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Throwing off the Corset: A Contemporary History of the Beauty Resistance Movement in South Korea

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Abstract

The *tal-corset* movement, a beauty resistance campaign, swept South Korea's feminist scene in 2018 and became a phenomenon bringing about unprecedented social changes in South Korea. This article explains sociocultural contexts to South Korea's *tal-corset* movement through group interviews and examination of online materials. It documents the contemporary history of the development of the movement from a feminist perspective. Findings show that movement participants see beauty practice as social oppression imposed on women's bodies and appearances and the marker of women's low social status. The new wave of an online feminist movement that emerged in 2015 created women-only communities that enabled South Korean women to share their personal experiences as women and to reach the conclusion that in order to reject femininity and sexual objectification of women, they needed to take off the *corset* collectively. Awareness was manifested by encouraging other women to reject beauty practice and display their own *tal-corset* practice online and offline. This article argues that *tal-corset* movement is a feminist political movement that aims to eradicate femininity as social oppression. Female solidarity and connectedness played an essential role in forming the rationale and the tactics of the movement.

Keywords

South Korea, beauty practice, feminist movement, tal-corset, Megalia, Womad, online movement, femininity

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THROWING OFF THE *CORSET*: A CONTEMPORARY HISTORY OF THE BEAUTY RESISTANCE MOVEMENT IN SOUTH KOREA

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ABSTRACT

The *tal-corset* movement, a beauty resistance campaign, swept South Korea's feminist scene in 2018 and became a phenomenon bringing about unprecedented social changes in South Korea. This article explains sociocultural contexts to South Korea's *tal-corset* movement through group interviews and examination of online materials. It documents the contemporary history of the development of the movement from a feminist perspective. Findings show that movement participants see beauty practice as social oppression imposed on women's bodies and appearances and the marker of women's low social status. The new wave of an online feminist movement that emerged in 2015 created women-only communities that enabled South Korean women to share their personal experiences as women and to reach the conclusion that in order to reject femininity and sexual objectification of women, they needed to take off the *corset* collectively. Awareness was manifested by encouraging other women to reject beauty practice and display their own *tal-corset* practice online and offline. This article argues that *tal-corset* movement is a feminist political movement that aims to eradicate femininity as social oppression. Female solidarity and connectedness played an essential role in forming the rationale and the tactics of the movement.

KEYWORDS

South Korea, beauty practice, feminist movement, *tal-corset*, Megalia, Womad, online movement, femininity

THE SO-CALLED *TAL-CORSET* MOVEMENT is a coined phrase referring to *casting off* feminized clothing, beauty practices, and conventions that swept South Korea's feminist scene in 2018. Its contents have been covered by many overseas media outlets such as the *BBC*, *CNN*, and the *New York Times*, which describe the movement as "pushing back against beauty standards" (Jeong, 2019), "rejecting their country's beauty ideals" (Kuhn, 2019) and "the simmering feminist revolution" (Edraki, 2019). The Korean word *tal* means "taking off (clothes)" or "breaking away from (something)" and *corset* represents sexist social customs, especially beauty practices, that are imposed on women. Participants in this movement usually cut their long hair short and stop wearing makeup and dresses, but degrees of participation vary depending on the individual. There is no data on exactly how many women are participating in this movement. Still, according to one survey, 56.3 percent of South Korean women in their 20s support it (Korean Women's Development Institute, 2018). The movement is bringing about many unprecedented social changes in South Korea. Year-on-year purchases of cosmetics, hair products, and other beauty products by South Korean women in their 20s significantly declined between 2016 and 2018.

Expenditures on plastic surgery that had beforehand been consistently growing, declined by 64.6 billion won (\$58.3 USD). Instead of spending money on beauty products, young women were spending more money on cars after 2016 (G. Kim, 2019). There also emerged new clothing brands such as *Fuse Seoul* that focus on producing and selling items that are sold as genderless, quality clothing for women.

The *tal-corset* movement can be characterized as a voluntary social movement not led by any specific organization or group that is mobilized online through various social networking platforms and online communities (Kuk et al., 2018). It is described as representing a newly emergent online feminist movement that has been building since 2015 in South Korea (Kim, 2019). This article explains sociocultural contexts to South Korea's beauty resistance campaign and documents the contemporary history of the movement's development from a feminist perspective. This task follows researchers who have traced the development of contemporary feminist initiatives such as the *#MeToo* movement and anti-rape protests (Jagsi, 2018; Boyle, 2019; Biswas, 2018).

This article will first provide theoretical contexts in terms of beauty practice and the social background of the *tal-corset* campaign—characteristics of beauty practice in South Korea and the social resources available for mobilizing the movement. Following the methodology, this study's findings will be discussed, focusing on the purpose and the motivations of this movement.

Theoretical and Research-Based Contexts of South Korea's *Tal-corset* Movement

Feminist analyses of beauty practices existed from when Mary Wollstonecraft said, "if artificial notions of beauty and false descriptions of sensibility have been early entangled with her motives of action, it cannot be expected that a woman will resolutely endeavor to strengthen her constitution and abstain from enervating indulgences (Wollstonecraft, 1792/1988, p. 57)." Even more sophisticated critiques of beauty practices were produced during the second-wave feminist movement through consciousness-raising meetings when women discussed issues from their daily lives with other women (Sarachild, 1978; Bruley, 2013). Many feminists at that time saw beauty practices as sexist. This view was exercised at the Miss America Protest in 1968 where women threw "instruments of female torture" such as bras, high heels, hair-curlers and corsets into a "freedom trash can," as well as the Miss World demonstration in 1970 in the UK where women declared, "we are not beautiful, we are not ugly, we are angry" (Bruley, 2013, p. 721). Subsequently, feminist writers and scholars published critiques of beauty practices. Andrea Dworkin, for example, in her book *Woman Hating* (1974) agonized over western culture in which "not one part of a woman's body is left untouched, unaltered" (Dworkin, 1974, p. 113). With an illustration of a female body under the title, "beauty hurts" she showed that every component of a woman's body is modified through beauty practices. For example, hair is straightened, eyebrows are plucked, nails are painted, and legs are shaved. Dworkin saw pain as "an essential part of the grooming process" and argued that, beginning in preadolescence, female socialization involves "the tolerance of pain" and, furthermore, that the "romanticization of that tolerance serves to prepare women for lives of childbearing, self-abnegation, and husband-pleasing" (Dworkin, 1974, p.115).

As Dworkin identified "the masochistic personalities generally found in adult woman," Sandra Bartky grasped "the nature of feminine narcissism" as "infatuation with an interiorized body" (Bartky, 1990, p. 40). She linked feminine narcissism to

sexual objectification and asserted that the “fashion-beauty complex” interiorized this alienated representation of the self in women. For Bartky, this fashion-beauty complex—a significant articulation of capitalist patriarchy—deepens “feminine anxiety which would accompany the status of sex-object” (Bartky, 1990, p. 41). Like sacraments in churches, which used to cultivate women’s anxieties about their bodies, body care rituals “put a woman who would be lost and abandoned without them into what they may feel to her like a state of grace” (Bartky, 1990, p. 41). She warns that the satisfactions of narcissism are *repressive* satisfactions that come from “false needs” whose satisfaction benefits “a social order whose interest lies in domination” (Bartky, 1990, p. 42).

More recent criticism against beauty practices is found in Sheila Jeffreys’s book *Beauty and Misogyny* (2011). Jeffreys analyses today’s invasive beauty practices such as breast implants, as well as persistent practices like high heels and makeup. She considers cosmetic surgeries a form of self-mutilation by women with low social status and points out that these procedures have become normalized in recent decades. She claims that such continuum of western beauty practices, from lipstick at one end to invasive cosmetic surgery at the other, should be understood as “harmful cultural practices” that fit the United Nations criteria. She argues that they “create stereotyped roles for the sexes, that originate in the subordination of women and are for the benefit of men, and they are justified by tradition” (Jeffreys, 2011, p. 39).

The perspective from which beauty practice is viewed as oppressive means of imposing femininity to women as a social group is shared by contemporary beauty resisters in South Korea. While these texts, which did not exist in Korean at the time the *tal-corset* movement emerged, did not necessarily directly influence its participants, their theorizing nonetheless reflected the kinds of discussions feminists were having online.

Amongst feminists, different views of beauty practice exist. Some feminist writers consider beauty practice a matter of women’s choice or personal expression, instead of an oppression women experience in common (Scott, 2005). In an essay exploring third-wave feminism, R. Claire Snyder points out that even though “discussions of how the beauty industry negatively affects the self-image of women have been central to the third wave,” in the end, “the principle of choice” usually prevails. She offers an example of an author criticizing the body-shaping industry but still insisting that breast implants can be feminist in a case that a woman overcomes her insecurity about having small breasts by getting implants (Snyder, 2008, p. 189). As examined later in this article, this idea that beauty practice can be feminist based on choice or self-satisfaction was echoed in the debates in the early stages of the *tal-corset* movement by women who defended women’s rights to choose beauty practice.

Third-wave feminism’s non-judgmental attitude and emphasis on choice that “calls on feminism to engage with beauty and fashion in terms of playfulness and pleasure rather than coercion” (Elias et al., 2017, p. 21) often coincide with the characteristics of *power feminism* or postfeminism. Naomi Wolf, who wrote *The Beauty Myth* (2002), adopted the term “power feminism” in her subsequent book *Fire with Fire* (1994) and encouraged women to “identify with one another primarily through the shared pleasures and strengths and femaleness” (Wolf, 1994, p. 72). Although this “affirmative turn” in the feminist discourse on beauty practice allows us to “think more ambivalently about beauty politics” and to “retain an openness to multiple possible readings” (Elias et al., 2017, p. 21), recent research on new technologies links to beauty practice stresses that beauty pressures have been intensified in the digital age.

In addition to the already pervasive, excessive sexualization of femininity, new technologies such as beauty apps on mobile phones have brought about digital self-monitoring that puts women's bodies under unprecedented degrees of scrutiny. In a study on beauty apps, Elias and Gill point out that the self-assessment practices conducted through these apps constitute "the nano surveillance of visual appearance" (Alias & Gill, 2018, p. 74). These technological advances in beauty practice reflect today's reality, where women are encouraged to enhance their appearances through self-monitoring, discipline, and aggressive makeover to look pretty and successful. Although neoliberalism drives individuals—both men and women—to enhance self-efficacy through endless competitions and self-disciplines, it is women who are "required to work on and transform the self to a much greater extent than men" (Gill & Scharff, 2011, p. 7). Digital media such as makeup tutorials and beauty vlogs are reproducing "a conventional, idealized definition of beauty," although their overt message in most cases is self-empowerment (Banet-Weiser, 2017). These insights from feminist research on beauty practice are useful in understanding in what contexts today's South Korean women are performing beauty practice in terms of social expectations and pressures.

On the topic of South Korea's *tal-corset* movement, there exists both a book and an academic article written in Korean that valuably describes the movement and its theoretical underpinnings. Minkyung Lee, in her recent book, *Tal-corset: An Imagination That Has Arrived* (2019), offered insights gained from interviews with 17 movement participants. She stresses that the *tal-corset* movement is "the arena where feminist knowledge accumulated since 2015 is deployed and generated" (Lee, 2019, p. 391). She also posits that this movement is distinguished from the body positive movement that seeks inclusivity of appearances with all shapes and sizes because it does not pursue freedom of choice or diversity of beauty. Instead, she argues, this movement has been created through criticism against the trend of understanding body and appearance. She identifies the core purpose of this movement—escaping normative femininity imposed on women by quitting beauty practices. On the other hand, Aera Kim's article on this movement takes the different view that the issue of sexist "additional expenses" lies at the heart of the movement. Kim, through online observation and interviews with seven individuals, posits that today's young women must take on an unequal burden of spending more time and money on appearance than men. *Tal-corset* constitutes resistance to "becoming a woman" that "renders them disadvantaged in competition by making them spend more" (Kim, 2019, p. 66). She argues that this aspect made the movement possible and became the most important feminist agenda among young female participants because they are the generation who must compete with men to get ahead and get desired jobs. These two quite contradictory arguments need to be examined further. I intend to focus on the formation process of the basic understandings of the movement by conducting group interviews and analyzing relevant literature and online data.

Social Background of the *Tal-corset* Movement

Societal pressures on women's bodies and appearances are universally witnessed around the world. Still, South Korea is particularly well known for its meticulous, high-end beauty regimens—represented in the famous "10-step Korean skincare regimen" (Rekstis, 2016)—and advanced technologies of cosmetic surgeries, being called "the plastic surgery capital" in one article. The term *K-beauty* came into public use within the last 10 years, referring to "Korea's global influence on aesthetics and cosmetics (Kim, 2016)." *K-beauty* is associated with the Hallyu (Korean Wave), the

global popularity of South Korean culture, and has resulted in a drastic increase in the export of Korean beauty products to other Asian countries and the west and a boom in plastic surgery tourism to Korea. The beauty industry's growth signifies the increase in social pressure on women's appearances in Korea, which seems contradictory to the rise of women's enhanced access to higher education and the job market. Statistics show that 31% of South Korean women in their 20s have gone through plastic surgeries (Gallup Korea, 2015). Against this sociocultural backdrop, the *tal-corset* movement emerged with the new wave of an online feminist movement formed in 2015.

To understand the context of this new form of activism, we need to look into South Korea's digital environment. According to research, South Korea has the fastest Internet connection speed and the highest internet penetration rate of 96 percent, being cited as "the most heavily connected society." Research shows that 89% of young adults check their social media accounts at least once per day, and women check even more frequently (Pew Research Center, 2018). When South Koreans mostly rely on the internet for information and interaction, it is no wonder that women started building their own online space to avoid misogynistic culture reported to be embedded in cyberspace. According to researches on female-centered online spaces in Korea, "women increasingly established female-oriented online communities based on their shared interests and to avoid the discomfort of being a woman in male-dominated communities" (Jeong & Lee, 2018, p. 707). These communities were not explicitly feminist, but they became "a milieu where feminist ideas and discourses circulate and proliferate," particularly after the emergence of *Megalia*.

During the MERS (Middle East respiratory syndrome coronavirus) epidemic in 2015, a news article circulated online, reporting two Korean women spread the virus by refusing to take the test after visiting Hong Kong. This news enraged Korean men who soon poured out misogynistic speech online about these two women, but the news turned out to be false. This irrational but ancient women-blaming behavior of men brought groups of women to a MERS forum on the *DC Inside* website to express their anger towards men. Women shortly afterwards setup an independent website called *Megalia*, a term that combined the word MERS and *Egalia* from a feminist novel *Egalia's Daughters* (1985). *Megalia* brought about an explosive, enthusiastic response from young Korean women, which made it a notable social phenomenon and marked the emergence of a new online feminist movement. Their signature tactic was parodying called *mirroring*, through which "they copy the misogynistic language but reverse the positions of perpetrators and victims in the original" (Jeong & Lee, 2018, p. 708). This online feminist movement soon expanded to offline world as shown in the case of *B-Wave* protests for abortion rights (B stands for the dress code of rally participants that stresses the demise of human rights of women) and *The Courage to Be Uncomfortable* rallies against illicit filming of women in public places and private sexual encounters, which brought thousands of women onto the street in an unprecedented scale in Korea's history. Most participants in the *tal-corset* movement are known to be supportive of or participating in marriage resistance campaign as well. This campaign involves pledges to resist marriage and its heterosexual imperatives like sex and pregnancy.

METHODOLOGY

This study's research methods are two-fold. First, three group interviews of the movement participants were conducted. Research on social movements often adopts group interviews (Brimacombe et al., 2018; Yannopoulou et al., 2019), and I chose to do group interviews because this movement was created through copious online discussions among women. I expected group interviews to facilitate the exchange of different experiences and ideas, making the movement's dominant themes emerge. Eighteen women ranging from age 20 to 42 participated in the group interviews. I used my connections as a feminist activist to recruit interviewees and obtain recommendations from others, mostly from a radical feminist press called *Yeolda Books*. The first group of participants was selected through purposive sampling to recruit women with various backgrounds such as age and occupation. The second group consisted of women working for the aforementioned feminist press, and the third one comprises members of a radical feminist group in a women's university in Seoul. Interviews were conducted in Seoul and Incheon between January and February in 2020. Group interviews were loosely structured around the following questions: (a) what is understood as *corset*?; (b) what is the purpose of the movement?; (c) what motivated women to participate in the movement? Group discussions were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed for the main themes that surfaced.

Secondly, online materials regarding the *tal-corset* movement on *YouTube* were examined. *YouTube* has been an important platform where ideas on the *tal-corset* movement are shared and discussed. Aera Kim pointed out, through her observation, that most-viewed *YouTube* videos on feminism were about the *tal-corset* movement and, unlike *Twitter* or *Instagram* where it is difficult to share lengthy texts, *YouTube* offered a space where women could talk about the purposes or methods of the movement in detail (Kim, A., 2019, p. 49). This research focused on analyzing contents of the videos that dealt with issues, in particular, the ones debated around the key purpose and nature of the movement—for example, whether the movement is about rejecting femininity or being more comfortable with one's own body, and whether beauty practice can be feminist.

The Development Process of the Movement: From Online Discussion to Real-Life Actions

The *tal-corset* movement first started through women analyzing what the *corset* comprises. The word *corset* was adopted to examine patriarchal, oppressive socio-cultural norms in the beginning stage of *Megalia* in 2015. For example, in late 2015, there was an online campaign by *Megalians* called the *Corset Awareness Project*. Women created online materials about the *corset* based on their discussions in the *Megalia* community and shared these texts and images on SNS platforms such as *Facebook* (Kim, I. et al., 2018, p. 6). These materials were intended to raise women's awareness of the sexist nature of certain practices such as waxing, dieting, and makeup. Discussions on the *corset* continued throughout 2016, but when it came to whether to actually "take it off," women's opinions varied. Some argued that no one should tell women what to do or not to do, or that women can, in some cases, do beauty practice for self-satisfaction. Some women defended untraditional makeup applications, such as bold Smokey eye-makeup, by some women as a rebellious act against social norms that dictate women to look docile. Ri-Na Kim, who documented and analyzed this debate in an article, sees this as a group process of coming to a consensus that meanings of individuals' practices should be interpreted in the context of social structure and its influences (Kim, R., 2018, p.98). Women stressed that wearing

makeup originates from women's low social status and powerlessness in a patriarchal society, some saying that in equal societies, today's makeup would be regarded as film-like special effects because women would be no longer expected to put on makeup. In 2017 at *Womad*, the most radical women-only online community derived from *Megalia*, discussions on how to take off the *corset* started in earnest. The website soon banned its members from uploading posts displaying them wearing *corset* and sent postings that contained members' experiences of *tal-corset* to a special bulletin board that listed the most popular postings. In this stage, some women started posting their *tal-corset* experiences on *Twitter* with tips on how to get a proper haircut and so forth. *Womad* and *Twitter* were both anonymity-based social platforms, and women posted this *Tal-corset Injeung* in which they showed proof of having taken off the *corset* without fully disclosing their faces—for example, posting a picture of smashed, destroyed makeup tools or their short hair in profile. (See Figure 1)



Figure 1. An example of *tal-corset Injeung* posting on *Instagram* with a before-and-after picture with the hashtag *tal-corset*. This person explained in her posting that she overcame her eating disorder after practicing *tal-corset*. (The woman's face in the photo was blurred by the author.)

B-Wave protest for abortion rights organized by *Womad* and other women's online communities, which started in late 2016 and continued until 2019 when the abortion ban was lifted through a Constitutional Court ruling, was the main space outside the cyberworld at the time where women can meet other women who have taken off the *corset* face to face. On *Facebook*, a platform with a lower level of anonymity than *Twitter*, *tal-corset Injeung* also started in late 2017 with a similar pattern to that occurring via *Twitter*.

Then, in May 2018, South Korea witnessed the largest women's rally against male violence named *The Courage to Be Uncomfortable*. Spy-cam had already been a serious issue in South Korea. There had been reports on spy-cam videos and pictures being illegally posted online. Women had made complaints numerous times, failing to solicit serious actions from the government or the police. However, when a woman illegally filmed a male nude model, the police swiftly took action and arrested her. This double standard of the police investigation enraged women who had witnessed police inaction in cases with female victims over the years. In response, anonymous women organized a rally against the crimes of secret filming. The first rally—to the surprise of the public, the police, and the organizing team—brought 12,000 women to Seoul's

streets. Afterward, this women-only rally was held almost every month, ending in December at the sixth rally with 350,000 accumulated participants in total. Chartered buses arrived at the rally with women from the southern half of the Korean peninsula. The women-only policy was so strict that even male reporters were not allowed inside the rally barricades (Kuk et al., 2018). The sheer number of participants and the fact that it was organized entirely by anonymous, average women online shocked the nation.

These rallies in 2018 offered young Korean women, who in general became feminists after the emergence of the online discussion group *Megalia*, an opportunity to gather and express their anger towards patriarchal society and meet like-minded feminists face to face. Many women confessed they were surprised and deeply impressed to see in-person women who had taken off the *corset*. The rally had the head-shave performance in which women got their heads shaved on stage and gave speeches on their thoughts on the *corset* and male violence. As the rallies progressed in 2018, more women started showing up to the protests with short hair and no makeup. Around this time, *YouTube* channels about the *tal-corset* movement started to appear and became very popular, with their subscribers rapidly accumulating day by day. For example, Jiwon Cha uploaded her video titled *A day of a Korean woman/Vlog (feat. Tal-corset)* on 25th May 2018, and it became an instant hit. In the video, she showed her simplified morning routines, especially with shortened time to get ready. Another *YouTube*er, Lina Bae, who used to run a beauty tutorial channel on *YouTube*, posted a video called *I'm not pretty* in June, which got eight million views. Bae showed her process of ripping off fake eyelashes and wiping off her makeup with subtitles appearing, in turn displaying the comments people make on women's appearance—some complimentary and some judging. At the end of the video, Bae smiles with her naked face, saying "I am not pretty, but it is okay." Many women said they cried watching this video, and one of the interviewees for this study echoed the sentiment. The emergence of *YouTube* channels on *tal-corset* is especially significant because contrary to the *tal-corset Injeung* postings on *Womad* or *Twitter*, *YouTube*ers openly, and more confidently, started speaking about the *tal-corset* movement, exposing their faces and lives outside of the computer. In the same period, *tal-corset Injeung* postings on *Instagram* increased rapidly. Considering that *Instagram* is known to focus on sharing users' photos and videos, this phenomenon also shows that more women started practicing *tal-corset* in their real life and became more confident sharing others' experience. Interviewees said they witnessed increases in *tal-corset Injeung* postings on *Instagram* as one "saw sudden rise in feminist postings on *Instagram* around the time spy-cam rallies went on. Hashtags on *tal-corset* started circulating on *Instagram*, and then more women plucked up the courage seeing these *Injeung* pictures online." The *tal-corset* movement was no longer an online campaign with limited numbers of anonymous women participating. It was now a social phenomenon and gained substantial media attention nationwide and overseas.

The Purpose of the Movement: Rejecting Femininity

Practicing *tal-corset* usually means casting-off makeup, long hair, and feminine clothes such as skirts and skinny jeans. Movement participants say that beauty practices are a marker of women's inferior social status and the mechanism that renders women dolls—turning women into things and commodities—and serves women's sexual objectification (SOLOdarity, 2019). *Tal-corset* differs from the body positive movement in this vein. *Body positivity* aims to "challenge the narrow appearance ideals and instead represent a diverse array of bodies of different shapes, sizes, colours,

features, and abilities, with the presumed aim of fostering body acceptance and appreciation” (Cohen et al. 2019, p. 548) While body positive movement advocates acceptance of any appearances and mainly focuses on removing fat-shaming, the *tal-corset* campaign refuses feminized appearance. Although refusal of femininity is the bottom line of the *tal-corset* movement, sometimes other aspects of the campaign are seen as more prominent on social media—advantages of practicing *tal-corset*: the convenience of wearing comfortable clothes; being able to save money by not buying beauty products; and having more spare time to pursue personal development.

From the interviews undertaken for this research, women indicated two reasons for this tendency to emphasize non-political benefits of *tal-corset*. First, it is easier to talk to other women into practicing *tal-corset* when they emphasize personal advantages to gain from it than stressing the movement's social cause. Interviewees talked about this point as one of them said, “I think the purpose always remained the same as escaping sexual objectification. We just kept saying *tal-corset* is convenient because it’s an easier way to talk other women into trying it.” Secondly, many women confess online their realization that they get to see things differently once they “take off the corset.” It occurs to them that they used to spend a lot of time and money to look pretty and benign activities such as a trip become very different when women do not pack beauty products in their luggage and do not spend much time on taking a perfect picture with perfect outfits and makeup to post on their social media (Heavy Talker, 2019). Women have been sharing online their newly gained insights on the disadvantages of beauty practices, and this in turn, has functioned as a motivation for other women to try *tal-corset*.

From these responses of research participants, one might wonder whether the nature and purpose of the movement were misunderstood when the beneficial aspects of *tal-corset* were emphasized, instead of the feminist, political cause, to motivate women to participate. For this reason, presumably, influential *tal-corset* YouTubers started posting videos in 2018, explaining the *real* reason why women should take off the *corset* when a flood of new women started trying *tal-corset*. For instance, in one of the most viewed *tal-corset* videos posted in November 2018, Heavy Talker, a team of two women, say, “Since we say that *tal-corset* makes you feel more comfortable with yourself, some say they already feel comfortable wearing long hair and long skirts.” They stress that “people need to understand that ‘being comfortable’ is not the primary motivator of *tal-corset*” and “*tal-corset* is about demolishing the norms of femininity socially imposed on women.” In June 2019, a similar video by the team SOLOdarity was uploaded in which they stated *tal-corset* was not about being comfortable:

Some misunderstand *tal-corset* as something you do to feel more comfortable, say they are comfortable with long skirts and complain that short hair makes you go to hair salons more often. It is true that *tal-corset* comes with some inconveniences. When your hair is short, you might have to get a haircut more frequently, and you might need to buy a whole new wardrobe for *tal-corset*. Nevertheless, we practice *tal-corset* because it is not about being more comfortable. It is about not being a doll, a second-class citizen. The benefits of *tal-corset*—convenience, financial advantages from not buying *corset* products, and enhanced quality of life—are just secondary gains. We’d like you to understand that we do not practice *tal-corset* for these benefits (SOLOdarity, 2019).

In addition to feminist social influencers' efforts to promote the real driver of the movement, another factor contributes to maintaining the social cause of the campaign. Women say that they see how bizarre beauty practices are with fresh eyes after taking off the *corset*. One interviewee of this study talked about her experience in which her mother applied lipstick on her lips after she cut her hair short: "You look very strange when you put on lipstick with buzz-cut hair." Another woman who had applied to a Japanese university bought a long-haired wig because she heard it was customary for Japanese female students to wear a skirt and heels with neatly tied hair for college interviews. She says:

but when I saw myself reflected in the mirror wearing the wig, it was unbearable. I thought I'd rather die than wear the wig. So, I decided to take a risk and went to the interview wearing a men's suit. I got admitted, fortunately.

She was a self-described makeup enthusiast before taking off the *corset*. These new perspectives they gained from taking off the *corset* transformed how they saw the performance of femininity.

Many movement participants describe the state of corset-free as a *default*, meaning "the state of not performing femininity as it is socially imposed," according to Heavy Talker. Originally referring to a standard-setting in terms of computer software, the word *default* is widely used in the movement, sometimes combined with other words, for example, *default-person*, *default-look*, and *default-trip*, which means a trip free of beauty practices. Minkyung Lee explains in her book that this term contains "a political determination to make a human form expected for women a state that no longer needs additional labor, as in the case of men" (Lee, 2019, p. 43). This pursuit of default state manifests in expressions women use such as *protein hijab*, meaning long hair, and *여장하다* *feminise oneself*, which is used when a woman wears makeup or feminine clothes.

At a head-shaving performance at one of the women-only rallies against spy-cam filming in 2018, a woman talked about her thoughts regarding this matter. "Sisters, we're not a longhair breed born with long hair. The question should be why we keep this inconvenient long hair, not why we cut our hair short" (Official *YouTube* Channel of the *Courage to Be Comfortable*, 2018). To these women, beauty practices are not natural or a real choice. Instead, they are something that makes women put up with the inconvenience. Through this analysis, women stress the societal aspect of beauty practices rather than individual choice. One woman who posted a comment under a *YouTube* video on the *tal-corset* points out that "Girls Can Do Anything" discourse is sometimes used to justify the argument that beauty practice can be a feminist choice:

The preferences of individual women cannot justify misogyny. Feminism exists in political, social arena, not personal healing. (...) *Corset* is the marker of second-class citizenship, but some people are using 'Girls Can Do Anything' to justify this. Feminism is about women's liberation and the abolition of patriarchy. It is not a movement to just promote women's happiness and needs.

These arguments show that the *tal-corset* movement has developed through counter-acting choice discourse on beauty practice that stresses individual choice and self-satisfaction by emphasizing social influences on beauty practices and its effects in sustaining patriarchy.

Displaying Oneself to Inspire Other Women To Take Off the Corset

In the interviews with movement participants, women's motivations for participating in the *tal-corset* movement were discussed, along with the meaning of female solidarity in respect of them. The *tal-corset* movement can seem like an individualistic protest because it involves changing participants' personal lives by casting off daily beauty practices. However, as examined earlier, the process of producing arguments for *tal-corset* was a collective one. In many cases, the practice of *tal-corset* is motivated by connecting one's beauty practices with the experiences of other women. Online discussions on the *corset* made women realize that their beauty practices can reinforce other women's beauty practices—commonly expressed as “tightening others' corsets.” This insight resonates with Alison Winch's term *girlfriend gaze* through which women and girls monitor each other's appearances and behaviors (Winch, 2013, p. 17). Winch argues the “mutual body regulation” among women is intensified through digital media where “the many girlfriends watch the many girlfriends” (p. 21). One interviewee in this study expressed this insight, saying that she realized that before taking off the *corset*, she was “walking around with a signboard attached to her body which said a woman is a thing to be made up and seen.” This realization made women acutely aware of the effect of their beauty practice on young girls. Five women among my 18 interviewees said that they decided to take off their *corset* when they realized their own beauty practices influenced younger women's perceptions and beauty practices. For instance, one interviewee said:

I was working at an elementary school library, and I knew about the *tal-corset* movement, but I wasn't brave enough to actually do it. I didn't wear much makeup at that time, but I always put on lipstick—pink or red. One day, this 10-year-old girl at school said to me ‘your lips look very pretty today.’ I was shocked and said (waving her hands), ‘no, no. this is not pretty.’ It suddenly occurred to me that these little girls noticed these things. The next day I cut my hair short and have never worn lipstick since.

A *tal-corset* YouTuber also says she took off her *corset* after seeing a group of high school girls putting on makeup at a restaurant table (Heavy Talker, 2018). It is said that wearing makeup is becoming normal among teenage girls, causing girls without makeup to wear masks to hide their naked faces. In a survey, 48% of Korean teenage women were considering having plastic surgery (MezzoMedia, 2019). The main channel through which teenagers get beauty tips was *YouTube* (49%). Lina Bae, a famous *tal-corset* YouTuber who previously ran a beauty tutorial channel, says in an article that although she knew about the arguments of *tal-corset*, it was the comments of little girls, saying watching her videos made them want to put on makeup, that gave her the final push to throw off the *corset* and start creating content on *tal-corset* (Stevenson, 2018). Women began recognizing their role in reinforcing beauty practices or encouraging *tal-corset* among other women. This awakening is why some online women-only communities—*Womad*—and student forums of women's universities such as *Ewha* and *Sungshin*, for example—forbade members from posting pictures or comments that contain displays of *corsets*.

The awareness of their own role in reinforcing beauty norms on other women led to the idea that they can also inspire others to free themselves from the oppression of beauty by displaying and sharing their *tal-corset* experiences. This illustration distributed online describes the process of spreading *tal-corset* messages through women practicing it themselves (See Figure 2).



Figure 2: An illustration of the social contagion effect of *tal-corset* by Suin Choi

Interviewees expressed how the online *Injeung* culture affected their practice of *tal-corset* and why they chose to post the *Injeung* pictures of themselves on social media. Some did the *Injeung* to impress other feminists in online feminist communities, and others did it to encourage other women to try *tal-corset*. One of the interviewees posted a picture of her long hair cut off on *Facebook* and was told later by a woman that she wanted to do the same after seeing the photo online, and she cut her hair short soon after. The spread of *Injeung* postings online among young women also made the *tal-corset* movement look “hip and trendy.”

However, the most effective way of influencing other women to take of the *corset* was offline gatherings. Seventeen out of 18 interviewees participated in at least one series of women-only rallies against spy-cam filming in 2018. They said that seeing masses of women free from the *corset* had a considerable impact on their practice of *tal-corset*. For instance, one of the interviewees had attended the first rally held in May, where there were some *tal-corset* women, but they were not the majority. Her second rally was the fourth one held in August, and she was surprised to see the increased number of women with short hair. She thought to herself: “There are actually many women who cut their hair short, and it is okay to live with short hair. Then, why can’t I do that, too?” The power of meeting with women practicing *tal-corset* was demonstrated in cases where women confessed online that they took off their *corset* after attending one of the rallies. One woman who identified herself as an *Instagram star* talked about her experience online:

To be honest, I wore a tight off-the-shoulder top and hot pants on purpose to the rally. It had been just a month since I'd become a feminist, and people always say that only ugly, fat women become feminists, so I wanted to show the world that wasn't true. But after participating in the rally, I had a chance to think more deeply about *corset* ideas, and I suddenly felt ashamed of myself and sorry for my sisters. I'm worried that sisters might have felt discouraged in taking off their corsets because of me or felt angry or disappointed in me. I am very sorry. The fact that I thought I was being cool by being a 'dressed-up' feminist now embarrasses me. You know, I used to be an *Instagram star* posting beauty tips, but when I look through those pictures of me now, I look like a ridiculous doll on a shelf and it even feels disgusting to see the way I look in degrading poses and stupid dresses and makeup. If we have another rally soon, I will put on a comfortable t-shirt and pants, I swear. I am grateful for everyone who cut their hair short and said women are human and don't have to look pretty (quoted from an article by Kuk, J et al. 2018).

One interviewee, a student of a women's university, was taking a women's studies course at the time that consisted of about eighty students. At the beginning of the course, only one or two women had short hair, but at the end of the semester in late June, she witnessed about twenty women had short hair. The professor asked the students if they cut their hair short for the *tal-corset* movement, and the students said yes.

The anti-spy-cam rallies that gave momentum to the *tal-corset* movement started having head-shaving performances on stage from the time of the second rally. In South Korea, head-shaving has been a symbol of demonstrating resolution for social causes, but this time, it had another meaning, as shown through the performance participants' speeches. In speeches they gave while having their heads shaven, women said they "refused to be sexually objectified as a woman."

I used to like looking pretty, but the society treated me like a doll, not a human. I'm not a princess. It is okay to have short hair. It is okay not being pretty. Today I came here to display my hair cut short to be a human. Please do not objectify or thingify me and my sisters (Official YouTube Channel of the Courage to be Uncomfortable, 2018).

Tal-corset was linked to a campaign against male violence in that women, in both movements, seek to be respected as humans, not sexual objects. The *tal-corset* movement was understood by movement participants as a collective resistance against beauty practices, which arise from society's sexual objectification of women. They recognized the influence their beauty practices had on other women and saw beauty practices as oppressing all women.

Conclusion

Women-only online communities such as *Megalia* and *Womad* provided Korean women with space where they could share their common experiences of oppression regarding their bodies and appearance. Through debates and discussions among women on what constitutes the *corset*, women countered the argument that beauty practices are an individual woman's choice and can be feminist. In response, they stressed the social aspects and impacts of beauty practices and posited that it originates from women's low social status and powerlessness in a patriarchal society. Their understanding of femininity as the marker of women's inferior status and the mechanism used to sexually objectify women propelled women to reject beauty

practices *all together*. Total rejection of femininity, especially in terms of appearance, as the *tal-corset* movement's aim is the characteristic that distinguishes the movement from the body positive movement that promotes acceptance of any appearances. "The personal is political," the slogan of the second-wave feminist movement, was echoed throughout the online discussions on what constitutes the *corset*. Although the emphasis of the personal benefits of the *tal-corset* practice such as saved time and money invited counter-argument that certain beauty practices were more convenient or comfortable, new insights gained from practicing *tal-corset* in real life made discussions on the *corset* richer, leading to the invention of new terms such as *protein hijab* which means women's long hair.

Women's analysis that their beauty practices can reinforce other women's—expressed as "tightening other's corset"—also offered a rationale for the need to resist beauty practices *collectively*. The intensified pressures on the younger generation's beauty practice were especially stressed as the reason to stop reinforcing the beauty norms, through the themes of female solidarity. The main tactic to spread *tal-corset* was displaying oneself through online *Injeung* culture where women posted pictures of their *tal-corset* practices on social media, such as pictures of destroyed makeup tools or short hair. This tactic was intended to inspire other women to be free from the *corset* and was effective in reaching out to average women on social media through hashtags. This tactic can be understood as a unique example of counteracting mutual body regulation among females by collectively displaying the practice of taking off the *corset*. The women-only rallies in 2018 offered physical space where women could actually see other women who had taken off the *corset* in real life, and meeting beauty resisters in person encouraged women to be more brave and confident to try *tal-corset*. As women experience what it is like to live free of the *corset* their newly gained insights on how beauty practices oppress women are being actively shared online, including in Japan, leading other women to re-examine their own beauty practices.

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