

Status of Online Sexism and Measures for Improvement

Sooyeon Lee ¹

Introduction

Online sexism is currently among the negative aspects of online culture. Online culture remains sexist despite the rosy expectations of the early stages of the digital development that digital technology would resolve the physical, economic, and technological inequalities between genders. Even with women's increased online participation, a considerable portion of online content contains sexist expressions of derogation of and hatred for women. For example, comments on news articles and posts on web forums are found to use extremely vulgar expressions revealing radically sexist ideology that can upset readers's emotional stability. Even news articles, which are considered public discourse, feature sexist remarks and images and can be accompanied by sexist advertisements, some bordering on pornographic images.

Many women feel uncomfortable with and even insulted by sexist content and suffer damage to their self-esteem when personally attacked by aggressive remarks addressed to them. This type of experience can prevent women from freely expressing their opinions or communicating online, and can even lead them to withdraw from online activities. The detrimental effects of sexist online content are not limited to women. It causes young people who frequently encounter sexist content in their daily online activities to form an inappropriate gender consciousness. Since the sexist content degrades and objectifies

¹ Senior Research Fellow, Korean Women's Development Institute

women based on gender stereotypes, young males can come to consider the essence of masculinity and gender relationships to be one of domination and violence. This distorted understanding of reality leads to not only gender conflict, but also to the imprisonment of men in inappropriate norms of masculinity.

Recently, the phenomenon of online misogyny, which started from certain male-dominated communities, has raised the issue of developing a systematic understanding of online sexism. Even though sexism in the media has been an important subject of media studies since the 1980s, online sexism has not been methodically monitored or discussed due to the difficulty of access to the broad online territory. Research into online content requires a qualitatively different approach from the previous methods utilized to analyze traditional media, such as broadcasting and newspapers. To monitor online content, we need to develop a tool for online monitoring which takes into consideration the multiplicity of platforms, un-fixity of content, and interactivity between content and users.

This research is designed to examine the status of online sexism by monitoring a diverse range of online environments, with a particular focus on the targets and types of online sexism and the related gender stereotypes. Online sexism is a recent development within the overall phenomenon of gender discrimination. This paper examines how it differs from previous forms of gender discrimination and how it can be contextualized. It also attempts to develop a monitoring tool that can be applied by civic groups as they conduct their own monitoring of sexism on the Internet.

Theoretical background

Contextualization of online sexism

To understand gender discrimination, we need to unearth the gender stereotypes which lead to it. Gender stereotypes are a society's prevalent preconceptions about gender. They are basically categories for evaluating each gender's performance and resultantly discriminate against them (Deaux et al., 1985, 146). Gender stereotypes can be divided into the three components of gender role, personal traits and physical characteristics.² These components reveal gender beliefs, in other words, what people consider gender differences to be. Gender roles refer to the roles that each sex is supposed to assume, such as "housework and childcare is a role for women." Personal traits refer to the

² Deaux and Lewis includes one more component, occupation (Deaux & Lewis, 1984, 993). Others exclude occupation and instead include cognitive capability (Cejka & Eagly, 1999, quoted in Kite, 2001, 562).

characteristics assigned to each gender, such as “men are rational and women are emotional.” Physical characteristics define gender-appropriate appearance, for example “women are supposed to be thin.” An additional component of gender stereotypes can be found embedded in online sexism: a negative attitude toward either men or women. For example, we can find extremely misogynist expressions based on a negative attitude toward women such as “women should be beaten and raped.” It can be considered a stereotype in that it is a fixed thought for some people (mostly men). However, unlike other components of stereotypes, it is not based on any background reasoning. Unfortunately, this type of unconditional hatred toward women is frequently found online today. Another manifestation of online sexism is complaints about gender roles. Such complaints can accrue from dissatisfaction with gender role expectations, such as the male obligation of paying for dates, the female obligation of caring for in-laws, etc. This attitude is not based on gender stereotypes per se, but on the contrary stands in opposition to them. However, it provides a pretext for gender discriminatory attitudes and therefore sparks online gender conflict.

Online sexism monitoring tool

Based on theoretical discussion, including the previous chapter, an online sexism monitoring tool was created as follows. The left column indicates the target of stereotypes and discrimination. This dichotomy of targets stems from the fact that sometimes the target of stereotypes differs from that of discrimination. For example, a sexist remark such as “a man’s sexual desire cannot be controlled and must be met” deals with a stereotype about men’s sexuality, but it can be discriminatory to women in that it ordains women’s sexual acquiescence to men’s sexual demand. The next four columns deal with sexism based on stereotypes, and the final column is about gender conflict based on dissatisfaction with gender roles.

Table 1: monitoring tool

target (stereotypes/ discrimination)	sexism based on gender stereotypes				gender role conflict
	roles	physical characteristics	traits	negative attitudes toward men or women	dissatisfaction with gender roles
women/ women	ex. Housework and childcare is women's role	ex. A woman must be slim.	ex. Women are emotional, dependent, and talkative.	ex. Women should be raped by ISIS.	ex. complaints about wedding gifts to in-laws
men/women and men	ex. Only those who complete their military obligation are real men				
men/women			ex. Men can exercise violence on women		
men/men	ex. Supporting the family is men's duty	ex. Men's attractiveness lies in physical strength and sexual prowess	ex. Men are rational and active	ex. Korean men are nerdy	

Monitoring method and procedures

sites

The platforms monitored were portal sites, online communities and cafes, and one web broadcasting channel, Afreeca TV. The portal sites were Naver, Daum, and Nate, the most popular examples in South Korea. Online communities and cafes were chosen according to popularity (frequency of use according to Ranky.com, <http://www.rankey.com/>) and the gender composition of users: two male-dominated communities, two male-dominated cafes, two female-dominated communities, two female-dominated cafes and two gender-balanced communities. The communities and cafes monitored were as follows.

Table 2: communities and cafes and their gender make-up

male dominated		female dominated		balanced
communities	cafes	communities	cafes	
Ilgan Best	I love soccer	82 cook	Jukbang cafe	Daum agora
MLB Park	Diesel Mania	Bestige	Remon Terrace	Nate pan

sampling

The unit of monitoring was statements and images in news articles and the related comments; posts and the responses to them on communities and cafes; and comments on individual broadcasts on Afreeca TV. The monitoring of news was performed by selecting the ten most-read articles in the sections on politics, society, entertainment and sports, 200 (at most) of the posts attached to the articles, and accompanying images and advertisements. One set of news monitoring consisted of ten articles, 200 posts, and the accompanying images. Twelve monitors monitored two sets per week for six weeks, meaning 144 sets all together were monitored. For communities and cafes, one set consists of the 15 most-read posts³ and 100 responses to those posts. Each monitor monitored one of ten sites once per week for five weeks, meaning 50 sets were monitored. For Afreeca TV, ten minutes each of 150 broadcasts were monitored out of the 500 most-watched broadcasts.

Status of online sexism

Overview

When it comes to sexism, the Internet is not a homogeneous world woven through with a single type of thread, but appears more to be a highly heterogeneous environment featuring both innocent sites and flagrantly sexist ones. In other words, sexism is not distributed evenly across the Internet, but is particularly robust on some sites while rare on others. The degree of sexism varies greatly depending on the site, and even on the section within a given site.

Sexism by site

Web broadcasting

Among targets of monitoring including online news sites, communities/cafes, and a web TV outlet, sexism has been found to be most prevalent in the comments on web broadcasting. On Afreeca TV, which this research examined, 85 of the 149 broadcasts monitored (57%)

³ In the case of the site which provides only the ten most-read posts, one set consists of ten posts and 150 responses.

were accompanied by sexist remarks. Given that the sampling standard for monitoring was broadcasts within the top 500 in popularity rankings, it is clear that the likelihood of a viewer encountering sexist remarks while watching Afreeca TV is high. In the sexist programs, sexist remarks appeared in the comments section 8.4 times on average during ten minutes of viewing time, and 63 times at their peak. The likelihood becomes even greater when the so-called “BJ” (“Broadcasting Jockey” or independent broadcaster) is female. In broadcasts with female BJs, about 68.8% of remarks included sexist implications, compared to 42.1% in those with male BJs.

News sites

Sexism on news sites accessed through web portals is more prevalent in the images than in the articles. While the proportion of sexist content was 3.5% in news articles, it was 27.6% in images. Here, sexist images include advertisements, image-based news, and photographs. Although the probability of encountering sexist images varied by portal site, sexist images were found on 67.5% of the pages monitored in the case of the portal with the highest rate of sexist images. With the original media websites that feed the news articles/images to the portal sites, 505 of 702 pages (70.1%) and 56 of 77 media websites contained sexist images. Furthermore, on the 34 media websites, all web pages subjected to monitoring contained sexist images. These websites also had the greatest number of sexist images per page, with 23.4 images per page at the highest frequency.

Viewers’ comments are another area where there is a significant chance of experiencing sexism on news sites. Although the proportion of sexist remarks among all comments was only 2.6%, it can increase dramatically based on the content of a news article. For example, the average number of sexist comments was 13.5 for articles containing stories with sexist implications, and 10.7 for articles with sexist images. There was also variation between different news sections, with entertainment sections having the most (6.6) sexist comments on average. In terms of the type of sexism, the bulk of the sexist remarks found in the news articles were opinions/arguments, but among comments on articles, 42.6% were opinions/arguments, 40.3% were derogatory criticism/attacks, and 17.1% expressed hatred/violence. This fact demonstrates that the exchange of hostile sexist comments usually called ‘flaming’ occurs in news sites and creates an anti-social atmosphere.

Online forums

Online forums, referred to as “communities” and “cafes,” were also highly heterogeneous. While sexism was not particularly noticeable in more than half of the sites monitored, three or four forums were found to be profoundly sexist. According to the analysis of posts, the proportion of sexist posts was less than 10% on six of the ten forum sites monitored. In contrast, it was over 20% on three other sites. In terms of comments, the proportion of sexist remarks was less than 10% on six sites. The greatest proportion of sexist remarks on an individual site was 25.5%, followed by 19.2%, and 15.6%. The two sites with the highest proportions of sexist remarks were found to have 60 and 71 sexist comments per post on average. Regarding the type of sexism, the proportion of hatred/violence rose as high as 50%

among posts and 68.6% among comments. The relationship between the user gender ratio and sexism was not statistically significant; the site with the most severe sexism had mainly male users, but the site with the next-highest degree of sexism showed a balanced gender make-up.

Characteristics of online sexism

Discrimination against women

There were commonalities in the nature of the sexism found among the sites investigated. The most noticeable among these was that the sexist remarks overwhelmingly discriminate against women. Gender stereotypes were also mostly about women. There were some stereotypes regarding men, but they were often used to criticize women as well as men. Seventy-six percent of news articles, 100% of images in news sites, 73% of comments on news articles, 80% of posts in forums, 71.9% of comments on posts in forums, and 82% of remarks on Afreeca TV contained negative implications against women. In sum, it is safe to say that the majority of the online sexist remarks targeted women.

What is more concerning is that such discriminatory attitudes against women were often expressed in the form of derogation/criticism or hatred/violence. This fact was reinforced in the analysis of keywords. In this research, keywords refers to words or phrases that appeared with a certain level of frequency. A significant proportion of these keywords is related to expressions of hatred and derogation in terms that can often be opaque to those unfamiliar with online culture. For example, the term 'kimchinyeo', a combination of 'kimchi' (Korea's definitive food) with 'nyeo' (woman), on its own does not carry any negative denotations. However, in an online context it connotes disparagement and blind hatred against all Korean women.

Another phenomenon revealed through the keyword analysis was the objectification of women, which is in line with the findings from the analysis of sexist images. Sexist images were categorized into sexual objectification of women, excessive exposure of erogenous areas of women's bodies, and fragmentation of women's bodies. In other words, sexist images were either expressing women's bodies as objects for the fulfillment of men's sexual desire or fragmenting women's bodies into parts for the visual pleasure of observers. In the keyword analysis, the fragmentation of women's bodies was similarly clear, as demonstrated in such keywords as 'butt', 'lips', 'legs', 'thighs', 'breasts', 'pelvis', 'tongue', 'hair', and 'skin'. This implies that women are treated and evaluated as collections of pieces of sexual interest rather than as holistic human beings. Women were also described as sexual objects, such as with 'spread', 'insert +', or 'feel'.⁴ These were often used in combination with derogatory expressions such as 'dirty', 'trash', or 'old/ragged'. As such, the objectification of women on the Internet was achieved through the combination of visual and textual messages.

⁴ Used as in 'spread' legs, 'insert' penis, 'feel' sexual pleasure

Discrimination against men

Discrimination against men also calls for attention. Although most sexist remarks/images targeted women, some were directed toward men. Among comments on news articles, 5.3% had negative implications toward men. In addition, 13.7% of comments on posts on online forums suggested that appearance is important to men. On Afreeca TV, ‘appearance is important to men’ was the most prevalent (11.0%) among all stereotypes of men. The prevalence of comments regarding appearance, even among men, accurately reflects the high value placed on appearance across South Korean society. Although appearance rarely becomes a subject for derogation of men, as in the case of women, people showed great interest in men’s appearance and expressed jealousy toward handsome men, indicating that appearance is perceived to be important not only for women, but also for men. Negative attitudes toward men were not uncommon as well. For example, 15.3% of comments on news articles was related to negative attitudes toward men as a whole, negative attitudes toward male politicians and professionals, and vulgar words addressed at men. While it is less severe compared to negative attitudes toward women, it still requires attention given that it makes up a part of the attitudes that fuel conflict and hatred within society.

Gender stereotypes

Gender stereotypes, which are the basis of sexist beliefs, were found to be slightly different depending on the category of the site. In news articles, ‘appearance is important to women’ and ‘women are sexual objects’ were the two most prevalent gender stereotypes. In comments on news articles, ‘women are into grooming and plastic surgery’ was most commonly heard. When it comes to online forums, ‘women are sexual objects’ was most widespread in posts and ‘appearance is important to women’ in comments. ‘Appearance is important to women’ was again the most commonly found gender stereotype on Afreeca TV.

Reinforcement of online sexism

Online sexism is part of the oppositional and polarizing tendencies of online discourse. Online participants seem to create a collective identity by exploring and then adopting the norms of a site and by acting in accordance with its prevalent attitudes. Hence, if sexism is found to be a norm of the site, it is intensified by the skewed selection of sexist information and voluntary adoption of sexist prejudices. This collective reinforcement of sexism is aided by anonymity and sense of unreality. Participants seek only information that fits criteria which assure them of their righteousness.

Measures to redress online sexism

As seen so far, online sexism is a detrimental part of online culture. It is an urgent matter to redirect online discourse to become a more balanced and just forum for free expression. Since online sexism can be difficult to tackle due to the anonymity and diffusion of the online world, we need to mobilize all the individuals and entities related to online communication into an

effort to eradicate online sexism. Here, we will discuss measures for redress on the part of online media producers, commercial entities, regulatory bodies, and civic organizations.

Strengthening the accountability of online media

Online media should primarily be accountable for reducing online sexism. The fact that 21 of 77 media sites monitored in the current study did not contain any sexist images proves that it is in fact possible to eliminate it. It is up to online media business entities to set a goal of eliminating sexist articles, images and advertisements and work toward its realization.

Along with strengthening the accountability of individual online news sites, it is also important to increase the accountability of online media industry associations. The Korea Internet Newspaper Association, which has 36 members and is currently responsible for the self-regulation of online media, should establish regulations on online sexism.

Strengthening the roles of portal sites and the Korea Internet Self-governance Organization (KISO)

The roles of portal sites in efforts to reduce online sexism cannot be overemphasized. Sites showing a low incidence of sexism, such as Naver, have relevant policies in place. Those with a higher level of sexism are strongly encouraged to follow suit.

Individual corporate policies to reduce online sexism will have a synergistic impact when they are organized into collective efforts, such as the Korea Internet Self-governance Organization (KISO). Incepted in 2008 as an autonomous regulatory council for portal sites, KISO currently entails eleven member organizations, including major portal sites (Naver, Kakao, and Nate), UGC (user-generated content) forums⁵ and Afreeca TV. KISO “supports autonomous regulation of the content on the websites of member organizations through policy decisions and deliberations” and discusses “issues related to online content regulation raised by member organizations” (http://old.kiso.or.kr/download/170209_KISO-brochure-ENG.pdf) It is suggested that sexist language be included on its list of prohibited speech and that joint monitoring of sexist conduct be regularly conducted among member organizations.

KISO also maintains an online advertisement deliberation committee to examine and advise upon the online advertisements carried by the member organizations. It is recommended that it specify and implement sexism-related policies.

⁵ Information-sharing forums such as Ppompu, Today’s Humor, SLR Club, Clie, etc.

Introducing anti-sexism provisions into the self-regulation of online advertising

The Korea Online Ad Association, which is responsible for the autonomous regulation of online advertisements, lacks sexism-related provisions in its deliberation guidelines. Article 6 of the Regulations on Online Advertisements (Korea Online Ad Association, http://onlinead.or.kr/?page_id=216), which deals with respect for human life, dignity, and cultures, contains a clause prohibiting expressions of disparagement or causing a sense of sexual humiliation in others. As shown in the monitoring, however, this does not seem to be effectively implemented. There is a need for the inclusion of a clause defining sexual discrimination and specifying its prohibition. It is further recommended that Article 18-6 “Online advertisements prohibited to youth” should include a clause about sexism, and for its effective implementation a cooperative mechanism with the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family should be established.

Each respective industry maintains its own standards for advertisements, including online advertisements (these are mostly based on the guidelines of the Korea Online Ad Association). Industries heavily reliant on online advertisements need to complement their standards with provisions banning sexism and the objectification of women. For example, given the high proportion of this class of advertisements on the Internet, standards for medical advertisements related to plastic surgery should be revised. Currently, the Medical Advertisement Deliberation Committee of the Korean Medical Association includes the prohibition of deceptive and misleading information among its deliberation standards (Korean Medical Association, 2014, http://www.admedical.org/_front_/index.php). This guideline can be expanded to include advertisements that promote an obsession with appearance and the objectification of women’s bodies.

Introducing anti-sexism provisions into the deliberation of online content

Currently, the deliberation of online content by the Korea Communications Standards Commission focuses on obscenity, defamation, cyberstalking, hacking/virus dissemination, failure to display required warnings on content harmful to youth, gambling, revelation of confidential government information, violation of the National Security Law, and crime-related information, as defined by Article 44-7 of the Act on the Promotion of Information and Communications Network Utilization and Information Protection, etc. (Korea Communication Standards Commission, http://www.kocsc.or.kr/02_infoCenter/info_Law_View.php?ko_board=info_Law&ba_id=188). However, it fails to include any prohibition of sexism. If the concept of sexism appears excessively broad and ambiguous, it can limit itself to banning sexual violence and expressions of hatred.

The definition of content harmful to youth should be expanded to include sexism. Content harmful to youth is currently ruled as such in accordance with Articles 7 and 11 of the Juvenile Protection Act by the Commission on Youth Protection, or by deliberation organizations, including the Korea Communications Standards Commission. It should consider including expressions of disparagement and violence based on sexism within the definition of content harmful to youth.

Legislation of an act prohibiting expressions of hatred, including sexism

The level of derogation and hatred expressed on the Internet is greatly concerning and could compromise the sound functioning of society. However, online sexism offenders, even at the level of hate speech, may be easily let off the hook since prosecution of such matters can be complex. Sexist remarks can be punished under the penal code if they are proven to insult or defame someone. However, many cases of online sexism do not address an individual women (or man) but women (or men) as a group. These cases cannot be addressed by existing defamation and insult laws. Here, we suggest avenues for making deeply sexist remarks punishable under law. One is to establish a new law that prohibits expressions of gender-based hatred. However, the prospects for the passage of such legislation would not be high. Secondly, online sexism could be included as sexual violence in order to allow it to be punished under the law on sexual violence against women. Thirdly, online sexism, as a form of discrimination against women (or men), can be included within the anti-discrimination acts. All three legal measures require thorough legal deliberation and must undergo the process of securing a social consensus.

Society-wide monitoring and awareness-raising

Sexism, especially gender-based derogatory and hate speech can create in young adults a distorted image of sexuality and provoke a range of social conflicts, including gender conflict, that inflict social costs. Given this, awareness needs to be raised in regard to expressions of gender-based derogation and hatred, and regular monitoring is required to prevent it. Furthermore, efforts need to be made to promote the awareness that the relationship between men and women is not competitive in nature or a zero-sum game.

Toward this goal, regular monitoring of sexist expressions needs to be conducted by civic organizations and others. Monitoring activities and the training of monitors, as was demonstrated in this research, would contribute to reducing sexism. Therefore, support is required at the level of the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family in order for general citizens and organizations to apply the monitoring tool developed in the current research and conduct monitoring of online sexism. The Korea Women's Development Institute may be capable of providing related training and support to civic organizations.

Gender equality training and guidelines for online content producers

Journalists, photo-journalists, and advertising agencies who provide online content are fundamentally responsible for online sexism. The goal of those who produce sexist news articles, images, and advertisements is to capture the attention of viewers. They may not even be aware of the fact that their content includes sexist implications. In this regard, providing them with training and guidelines about sexism and sexist content will assist in the reduction of sexism in online content.

Photo-journalists and advertising specialists are often not easy to reach because they are commonly freelancers and small-scale operators. It is suggested that online channels, particularly portal sites, be used to disseminate training materials and guidelines designed specifically for their needs.

References

- Deaux, K. and L. Lewis (1984). Structure of gender stereotypes: interrelationships among components and gender label (1984). *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 46(5): 991-1004.
- Deaux, K., W. Winton, M. Crowley, and L. Lewis (1985). Level of categorization and content of gender stereotypes, *Social Cognition* 3(2): 145-167.
- Kite, M. (2001). Changing times, changing gender roles: Who do we want women and men to be? in Unger, Rhoda K. (ed) (2001). *Handbook of the psychology of women and gender*, NJ: Hoboken, 215-227.

Websites

- KISO. http://old.kiso.or.kr/download/170209_KISO-brochure-ENG.pdf
- Korea Communication Standards Commission,
http://www.kocsc.or.kr/02_infoCenter/info_Law_View.php?ko_board=info_Law&ba_id=188
- Korea OnlineAd Association, http://onlinead.or.kr/?page_id=216
- Ranky.com, <http://www.rankey.com/>