

“Escape the Corset”: How Social Media Shaped Feminist Consciousness, Discourse, and Activism in South Korea

Zhiyi Chen

*Institute of Global Prosperity, London, United kingdom
803926@qq.com*

Abstract. Through the Escape the Corset Movement (ECM), the essay explores the impact of social media on feminist consciousness, discourse, and activism in South Korea. Founded in 2016 and prominent nationwide in 2018, ECM urged women to discard the patriarchal model of beauty and reassert bodily control by cutting their hair, not wearing makeup, and throwing away beauty products. Drawing on concepts from digital activism and feminist media studies, the paper maps the historical transition from conventional to digital media in Korean feminist movements and reveals how online platforms changed modes of participation and communication. With hashtags like #EscapeTheCorset, social media operated as a public sphere where stories, community, and the development of collective identity could take place. The text analyzes how digital narratives and graphical confrontations as forms of protest challenged Confucian gender norms and re-considered femininity in modern Korean culture. Finally, the paper demonstrates how ECM’s discourse played a role in economic and cultural resistance, with efforts to resist the pink tax as well as the #Women_ShortCut_Campaign, demonstrating social media’s potential to reproduce and sustain activism. However, the study does emphasize critical constraints: platform hierarchies, online harassment influenced by gender, and entrenched patriarchal structures that inhibit transformational initiatives. ECM embodies, in the end, the emancipatory and structural possibilities of digital feminism, exposing how social media can become a force behind social change, but also remain rooted in unequal power relations.

Keywords: Digital Feminism, Social Media Activism, Beauty Ideals, South Korea

1. Introduction

The South Korean feminist mobilization has been increasing in recent years [1,2]. To be clear, the Escape the Corset Movement (ECM) is one among many movements with this explicit challenge to traditional norms for ideal beauty in which social media provided a way for collective resistance [3]. The women's liberation movement which urged women to stop wearing makeup, cut their hair short, and reclaim their own bodily autonomy not only questioned norms, but also was against patriarchal control of beauty [4]. This essay starts with a look into the shift from traditional media to digital media in South Korea, and considers how this transformation has created various new forms of feminist expression. It subsequently considers how social media shaped activist dialogue, contributed to personal storytelling, and contributed to the construction of shared feminist

consciousness in the context of the Escape the Corset Movement. Finally, it is to ponder the persistence of the digitalized resistance and the limitations.

2. The shift from traditional to digital media in Korean feminist movements

“Tradition was seen as an obstacle to change” [5]. Confucian-dominated patriarchal societies have long subjected Korean women to structural oppression, with rigid gender hierarchies overshadowing their humanity [6]. Affirmative action was necessary to address centuries of sustained discrimination due to this systematic inequality [7].

Social movements have historically challenged the legal, institutional, and cultural structures that sustain marginalization [8]. For example, social movements like Black Lives Matter, which emphasizes human rights, and the Indignados Movement, which demands fair wages and safer working conditions for workers, aim to challenge structures of inequality [9,10]. For South Korean women, social movements have become a powerful means of resisting dominant power structures.

South Korean women’s social movements often rely on media communication to unite voices and amplify demands [5]. In the early stages, however, communication and dissemination of social movements relied heavily on mass media such as newspapers and television [11]. In South Korea during the 1970s and early 1980s, female workers in light industry factories played a leading role in the labor movement by forming democratic unions to resist poor working conditions [12]. Although female activists used mass media to publicize strike actions, these state-owned and one-directional platforms offered little support, as sources like news articles, opinion polls, and government statements were either too fragmented for analysis or entirely absent [11]. This reflects how women’s labor protests were suppressed and placed in a contradictory position: fighting to express their demands through mainstream media that were unwilling to accommodate them [12]. As Bennett and Segerberg [13] argue, mass media often portray movements negatively, especially when they disrupt social order, thereby reinforcing dominant narratives and marginalizing dissenting voices.

Social media today provides new tools for direct protest and discursive activism. Its decentralised and scalable structure enables people to challenge dominant power dynamics in their communities by engaging in value-based action and quickly promoting alternative voices [14]. Korean women’s movements, in this regard, have undergone great transformation through digital platforms: the visibility and influence of their movements is dramatically intensified. For example, the 2008 Sowon Case, where an eight-year-old girl was brutally attacked and her attacker received a lenient sentence [15,16], stirred up national outrage on digital platforms. The 2018 #MeToo incident led by prosecutor Seo Ji-hyeon to reveal allegations of sexual harassment also followed suit, leveraging social media to facilitate the broad dissemination of stories, challenge institutional silence, and demand more legislative change in numerous industries [17]. These are examples of social media allowing both visceral campaigns and sustained changes in public attitudes, opening a powerful space for online resistance [18]. The Escape the Corset Movement (ECM) is thus a key moment in South Korea’s feminist activism, showcasing the transformative power of social media. ECM called on women to refuse patriarchal standards of beauty and reclaim bodily autonomy by reframing how society values appearance [3]. Through hashtags like #EscapeTheCorset, women turned to digital spaces in order to speak out and perform symbolic acts, including those that required cutting their hair or throwing out beauty products, and directly confront systemic social pressures. Through active engagement with contemporary communication technologies, empowering women and promoting collective resistance [19].

3. Escape the corset movement

The “Tal-Corset” movement, which gained national attention in 2018, describes a wave of resistance against feminized clothing, beauty practices, and societal conventions that reshaped South Korea’s feminist landscape. In Korean, “tal” means “removal” or “breaking free” [4].

Historically, the corset was an object of male admiration that constrained women physically and symbolically to meet narrow ideals of beauty [20]. In ECM, the corset serves as a broader metaphor for the societal norms and sexist “economy of desire” that pressure women’s self-perception through normative beauty ideals of femininity and bodily discipline [4,21].

Timeline wise, the Escape the Corset Movement (ECM) unfolded over several years through social media. It originated on the online feminist community Megalia in 2015, got its first official stamp from 2016, and finally became a major feminist campaign by 2018 [3,22]. It was in 2018 when mass protests against the illegal filming of videos spread to much greater strength than ever before. The Korean women took to the streets to protest against the surreptitious recording of women [4] where symbolic acts were taken including shaving themselves, speeches and, discussions that linked the “corset” with male violence [4]. Shin [3] expands this metaphor to all beauty ideals from traditional ideas about womanhood, and exhorts women to reject these norms.

The movement epitomizes a deep reimagining of selves. Women started to challenge imposed standards, escaping the metaphorical corset by opting out of makeup, clipping their strands, and rejecting plastic surgery [22,6]. As real corsets once curtailed breathing and shattered ribs, these metaphorical one-sizes impose a warped quest for beauty that entrenches marginalization within a system predicated on power.

ECM was a fringe feminist conversation on social media; social media became a popular movement on the national level. Platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and the web proved to be virtual public spaces that women could share, share experiences, and criticize societal attitudes. Through hashtags such as #EscapeTheCorset they became communities and forged online platforms so that they could continue to spread their voices, and organize. With using such tools, social media served their communities as well as the public at large, to raise consciousness through them, it ignited not only awakening a new level of critical consciousness for those taking part in dialogue, solidarity and struggle for change in general.

4. Social media as a public space for awakening self-consciousness

Social media has transformed the process that moves like ECM through support and participation through acts as a public domain for women to connect, share experiences, and, together challenge norms. As Milan [2] discusses, modern social media brings people together, linking media, participation, and social mobilization, unlike traditional media, which reinf [23-25]. “It sets a framework in which women coalesce, share insights, and rearrange the collective subjectivity,” it encourages a space for critical consciousness.

The rapid spread of information [1] and the prompt gathering around common concerns [14] through social media developed a public space where women could face down collective social norms. The movement was gaining momentum in this way by late 2018, when nearly 120,000 posts on social media platforms such as Twitter were post based on the #EscapeTheCorset hashtag [3]. Hashtags became strong points of reference, making hashtags searchable and linking links and a myriad of accompanying articles, stories, and conversations. Every single hashtag was not so much driving more content as allowing women to go deeper into a larger community and shared meaning, connecting more people to the community.

Viral phenomena, such as Lina Bae's YouTube segment after she removed her makeup [26] on camera, has been watched by millions and promoted to the idea that women should examine their beauty by examining society's idea of beauty standards. With these platforms, women united to hear their voices resonate and motivate others to do the same, to translate personal discontent into a call to arms for social change.

Social media platforms also empowered women to communicate potent visual and textual narratives that disrupt entrenched gender bias. In order to shed more light on this myth of beauty, participants shared photos of their short hair and makeup-free faces with personal stories about resisting pressure from digital media and society. For example, Cha Ji-won told me it felt as if I had born over again, a personal rebirth. Each day, there's only so much mental energy a person can spend, and I used to put a lot of work into my mind worrying that I would be 'pretty'. I use that time to read books and exercise" [22]. In the same manner, Sohee said, "I felt like the makeup and the outfits was not my decision, and I really do not think that is fun, so I decided to take off the corset. It felt liberating to finally be my true self without any pressure to conform" [27]. These were the stories provided a sense of camaraderie between women, and an empowering experience that reflected solidarity among women, and helped build a sense of collectivity among them, demonstrating that their problems were not in isolation, but a structural issue in the context of the broader social and institutional structure.

Women from all walks of life could participate in ECM despite the lack of the physical manifestations of this action, social mediational reach of social media meant that all women could participate in ECM even though they could not attend demonstrations physically [1]. Participants of the movement could participate via Instagram and Twitter by posting personal experiences, supporting others, or simply posting hashtags such as #EscapeTheCorset. The destruction of high-end beauty products and documenting them on social media, as in Jeong's [12] examples, became a symbolic and accessible mode of protest. Such inclusivity ensured that people, even women who were confined to spaces, were not excluded from the movement's discourse and expansion.

5. Reshaping discourse through social media

But while social media was important for promoting ECM, and for mobilising participants it also had wider ramifications for ECM beyond being online. Instead of simply rejecting beauty standards, women leveraged digital media to contest and transform normative notions of femininity. It is through viral posts, hashtags and symbolic work that women upended old ideals, altering long-held societal assumptions about beauty and gender and, thusforth, re-framing the way beauty and gender are discussed in public communication as they did so, casting social media as a potent tool of discursive transformation [28].

Confucianism, rooted in the cultural and familial values that influenced South Korea, offers the seeds for one of the major discourses that were challenged by ECM. Such tradition taught the image of women as obedient daughters, good wives, and attentive mothers, therefore establishing the notion of a woman's submissiveness under the concept of patriarchy [29]. While Confucian ideology can hardly stand a complete block to the movement of women to the job market, it persists in informing cultural norms while bucking them to modern times. Thus, women are still negatively viewed in work situations and have her worth diminished to her looks, which leads to low self-esteem and lack of independence [30,31].

To counter these and similar pressure, many women struggle to reclaim control through management of appearance leading them seek cosmetic surgeries, as well as adopting beauty standards on their own to promote confidence and help meet social expectation at the expense of

themselves to their bodies [31]. Parents, educators, and advertisers only reinforce these ideals, reinforcing the idea that appearance is what is demanded of success by pushing it [32,33]. Traditional media exacerbates these pressures by rendering women as objects that are to attract men on a sexual level, objectifying them, objectifying them as objects only for male desire to use, reiterating established norms and stereotypes [34]. Due to which, women's viewpoints are regularly excluded in mainstream discourse.

By contrast, social media offers women opportunity as a medium to co-author alternative narratives. Instead of being passive consumers of normative ideology, users are active producers of their own content, who challenge normative constructs and articulate their own representations of femininity [1,35]. The participatory characteristic of social media facilitates the empowerment-enhanced circulation of individual tales and images that resist idealized appearances and reclaim bodily autonomy. Instagram videos of women who cut their hair, take off makeup, tear apart expensive cosmetics, etc. [36,4] garnered far-reaching exposure, leading to others following suit. As these online expressions gained traction, the movement's influence went beyond digital territory. Narratives that had gone viral on social media became physical acts of resistance in physical spaces, giving the change in conversation a tangible and workable foundation. For instance, female university students organised protests on their campuses, using lipstick and eyeliner to write things like, "Makeup isn't my power. Getting dolled up isn't a power. The lack of need to get dolled up is a power" [37]. When this statement spread across the web, it made many women reject dresses, skirts, and conventional beauty standards in favor of stripped-back beauty and natural chic. Similarly, in business community, news anchor Lim Hyeon-ju became the first woman in Korea to wear glasses on air in defiance of societal expectations. Her well-publicized decision focused the conversation away from material beauty and towards the content of her reporting, inspiring women nationwide to challenge conventional beauty norms [38]. This real life activity that is a product of online discourse indicates the way social media can take messages and translate them into the real change that society needs to break deeply-rooted prejudices. The ECM, by linking online activism to concrete protest, shows that social media allows the restructuring of discourse through co-participation and embodied resistance [28]. Such practices are not just symbolic but in fact work to contest the power relations that shape and regulate femininity [39]. In the end, ECM illustrates how reforming discourse on social media can create longer-lived forms of collective resistance.

6. How social media reproduces movements

The awakening consciousness sparked by the Escape the Corset Movement (ECM) reshaped discussions around beauty standards and gender norms, paving the way for collective empowerment. Social media has emerged as a powerful tool for preserving and spreading the goals of social movements, ensuring their messages endure and inspiring new forms of activism [40]. By offering access to information, opportunities for involvement, and a platform for sharing ideas, social media further strengthened this transformative discourse, helping it evolve into concrete activism [19].

6.1. The pink tax and economic resistance

Following this discursive shift, ECM's influence expanded beyond beauty norms to broader gender-based economic injustices, such as the pink tax. The pink tax, which refers to the higher pricing of products and services marketed toward women compared to similar male-targeted alternatives [41,42], gained prominence in 2018—ECM's most active period. For instance, haircut prices at

beauty salons were found to differ by gender, with women in Seoul paying an average of 21,308 won per haircut, 1.82 times higher than the 11,692 won for men [43].

In the same year, feminist activists launched the Facebook group Female Expenditure Strike and its sister Twitter account, calling for a nationwide boycott to protest objectifying advertisements, wider gender discrimination, and the pink tax. The strike urged women to halt all spending, including on necessities, to demonstrate their economic impact and raise awareness of systematic gender inequalities [44].

While ECM-related posts began to decline after 2019 [3], its influence persisted through new forms of digital activism. In 2021, the Instagram account `pinktax_hairshop_out` was created to document unfair pricing practices in women's haircuts and personal care products. This account, with over 2,000 followers, provided a space for women to report cases and continued ECM's legacy by addressing gender-based pricing disparities [43].

Social media's ability to sustain communication and maintain connections through actions like following groups or sharing posts enabled ongoing engagement among activists, leaders, and followers [40]. This sustained long-term interest and strengthened connections highlight the lasting potential of social media to advance social movements and spark new initiatives.

6.2. The #Women_ShortCut_Campaign

Moreover, ECM's hidden power can boost rapid initiation and growth of subsequent events through social media [45], exemplified by the #Women_ShortCut_Campaign in 2021. This campaign also opposed beauty standards and patriarchal control over women's bodies, mirroring the aims of ECM while primarily utilizing Twitter to spread its message. Nearly 1,000 posts, including 811 selfies or photos of women with short hairstyles, celebrated this act of opposition [46]. Among them, many tweets combine the hashtags #EscapeTheCorset and #Women_ShortCut_Campaign together, reflecting a shared message of resisting societal norms and embracing personal identity.

Social media allows movements to converge into coherent narratives. A tweet can bring together campaigns, linking different protests into the larger shared conversation. In South Korea, prevailing beauty standards still stress features such as fair skin, slenderness, and youth, which continue to marginalize individuals with gender-neutral or non-conforming appearances. As a response, the #Women_ShortCut_Campaign continues ECM's legacy through advocating a more expansive view of femininity—one based on autonomy and bodily agency. And in reshaping online conversations and shaping choices for everyday life, these movements represent a radical shift in the awareness of women's gender identities in South Korea. In this situation, social media is not only the site of expression, but it is also a powerful platform for the development of the culture [47].

7. The constraints of social media

ECM may have shown the power of social media to transform, but also faces both structural and platform-specific constraints. A key limitation for such a platform, however, is South Korea's media landscape, where conservative ideologies and state influence limit dissenting narratives [48]. Herman's [49] propaganda model illustrates this further by pointing out the role of media systems defined by ownership, advertising, and sourcing, which can severely constrain the airing of dissenting views. As such, popular media tended to overlook, distort, or simply ignore the ECM movement itself, ultimately blunting its effects and upholding prevailing beauty standards. Social media is a mirror — and amplifier — of offline inequalities and is often toxic for threats, misinformation and gender-based violence that go unchecked. These problems weaken the

credibility of movements and dissuade participation [50]. Gender gaps in activism online severely detract from inclusivity as well. For South Korea female online commenters are only 31% and indicate a high level of unwillingness to participate actively or create content [51].

This disparity is seen as restraining the pace of ECM and as leading to potential distortion of public opinion [51], considering that unequal participation impacts activism on these platforms in terms of direction and representation. But as well as participation gaps, social media's potential to effect change in the real world is fundamentally constrained. Kidd and McIntosh [14] contend that social media frequently provides the appearance of activism without affecting the practices involved in real life. While social networking may serve to strengthen physical offline activities in ECM to varying degrees, lasting real change requires the consideration of long held patriarchal expectations and structural inequality [52,21]. For instance, South Korea's K-pop culture still perpetuates narrow and idealized ideals of beauty, which can counter ECM's endeavors to critique aesthetic norms [21]. Such dominant cultural forces both reaffirm these ideals and use them as mechanisms of social discipline, mandating conformity in women even when they try to resist [53,54].

While ECM aimed to challenge patriarchal gender norms, evidence suggests that individuals were not forthcoming with a fully "remove the corset" solution. ECM's engagement was declining substantially by late 2019, highlighting the difficulty of sustaining digital activism [3]. You cannot use social media alone to overcome the deep-rooted power of patriarchy. Structural and cultural barriers persist throughout South Korean society and all of this requires a holistic approach to reform that can only be complemented and supported by grassroots efforts as digital platforms provide new avenues.

8. Conclusion

The Escape the Corset Movement (ECM) epitomizes the transformative impact social media can play on contemporary activism, illustrating how the digital spaces enhance disenfranchised actors, disrupt social customs, and amplify collective action. One way that social media help women challenge the patriarchal beauty standards around women, share personal stories, build solidarity within a larger collective movement as a public space, etc. Platforms such as Instagram and Twitter played an important role here too, as they facilitated active participation while also empowering users to create and share content, creating a way of connecting online advocacy to real-world activism, effectively increasing the impact of ECM on activists.

Yet, the wider influence of ECM was largely limited by the social media landscape. Structural conditions, including state control of media and entrenched patriarchal norms, continued to constrain the movement's larger reach. Moreover, gendered disparity in the world of online engagement — in addition to consistent harassment and the spread of misleading content in general — made communication more difficult, reduced inclusivity and conveyed key messages of the movement. Yet ECM's spirit lives on in other projects like protests against the pink tax and the #Women_ShortCut_Campaign. These cases illustrate how online platforms can be used for sustained struggle even in the face of waning public attention.

#EscapeTheCorset, in all of its successes as well as shortcomings, is an example of how digital media can stimulate, while still remaining anchored to, structural conditions. It reveals that, while social media and social media platforms can catalyze and encourage resistance, any substantive change must also be sustained by constantly challenging deeply entrenched power relations in culture and in institutions.

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