

Cloud Backlash: Digital Sex Crimes and Anti-Feminism in South Korea

by Anat Schwartz

Abstract: This article explores the ongoing issue of bodily security, surveillance, and safety in and around South Korean digital spaces. By focusing on the Nth Room in March 2020, I argue that the rapid growth of digital and cloud-based technologies exacerbates social and political issues in Korea. I use an interdisciplinary methodological approach to critical gender and sexuality studies, data feminism, and Korean feminist scholarship to interrogate the relationship between transnational digital technologies, the deep-seated roots of patriarchy, and the contemporary anti-feminist backlash and conservative political landscape in South Korea. I argue that the cloud-based servers of instant messaging group chats pose a particular case that illustrates the challenges feminist activists face around digital sex crimes and surveillance in South Korea and transnationally.

Keywords: digital sexual violence; digital technologies; feminism; South Korea; surveillance and security; technology-facilitated sexual violence

Résumé : Cet article explore la question de la sécurité corporelle, de la surveillance et de la sécurité à l'intérieur et à proximité des espaces numériques sud-coréens. En m'intéressant au cas de la Nth Room de mars 2020, je soutiens que la croissance rapide des technologies numériques et infonuagiques exacerbe les problèmes sociaux et politiques en Corée. J'utilise une approche méthodologique interdisciplinaire par rapport aux études critiques sur le genre et la sexualité, au féminisme des données et aux études féministes coréennes dans le but de remettre en question la relation entre les technologies numériques transnationales, l'enracinement profond du patriarcat, la réaction antiféministe contemporaine et le paysage politique conservateur de la Corée du Sud. Je suis d'avis que les serveurs infonuagiques de clavardage en groupe instantané constituent un cas particulier qui illustre les difficultés auxquelles les activistes féministes font face à l'égard des crimes sexuels numériques et de la surveillance en Corée du Sud et à l'échelle transnationale.

Mots clés : violence sexuelle numérique; technologies numériques; féminisme; Corée du Sud; surveillance et sécurité; violence sexuelle facilitée par la technologie

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1. Introduction

In March 2020, the “Nth Room” made international headlines as a criminal operation in which women and girls were blackmailed and coerced into sexual slavery. Young women and girls using social media platforms to search for part-time work or to share personal pictures were targeted by perpetrators. These perpetrators ran phishing scams to attract young girls for part-time work that, at first, seemed harmless but would turn to blackmail or into conditional meetings with a “sponsor.” The “sponsor” would send them money in exchange for sharing photos or videos of themselves beginning with modeling poses or miscellaneous tasks. These interactions migrated to Telegram, an encrypted messaging application, where perpetrators would ask or harvest for personal information such as the victims’ legal names, bank account numbers, and home addresses under the guise of depositing money for their part-time work. They would use this information to stalk, harass, blackmail, and physically abuse girls and women to extort violent sexual content. These exploitative videos were distributed in Telegram chatrooms where viewers paid through cryptocurrency per-view. The case became publicly known as “Nth Room,” (*Npŏn-pang*¹) as the Telegram channel included eight groups using ordinal numbers (e.g., First Room, Second Room, etc.).

As of March 2020, the number of individuals involved in criminal activities related to the possession and distribution of illegal videos is estimated to be at least 60,000, with over 260,000 consumers (Jun 2022). This includes both those holding illicit materials and those engaged in unlawful distribution. The production and dissemination of sexually exploitative content through modern information and communication technologies, notably on the dark web, have exhibited a concerning trend of increasing sophistication and expansion. The resulting harm is severe, semi-permanent, and scalable, underscoring the imperative for targeted and decisive measures to address this issue.

The sexual violence and violation experienced by victims of the Nth Room case went viral domestically and in international media, which led to public outrage at some politicians excusing viewers’ participation as personal enjoyment and teens fooling around on the computer (Kong 2021). The general public was outraged not only at the perpetrators but at the politicians’ dismissive and victim-blaming reactions. In response, a public petition drew over 2.7 million signatures on a Blue House Presidential Petition requesting that the government reveal the identities of the traffickers and viewers. This petition platform was a national system that allowed the public to voice concerns directly to the Blue House, formally referred to as Cheong Wa Dae.² The signatories on this petition demanded that Korean lawmakers propose stricter censorship and surveillance measures as well as more punitive laws, measures which were met with both acceptance and suspicion by Korean feminists.

The Nth Room, and the subsequent partial revisions to the Act on Special Cases Concerning the Punishment of Sexual Crimes and the Telecommunications Business Act, came at the tail-end of the height of #MeToo activism in South Korea. Feminist organizing against digital sex crimes in South Korea has been further complicated by local and global far-right politics and anti-feminist backlash. By situating the Nth Room incident within the broader context of feminist movements in South Korea (henceforth, Korea), this article reconsiders the role of chatrooms (Kim 2020; Yun 2020) as they are used and viewed by Korean feminist activists, particularly on popular instant messaging applications such as Telegram, to argue that increased censorship and surveillance measures on cloud-based messaging platforms present a unique challenge for both local and transnational feminists. In the conclusion, I examine how feminist activism against digital sex crimes became entangled with the complexities of anti-feminist backlash and the global rise of far-right ideologies.

2. Prior Scholarship and Methods

In this article, I use a transnational feminist approach by building on interdisciplinary Korean feminist scholarship to address issues relating to global feminism in the digital age. Korean-language monographs have addressed feminist concerns regarding digital technologies of surveillance from a wide range of perspective, including the Nth Room and growth of digital sex crimes (Fire Press Corps 2020), feminist narratives (KwonKim et al. 2017), intersectional feminism (Jeon et al. 2018; Han et al. 2018), and the Break the Corset movement, a youth-based protest movement which

sought to break away from stereotypical femininity by breaking and disposing of feminized products such as heels, makeup, and dresses (Lee 2019). Recent English-language publications on digital sex crimes in Korea address issues of censorship and pornography (Lee 2020; Y. Lee 2022), feminists' varied reactions to digital sex crimes (Lee and Jeong 2018; Jeong 2020; E. Lee 2022), digital sex crimes as a human rights issue (Jun 2022), and legal concerns (Women's Human Rights Institute of Korea 2020, 2021; Amnesty International 2023).

South Korean feminist scholars have documented the intimate connection between pervasive sexual violence and its evolution into digital spaces since the late 1990s (Jeon 2021). Korean scholars and activists use terms like *saibŏsŏng-bŏmjŏe* (cyber sexual violence) and *tijit'ŏl sŏngp'ongnyŏk* (digital sex crime), or a mixture of both, to discuss these issues. Similarly, this article uses "digital sexual violence" and "digital sex crimes."

Korean research has linked the rapid expansion of misogyny and the illegal distribution of explicit images, referred to as "pornography," to the proliferation of sexual violence on digital platforms (Jeon 2021; Park 2021; Lee and Lee 2021). According to Jeon (2021), the Korean government, National Assembly, and judiciary system have only recently acknowledged the severity of this issue and have started addressing it by establishing relevant laws and systems. However, these measures provide only a foundational shift in society's perception of digital sex crimes and have yet to prove effective in deterring offenses.

In the late 1990s, digital sexual violence emerged through actions such as filming personal sexual acts without consent using hidden cameras, and distributing and consuming these materials online (Kim 2018; Jeon 2021). The widespread use of smartphones and Korea's hyper-connected mobile internet networks exacerbated this issue in the late 2000s, leading to the proliferation of *mollaek'amera* (hidden or spy camera, colloquially known as *molka*) in both public and private spaces. Women's organizations, scholars, and feminist activists argue that the prevalence of digital surveillance and violence has blurred the lines between the production, distribution, and consumption of sexual content, contributing to the "pornification" of the everyday lives of young girls and women (Kim 2018; Korea Cyber Sexual Violence Response Center 2020). In other words, digital sexual violence is an extension of gender-based sexual violence, amplified by systemic and cultural misogyny.

Korean scholars and activists refer to "digital sexual violence" and "digital sex crimes," while Western scholars often use the term "technology-facilitated sexual violence" (TFSV) to describe sexual harm and violence perpetrated via digital platforms. Prominent scholars in the field include Suzie Dunn and Jane Bailey from Canada, Clare McGlynn from the UK, and Nicola Henry, Anastasia Powell, Bridget Harris, and Molly Dragiewicz from Australia. Dunn and Bailey have highlighted the legal and social challenges of addressing TFSV within current frameworks, discussing issues like cyberstalking, non-consensual distribution of intimate images, and online harassment (Bailey et al. 2021; Dunn 2021; Bailey et al. 2022; Dunn 2022). McGlynn advocates for comprehensive legal reforms to keep pace with technological advancements and better support survivors (McGlynn et al. 2017; McGlynn 2022). Powell and Henry examine TFSV as a persistent form of gender inequality through technofeminist and criminological lenses (2017), and image-based sexual abuse from interdisciplinary perspectives (Henry et al. 2021). Additionally, other scholars explore topics like intimate partner violence and victimization (Harris and Woodlock 2023), survivor narratives (Dragiewicz et al. 2023), surveillance and control (Woodlock et al. 2023), and digital spatiality (Harris and Vitis 2020).

Despite overlapping language between Western and Korean scholars and activists, it is important to recognize the distinct ways Korean scholars frame the discourse on digital sexual violence. This article aims to bridge Western discussions on technology-facilitated sexual violence and Korean discussions on digital sex crimes.

Drawing on qualitative research conducted from 2018 to 2022, I analyze South Korean feminist activism, transcending the online/offline binary. The primary sources include fieldwork conducted in South Korea between 2018 and 2019, comprising fifty semi-structured interviews with feminist activists and individuals from various affiliations and regions.³ Additionally, I utilize textual analysis of Korean feminist legal scholarship on digital sex crimes and legislation, legal documents from the Korea Legislation Research Institute, and digital technologies and instant messaging applications such as Telegram and KakaoTalk, the most popular messaging platforms in Korea. I include follow-up

correspondences with feminist activists originally interviewed in 2018-2019. As my research interlocutors and Korean scholarship favour the terms “digital sexual violence” and “digital sex crimes,” I have adopted this terminology here. This article expands on prior research findings related to digital sexual violence, cloud-based technologies, and anti-feminist backlash.

3. Digital Sex Crimes: The Nth Room Case

While not all forms of digital sexual violence are encompassed as sex crimes, sex crimes are a dangerous and serious category of violence primarily experienced by women, marginalized individuals, and minors (Powell and Henry 2017). Sex crimes include non-consensual sex acts and diverse forms of violence, such as sexual assault, rape, minor sexual abuse, sexual harassment, and sex trafficking. Digital sexual violence broadly refers to gender-based violence that occurs online and/or offline through digital devices and information and communication technology. Referred to in Western discourse as technology-facilitated sexual violence, these forms of violence traverse non-physical spaces such as social media to use non-physical force to assault and intimidate victims. Digital sexual violence includes non-consensual distribution of intimate images (often described as revenge pornography) and the creation, distribution, or consumption of sexually explicit materials obtained without proper consent. Digital sexual violence materials are frequently obtained through online harassment, cyberstalking, blackmail, and engagement in illegal online spaces dedicated to sharing explicit sexual content.

In my fieldwork research in Korea, the feminists I interviewed who were in their 20s-30s frequently referenced the prevalence of misogynistic culture and sexual violence online as a catalyst for their own awareness and engagement in feminist activism. Whether they were involved in grassroots feminist groups, non-governmental organizations, feminist and queer book clubs or university student clubs, online feminist communities, or elsewhere, my interlocutors referenced their own or their female friends’ experiences with digital sexual violence as an urgent social and legal issue. At a feminist discussion meeting held in October 2018 at the Feminist Book Cafe ‘Doing’ in Gangnam, Seoul, participants discussed the need for proper legislation to address the widespread issue of misogyny and digital sexual violence. So-young,⁴ a participant at the meeting, argued that the issue of digital sex crimes was a “basic problem” (*kibonjŏgin munjejŏm*). Later that month, So-young and I met at a café and continued discussing the issue of digital sexual violence:

So-young: “The [Korean] government can use technology to prosecute women when they distribute obscene materials (*ŭmnanmul yup’ojoe*) of men online, but they don’t use technology in cases of violence against women.”

Me: “Are you referring to the Womad case⁵?”

So-young: “Yes, but that is just one example of the lack of laws addressing digital sexual violence.”

Me: “How would you like to see the government address digital sexual violence?”

So-young: “They could begin with revising existing laws to include requests to delete *molka* [hidden spy camera] images online, address the social stigma of survivors, societal misogyny [...] the biggest issue for victims is the risk of secondary victimization when reporting.⁶ These images [*molka* and digital sex crime materials] are everywhere online.”

Interview with the author (October 2018).

As this vignette from my interview with So-young demonstrates, at the center of young women’s concerns is the ubiquity of digital sex crimes and the lack of a comprehensive legal framework to address the impact of digital technologies on women’s everyday lives. While So-young was discussing a case involving an operator of the online radical feminist community, Womad, facing a warrant for distributing nude photos of a male model in an act of misogynistic

“mirroring” activism, it is important to note that the laws and policies classified digital sex crime photos and videos as *Ŭmnanmul*, which can be translated as “obscene materials” or “pornography.” This view of materials produced through technology-facilitated sexual violence focused on penalizing the suppliers and created a societal perception that victims had consented to the filming and/or the acts involved, which led to lenient punishments (Kim 2023). The perception of women and girls surviving acts of digital sexual violence as engaging in pornography or “obscenity” is a central issue related to the social and legal environment that still perceives such materials as consumables (Ko and Park 2023). “Obscene” materials obtained using spy cameras and distributed online had become a widespread issue by 2018. Jiwon, another interlocutor in her 20s, reflected on young women’s anxiety surrounding hidden spy cameras.

Jiwon: “The issue of *molka* needs to be addressed socially. *Molka* culture is so pervasive.”

Me: “What do you mean by pervasive?”

Jiwon: “Victims [of illegal spy cameras] are viewed as engaging in vulgarity. We need to confront victim blaming.”

Me: “Where do you see victim blaming happen?”

Jiwon: “Everywhere [...] I feel that not much has changed yet, but especially when reading comments on news articles. Change is not something you can just receive.”

Interview with the author (May 2019).

Speaking from a place of anxiety regarding young women’s experiences with digital sexual violence, the above vignettes from my interviews with Jiwon and So-young demonstrate the pervasiveness of digital sex crimes in Korea. While women of all ages have had to contend with the continuous threat of digital sex crimes in public spaces (Human Rights Watch 2021), such as spy cameras hidden in subway station bathrooms, my interviews with young women in their 20s and early 30s frequently discussed feeling anxious about becoming a victim of digital sexual violence. As Jiwon argued, victim-blaming culture is particularly pervasive around the distribution of so-called “obscene materials” produced through technology-facilitated sexual violence. Many of my interlocutors echoed this anxiety and a distrust in the government’s approach to digital sex crimes. In my interviews with So-young and Jiwon, as well as other young feminists in various regions, digital sex crimes were regarded as a manifestation of legal and social misogyny that required comprehensive legislation and structural societal change. The feminist activists I interviewed in 2018-2019 had accurately foreseen the evolving nature of technology-facilitated sexual violence, which continues to advance swiftly as information and communication technologies outpace legislation. Their insights also highlighted the deep-rooted nature of misogyny in society.

The Nth Room consisted of a network of chat rooms operating on instant messaging applications, particularly on Telegram, and functioned as an online sex-abuse ring from mid 2017 to March 2020. Perpetrators used the chat rooms to disseminate sexually exploitative material for pay and to further antagonize and blackmail victims. Ringleaders created different online chat rooms to circulate explicit materials in a pay-per-view system. Many of the victims of Nth Room were minors. A total of 1154 victims were confirmed at the end of a formal government investigation in December 2020 with a total of 60.7% in their 20s or younger (Jun 2022). Although only 103 victims moved forward with legal prosecution, 26 were minors (Simons 2022).

The investigation of the Nth Rooms led to the arrests of ringleaders Cho Ju-bin⁷ (nicknamed “Doctor”) and Moon Hyung-wook (nicknamed “god god”). Cho’s chatrooms had at least 10,000 people paying up to \$1,200 USD to access materials, with Moon’s chatrooms seeing approximately 260,000 users. Cho’s arrest included 38 accomplices operating from 2017 through March 2020. Cho was sentenced to 42 years (reduced from 45) and Moon was sentenced to 34 years in prison for coercing 20 women and girls into sharing 3,800 videos and images (Simons 2022; Kim 2023). The Korean government arrested an additional 3,757 people connected with the Nth Room and imprisoned

245 of them (Kim 2022). *Hankyoreh* news staff reporter Oh Yeon-seo was one of the first journalists to uncover sexual abuse of Korean women and minors on Telegram. Oh (2020) detailed the newspaper's work to create an archive chronicling the battle with digital sex crimes but stated that survivors had little time or energy to spend on the larger issue of systemic disregard for digital gendered crimes.

A subsequent investigation by *Hankyoreh* reporter Ch'oe Minyŏng (2022) revealed that among the 378 "general participants" involved in the Nth Rooms, individuals received an average fine of approximately \$4,713 USD and an average prison sentence of 13.2 months, although 61.9% of these sentences were suspended. The primary charges included: downloading or purchasing "sexual exploitation material" (*sŏngch'akch'wimul*) on Telegram (277 individuals, 73.3%), aiding and abetting (33 individuals, 8.7%), selling photos and videos (35 individuals, 9.2%), creating sexual exploitation material (20 individuals, 5.3%), redistributing downloaded material (9 individuals, 2.4%), and operating chatrooms (4 individuals, 1.1%). Additionally, 64 individuals (16.9%) received fines, 47 (12.4%) received imprisonment, 4 (1.1%) had their sentences deferred, and 2 (0.5%) were acquitted. Although the findings suggest increased judicial awareness and harsher sentences, 7 out of 10 individuals charged with possession received suspended sentences.

In the aftermath of the Nth Room case, perpetrators and users leaked victims' personal information, including full names, addresses, phone numbers, and citizen identification numbers (Oh 2020). In the following section, I detail the Korean government's response to public demand for legal solutions to digital sex crimes. This legal response is one of two major systemic changes resulting from the Nth Room investigation. The second notable change was the prosecution's release of four names associated with Nth Room crimes, a rare move under Korean criminal law, which typically protects suspects' anonymity from the media and public.

4. Cloud Backlash to the Nth Room Prevention Act, "Obscene" Images, and the Limit of Legislation

Dubbed the "The Nth Room Prevention Act," a Partial Amendment Enforcement Decree of the Telecommunications Business Act was announced in 2020, partially applied in 2011, and officially enforced as Presidential Decree No. 33038 by the Korea Communications Commission on December 9, 2022. This partial amendment has three components:

- i. Designate the Korea Women's Rights Promotion Agency, Sexual Violence Victims Counseling Center, as well as other institutions subsidized by the government, as the organizations that can request the deletion of illegally filmed and/or distributed images.
- ii. Require businesses to implement new technical and operational protocols when offering digital storage services or running platforms where users freely share and upload information. These protocols include: the establishment of a systematic mechanism for regular reporting of activities; the integration of measures restricting search results associated with keywords commonly linked to illicitly recorded content; the assessment of uploaded materials against the Korea Communication Standards Commission's (KCSC) list of censored materials; and notification to users that uploading unlawfully recorded content will result in penalties as per established laws. Additionally, in cases where business operators are uncertain about the legality of specific content, they are permitted to request prompt review by the KCSC.
- iii. The final clause of the Decree originally permitted business operators to temporarily restrict access to the offending content while awaiting the outcome of the KCSC's deliberation. However, in response to public pushback over concerns that this authority might be misused to arbitrarily suppress and censor political speech, the clause was subsequently amended. As per the revision, business operators are no longer granted the authority to temporarily block the content in question prior to the completion of KCSC's examination (Korea Communications Commission 2022).

Ko and Park (2023) analyzed the Korea Communications Commission's "2021 Transparency Report" from 87 operators, finding that nearly three years after the enactment of the Nth Room Prevention Law, the issue of digital sexual violence remains without clear solutions. While the Korea Communication Commission found that a total of 87 business operators claimed to have deleted 27,575 posts flagged for illicit videos in 2021, including Korean business giants Kakao and Naver and multinational companies such as Google, Twitter, and Meta (Yoon 2022), this report did not include Telegram, the instant messaging application used by perpetrators and consumers in the Nth Room case. The report failed to include other responsibilities outlined in the amendment, such as the outcome of the Korea Communications Commission's preventative measures. While some platform operators have turned to artificial intelligence to experiment with algorithms to filter illegal sexual content, the results have been unreliable to date, accidentally censoring models wearing bikinis or unrelated content featuring female content creators on YouTube (Yoon 2022). Other post-2020 legislative amendments include the Act on Special Cases Concerning the Punishment of Sexual Crimes (Act No. 19517), which added language specific to the protection of minors ages 19 and under.

The reach of local legislation on the landscape of transnational digital media is limited in its current scope. The instantaneous nature of digital platforms—including livestreaming and instant messaging applications—encompasses a vast and complex world. Digital platforms hold promise for feminist and anti-sexual violence activism yet are precarious as these platforms can be used to perpetuate violence against women and girls. The Nth Room was a complex web that spanned multiple social media and messaging platforms. By operating on member-to-member admittance or by completing simple verification tasks assigned by chatroom moderators, Nth Room grew rapidly. The Nth Room included an expansive library of extorted videos and deepfakes in the First to Eighth Rooms. The most infamous component of Nth Room's operation was its tiered subscription model, wherein members paid incremental fees to witness and even participate in physical violence inflicted on enslaved women and girls during livestreams (E. Lee 2022).

The digital landscape in Korea was particularly conducive to the rise of the Nth Room. The widespread availability of high-speed Internet and the common use of online forums (or "cafes") for anonymous communication had shaped the country's digital landscape into both a space for social mobilization and a platform for exploiting vulnerable communities. The Korea Cyber Sexual Violence Response Center (KCSVRC; *Han'guk Saibŏ Sŏngp'ongnyŏk Taeŭng-sent'ŏ*, colloquially known as *Hansasŏng*) was established in May 2017 to support victims of cyber sexual violence through counselling, monitoring portals and mobile applications distributing digital sex crimes, issuing reports on the status of digital sexual violence in Korea transnationally and at the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, and pushing for harsher laws and prosecuting digital sexual violence, among many others.

On their website,⁸ the KCSVRC declares, "The change has already begun." This refers to the significant gains the anti-digital sexual violence movement has made since 2017, namely:

- i. Taking photos without consent and distributing or viewing them are now sex crimes.
- ii. The government established a support system for the deletion of sex crime materials and opened a specialized counselling center for survivors of digital sex crimes.
- iii. The passing of the Webhard Cartel Prevention Act and the arrest of Yang Jin-ho strengthened the responsibilities of online service providers, such as cloud-storage hardware.
- iv. An online grooming punishment law was enacted.
- v. The Nth Room Prevention Act was passed.

vi. Cho Ju-bin was sentenced to 40 years in prison.

vii. The Act on Punishment of Crimes of Stalking was enacted.

As discussed above, a core aim of the Nth Room Prevention Act was to force cloud storage providers and large value-added service providers to actively prevent and remove the distribution of digital sex crime content (Lee 2021). While not directly connected to the Nth Room case, the Webhard cartel mentioned by the KCSVRC as their third gain is an important example of how certain technologies have been used to facilitate the illegal distribution of sexually explicit material in South Korea. In 2019, Yang Jin-ho, the chairman of Korea Future Technology Corporation, was charged with distributing pornography through an organized system known as the Webhard cartel. This system involved multiple levels of collaboration: large-scale uploaders, website operators, companies that filtered content, and digital eraser services, all working together to maximize the illegal circulation of pornographic material (Hong 2019).

Although new laws have been introduced to combat digital sex crimes, including those involving hidden cameras, the rise of cloud storage services—especially those hosted overseas in countries with no extradition agreements with South Korea—continues to make it difficult to curb the distribution of such content. Additionally, the legal language used in these laws often frames materials from digital sex crimes, such as images taken without consent, as mere pornography, which can be problematic in terms of how the severity of these crimes is understood and addressed.

The KCSVRC points out that despite a long history of amendments made to address sex crimes, recent digital sex crime cases highlight that the current legal protections lag in technological developments to address the widespread reach of sex crimes. Attempts to establish, amend, and enact local laws to punish and mitigate violence against women span from the late 1990s to the 2010s (Korea Cyber Sexual Violence Response Center 2020). The final versions of Article 13 (Obscene Acts by Using Means of Communication) and Article 14 (Taking Photographs or Videos by Using Cameras) in the Act on Special Cases Concerning the Punishment of Sexual Crimes still lack legal recourse.⁹

Digital sex crimes and the distribution of sexual exploitation materials are difficult to punish under current law. This provides victims with limited recourse. Law enforcement is not adequately equipped to handle complaints of online harassment or digital sex crimes. Consequently, the responsibility for reporting these crimes falls on the victims. Survivors of illegal spy cameras and digital sex crimes often face social backlash and secondary victimization through victim-blaming discourse. Despite recent legal advances, significant loopholes persist. These include the continued use of spy cameras, societal and legal perceptions of digital sex crime footage as “obscene” or “pornographic,” inadequate legal language addressing online grooming, and ambiguous definitions of consent regarding sexual violence and digital sex crimes.

The problematic framing of materials filmed, distributed, and consumed through digital sex crimes is rooted in negative social attitudes toward pornography and stringent laws against the production, distribution, and possession of pornographic materials. These laws lack clear definitions of what constitutes “obscene” content and the standards used to determine it.

The focus on misogynistic violence and discrimination against victims of digital sex crimes is complicated by outdated legislative language and the rapidly evolving landscape of digital technologies.

These complications are not unique to Korea. As Catherine D’Ignazio and Lauren F. Klein demonstrate in *Data Feminism* (2020), thinking about how data—or digital spaces, here—impact marginalized and oppressed groups requires contextualization of the intersecting systems of power and privilege. Clare McGlynn in the UK and Jane Bailey and Suzie Dunn in Canada have similarly argued that existing laws do not adequately address technology-facilitated sexual violence. McGlynn argues that traditional legal frameworks are often outdated and ill prepared to handle digital sexual crimes, such as revenge pornography and cyberstalking (McGlynn et al. 2019). Bailey and Dunn likewise criticize Canadian laws for failing to provide sufficient protections against technology-facilitated sexual violence and call for more comprehensive legislation to better reflect the specific complexities and reach of digital sex crimes as

a response to survivors' needs (Bailey and Mathen 2019; Dunn 2020). Hester Baer has argued (2015) that digital feminisms reflect the oppressive nature of neoliberalism and its possibilities for new subjectivities and social formations. Legislative amendments transnationally as well as in Korea have yet to curtail the widespread use of digital spaces and offshore cloud storage. As of the writing of this article, there is no unified transnational cooperative response to the complex issue of individual criminals and crime rings using digital technologies such as cloud-based hardware and encrypted software to exploit women and young girls.

5. Feminist Critiques of the Nth Room Prevention Act

The Nth Room Prevention Act and other legislation have begun to address the broader issues surround sex crimes. In particular, the resulting legislation addressed some of the concerns So-young spoke to in our interview vignette (Section III of this article) pertaining to language requesting the deletion of spy camera or *molka* images and including procedures for reporting digital sex crimes. However, the issues of social stigmas for survivors, potential doxing and secondary victimization, and societal misogyny persist.

Moreover, not all responses to the Nth Room Prevention amendment were favourable. In Korea, engaging in both the posting of explicit images of oneself and soliciting customers for paid sexual services are not only criminal offenses, subject to legal repercussions, but are also culturally stigmatized. Exploiting this social stigma and the fear of legal consequences, the Nth Room perpetrators were able to manipulate and coerce victims into becoming targets of digital sex crimes. Feminist critiques further the argument that current laws conflate images and videos produced through digital sex crimes with pornography (*ŭmnanmul*), which further stigmatizes survivors and fixates on establishing “voluntary” or “involuntary” consent. In other words, under the current law and cultural perceptions, the government still considers photos and videos resulting from digital sex crimes as pornography.

Some feminist critics view the Nth Room Prevention Act as extending government reach, invading privacy, and censoring citizens online (Ko 2021). This form of nationalistic paternalism places itself as the moral and ethical protector of women's sexuality and bodily autonomy. As Cho (2009) argues, the transformation of women into subjects of neoliberal governmentality belies a fundamental requirement for the paternalistic nation-state through a focus on sexuality for reproduction for the nation.

6. Anonymity and Surveillance

In addition to the limited success of legislation in curtailing the filming and distribution of digital sexual violence, public demand to name and shame the perpetrators and buyers of such materials has also been limited. The National Human Rights Commission of Korea argued in 2001 that breaking anonymity before a guilty verdict is a violation of human rights (Seo 2023). Since the early 2000s, the disclosure of high-profile criminal suspects has been left to the authorities' discretion. The public demand to reveal the names behind the Nth Room resulted in authorities releasing the names of four perpetrators: Cho Ju-bin, Moon Hyung-wook, Nam Kyung-eup, and Ahn Seung Jin. In addition to their names, authorities subsequently released current photographs of the four, as opposed to the more common practice of releasing high school yearbook photos of perpetrators.

Digital surveillance presents a significant concern for feminist activists, especially young feminists in their teens to early 30s. While younger feminists rely on anonymity to share their experiences with sexual violence (e.g., #MeToo and the Uncomfortable Courage protests) and to oppose gender-based violence, the same technologies are also exploited by perpetrators of digital sex crimes. Moreover, both the government and anti-feminist activists use these technologies to monitor feminist activist spaces.

Maintaining anonymity is a vital component of feminist activism, particularly around sexual violence. News of the Nth Room first broke through the meticulous investigate journalism of two university students under the joint pseudonym of Team Flame on Twitter and YouTube (Yoon 2020). Anonymity has become an important tool for

young radical feminist activism in Korea and is used to organize rallies protesting digital sex crimes, troll misogynists online, and protect feminists' identities in a landscape hostile to feminist ideals and ideologies. In 2018, during the height of #MeToo activism in Korea, a mass protest series against digital sex crimes using the hashtag #Uncomfortable_Courage erupted. Also known as the "Hyehwa subway station protests," these protests were organized online by anonymous young radical female feminists. Although referred to by most feminists simply as "the illegal spycam protests" (*pulbŏpch'waryŏng shiwi*), the previous Minister of Gender Equality and Family, Chung Hyun-Back, framed the protests as fighting for an unbiased investigation of voyeuristic hidden camera crimes (*pulbŏpch'waryŏng p'yŏnp'asusa kyut'anshiwi*) in June 2018. The importance of anonymity is especially significant for young feminists in Korea, as anonymity is a tool primarily used by young radical feminists online as it allows them to express their dissent without fear of backlash or harassment. While this is not exclusive to younger feminists, the feminist activists I interviewed—regardless of age or affiliation—noted that perpetrators of digital sexual violence primarily target young women and girls. This is reflected in the slogan of the Hyehwa protests, Uncomfortable Courage (*Pulp'yŏnhan Yonggi*), which highlighted the courage to protest and to publicly confront issues like spy cameras crimes, despite the potential social and economic risks and discomfort of speaking out in a society hostile toward women's voices and feminism.

Feminist transgressive spaces, both physical and digital, are often subjected to surveillance. Jeong (2018) contends that the rapid spread of radical feminism in Korea is closely linked to young women's anxieties about illegal photography (*pulbŏpch'waryŏng*), spy cameras, and surveillance in both private and public spaces. The widespread presence of spy cameras, especially in public bathrooms, exemplifies how neoliberal surveillance technologies and digital sex crimes affect the daily lives of young Korean women. Donna Haraway (1991) argues that the new economy has dissolved previous distinctions between public and private domains, leading to a blurred boundary for women through surveillance technologies. Haraway's perspective underscores how women's experiences are profoundly reshaped by the social relations of science and technology.

The anxieties of young women and feminists over surveillance have become a significant aspect of the Korean feminist activist landscape. The dual use of anonymity by perpetrators of digital sexual violence and feminist activists presents a complex issue that demands further feminist research.

7. Anti-feminist Backlash, Censorship, and Cloud Technologies

Wang: "Online and offline activism are both important. My friends use both. I don't believe in 'keyboard warriors' (*ipp'emŭ*). After [activist meetings, rallies, or protests], we cool off together, drink together, and talk freely together."
Interview with the author (September 2018).

The above excerpt from an interview I held with Wang, a radical Korean feminist in her 20s, illustrates the porousness of activism in digital and physical spaces. The research included in this article demonstrates that there is no single feminist approach to digital sex crimes or activism, but rather feminists find solidarity and friendship in all formats of activist spaces.

The surge of anti-feminism in Korea is not a unique response to feminist social and/or political advancements (or their scale). Writing about sexual violence at Ontario universities, Colpitts argues that misogyny and resistance to feminism are persistent components to social movements, but that backlash corresponds to specific feminist efforts that endanger a patriarchal status quo (2020). The transition from former President Moon Jae-in's liberal government to Yoon Suk Yeol's conservative government in 2022 was a blow to the feminist movement's momentum. Yoon's successful bid was due to a persistent rise in anti-feminist backlash and pro-natalist rhetoric that placed the burden of low birthrates on women being "picky" about their partners and pressuring them to give birth (Moon 2021). Yoon Suk Yeol ran on a platform that stirred up anti-feminist sentiment by calling for the abolishment of the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, whose officials they accused of treating men like sex criminals. Yoon's platform also blamed feminism for low birthrates and denied the gender wage gap and systemic discrimination (Gunja 2022). It is

evident that the gains won by the feminist movement in recent years have been countered with anti-feminist backlash.

Yoon's administration has worked to undo efforts by the prior progressive administration to publicly address citizen concerns. In addition to President Yoon relocating the South Korean presidential office from Chung Wa Dae (Blue House) to a Defense Ministry Complex in Yongsan in 2022, Yoon shut down the popular public petition platform on Cheong Wa Dae's website which was introduced by former president Moon Jae-in on August 19, 2017. Under former-president Moon's "National Petition" platform, when a petition reached more than 200,000 citizen signatures, the petition required a response by government officials, including ministers and chief secretaries, within 30 days. On June 23, 2022, President Yoon established the "National e-People" website (<https://www.epeople.go.kr/>) for petitions and complaints from overseas Korean nationals and foreigners residing in Korea and the "People's Proposal" (kungminjeon) website (<https://withpeople.president.go.kr/>) for Korean citizens. Under Yoon's system, petitions no longer require a response if they reach over 200,000 signatures by citizens, but are sent to the National Assembly for legislative matters and to the relevant government agency for administrative matters.

According to an analysis by the Korean Women's Development Institute in June 2019, 4 out of 10 petitions that received more than 200,000 signatures and warranted a response from the Blue House were gender-related issues, and the platform had brought many gendered issues into public discourse, particularly 23 cases of sex crimes and 19 cases of digital sex crimes, which includes the Nth Room case on Telegram (Mun and Yu 2024). The Yoon administration's changes to the online petition systems had greatly reduced citizens' use of petitions as a public forum to give voice to otherwise marginalized issues. Ultimately, these changes in administrative reception and responses to democratic public discourse is intimately tied with backlash against progressive social policies. As demonstrated, online citizen petitions were an important avenue for raising gender-based issues publicly in a way that could maintain anonymity. The removal of the National Petition platform functions as a form of governmental censorship of citizen concerns and directly impacts the visibility of issues relating to gender-based violence and digital sex crimes.

It is not only anti-feminist politicians and skewed understanding of gender discrimination that further complicate meaningful change. The anti-feminist stance by Yoon's administration has influenced government policies and curtailed progress in gender equality initiatives. For example, the implementation of stricter penalties for false accusations in sexual harassment cases has been criticized as potentially deterring victims from coming forward. The impact of intensifying anti-feminist backlash was felt by my prior interview participants as well.

In a follow-up chat on KakaoTalk, a popular messaging application in Korea, So-young and I discuss her dating life as a heterosexual cisgendered woman and feminist. So-young remarked: "I don't always reveal that I'm a feminist. [...] I think the reason feminists seek out people with similar values is not just because it brings them joy, but because there is a strong desire for safety. However, having similar values doesn't necessarily mean that person is safe. Safety can also be compromised outside of political and ideological alignment" (exchange in a chatroom on KakaoTalk with the author, March 2022).

With a growing rise in anti-feminist politics, feminists continue to find ways to resist backlash and misogyny, and continue to work towards political and social change. This brief exchange with So-young is a reminder that feminist ideology and values require a delicate navigation of public action and personal relationships.

8. Conclusion

Yeo: "The country is really a mess...."

So-young: "It's really infuriating."

Sue: "Ridiculous."

Yeo: “Even with that revealed, it’s still confirmed. [...] I can see how they view women.”

Exchange in a chatroom on KakaoTalk with the author (November 2022).

The above exchange between feminist activists I had met during my fieldwork occurred after a troubling news report was shared in a group chat. In November 2022, an incident dubbed “the Second Nth Room Case” was reported when a suspect was apprehended with over 1,200 videos of sexual exploitative materials involving minors (Ko and Park 2023). This “Second Nth Room” is a troubling recurrence that highlights the weakness of post-Nth Room legislative measures. Additionally, in late 2024, several incidents involving nonconsensual deepfake porn of videos and images of women and girls highlight my argument that, without addressing misogynistic culture and politics, digital sex crimes will continue to occur via new and emerging technological forms.

As discussed, digital technologies exacerbate existing misogynistic cultures, which can result in ineffective legislation. This is evident in the classification of digital sex crime materials as obscene pornography. Although the Nth Room Prevention Law rephrased this to “illegal filming” (*pulbŏpch'waryŏngmul*), there remains no clear legal distinction between pornography and illegal footage obtained and distributed through digital sex crimes. However, effective transparency and enforcement of laws to prevent and deter digital sexual violence require some form of digital surveillance. Feminist activists recognize the need for surveillance but also depend on anonymity for safety in an increasingly hostile, anti-feminist and right-wing political and social landscape. The same anonymity used for anti-sexual violence activism is exploited by perpetrators of digital sexual violence. Further critical research on transnational digital sex crimes, surveillance technologies, and the global rise of extreme right-wing politics and anti-feminist backlash is essential to understand the impact of local legislation and feminist activism in a transnational context. By examining cases like the Nth Room and the use of digital chatrooms on platforms like Telegram, I argue that heightened censorship and surveillance of cloud-based messaging platforms pose new challenges for both local and transnational feminists.

Endnotes

1. All Korean-English translations follow the McCune-Reischauer Romanization system primarily used by Korean studies scholars in North America, with the exception of instances where authors, public figures, and institutions have an established English spelling of their name or institution, such as President Yoon Suk Yeok (Yun Sŏkyŏl in McCune-Reischauer) or feminist film scholar Sohn, Hee-jeong (Son Hŭichŏng).
2. As one of the key promises made by Yoon Suk Yeol (2022-) during his presidential campaign, Yoon relocated the South Korean presidential office from Chung Wa Dae (Blue House) to a Defense Ministry Complex in Yongsan in 2022. In the same year, President Yoon shut down the popular public petition platform on Cheong Wa Dae’s website which was introduced by former president Moon Jae-in on August 19, 2017. I discuss this change in section six of this article.
3. The ethnographic research included in this article was supported by a grant from the Academy of Korean Studies in 2018 and a Fulbright grant in 2019. All interviews were conducted in Korean and translated by the author. Unless otherwise noted, translations from Korean to English are by the author.
4. Interview subjects’ names have been anonymized either by the author or using a nickname chosen by the interview subject, unless otherwise noted.
5. The case mentioned in my interview with So-young refers to the South Korean authorities issuing a warrant for arrest of the operator of an anonymous online radical feminist community, Womad, in August 2018. For more on this case see Haas 2018.

6. Secondary victimization refers to the additional trauma or victimization that individuals may experience as a result of their interactions with institutions, systems, or individuals after the initial victimization. This can occur through insensitive or dismissive treatment by the legal system or law enforcement, victim blaming, or other forms of inadequate or harmful responses from law enforcement, medical professionals, social services, or even friends and family in-person or online.
7. Korean names are written last name, first name.
8. “About.” The Korea Cyber Sexual Violence Response Center.” <https://www.cyber-lion.com/about>.
9. The Act on Special Cases Concerning the Punishment of Sexual Crimes (Act number 19743) was enforced on January 25, 2024. The English translation of the Act is available through the Korean Law Information Center: <https://www.law.go.kr/eng/engMain.do?menuId=0>

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