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Monitoring online sexism and the development of a monitoring tool

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1. Introduction

1. Research goals

This research is designed to first monitor a diverse range of online environments and then examine the status of online sexism, with a particular focus on the targets and types of online sexism and related gender stereotypes. It also attempts to develop a monitoring tool that can be applied by other organizations, including civic groups, as they conduct their own monitoring of sexist behaviors on the Internet. This research also uses text mining as a means to identify topics and keywords related to online sexism.

2. Research content

A. Identifying the concept of online sexism

1) Background

2) Definitions

B. Developing and implementing a monitoring tool

1) Operationalization of online sexism

- a. Categorization of online sexism: gender stereotypes, negative attitudes toward a particular gender, and complaints about gender roles, etc.
- b. Types of online sexism: opinions/arguments, criticism/disparagement, and hatred/violence

2) Development of a monitoring tool by content type

Respective monitoring tools were developed for language and imagery

3) Monitoring

Monitors were recruited and trained to observe the platforms and select content for analysis.

C. Analysis of the status of online sexism

Sexist speech and images found in posts, comments, and real-time chatting on online portal sites and forums were analyzed. The status of online sexism on each site and variations between different sites were discussed. Sexist topics and keywords were identified that were common to all sites.

D. Policy measures to promote online gender equality

1) Strengthening the accountability of online media

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

- 3) **Introducing anti-sexism provisions into the autonomous regulation of online advertisement**
- 4) **Developing anti-sexism standards in the deliberation of online content**
- 5) **Legislating a law banning expressions of hate that includes anti-sexism provisions**
- 6) **Providing gender equality education and guidelines for producers of online content**

3. Research methods

A. Literature review

1) **Concepts**

Studies on philosophical and conceptual discussions on sexism, characteristics of online culture, and gender stereotypes were reviewed.

2) **Institutions and regulations on online media**

Issues on online media sites including freedom of expression, human rights, and self-governance of medical advertisements, and related National Assembly initiatives were all examined.

B. Monitoring

Monitoring was conducted in two stages: preliminary and primary monitoring.

1) **Preliminary monitoring**

Preliminary monitoring was conducted between March and April

2016 with an aim to develop a monitoring tool. Monitors included the researchers performing the current study, members of media-related women's organizations, two graduate students in Women's Studies, and an online-based freelance worker. News websites, online forums, and a web TV station (Afreeca TV) were monitored for two weeks each and the results were discussed.

2) Primary monitoring

Primary monitoring was conducted over the six weeks from May 14 to June 24, 2016. The objects included news articles, comments, and images on South Korea's three largest portal sites (Naver, Daum, and Nate), posts and comments on ten online forums, and real-time chatting accompanying the content on Afreeca TV. A total of 13 monitors took turns conducting the monitoring.

C. Training of monitors

In order to reduce any discrepancies between monitors, a total of six rounds of training were carried out with a focus on the concept of online sexism and cases of sexist content. A reliability test was also conducted.

D. Text mining: identifying sexist topics and keywords

The data collected from three types of online sites were combined to perform text mining and extract sexist topics and keywords.

E. Consultation meetings

Consultation meetings were held with the operators of relevant websites, civic groups, researchers of related laws, media researchers, and those implementing related policies.

II. Theoretical background

1. Contextualization of online sexism

Online sexism is a recent development in the discussion on gender discrimination. This paper examines how it differs from previous forms of gender discrimination and how it can be contextualized. It reviews preceding discussions on gender discrimination, explains the characteristics of online sexism based on prior studies, and attempts to define online sexism. Lastly, it explains the characteristics of online culture that allow online sexism.

2. Online sexism and gender stereotypes

This paper explains gender stereotypes that facilitate online sexism by dividing their causal factors into several categories: gender roles, physical characteristics (appearance), prejudices related to gender-based attributes, negative attitudes against a specific gender, and complaints related to gender roles.

III. Status of online sexism

1. Overview

When it comes to sexism, rather than a homogenous world woven with a single kind of thread, the Internet appears to be a highly heterogeneous world blotted intermittently with robust sexism. In other words, sexism is not spread evenly across the Internet, but is particularly strong at some sites while rare in others. The degree of sexism varies greatly depending on the site, and even on the section within a given site.

2. Sexism by site

A. Web broadcasting

Among targets of monitoring such as online news sites, forums, and comments on web TV, sexism has been found to be most prevalent on the comments on web broadcasting. On Afreeca TV, which this research examined, 85 of 149 broadcasts monitored (57%) were accompanied by sexist remarks in the live comments. Given that the sampling standard for monitoring was broadcasts within the top 300 in popularity rankings, it is clear that the chance of a viewer encountering sexist remarks while watching Afreeca TV is above 50%. In the case of sexist programs, during ten minutes of viewing time sexist remarks appeared 8.4 times on average, and 63 times at their peak. The likelihood becomes even greater if the so-called “BJ” (“Broadcasting Jockey” or independent broadcaster) is female. In broadcasts with female BJs, about 68.8% of remarks had sexist implications, compared to 42.1% in those with male BJs.

B. News sites

Sexism in news sites accessed through web portals is more prevalent in images than in articles. While the proportion of sexist content was 3.5% in popular news articles, it was 27.6% in images. Here, sexist images include advertisements, image-based news, and photos. 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. When it comes to the original media websites that provided the news articles/images, 505 of 702 pages (70.1%) and 56 of 77 media websites contained sexist images. Furthermore, 34 websites among these contained sexist images on all webpages subjected to monitoring. These websites also had the greatest number of sexist images per page, with 23.4 images per page at the greatest frequency.

Viewers' comments are another area featuring 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 the news article. For example, the average number of sexist comments was 13.5 for articles with sexist implications and 10.7 for articles with sexist images. There was also variation between different news sections, with entertainment sections having 6.6 sexist comments on average. In terms of the type of sexism, most of the sexist remarks found in news articles were opinions/arguments, but among comments, 42.6% were opinions/arguments, 40.3% were derogatory criticism/attacks, and 17.1% expressed hatred/violence.

C. Online forums

Online forums 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 extremely sexist. According to the analysis of posts, the proportion of sexist posts was less than 10% in six of the ten forum sites monitored. In contrast, it was over 20% in three other sites. In terms of comments, the proportion of sexist remarks was less than 10% on six sites. The greatest proportion on an individual site was 25.5%, followed by 19.2% and 15.6%. The two sites with higher 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 was as high as 50% among posts and 68.6% among comments. Although the relationship between the user gender ratio and sexism was not statistically significant, the site with the most severe sexism had mainly male users. The site with the next-highest degree of sexism was gender balanced.

Gender stereotypes, which are the basis of sexist beliefs, were found to be slightly different depending on 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 also the most commonly found gender stereotype on Afreeca TV.

3. Common factors

A. Discrimination against women

There were also similarities among the sites investigated in this research. The most noticeable among these was that sexist remarks are overwhelmingly discriminatory against women. Gender stereotypes were also mostly about women. There were some stereotypes regarding men, but they were used to criticize women. 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 online sexist remarks target women.

What is more concerning is that such discriminatory attitudes against women were often expressed as derogation/criticism and/or hatred/violence. This was clear in the analysis of keywords. In this research, keywords refer to words that appeared with a certain level of frequency. A significant proportion of these keywords is related to expressions of hatred and derogation in forms that are often unknown to those unfamiliar with online culture. For example, the word 'kimchinyeo' itself does not carry any negative connotations, but as a combination of 'kimchi' (Korea's definitive food) and 'nyeo' (woman) it implies 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, exposure of women's bodily parts, and fragmentation of women's bodies. In other words, sexist images were either expressing women's body 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 humans. Women were also described as sexual objects such as 'open', 'insert', or 'feel'. These were often used in combination with derogatory expressions such as 'dirty', 'trash', or 'old/ragged'. The objectification of women on the Internet was achieved through the combination of visual and textual messages.

B. Discrimination against men

Discrimination against men also calls for attention. Although most sexist remarks/images were targeting 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 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 for 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 this is less severe compared to negative attitudes toward women, it still requires attention given that it is part of the attitudes that fuel conflicts and hatred within society.

C. Topics and keywords

The topics identified in this research can be grouped into seven categories: derogation and objectification of women related to women's appearance; interest in men's appearance; stereotypes of women's roles; stereotypes of men's roles; stereotypes of women's attributes; negative attitudes toward women; and negative attitudes toward a female president. This shows that online sexism is targeting women more so than men, and is manifested in the form of disparagement and hatred.

IV. Measures to address online sexism

A. Strengthening the accountability of online media

Along with their voluntary efforts to reduce online sexism, it is necessary for online media sites to be more accountable. 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.

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 self-regulation of online media, should establish regulations on online sexism.

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

In efforts to reduce online sexism, the roles of portal sites cannot be emphasized enough. The sites with a low incidence of sexism had relevant policies in place (Jeong Min-ha, 2014). 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 become supported by the Korea Internet Self-governance Organization (KISO). Incepted in 2008 as an autonomous regulation council for portal sites, KISO currently has eleven member organizations, including major portal sites, UGC (user-generated content) forums¹⁾, and Afreeca TV. KISO “supports

1) Information-sharing forums such as *Pompu*, *Today's Humor*, *SLR Club*, *Clian*, etc.

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://www.kiso.or.kr/기구소개/기구정보>). It is suggested that sexist language be included on its list of prohibited words and joint monitoring of sexist conduct be regularly conducted among member organizations.

KISO also maintains an online advertisement deliberation committee to examine and advise on online advertisements. It is recommended that it specify and implement sexism-related policies.

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

The Korea OnlineAd 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 OnlineAd Association, <http://onlinead.or.kr/?p=1133>), which mandates respect for human life, dignity and culture, explicitly prohibits expressions of disparagement and/or causing a sense of sexual humiliation in others. As shown in the monitoring, however, this does not seem to be effectively implemented. It is further recommended that Article 18-6 “Online advertisements prohibited to youth” should include manifestations of sexism. It is necessary to include a provision defining sexism and discuss its effective implementation with the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family.

Each respective industry maintains its own standards for advertisements, including online advertisements. Since these standards

are usually based on the Regulations on Online Advertisements mentioned above, industries heavily reliant on online advertisements need to complement their standards with provisions banning sexism and 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 Advertisements 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 can be expanded to include advertisements that promote appearance obsession and objectification of women's bodies.

D. Introducing anti-sexism provisions into the deliberation of online content

Currently, the Korea Communications Standards Commission's deliberation of online content focuses on obscenity, defamation, cyberstalking, hacking/virus dissemination, failure to display required warnings of 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. However, it fails to include any prohibition of sexism. If sexism appears too broad and ambiguous, it can start with 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 defined as

being content ruled as such by the Commission on Youth Protection in accordance with Articles 7 and 11 of the Juvenile Protection Act, or by deliberation organizations, including the Korea Communications Standards Commission (ibid., 8)”. It should consider including expressions of disparagement and violence based on sexism within the definition of content harmful to youth.

E. Legislation of an act prohibiting expressions of hatred, including sexism

The level of derogation and hatred expressed on the Internet is greatly concerning and can compromise the sound functioning of society. However, there are currently no means for holding offenders accountable, since online expression is protected under freedom of expression. It is necessary to establish a law that prohibits expressions of gender-based hatred. As discussed above, such a proposed anti-hatred act can be expanded to include sexism as a basis of hatred.

F. Society-wide monitoring and awareness-raising

Sexism, especially gender-based derogatory and hate speech can inflict in young adults a distorted image of sexuality and incur social costs by provoking a range of social conflicts including gender conflict. In this regard, 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.

For this goal, regular monitoring of sexist expressions needs to be conducted by civic organizations and others. Monitoring activities and training of monitors, as was performed 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 Korean Women's Policy Institute may be able to provide related training and support to civic organizations.

G. Gender equality training and guidelines for online content producers

Journalists, photojournalists, and advertising agencies who provide online content are primarily responsible for online sexism. The goal of those who produce sexist news articles, images, and advertisements is to capture attention from viewers. They may not even be aware that their content has sexist implications. In this regard, it will assist the reduction of sexism in online content if they are provided with training and guidelines about sexism and sexist content.

Photojournalists and advertising specialist are often not easily reached 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 for them.