sought asylum:

> People say if we have a war in our country we will also be refugees but if there were to be a war in Korea it's likely that men will shove away women and children to go seek asylum only for themselves (don't you think so?) and when that kind of 400 Korean men go to some country and say we are refugees, and if that country's feminists ask them where did all women and children go and criticize, I would be fucking grateful. (#i)

> By simply looking at the Philippines, you can see that allowing in Korean men as not even refugees but just as international students and tourists can be detrimental to the country and their women. . . . Retweet: I personally think accepting Korean men as refugees in any Asian country is taking a risk. (#j)

These tweets did not clearly indicate the user's opinion on the issue of hosting Yemeni refugees, but instead appropriated the controversy to criticize Korean men, using a derogatory digital feminist slang. Tweet #i describes the rejection of Korean refugee men as a feminist move. Tweet #j, on the other hand, uses the refugee issue to highlight Korean men's sex tourism in the Philippines, which has been an issue that Korean feminists and digital feminists have regularly attempted to surface.

Antifeminism

There is also a subtheme of antifeminism. These tweets tended to involve uniform categorization of diverse feminist perspectives under certain social or political stances. This includes portraying feminists as opposed to the refugees. Some tweets equated feminists with being against the progressive Moon Jae-in government or being antiestablishment in general:

Femis that are going as far as to do performances to urge the Korean president to kill himself and shout out go kill yourself!!! 🤣 So you don't like the president as much as you hate the refugees? And the liberal party congress-dogs not responding to this thinking about their votes lol (#k)

North Korea doesn't work anymore. So they are creating new conflicts through the refugee controversy and women's issues. . . . Sources to attack the government. (#l)

Here, antirefugee arguments advocating for women's rights were generalized as either mindless or calculated attacks against the Moon Jae-in government. The above users were identified as supporters of the politically liberal Moon Jae-in government. However, politically conservative users also accused feminist-inclined liberals' integrity:

To their former female president. Frame all kinds of accusations. And enforce political oppression by locking her up for 24 years in jail but toward Black people who came over from Africa and Islam you bring up international human rights and treat them as refugees who came to escape political oppression? If this is not comedy, then what is? (#m)

In contrast to the Moon Jae-in supporters' claim that feminists were wrongfully opposed to refugees, conservative users argued that the feminists were contradicting themselves by supporting refugees when they had politically oppressed the impeached female president Park. In response, some tweets addressed the issue of overgeneralizing what constituted feminism:

Hey, those women are saying refugees shouldn't come! Those women are insulting "all" men! Those women are insulting sexual minorities! Therefore what they are saying is not real feminism! They are sexists and far-rights! It seems it is so easy for everyone to make these kind of conclusions. I'm at a loss for words. (#n)

So, what comes to your mind when you see the way the jerks that say "members of the digital feminist group who use the word Korean men is making all Korean men into potential criminals and therefore feminists are mentally ill" are [ironically] sweepingly treating Yemeni refugees as potential criminals. (#o)

The first tweet points to general sweeping generalizations of diverse feminist perspectives in Korean society, not simply those regarding the refugee controversy. The second mockingly describes the self-contradictory attitude of some antifeminists by arguing that those who deride digital feminists for their use of derogatory slang toward Korean men are themselves overgeneralizing when they frame all Yemeni refugees as potential criminals. Whereas some users were intent on addressing the widespread generalization of feminist opinions, some others attempted to zone in on the refugee issue by distinguishing differing beliefs among feminists:

Feminist extremists are seizuring and attacking with foam in their mouth that Jeju Island is letting in Yemeni refugees—but yeah, that refugee law was by you people's *Haetnim*'s

[Internet slang referring to President Park, to put in contrast with President Moon] Hwang Wooyea~ [prominent conservative politician]. It's so transparent that you switched to the topic of Muslim refugees to harass the president because your attempt to talk crap about the government with anti-illegal camera measures is no longer working, boohoo. In reality it was during Park Geunhye's time when women's rights was dick-mushed—what's good? (#p)
Your *Haetnim* made people talk because she made a total mess out of the refugee law and did not give a crap about policies for women and only kept on fantasizing about celebrities, ugh. (#q)

The above tweets argue those that have been attacking President Moon about the refugee controversy do not represent all feminists, but only certain feminist extremists that supported President Park. Their attitude toward the refugee controversy is unreadable from the tweet; it is likely they are also conflating the refugee policy issue with other social, political issues in Korea.

Tweets conflating the Yemeni refugee policy controversy with women's issues tended to have three main foci: (1) Korean women's safety; (2) the priority of the women's rights movements; and (3) antifeminist perspectives. Many of these tweets incorporated digital feminist viewpoints, the undertone of some of which were only readable via the users' inclusion of digital feminist slang. The diverse array of the users' stances, as well as their often-tangential relevance to the refugee issue, supports our observation that the Yemeni refugee controversy was the convening space for various ongoing public debates and social changes in Korea.

Multiculturalism

Another major theme that emerged was related to *damunhwa*, with connections drawn between the Yemeni refugees and other ethnic and cultural groups. Like the theme of "Women," *damunhwa* was made up of the following overlapping but mutually exclusive categories: commentary on multiethnic society; anxieties about Islam; historical responsibility and global context.

Commentary on Multiethnic Society

Some prorefugee tweets lamented seemingly across-the-board discrimination against various vulnerable minorities in Korea:

It's lamentable how [our country] treats the socially weak—women, laborers, the disabled, sexual minorities, and animals—it is not surprising that the treatment of overseas refugees is deplorable. I hope for a better country than this. (#r)

I've known Koreans to be [xenophobic]. A country that is hostile to mixed-descent people surely is going to kick up a fuss about refugees. I'm arguing that accepting [refugees] is the right thing to do in the humanitarian sense, but I am not for a moment mistaking Korea for something it is not. (#s)

> Our country [Korea]'s refugee acceptance rate is 2%, the lowest in the world, and
> [multicultural] families featuring a White person are called "global families," and those
> that have non-Whites are called "multicultural families." (#t)

The prorefugee tweets above use the refugee issue to call attention to other forms of racism in Korean society. Thus, tweets #r and #s use the refugees' plight to call attention to already existing racism in Korean society, with #t specifically targeting Korea's double standards toward different types of foreigners (see Ahn, 2018).

Commentary on the multiethnic and multicultural dimensions of Korean society also entailed reference to North Koreans, a group that is ethnically Korean yet also labeled as "refugees" in the public discourse. These North Koreans are used to frame a nonsupportive stance on refugees:

> I had actually neglected one aspect about [Korea's] refugee policy. Korea already accepts
> over a thousand North Korean defectors each year, with over 30,000 defectors resettled
> here cumulatively. This is why the global powers had not asked Korea to shoulder the
> burden on refugees. (#u)

Anxieties About Islam

Unsurprisingly, given previous research on refugees from predominantly Muslim countries, this subtheme featured tweets that were explicitly Islamophobic or criticized Islam. Such criticisms were both explicit and implicit:

> Korea won't become a Muslim state with only 500 refugees. (#v)

> What are Korean Islams doing, not helping the Islam refugees out; their corruption is
> preventing them from focusing on what is actually important. (#w)

While demonstrating a more prorefugee stance, tweet #v implies that is the small number of refugees that ought to alleviate the public's concern. That is, the above tweet does not problematize anti-Muslim sentiment. In tweet #w, although some form of "responsibility" toward the Yemeni refugees is acknowledged, the burden of responsibility is placed on Korean Muslims, against whom accusations of corruption are simultaneously leveled.

Historical Responsibility and Global Context

A subset of tweets also reflected contested understandings of Korea's responsibility to the refugees. Analogies were made between Korea's past and Yemen's present:

> If this country [Korea] is invaded, how do you possibly think that we'll be able to set up
> an overseas government-in-exile, request aid and troops with a straight face? (#x)

> A top-10 global economy saying such things about refugees, we might as well have gone belly up when we were poor, not accepting economic aid from others. (#y)

Reference is made to Korea's own past as a recipient of help from abroad, bolstering the users' argument to accept and resettle refugees. However, some users who referenced Korea's past or Korea's relationship to the global society did so to advocate against accepting refugees:

> Government-in-exile is not really the same as accepting individuals who escaped. They're not asking us to help them return to steer their country back on the right course again, are they? (#z)

> Brexit occurred against the backdrop of illegal immigration and refugees, and the antirefugee demonstrations in Poland, strongmen leaders in Italy and Hungary against accepting refugees, and Trump's hardline opposition to illegal immigration. . . . The West is currently swept up by anti-immigrant movements. We [Koreans] also have to block the rapid admission of Chinese and refugees! (#aa)

Tweet #z references Korea's past and its "government-in-exile" in Shanghai during the years under Japanese colonial rule. This juxtaposes the image of patriotic and oppressed Koreans against undeserving Yeminis. In the case of tweet #aa, the user references the West's xenophobic response to refugees to make the argument for Korea turning away refugees and immigrants.

Economy

As in other countries, the economy was a common theme that appeared in opposition to the refugees. Here, the tweets in many ways mirrored the type of populist claims that have propelled far-right parties to power in Europe and helped elect Donald Trump, focusing on both economic prospects combined with criticism of elites. As with the previous themes of "Women" and "damunhwa," the theme of "Economy" was similarly composed of two overlapping but mutually exclusive categories: "here to take our jobs" and "critique of philanthropy."

"Here to Take Our Jobs"

These tweets invoked fears about refugees taking Koreans' jobs. This sometimes involved questioning refugees' motivations, claiming that their path to Korea was based on deliberate, conscious planning:

> There's no evidence that they [Yemeni refugees] are refugees. They had a very elaborate plan, and boarded on a plane to Korea to find jobs as illegal workers in Korea. (#bb)

In the above tweet, the refugees are accused of being economic migrants, rather than victims fleeing violence.
Critique of Philanthropy

Other tweets criticized elites for their supposed "do-gooder" behavior and for neglecting ordinary Koreans' substantive economic concerns. This included tweets expressing critiques of prominent wealthy philanthropists who advocated on behalf of refugees, categorizing this advocacy as being insufficiently attuned to the perceived dire practical consequences of admitting refugees. For example, Jung Woo-sung, a popular Korean actor who has been active as a United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, received ire from Twitter users:

> Yes, those who don't give a damn about one's own neighbors are blowing their trumpets
> so loudly [on the issue of refugees]. Buggers like Jung Woo-sung, who live in expensive
> and safe neighborhoods, seldom have to encounter refugees every day. (#cc)

These critiques zeroed in on what posters saw as an undue amount of attention and funds paid to the refugee issue, which was seen as coming at the expense of pressing domestic issues, such as unemployment and structural economic inequality:

> Self-described humanitarians neglect complicated domestic problems, such as pervasive
> abuse of authority, countless suicides caused by economic precarity and the families who
> are left with debt after their loved ones' suicides, high youth unemployment. All of a
> sudden, they then pretend to be the guardian angels of the Yemeni refugees, and surely
> this is problematic? (#dd)

This tweet invokes the refugees primarily as a way to discuss a litany of broader social issues. Furthermore, it abstains from commenting directly on the Yemeni refugee issue and instead focuses on the perceived lack of attention being paid to various social issues in Korea.

Discussion

Unsurprisingly, Korean Twitter discourse surrounding the Yemeni refugees shares some similarities with the European context. This includes issues of race (e.g., Kreis, 2017), the protection of native women (e.g., Rettberg & Gajjala, 2016), and economic issues. However, there are also clear differences that emerge from our identification and analysis of the themes discussed above. Interestingly, and unlike the European case (e.g., #refugeesNOTwelcome in Kreis, 2017; Rettberg & Gajjala, 2016), there are no unifying hashtags which emerged around the refugee issue in Korea. This is an important and interesting distinction because hashtags play an important role in organizing and aggregating information on a topic. Meraz and Papacharissi (2013) point out that hashtags can "aid in the creation of an ad hoc issue public" (p. 144). However, in the case of Yemeni refugees, despite the heated emotions around the topic, no such issue public emerged. Instead, different groups largely talked among themselves, without linking their arguments back to the macrolevel of the hashtag (Bruns & Moe, 2014).

Previous research has found that Koreans are more likely to use direct replies rather than hashtags (Hong, Convertino, & Chi, 2011), but J. Kim (2017) identified feminist hashtag activism in Korea, much of which coalesced around the use of the "#iamafeminist" hashtag. J. Kim (2017) notes that this hashtag "became the 'mother tag' for articulating various gender issues" (p. 816). Further, broader research on

Twitter by Jackson, Bailey and Welles (2020) highlights the importance of hashtags to various women-focused movements. They highlight how these various hashtags "work to challenge dominant understandings of gendered violence . . . even as they debunk cultural myths and offer systemic critiques of patriarchy" (p. xli). They note that "at its peak, #YesAllWomen resulted in more than 60,000 tweets an hour" (p. 5).

In contrast, the corpus we examined featured not only a lack of unifying hashtags but was marked by what we refer to as "affective splintering." For example, both liberals and conservatives were often deeply at odds with others in their own respective camps over the issue of the refugees, and digital feminist slang was deployed by those both voicing support for the refugees as well as others who either opposed their acceptance, or were highly ambivalent. Further research is warranted that examines the formation—or lack thereof—of hashtag-based issue publics in the Korean context.

Importantly, this study found that different groups appropriate each other's plight to further their own goals. Thus, digital feminists employ the Yemeni refugee issue for the purpose of discussing the shortcomings of Korea's patriarchal society. Likewise, ethnonationalists and patriarchal Koreans appropriate the discourses of both refugees and women to make their case for expelling refugees and/or supporting the Moon Jae-in government. For many users, issues such as women's safety, antifeminism, and the economy were the primary target of focus, and the refugee issue was appropriated to provide a lens through which these topics could be discussed, as well as a timely vocabulary for doing so. That is, while some posts directly engaged with the refugee issue, others expressed anti- (and pro-) refugee sentiments to segue into making arguments about broader societal disgruntlement. The preoccupation with issues besides the refugees may help explain why no common hashtags were adopted and no ad hoc issue publics formed around these conversations; the refugees were not the true issue of concern to many posters.

The superficially minor issue of a mere 500 refugees divided Korea along multiple axes that extended beyond gender, age, and party affiliation. Thus, we conclude that this specific case is an example of "affective splintering," as groups previously perceived as coalesced (e.g., conservatives, liberals, digital feminists) appear to fracture over an emotionally charged issue, and no new alliances/configurations emerge to replace them. No unifying hashtag emerged to bring different groups together for discussion around the issue. This lack of hashtags may speak to a splintering in which previous solidarities are dissolved and beyond which no new configurations appear to be formed. The same networked affordances that allow for issue publics to form in the first place also allow them to persist as merely loose connections or easily dissolve, because individuals can rapidly exit/reconfigure their networks to better serve their specific individual interests. This affective splintering is unlikely to be confined to the Korean case and more research is needed to identify such occurrences in other contexts. However, it is likely exacerbated in the Korean context by two related issues: (1) the extremely high penetration and adoption of broadband Internet and social networking services, and (2) the incredibly rapid demographic and social changes to Korea that are encapsulated in the *damunhwa* debates.

Unfortunately, this study was unable to locate any Twitter handles of Yemeni refugees themselves, so it is unclear how they are engaging with Korean Twitter. It is unlikely that they are passive subjects in the Twittersphere, and further research is necessitated on their online engagement with the Korean Twittersphere.

Further research into the Yemini refugees' social media practices would reveal if and how they seek to reassert their own agency and enter the conversation about their contested social/legal status in Korea.

In addition, this study was limited by its investigation of only the tweets themselves. Future scholarship is needed that considers the positionality of the Twitter users who engaged in these debates. For instance, an in-depth engagement with the authors of the tweets may reveal further entanglement with other related issues around gender and sexuality, both specific to and/or generalizable beyond the national context of the Korean society. For example, although the groups mentioned above are not explicitly queer, they share much in common with the "queer safe spaces" described by Pascar, Hartal, and David (2018). That is, they represent "space[s] of agency" that are "produced through the acknowledgement of affects such as rage and shame and encouraging their use against heteropatriarchy" (p. 4). However, as Pascar et al. point out, echoing the criticisms of Womad discussed above (Koo, 2019), like other spaces queer spaces can also "stage and recreate problematic power dynamics" (p. 2). Depending on the makeup of these groups, homonationalism (Puar, 2007) may be another useful lens with which to make sense of how digital feminists' tenuous position in Korean society is legitimated by "the simultaneous engendering and disavowal of sexual-racial others who need not apply" (p. 10). However, the situation is also determined by the specificities of the Korean context, which we have sought to illustrate above.

Conclusion

It has been troubling, but also theoretically informative, to document the appropriation of the Yemeni refugee's situation by various groups who then invoke them as a quasi-rhetorical strategy to highlight their special interests. Rather than issue publics being formed, the various groups remained (mostly) unconnected with each other on the macro level, due to the lack of unifying/aggregating hashtags. This may have had the positive effect that an antirefugee public did not emerge (as it often has in the European case), but it also precluded the formation of prorefugee groups that might have formed solidarities along multiple axes.

What is most clearly explicated by this study is that the discourse around a small number of Yemeni refugees reveals deeper divides in Korean society around issues like gender, the economy, and multiculturalism. Though these divides are present in other countries that host refugees, the discourse on Korean Twitter point to unique overlaps and divergence in the arguments for and against refugees, across and among social groups. Some of these differences, we conclude, are due to Korea's highly networked status, and self-awareness of Korea's ambivalent position in the global hierarchy of nations, as well as vociferous debates both about and among digital feminists in Korea.

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