

## The #MeToo Movement and Korean Journalism: Comments on Online News Coverage of the Trial of Former Governor Ahn Hee-jung

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*The purpose of this study is to reveal the discursive structure of Korean society regarding sexual violence through an analysis of news coverage of the Me Too movement, particularly as it regards allegations against former South Chungcheong Province Governor Ahn Hee-jung, and comments left by netizens on portal news sites. Media reports and commenters on news emphasized the vetting of sexual assault victims, exacerbating secondary victimization in this case. The media knowingly presented Ahn's case devoid of context and actively supported perceptions that "the victim initiated the situation." Secondary victimization caused by the media and news comment sections is a distinctive phenomenon found in situations related to Korea's portal services. Negative stereotypes of victims of sexual violence and attitudes that are suspicious of testimonies from victimized women are reproduced into a sense of public opinion, illustrating need for feministic intervention into online comment culture.*

**Keywords:** *Me Too movement, quote journalism, portal news comments, secondary victimization*

## Introduction

The purpose of this article is to reveal the discursive structure of Korean society regarding sexual violence, through an analysis of reports on the Me Too movement in regard to former governor Ahn Hee-jung and comment sections on portal news sites. This study attempts to demonstrate that secondary victimization (i.e., re-victimization) of victims of sexual violence is exacerbated in Korea due to particular media reporting, journalism practices, and portal news comment culture. The Me Too accusations against former governor Ahn instantly became a historic event in that sexual violence charges were brought against a prominent politician, and, as a result, secondary victimization was severe as the victim received much more media and public attention due to the status and social recognition of the accused. A protracted period of 554 days stretched between the day that Kim Ji-eun, personal assistant to former governor Ahn, first appeared on JTBC to give her statement and the date of the final ruling by the Supreme Court. Kim made her pain and will to survive known in her book *I am Kim Ji-eun*, published in February of 2020. Kim underwent acute mental distress due to secondary victimization, being accused of intentionally falsely accusing a well-known politician of sexual assault in addition to the social criticism she faced that was generally caused by ignorance and prejudice towards victims of sexual assault.

This study aims to analyze news reports and comments on portal news on the case of sexual abuse by former governor Ahn Hee-jung. While there is the anguish brought on by the trial process and the trial itself, this article demonstrates that secondary victimization, a process by which victims are retraumatized by the cultural dimensions and reactions to their case, is exacerbated by media reports and anonymous online commenters who lack (or are outright contemptuous of) gender-sensitivity on Korean news portal site comment sections. The portal system of Korean online media gives prominence to comments in its news comment section based on the number of likes comments receive from other readers. Comments criticizing Kim as a “homewrecking woman” and someone trying to tear down a respectable man used to rank highest on the recommended comment lists. These same portal services are where many people go to read the news, and the comment sections on them are publicly accessible spaces. Readers perceive comments on news articles as representing public opinion. Under these circumstances, when the offender’s claims are reported as news items, criticism of the victim

tends to grow.

As a result, news coverage of sexual violence in the age of portal services tends to trigger secondary victimization. The problems of portal news comment culture lie in the demand for support and how reactions to news registered there come to dominate public opinion. In Korean society, the infidelity paradigm effectively dismisses the idea that a man bears responsibility when it comes to sexual assault, and contributes to framing the problem as one between females. Ahn's case is a symbolic one in which there are conflicting opinions on the woman involved, with some accusing her of adultery and acting as a gold digger. Furthermore, such a cultural backdrop cause difficulties for victims of sexual violence when it comes time for them to return to leading everyday lives, even after coming out victorious in systematic procedures such as trials. Victims face difficulties in returning to their daily lives for a number of reasons. Lack of financial compensation after winning their suits, difficulty retaining their jobs, and the troubles that characterize their search for reemployment due to the rumors and criticism surrounding them are the biggest obstacles. The majority of victims sexual of abuse quit their jobs, and their mental anguish persists as they are hounded by criticism of them that is closely connected to the internet that permeates the environments in which they conduct their lives (Kim 2020).

This study collected news reports and comments related to the trial of former governor Ahn from July 11, 2018 to February 25, 2019, and analyzed ten news reports per subject in the order of the highest to the lowest numbers of comments. Additionally, this study analyzed the top 20 comments based on the number of times they had been shared, a ranked metric. Selection standards for news and news comments that were subject to analysis were as follows. News reports with the most comments were selected corresponding with the dates that trial reports were published on the portal site Naver.<sup>1</sup> That is, ten news reports with the most comments were selected from news published on July 13, 14, 27, as well as the sentencing date of August 14, 2018 with regard to the first trial. The dates selected for the analysis of comments correspond to days when testimonies from the trial were published via portal news. With regard to the second trial, articles were selected from those posted on the sentencing date, February 1, 2019, along with articles from February 14 and 21. Another date chosen in 2019 corresponds to the day that

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<sup>1</sup> Naver is the largest portal service site in Korea. The market share of Naver reached 62.93% as of September 2020. Included in the Naver portal services are news, videos, music entertainment, and community service, drawing the majority of online users in Korea to Naver. The aggregated number of Naver's online portal users reached 30.16 million as of June 2020 (In 2020).

the wife of former governor Ahn uploaded a post on her Facebook page after her husband was pronounced guilty at the second trial, reversing the sentence imposed at the first trial. Comments were collected from each of the relevant articles based on the number of likes that they received.

## Background: News Consumption via Portal Services

Portal services in Korea are an important context that must be considered when analyzing the discourse around the Me Too movement (#MeToo). Social discourse on the Me Too movement in Korea was formed through media and comments left on news articles. Although social networking sites, such as major platform of the Me Too movement, Twitter, focused on advocacy for victims, the trend on portal services proved rather different. The comments left on news portals are influenced by media framing. According to existing research, such comments are a result of conservative press treating the Me Too movement as a debate on responsibility attribution and a battle over allegations.

The Korean portal site is a space where news, entertainment (music, webtoons, movie information, etc.), email, blogging, online communities (cafes), online shopping, and other internet features are all gathered. On the main page of portal sites, real-time search term rankings are displayed to draw the attention of visitors. Real-time search term rankings work similarly to Twitter trending topics and hashtags by displaying the most searched keywords at the time. Real-time search terms and news are interlinked in the system, making news bylines unimportant in a portal service environment. Readers not only ready news reports from certain press outlets but click news reports directly linked on the main portal page to read. Otherwise, readers click on the news reports that have high volumes of comments or reports that have received the most views.

The press invites viewers to click their news reports using systems such as the “pick” designation shown in Figure 1. Naver’s portal service provides associated news articles on every search result for news, and the article that has attracted the most attention appears with a headline in larger font, denoting that it is representative of the story. Below the top linked news article with a picture follow related news from other media outlets.

Corresponding to the advertising industry practice that equates numbers of views as attention from the public, higher numbers of views generate more profits for news outlets. As a result, a sensationalistic strategy



FIG. 1.—PORTAL NEWS ‘PICKS’ FROM FEBRUARY 14, 2019. RESPECTIVE NEWS OUTLETS PICK THIS ITEM AS HEADLINE NEWS FOR PEOPLE TO READ.

has been developed to increase the number of clicks on stories. According to this strategy, outlets generate headlines that include sensationalistic words or stimulate readers’ curiosity with an unfinished sentence. People habitually leave comments on news reports they have viewed and interact with other readers. In one study, 70% of the research subjects reported to read comments and perceive them as public opinion (Kim and Oh 2018). Portal comments in Korea foster a competition for readers’ attention through mechanisms of recommended and related content. If comments sections on news stories in other countries are presented in chronological order to show what kinds of conversations took place, the comments on news in Korea shows which opinions related to the news gain more support. Consequently, various methods of manipulating comments sections have been introduced to rally more support, for example, the use of multiple IDs by a single reader, brigading, or requesting others to like certain comments via other websites or KakaoTalk (the most used messenger in Korea), among others.

## The Me Too Movement as Seen in Korea's Legacy Media

The Me Too movement started to pick up its pace in Korea when Seo Ji-hyun, a public prosecutor, exposed sexual harassment within the prosecution office on a live JTBC news broadcast on January 29, 2018. Although there had been online hashtag movements prior to this, her interview amplified the case to the entire nation. Seo Ji-hyun's public Me Too allegation was followed by numerous disclosures of sexual harassment, abuse of women at work gatherings where alcohol was consumed, and the institutionalization of sexual harassment. That the perpetrators were part of the corrupt power elites in Seo's case contributed to public opinion siding with her. Victims voluntarily revealing their own names and pointing out perpetrators during interviews just as Seo had done became one of the tactics of the Me Too movement. Revealing their real names became proof of their honesty.

On March 5, 2018, Kim Ji-eun, a personal assistant to the incumbent governor of South Chungcheong province, Ahn Hee-Jung, appeared on a live JTBC news broadcast where she claimed that she had been repeatedly sexually assaulted by Ahn. Directly following Kim's interview, Ahn Hee-jung—a strong contender for a future presidential bid with many supporters—posted a message on SNS confirming the allegations and apologizing for them, which he later deleted, proclaiming his innocence.

The majority of comments reviewed for this study claimed that Kim's Me Too allegation was not about sexual assault because a long time had passed since the alleged crime had taken place, and she had not reported it in the meantime. Most posts on the portal services viewed Kim, who was nervous and could even be seen trembling during her broadcast interview with JTBC, in a negative light. Her restlessness during the interview was seen as a sign of pain by some and as evidence that she was lying by others. The myths surrounding victims who come forward with allegations of sexual abuse are usually constructed on the baseline belief that the victim is lying. Critics cite the fact that the victim did not respond on the spot, did not resist, or was late in reporting the incident as evidence that the accuser is fabricating their allegation. This is because the moment people begin to discuss sexual abuse, their suspicions regarding the victim do not rest on the behavior itself but on the myths or conventional wisdom surrounding sexual assault that people accept without critical consideration.

Those who considered themselves to be supporters of Ahn left comments expressing their support for the former governor and criticizing

Kim because they felt that she had falsely accused Ahn of sexual abuse. Later, those comments became prominent and overpowered support for Kim's courageous revelation. The Council of National Sexual Violence Counseling Centers released an open letter on March 12, 2018 pleading with the public to stop the secondary victimization of Kim with reckless online comments. Supporters of Ahn inflicted secondary victimization on Kim through online comments, and as the public expressed their sympathies with him, the secondary victimization grew even worse. In this case, these comments were not only written by ordinary people but also by supporters of Ahn for political purposes.

### Secondary Victimization of Victims through Media Reports

Discussions on the secondary victimization of sexual assault victims have taken place in most countries where patriarchal sexual norms and sexual double standards concerning women exist. It has been pointed out that the perspective of institutions and organizations can exacerbate harm to victims. If the party (such as the police) that a victim reports their assault to adheres to the prejudice that sexual assault victims are to blame for what happened to them and the victim reports the assault immediately after suffering it, the victim is likely to be too traumatized for rational communication. At the same time, authorities may suspect that a person is lying if they are able to describe the harm dealt to them clearly or if they report the incident after much time has passed (Campbell 2008; Campbell et al. 2001; Correia and Vala, 2003). Such experiences compound the harm already suffered by the victim by denying or trivializing harm done to victim or by lowering the victim's credibility (Stringer 2014).

Existing discussions on secondary victimization of survivors of sexual violence in Korea have primarily focused on misogynic incidents in the context of legal procedures including investigations and trials (Kwon 2019). The tendency to criticize victims causes victims to experience pain and hardship early in the investigation phase. Also affecting the secondary victimization are the procedures for identifying the actual damage caused by the sexual assault, arraignment procedures by the prosecutor, and the judge's ruling (Lea 2007; Orth 2002). This study, however, focuses on the influence of media that frequently exacerbates secondary victimization. Similar to cases of child sexual abuse, secondary victimization by the media includes exposing the identity of victims and otherwise failing to consider the wellbeing of

victims while reporting (Tandon 2007). Although the ethical standards on how to report on incidents of sexual assault have been formalized in guidelines (IFJ 2007), journalists often ignore or compromise these guidelines for the sake of attracting public attention. At the same time, concerns have been raised over the occurrence of secondary victimization when pictures and details of incidents are shared on social networks (Fairbairn and Spencer 2018).

Studies related to reportage on the Me Too movement show differences between countries. In the case of the UK, the Me Too movement was covered from perspective of victims, but the representations of sexual assault victims were focused on individual experiences, and largely those related to people with celebrity status (De Benedictis, Orgad and Rottenberg 2019). In Sweden and Denmark, media coverage positioned #MeToo within “an individual action frame portraying sexual assault as a personal rather than societal problem” (Askanius and Hartley 2019, p. 30). As for the Me Too movement in Korea, Lee (2019) argued that media reports that include the victim’s perspective, or voice, have promoted gender sensitivity in readers, and suggested that the media industry could respond to the Me Too movement more reflexively. But it should not be overlooked that, in a networked society, media coverage demands a response from people, and this leads to secondary victimization of sexual assault survivors. Research on the Me Too movement and secondary victimization are both mainly focused on social media (Bogen et al. 2019), but in Korea, news reports, comments on such news reports, and social media are all likely to increase secondary victimization.

In the South Korean context, there is a problem of secondary victimization being exacerbated not only by widespread social networking services, but also in the form of comments on news articles. Most news consumption in the country is done through web portals. Furthermore, many pay attention to comments on articles and consider them to be representative of an integral part of public opinion. The existence of comments that insist that Kim Ji-eun is not a victim of sexual violence, though perhaps not actually representative of popular opinion, may cause people to believe that such a notion is generally accepted by most of the public.

## Problems in News Reporting Methods: Reporting of the First Trial

There is a distinctive kind of objectivism that is prevalent in Korean media



which has been labeled “Korean-style formal objectivism” by a few researchers (Lee 2018; Nam 2017). One of the key features of Korean-style objectivism is that it relies on a high number of direct quotations when reporting, earning it the name “quote journalism.” But these quotes involve some degree of biased adaptation rather than reporting what was actually said (Lee 2018; Park 2015). For example, editing and combining two different sentences and reporting a statement constructed by the media that is different from the original statement as given is a typical practice in quote journalism. If we take a look at the article “Min Joo-won (Ahn’s wife): ‘Kim Ji-eun Entered Our Bedroom, Observed Us for 3-4 Minutes’”, the piece itself indicates that Min did not literally say those words, but the headline leads readers to believe that Min was eyewitness to Kim entering the bedroom. This summary is placed within quotation marks, thereby giving the impression that the witness had uttered those very words. The media has claimed that it is exempt from responsibility because they are only quoting what was said, however, this is a problematic practice because the summaries that are printed within quotation marks are generated from the media’s point of view, one that is deeply framed by Korea’s polarized politics. Moreover, the problem lies in that the news portal services have established sister companies to generate quote journalism-style reportage for the purpose of disseminating news items. For example, Chosun.com is first to post news that is believed will draw much attention. Then, depending on how much traction it receives, its parent company, the newspaper the *Chosun Ilbo*, may or may not choose to run the story in its pages. It is as if it outsources the function of posting provocative or sensational news items to its sister company. Thus, a tendency of publishing more provocative news on portal sites is rewarded due to the impact doing so has on the survival of the parent or affiliated companies of the portal news outlets. Citizens believe that these affiliated companies are the same as their original press and place their faith in them.

Another feature of Korean-style objectivism is that, while the Western media uses predicates related to articulation to describe the quotations, such as “so-and-so said thus” or “thus added so-and-so,” the Korean media uses evaluative language as predicates (Park 2015). For instance, take the sentence “Regarding her statement that Kim flirted while making drawings on the floor, it came as a great shock when it was found that Min had raised

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<sup>2</sup> YTN(2018.7.13). “Min Joo-won (Ahn’s wife): ‘Kim Ji-eun Entered Our Bedroom, Observed Us for 3-4 Minutes’”. Retrieved from Dec. 2020 ([https://www.ytn.co.kr/\\_ln/0103\\_201807132248301083](https://www.ytn.co.kr/_ln/0103_201807132248301083)).

concerns about Kim's behavior in the past"<sup>3</sup>. Here, the predicative vocabulary is "it came as a great shock" rather than "it was found" or other precise language, thus suggesting that this testimony was either decisive or revealed a hitherto unknown truth that produced an unexpected turn of events.

The frequent use of quotation marks in the titles of news articles has been criticized for feigned emphasis on the objectivity of the reports. At the same time, there has been a growing tendency to pique readers' curiosity and attract their attention by frequently using such terms as "shock," "turnabout," and "urgent" in titles, as the number of clicks became a sure-fire road to revenue when portal sites started providing news services. When it comes to issues that receive national attention, like Kim's allegations of sexual abuse by Ahn, the portal sites construct titles to draw attention amid a flurry of just-ins, in an effort to rile up anger in the readers.

Because such news reports appear as breaking news as soon as a trial is concluded, they take the form of simple summaries. Nevertheless, they also convey an evaluative attitude through those summaries. This brings us to an interesting point about reportage following the first trial of Ahn. Only testimonies related to former governor Ahn were made public at the trial, which caused problems in the reporting on the fourth and fifth trials (July 11 and 13). If the Korean press had at least tried to take an objective position, they would have reported statements from both Ahn and Kim from the first trial. However, as Kim's testimony was handled behind closed doors, they primarily reported on Ahn's statements, which had been processed openly. Some press adopted an objective attitude of reporting both sides of the testimonies (e.g., the *Kyunghyang Sinmun*). However, most press insisted that they had maintained objectivity by simply quoting statements from Ahn. We can interpret this to mean that the press did not take into account or simply did not care that Ahn was thus becoming overrepresented in the field of social opinion.

Now, when a news report contains an opinion that is critical of another person, journalistic ethics prescribes that a countering statement by the party being criticized be included in the report or publicized through another news report. However, given that online news services in Korea are based largely on breaking news linked on web portals, most such services are geared towards providing articles that rank high on the real-time search term charts rather than in-depth reporting. Likewise, in the coverage of Ahn's trial, if it

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<sup>3</sup> Seoul Economic Daily (2018.7.27). "Min (Ahn's wife) said, "Kim flirted while making drawings on the floor"". Retrieved from Dec. 2020 (<https://www.sedaily.com/NewsView/1S28WYO6FP>).

was difficult to immediately report on the position of Kim's witnesses, it would have been necessary to collect their opinions and provide balanced reports of the positions held by both sides. Yet instead the media rushed out breaking news articles as soon as the trial had ended, thus steering public opinion in one direction. The question of objectivity stirs much controversy in Western media as well, but if an article includes a word from at least one source, it must be fact checked before being published. If a statement is found to be false, it is included in the headline that the words are false (Tandoc 2020). On the other hand, the Korean media merely disseminates what people say in real-time. News articles are mass produced because real-time reporting is essential in the news portal environment, forgoing the process of in-depth news coverage. In cases concerning sexual violence, this coverage pattern leads to rapid and widespread dissemination of the excuses given by the perpetrator who has political power associated with multiple sources.

When claims from the accused are presented unilaterally, they can cause serious secondary victimization to the victim if presented as a narrative that stimulates the conventional patriarchal sexual perceptions or provokes readers' imaginations (Dharmapala, Garoupa and McAdams 2009; Lee 2013). In such cases as Kim Ji-eun's, there were two types of news reports that exacerbated secondary victimization. First, press reports established a narrative that prompted certain ways of understanding of the case and a particular framing of the story based on this narrative. These triggered secondary victimization to the victim. Second, the press chose to position the victim and perpetrator at odds in a competition over who was telling the "truth." The press focused on the claims of the accused and reported them as the truth, but the real truth here is that such claims were made in the context of a trial, not that the substance of the claims are true in themselves. However, the press emphasizes these claims and frames them with descriptions such as "new development," or "new testimony."

As the Me Too movement progressed, Korean male-centered online communities developed a perception that women's claims are unconditionally accepted as truth under the guise of gender sensitivity while men fall victim to such claims without compelling evidence. With an increasing interest in libel cases, the main discourse in male-centered online spaces was to declare neutrality and wait for evidence to refute the harm suffered by the victim. Accordingly, articles reported as if new proof has been found were understood as true evidence to nail a lie to the counter.

The following things have been pointed out as problematic coverage of sexual violence in the media. First, the media places an emphasis on the

image of weak, vulnerable, pure, and innocent victims and actively composes their own meanings regarding the image of the “true victim” (Kim and Lee 2015). An innocent and pure victim signifies a female who, while appropriately conducting her social activities, became the victim of a sexual crime committed by a complete stranger, the stereotypical attacker, and who resisted her attacker until the end (Huh and Shin 2014). Consequently, when the victim is an adult and the perpetrator and victim know each other, the media focuses on examining whether the victim fits into the image of the stereotypical “innocent” victim who has no liability, and the majority of news articles are primarily interested on the relationship the victim had with the accused. The notion that sexual violence is perpetrated by strangers or arises in violent situations is deeply rooted in patriarchal society. Thus, it is easy for the victim to be accused of lying when the sex offender is an acquaintance.

## Reporting of the First Trial and Comments on the News

A unique point of Ahn’s case is that even though the parties involved did not mention any possibility of a romantic relationship, readers assumed their relationship to be an adulterous one situated within the patriarchal cultural settings and the strong norms of heterosexuality. Nobody mentioned a romantic relationship during the trial, so why did portal news commenters immediately invoke a discourse of a romantic relationship? This can be attributed to the cognitive structure of female/male, and longstanding societal cognitive structures regarding women and men. In particular, politicians are regarded as people who do great things, and there is a fundamental perception that such “great men” tend to be attractive to women. Thus, when a male assailant is a politician or a businessman who enjoys a certain level of social recognition, it is easy to regard the issue as a “woman problem” (Kwon Kim 2018). The underlying belief is that women are naturally attracted to great men and being in an endless chain of relationships with women serves as a kind of testament to a man’s power.

The stable patriarchal family is threatened when a married man begins a relationship with a woman outside his family, and this woman is called an “adulteress,” among worse epithets. In this societal context/norm, husbands cheating on their wives has become a major topic in online women’s communities, so much so that in some cases community members have come together to address and solve such problems through collective intelligence. For instance, in one advice board for husband problems at a

women's community called MiClub, a member posted a series of ways one can divorce one's husband by collecting evidence of adultery, conflict with one's in-laws, and so on (Kim 2008). Furthermore, individual cases exercise a very powerful influence in online culture. Because these cases can be copy-pasted anywhere, and online spaces are connected via social networks, such cases can be spread to various online spaces and consumed by netizens regardless of their frequency or veracity and remain in the perceptions of those who come across them. Of course, there are internet memes that claim that one should not believe all the stories one finds online. Nonetheless, posts that seek advice about cheating husbands are taken seriously in online women's communities, and providing emotional support for women undergoing such problems is believed to be a way of showing solidarity among women.

In this context, in communities of middle-aged and older homemaking women such as 82Cook,<sup>4</sup> the prevailing discourse framed Kim's testimony against the former governor Ahn in terms of adultery from the outset. The age group of these community members coincides with that of the majority of those who leave comments on news articles on the Naver web portal in Korea, who are in their 40s and 50s, and who also share the same negative perceptions of Kim's testimony. The negative prejudice about divorce is particularly strong amongst women middle-aged and older. These women have numerous socio-cultural references to situations that force them to maintain their families despite male infidelity. Anxiety over the extramarital affairs of men is common within communities of women as men work as breadwinners and sexual advances are a rampant problem in Korean society. Kim's position as a former secretary to a prominent politician is reminiscent of the image of affair stories familiar to popular culture and tabloid gossip. Behind the negative evaluations lies the belief that Kim's testimony is not reliable, given the perception that sexual violence is something that involves physical violence and the expectation that she would be fearful that she would lose her job if sexual violence occurred.

Such negative comments started to multiply on a massive scale when the testimony of the wife of former governor Ahn, Min Joo-won, was quoted in each of the news reports on the trial. In large part, the testimony expressed Min's impression that Kim had romantic feelings for former governor Ahn.

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<sup>4</sup> Numerous female-centered online sites exist in Korea and they have an extremely powerful influence in the formation of public opinion. 82cook is an online site widely used by middle-aged and older women who are homemakers. In particular, it has an amicable attitude towards the current party in power (the Democratic Party) and it is a site that is amicable to former governor Ahn.

Although this was a highly subjective and unsubstantiated testimony, it headlined news coverage of the trial, and thus spread instantly across online communities, eliciting gut reactions in the comments.

As online commenters tended to accept Min's testimony as fact, the argument that Kim falsely accused Ahn because she was in love with him received the most likes. Of course, this can also be viewed as the result of a deliberate effort by Ahn's supporters to shape public opinion. However, general readers also view comments sorted by the number of likes, and thus, are easily exposed to this opinion. A similar claim circulated widely in the major online women's communities, thus indicating the cultural resonance of this perception.

The biggest problem here is that the issues of sexual violence or harassment committed by men are, in general, transformed into quarrels between women who compete with and criticize one another. According to Nam's (2019) analysis, when the wife of a sexual offender makes a statement, the case in question is not perceived as a problem in the gender power structure, but downplayed as a conflict between two women, and outsiders—especially men—become arbiters of what is more likely to have transpired in the case. Discourse on the destruction of families unfolds with male perpetrators being understood as the heads of households instead of as male authorities due to the overarching discourse of familialism. Thus, the families are dissolved when the family representatives are threatened. Damage from the dissolution of families is experienced acutely wives and mothers. That the assailant's wife is in fact the greatest victim was mentioned even in media coverage of Ahn's case (see the abovementioned YTN article). However, deciding who is the greater victim in this manner sidesteps the more critical issue of sexual violence as a violation of the rights of a female worker. The crimes alleged to have been committed by the man begin to fade away as the discourse shifts towards a clash between women, despite the fact that both the family issues and the harm faced by the female worker are a result of the sex offender's original crime of sexual violence. This framing structures a perception wherein the man's family is the greatest victim because the sexual behavior in question destroys the stability of the patriarchal family. The general problem of gender power structure, which in this case coincided with the problems of sexual violence and abuse of power in the workplace, was framed as a problem of male vs. female sex, thereby displacing the significance that the case has as part of the Me Too movement.

## Categorizing Comments Left on the News Reports of the First Trial

During the first trial, in 2018, the testimonies of Ahn's witnesses continued to be reported on in the press. The testimonies primarily discussed why Kim's words should not be considered credible or reviewed her previous claim that she respected Ahn. In addition, they discussed the responsibility of a secretary to book hotels for the governor on business trips, making it sound like she made such reservations with sexual intentions. Among the many articles on the trial, on one News1 article titled "Witness Of Ahn Testified with Tears That Kim and the Governor Seem to Drift Apart,"<sup>5</sup> 757 out of the total 2,246 comments have since been deleted by the authors of the comments themselves.<sup>6</sup> Of the commenters, 62% were men, 38% were women, 39% were in their 40s, 16% in their 50s, and 28% in their 30s. Below is the comment that received the most likes, with a total of 4,762.<sup>7</sup>

*I was honestly doubtful ever since her first interview with JTBC. I couldn't feel the pity that I would feel for other victims; her eyes and words were somehow unreliable. I hope she doesn't tarnish the meaning of the Me Too movement.*

Among the comments that received more than two likes, 361 condemned Kim and claimed that what had happened was simple adultery or that there was no sexual violence. Only 61 comments advocated for Kim or criticized the contents of the article, 51 argued that Ahn should be criticized for the affair, 48 claimed that it was a political conspiracy, and 20 purported that Ahn was the victim. Forty-nine comments criticized the press or the president.<sup>8</sup> Even if they did criticize Ahn, it was not because he was a sexual

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<sup>5</sup> News1 (2018.7.11) "Witness of Ahn Testified with Tears That Kim and the Governor Seem to Drift Apart" Retrieved from Dec. 2020 (<https://news.naver.com/main/read.nhn?mode=LSD&mid=sec&sid1=102&oid=421&aid=0003477381>).

<sup>6</sup> This mass deletion occurred because Kim sued the people who commented for defamation on July 8, 2020. Since then, significant numbers of comments were deleted by their authors. Therefore, it is possible to guess that the self-deleted comments also generally contained insults or accusations aimed at Kim.

<sup>7</sup> Comments below the news, News1 (2018.7.11) "Witness of Ahn Testified with Tears That Kim and the Governor Seem to Drift Apart" Retrieved from Dec. 2020 (<https://news.naver.com/main/read.nhn?mode=LSD&mid=sec&sid1=102&oid=421&aid=0003477381>).

<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that the comments in Korean portals essentially always contain accusations lobbed at the president, regardless of the article's content.



assaulter, but because they assumed he had committed adultery, which suggests that they did not view Kim as a victim.

In those comments, there is a criticism of the concept of the secondary victimization. They argue that using the term (secondary victimization) blocks people from raising reasonable doubts about victim. This was a discourse created by the supporters of the accused, given that he was a politician. Secondary victimization is assumed when the offender is a politician or a celebrity with a fandom. Ahn was a possible presidential candidate with a fair number of followers. These followers posted comments insulting the victim online and on news stories to undermine her credibility. The sabotage has continued even following Ahn's conviction and imprisonment.

Secondary victimization is also linked to comments that repeat common ideas regarding sexual violence and victims by claiming that people who are not related to the case can make false judgements. Moreover, there is an outcry over damage suffered by men claiming that abuse or misuse of Me Too creates male victims. Based on the Department of Justice's finding that victims of sexual violence can be intelligent adults, their image has turned into one of insidious schemers.

## Problems in the Reporting of the Second Trial

When the plaintiff won the appeal trial, reports highlighted the concept of gender sensitivity. Although several reports pointed out the problems with the concept of being victim-like, some news reports generated an understanding of the concept of gender sensitivity as something subjective and unclear. It has been argued that gender sensitivity is not a legal term, for two reasons. First, the word sensitivity as translated into Korean (*gamsuseong*), shares a connotation of emotion or feeling, which evokes a non-objective tone. Second, it is hard to accept that males need to be sensitive to sexual discrimination in male-centered Korean society, where the idea of "reverse discrimination" which denies the existence of sexual/gender discrimination has already become deeply rooted.

The so-called truth contest between women took a dramatic turn after the former governor Ahn was found guilty at the second trial and his wife posted her feelings on Facebook, which then received widespread attention through media coverage, making it high-ranked on Naver's real-time search term chart. Many press outlets reproduced the full text of the letter of plea



written by Min that she had posted on her Facebook page after the appeal trial. Family members of perpetrators often inflict secondary victimization in cases of sexual violence, and such damage is furthered in the online media environment. Posting case-related issues on social networking services alone is worse than family members visiting the victim's workplace or home as well as speaking ill of the victim to those around them, but the media relays the issue to expand its reach in online spaces. By citing the words of perpetrator's wife, news reports used a style of reporting them as truth. They generated comments by suggesting the reports as the portal news "pick."

Initially, there were only news reports reproducing Min's Facebook post. Later, the Joint Action Committee (a victim support group organized by the Korea Sexual Violence Counseling Center) posted a rebuttal on behalf of Kim, and the media covered it by headlining the confrontation between the committee and Min. Such headlines represented the situation as a contest over who was speaking the truth, but this framing of the situation itself was created by the media. Much of the coverage set up the confrontation as "Min Joo-won: Not #MeToo but Adultery" vs. "Kim Ji-eun: This Is Secondary Victimization." For example, SBS News ran an article titled: "Truth or Dare About Ahn's Sanghwawon Case, Second Trial Sides with Kim not Min"<sup>9</sup>. And the *Segye Ilbo* ran an article titled: "Me Too or Romance? There is a Dispute About Gender Sensitivity"<sup>10</sup>

Given the current cognitive structure of the Korean public, however, this way of framing the confrontation leads to the perception that the committee is diverting attention away from the facts of the case, and not to the perception that it is presenting facts relevant to the case. Moreover, given that the meaning of Me Too was reduced to a dilution of sexual violence in the Korean media at the time, the claim "Not Me Too but Adultery" used in the headlines helped to represent the contest over truth between the two women as one where one is speaking the truth and the other is obstructing it. In fact, secondary victimization is not well understood in Korean society. This is because there is very strong prejudice concerning what it means to be victim-like, and therefore the victim's testimonies are not taken at face value in many cases due to their failure to conform to these prejudices.

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<sup>9</sup> SBS(2019.2.2) "Truth or Dare About Ahn's Sanghwawon Case, Second Trial Sides with Kim not Min" Retrieved from Dec. 2020 ([https://news.sbs.co.kr/news/endPage.do?news\\_id=N1005123682](https://news.sbs.co.kr/news/endPage.do?news_id=N1005123682)).

<sup>10</sup> Segye Ilbo(2019.2.22) "Me Too or Romance? There is a Dispute About Gender Sensitivity" Retrieved from Dec. 2020 (<http://www.segye.com/newsView/20190218000964>).

## Problems with Comments on News Reports of the Second Trial

When Min Joo-won disclosed private text messages exchanged by Ahn and Kim, the claim that these act as evidence of a romantic relationship is a matter of her judgment. The relevant article revealed the use of KakaoTalk emoticons and text messages comforting the governor sent by Kim. However, this merely revealed the reality of the emotional labor expected of women. In the comment section, however, the majority of people leaving comments had already formed the opinion that this was not a sexual assault case. The following article was published in the EDAILY<sup>11</sup> and received a total of 2,176 reactions and 2,775 comments, in which 70% of the commenters were males and 30% were females, mostly in their 40s (33%) and 50s (31%). The three “best” (i.e., most liked) comments for the article are as follows, in order.

*In my opinion, it's an "affair." There's nothing more to say about it. (5,396 Likes)*

*Anyone can see it; it's an affair. The two should be socially disgraced. The victims here are the wife and family of former governor Ahn! (2,978 Likes)*

*I do support the MeToo movement, but the essence of this case is infidelity. If we can't differentiate between MeToo and infidelity, it will negatively impact the future of the Me Too movement. It is natural for a sexual assault victim to be afraid to confront the perpetrator, but if you look at her later actions, she does not have an attitude of a victim, but of an adulteress. Ahn, of course, should be held morally and politically responsible, but I think it is correct to view this as an affair. (2,370 Likes)<sup>12</sup>*

Out of the 1,637 comments, excluding those deleted as of September 2020 from the total 2,775, only 42 advocated for Kim or argued that the matter should not be seen as an extramarital affair. Twenty-seven comments demanded neutrality claiming Kim's perspective, or voice, on this was not reported or were unrelated (such as comments criticizing the president), and 53 comments directly criticized Min. The rest of the comments criticized

<sup>11</sup> EDAILY (2019.2.21). “Min, Ahn's Wife Revealed Kim's Message: I Lost My Mind After Watching the JTBC News.” Retrieved Dec. 15, 2020 (<https://news.naver.com/main/read.nhn?mode=LSD&mid=sec&sid1=100&oid=018&aid=0004315090>).

<sup>12</sup> Comments below the news, EDAILY(2019.2.21). “Min, Ahn's Wife Revealed Kim's Message: I Lost My Mind After Watching the JTBC News.” Retrieved Dec. 15, 2020 (<https://news.naver.com/main/read.nhn?mode=LSD&mid=sec&sid1=100&oid=018&aid=0004315090>).

Kim, supported Min, criticized the judiciary or the women's organizations involved, and did not view the case as one of sexual assault by coercion. Something worth noting about these comments was that there were neither likes nor dislikes on those that requested advocacy or neutrality toward Kim, but that the comments criticizing Min Joo-won only received dislikes.

These comments first of all suggest that sexual assault victims are expected to behave in a certain way, and since Kim did not act in accordance with such expectations, they claim that she is not a victim. Usually, victims of sexual violence are expected to be afraid to talk to or be with the perpetrator again and onlookers believe that she should have reported what happened to her the first time that she was sexually assaulted. It contends that talking to the perpetrator using emoticons is not the behavior of someone who has been sexually assaulted, since the texts released by Min were sent by Kim while working for Ahn following the sexual assault. Underlying this sentiment is the Korean culture (or Confucian culture) that still interprets sexual violence as a crime related to chastity. It suggests that victims of sexual assault should consider themselves to be sullied and worth less because they lost their virginity, and therefore be angry and despairing. Thus, the fact that a woman alleging to be a victim of sexual violence had been seen talking cordially with the perpetrator was used as evidence that the allegation was not true.

Secondly, there is a tendency to interpret emotional labor performed by women as a sign of love. The use of emoticons and the friendly tone of the abovementioned text messages have been interpreted as evidence of romantic feelings on Kim's part. Furthermore, the comments exhibit a tendency to consider the wife to be the most pitiable figure in all of this, claiming that the case is a battle between two women, which denies the reality of the sexual assault that was committed. This is because, in the case of the wife, the stability of her family has been shattered. Such a notion is built on the assumption that, for women, maintaining a stable family is the most important criteria by which to evaluate their life, as per the gender division. This line of reasoning also portrays other women as agents that destroy the stability of the family. It describes the case to be one where a woman, rather than a man, competes for the position of another woman—the position of being the first lady in particular, as Ahn was a rising star politician.

Moreover, many comments express the belief that Ahn's wife continues to tell the truth, but that this is covered up by the court and women's advocacy groups. Because Min had divulged the victim's medical records, her post was deleted in accordance with Facebook policy. She protested that this

was censoring the truth, and there were commenters who supported her. In the comments, this was framed as a confrontation between one person who is telling the truth and another who is concealing it. Accordingly, comments insisting that the victim was spouting lies, and that the offender did not commit any acts of sexual violence, tended to rise to the top of the most-liked comments. This was how the discourse about women's voices came to be framed. Commenters claimed that Ahn's wife is also a woman with a voice that must be heard, thus producing the image of one woman suppressing another woman's voice. Commenters argued that the true victim here was Ahn's family. They claimed that the family members refused to admit that the victim who came forward with allegations against Ahn had suffered any damage owing from the alleged assault. They also claimed that because Kim was the one who brought about the affair, the family members were the true victims who had been betrayed. When one person wrote "As a woman myself, I understand," her position was that of a subject who takes care of a female victim.

Ahn Hee-jung was a strong contender for future presidential candidacy and wielded immense power as a provincial governor. This gives a significant weight to Kim Ji-eun's #MeToo accusations against Ahn. However, two distinct but equally important discourses in South Korea have unfolded as prejudices in the judgement of Ahn. One of those discourses is the context of familialism in South Korea. Because support for older generations is only meaningful within the context of family, staying married (i.e., not pursuing a divorce) is a very important symbol of normalcy in South Korean society. Understandably, negative emotions abound on social threats which might lead to a divorce. If anyone perceives a sexual assault case as a competition or fight between women, that is because they regard the alleged victims as damaging to the stability of the couple's life. This is seen as dually harmful, because the couple's trust has been broken and the revelation of the case to the public jeopardizes the social status of the family.

Most of the comments had nothing to do with the results of the trials or the contents of news reports. Rather, the main impetus for commenting was dominating public opinion on news reports with numerous comments. The comments did not discuss the concept of the threat of force and in fact denied the very existence of such a concept. This was because the case became perceived as no more than an affair between a man and woman. When it is considered a love affair, the case succumbs to romantic discourse, which touts the idea that women are fickle and moody, and they are the ones who choose men (e.g., comments sympathizing with Kim for having 'chosen

the wrong man' etc.)

## Conclusion

Reporting on Ahn's trial was framed according to patriarchal perceptions, reinforcing incorrectly stereotypes regarding victim-survivors of sexual violence. Reports were made with omissions regarding the context that the relationship between the accused and the victim was not a general relationship but a relationship between a subordinate and her superior. The victim was working as a personal assistant to the man who assaulted her, and while this fact is extremely important when it comes to the interpretation of power relations, the media presented the story without this context. Moreover, the media manufactured witness statements formulated to defend the accused into "facts" and created perceptions that Kim was actually the one who actively pursued the relationship, making her allegations false. In this process, the media actively supported perceptions that the victim was to blame for what happened.

When the general public expresses their own opinions in comments without reflecting on the common ideas of sexual violence or their own patriarchal perceptions, it can exacerbate the pain of the victim, even if the comments are unrelated to the case itself. What is worse, however, is that media reports that blame the victim can steer the direction of comments and, in turn, public opinion is formed via digital media through the sensationalized presentation of search terms. In particular, Korea's media has a custom of reporting what they call netizen perceptions, a practice that good journalism would not take part in, and because of this, a small number of internet comments have frequently snowballed into public opinion. In truth, the comments found on news articles are written by a very small number of people.<sup>13</sup> But the tendency to interpret comments as indicators of public opinion has been shown in many studies and surveys; comments function as "a barometer of public opinion" which can be used to gauge public opinion on a certain issue (Lee and Jang 2009, p. 52). While countless comments that cast doubt on or downplay the damage are written, the media confirms them, creating a vicious cycle.

Media reports faithfully uphold the strategies of perpetrators of sexual

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<sup>13</sup> Only 8% of portal users left comments on news reports according to a KISDI report (News1, October 21, 2019).

assault, thus exacerbating secondary victimization of victims and reinforcing fixed ideas of sexual violence in society, which engenders severe problems. While it has repeatedly been discussed that it is critical for media reports to take objective positions when reporting on the repercussions of sexual violence lest they actually reproduce perpetrator-centered perspectives, such reflective attitudes were not applied to media reports of this trial. Because of this, language that reflects double and distorted concepts of gender norms and that insult victims have become mainstream in online spaces. Problematic reporting of this kind and expressions in online spaces generate effects that clearly intimidate victims of sexual violence. The fact that such media effects reinforce stereotypes regarding violent sex crimes and images of victims can be seen in the comments left on articles. We can consider this a lesson on the importance of gender sensitivity in reporting on sexual violence.

So long as the comment sections on news articles are considered to represent public opinion, attempts to dominate them will continue. In this case, Ahn's supporters attempted to manipulate public opinion by dogpiling those who spoke publicly on the case. For example, they tried to manipulate opinion by sharing news reports on Twitter and Facebook and commenting on or sending direct messages to those who publicly shared their opinions on the case.

With regard to the relationship between digital public forums and the media, it is important to ensure opportunities for diverse opinions to be presented and for democratic principles to be identified through guarantees of plurality and accessibility (Rhee 2017). However, this article showed that the device of comments on news articles, which exists to ensure plurality, actually cements public opinion towards opinions based on androcentric sexual orientations. The court's ruling in this case stated that there is no typical image of victims of sexual violence, but media and news comment users still urged for the victim to be vetted, exacerbating secondary victimization.

Secondary victimization caused by the media and news comment sections are unique phenomena found in relation to Korea's portal services. On one hand, demands are being made for recommendation-centered comment section reform that require attention, and on the other hand, the gender sensitivity of comment writers remains essential. In other words, calls to change perceptions regarding victims of sexual violence in our society are being made.

Young Korean feminists are striving to actualize interventions of feminist

perspectives in online comment culture. A representative case of this is the collective action to observe and analyze hatred directed at women and feminist topics on the community app for university students, *Everytime*. This was an effort to ensure that women's voices were heard in digital public forums, as well as an endeavor to reveal the androcentrism that appears in online comment culture and to expose the deeply rooted attitudes and perceptions in our society that must change. In particular, the fact that negative stereotypes of sexual violence victims, attitudes that are suspicious of women's testimonies, and mindsets that do not acknowledge the harm suffered by victims can be reproduced into public opinion illustrate the need for feministic intervention into online comment culture.

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