

Webtoon

The Confluence of Platformization, Snack Culture, and the New Korean Wave

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Webtoon is an emerging, born-digital, online comics reading platform gaining global popularity. The current study investigates how the webtoon reading experience differentiates from conventional book-based reading experiences, and what these differences mean for readers' advisors. Based on semi-structured interviews with 29 webtoon readers, findings from our qualitative analysis suggest that the platform's characteristics, such as vertical scrolling, mobile friendliness, and short time commitment, have provided readers with a more accessible and unique reading experience. In addition, webtoon fosters informal learning experiences as readers are naturally exposed to Korean culture and language while enjoying the content.

Entertainment media platforms are diversifying. The evolution of information technologies enables more convenient access to information and provides different sensory experiences. Reading is not an exception, as increased media affordances such as audiobooks and interactive ebooks have diversified the reading experience. *Webtoon*, a newly emerged webcomic reading platform that originated in South Korea, is one example of a new entertainment media platform. Webtoon is specifically designed to be read on a smartphone and demands the user's active engagement through scrolling. Its format relies upon the user's ability to read and understand text, pictures, and occasional auditory input such as music or dramatic noises. Several studies have examined webtoon's cultural and artistic aspects, focusing on it as a transnational communication medium or a kitschy, artistic medium.¹ However, little research has been conducted to understand the influence of the webtoon reading experience and, specifically, how that reading experience differentiates from and expands upon book-based reading experiences.

Scholars in library and information science have researched the needs of readers and what elements of books appeal to them to provide satisfying reading services²; similar to these efforts, comic books and graphic novels have been studied due to their growing demand in public libraries.³ As the form of reading has evolved, the services libraries are expected to provide expanded regarding the entertainment media materials—from physical sources to more digital/online sources, such as e-books and streaming videos. Exploring the appeals of webtoons as a new medium also highlights changing reading preferences, which may be useful to readers' advisors as their services evolve.

Noting the trend of the diversification in media formats that libraries provide, the current study aims to understand webtoon, an emerging visual narrative medium, and its readers. Born-digital visual narratives, such as webtoons, are a growing medium that should be included in future reference

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and user services. This will be aided by a better understanding of their appeals to emerging adult readers and the cultural and platform shift in leisure reading.

Reference and reader advisory services need to be responsive to the changing reading preferences of younger generations. With that need in mind, the current study intends to explicate appeals of webtoon and how those appeals might encourage readers' advisors to reflect on their services and collections. This manuscript analyzes webtoon readers' experiences based on two concepts, *snack culture* and *platformization*, to suggest ways the reading experience is changing. The findings of this study provide an understanding of new mediums and emerging readers' needs with the goal of supporting current and future reference services. In this process, the following research questions will be answered:

RQ1: How does the webtoon platform support readers' engagement with the content?

RQ2: How does the length of the webtoon influence readers' engagement/enjoyment?

RQ3: Does webtoon foster interest in learning about South Korea or its cultural output?

Literature Review

Webtoon has been available in the United States since 2014. One of the pioneers of webtoon providers, *Webtoons.com*, was launched in 2014, and other webtoon providers, such as *Tappytoon* (the initial app launch was in 2015, and *Tappytoon Manhwa & Novels* was released in 2016) and *Manta* (launched in 2024), followed soon after. These online digital comics platforms allow professionals and amateurs across multiple countries to create sequential visual narratives. Simply put, a webtoon is a "colorized manhwa (Korean comics) made just for smartphones where you scroll vertically instead of the standard page flipping."⁴ For example, Figure 1 shows a screenshot of a webtoon. Instead of reading from left to right, webtoon readers read from top to bottom. Thus, the visual narratives are presented in an elongated format, like a digital scroll.

From a cultural and technological perspective, the platform enabled anyone to be able to share their creative works with a large audience easily, democratizing the comics and making this genre more accessible, in addition to creating a huge shift in reading visual narratives in Korea—from papers to digital. It is, moreover, a growing medium. As of June 2022, *Naver's Webtoons.com* reported a global user count of 85.6 million.⁵ Webtoon's short, accessible, and culturally diverse format is well-aligned with the current "trend" of information use and provision, as manifest in the concept of *snack culture*.⁶

Webtoon can include additional multimedia elements other than images and texts; sound, narration, music, and animation effects are sometimes added to webtoon for a more immersive reading experience. Additionally, because it has a social media-like reading platform, webtoon promotes a social reading experience among readers. It fosters community as it promotes content.⁷ Readers bookmark the works they like, exchange their views, communicate with the authors through comments, and share the works they like using other social media platforms. Some avid webtoon readers also create/join fan communities through other social media platforms where they share their webtoon reading experiences and derivative works like fan art or fan fiction or create translations of Korean webtoon works together as a team.

Webtoon is a relatively new medium. Its traits—short, serialized chapters, audio effects, opportunities for readers to engage with creators and each other, and originating from a specific cultural environment—create the opportunity to explore how readers explore and engage with webtoon using the lenses of snack culture, platformization, and the New Korean Wave.

Platform Society

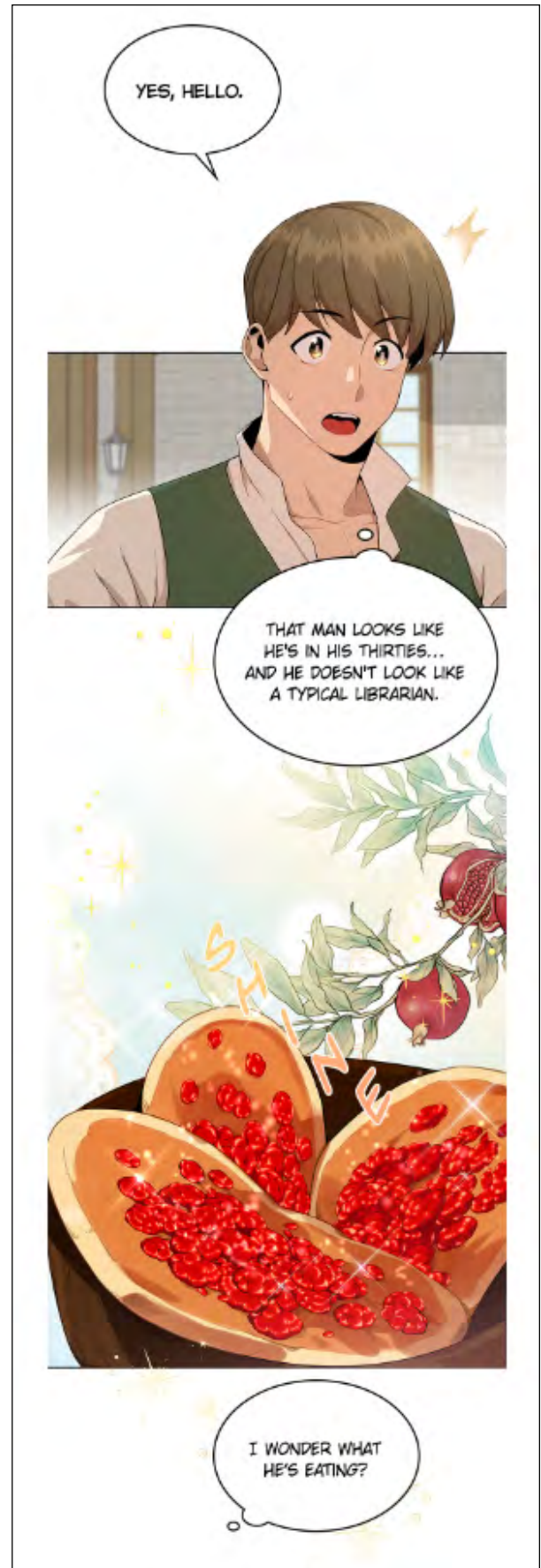
*Platform society*⁸ refers to a social arena where creators, content, and audiences are intertwined in a complete environment. The social web creates ecosystems that offer consumers huge amounts of free content and diverse genres, with the possibility to monetize their original works through multiple distribution channels.⁹ Platformization may offer a wider content range, with greater access to self-publishing and content dissemination on a wider scale. A potential downside is the “platformization of culture,”¹⁰ wherein local cultural commodities rely on specific platforms for transmission to global audiences.¹¹ This may at first empower artists and authors, but it may also result in the tethering of content to particular platforms that eventually undermine artistic autonomy for creators.¹²

Snack Culture

Jang and Song define *snack culture* as “the cultural behaviors of consuming information and cultural content in a short time rather than engaging in deep reading.”¹³ Snack culture has contributed to diverse cultural forms, genres, and themes geared toward various users’ needs, allowing transmedia storytelling across multiple platforms.¹⁴ This phenomenon has often been associated with the use of smartphones.¹⁵ Online cultural content that has shorter segments or lengths, such as short novels,¹⁶ videos, and film, has become considerably popular among younger generations, especially those who use smartphones.

Webtoon exemplifies snack culture due to its convenient access to content that can be consumed anywhere easily.¹⁷ There is an evident decline in students’ engagement with long-form texts, such as books and complex articles where students now prefer short digital texts or multimedia, which offer quicker and easier consumption compared to dense and lengthy books.¹⁸ This general decline in the

Figure 1. Screenshot of Naver webtoon, “Resigning and Healing in Another World,” ep. 3, https://www.webtoons.com/en/fantasy/resigning-and-healing-in-another-world/ep-3-joining-the-army-in-another-world/viewer?title_no=5264&episode_no=4



popularity of long-form media may coincide with the changing tastes of younger age groups, who, in turn, make greater use of new technologies and narrative structures like those used in webtoon.

The New Korean Wave (Hallyu) and Learning

In discussing webtoon's cultural influence on international readers, Jang and Song (2017) introduce *glocalization* in the conversation: "the interaction of regional tendencies with global characteristics and by the simultaneity of both universalizing and particularizing tendencies."¹⁹ In this sense, different elements from the local culture, such as political, economic, and social issues, intertwine with global characteristics to garner both local and global relevance. The authors further point to the "Korean Wave" or *Hallyu* (한류) as an ongoing cultural zeitgeist in which Korean art, film, music, and media are growing in popularity globally. This assessment is shared by Jin and Yi,²⁰ who also point to the Korean diaspora as a contributing factor to the spread of this cultural phenomenon. For example, Kim studied out-of-school literacy by interviewing three adolescent fans of webtoon in the U.S.²¹ The author looked specifically at how new readers might arrive at the platform through related media, like K-pop, and how it fosters an abiding interest in Korean culture. Findings showed that this interest drives the desire to find other related content and learn more about the culture, such as learning languages or cultural awareness. Webtoon is currently an international platform, but its South Korean origins may be manifest by leading readers to discover other South Korean phenomena. Existing studies on other relevant visual narrative mediums, such as graphic novels and comic books, also often highlight the educational elements of reading those materials regarding literacy and cultural/social training.²² This perspective suggests that webtoon readers may experience informal learning during their reading or have informal learning needs when looking for new webtoon to read.

Methods

The current study adopts the Uses and Gratifications (U&G) perspectives as its methodological framework.²³ U&G perspectives posit that media users are aware of their media consumption motivations and needs and can actively select the media items they want. Based on this view, the current study uses semi-structured interviews to understand webtoon readers' reading engagement experiences regarding webtoon and its platform.

In March 2022, as a pilot study for this project, the research team conducted two focus group sessions to collect preliminary data to identify initial themes and formulate the interview questions.²⁴ Seven participants, recruited via the University of Missouri student email listserv, participated in online focus group sessions (three participants in one session and four participants in another) using Zoom. Findings from the pilot study were used to create the semi-structured interview instrument.

The sampling frame included webtoon readers aged 18 years or older who feel comfortable communicating in English. Webtoon readers 18 years and older were recruited online by targeting webtoon fan communities, discussion forums, and social media webtoon fan pages. Recruitment messages were also shared via the campus student e-mail listservs. The research team also used snowball sampling and recommendations to recruit 30 participants.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted from April to May 2022. Each interview was conducted virtually, asking questions about participants' general webtoon reading experiences, including its content and platform, their preferences for webtoon, motivations for reading webtoon, and any informal learning experiences encountered while reading webtoon. Interviews lasted between 30

to 60 minutes, and each interview was recorded, transcribed, and anonymized for data analysis. Interview participants received a \$30 Amazon e-gift card for their compensation. One interview was discarded after the research team determined the data was invalid, resulting in 29 viable interviews.

After transcription, two researchers used a sample data set of six interviews (approximately 21% of the total) to identify and compare emerging themes. After iterative discussions, the initial codebook was created and imported to NVivo 12, a qualitative analytical software. Then, using the initial codebook, the other two researchers coded the same set of ten interviews to measure intercoder reliability. The intercoder reliability between these two researchers was 0.48 (Kappa coefficient) with 97.64% agreement ratio, indicating *fair to good agreement* (NVivo n.d.) After this step, the codebook was revised and refined again based on 1) the additional themes that emerged from the dataset and 2) the iterative discussions and consensus reached by all four researchers. Then, two researchers coded the entire body of transcripts.

Findings

Qualitative analysis revealed topics regarding the webtoon reading experience in general, including motivations for reading webtoon and general reading behavior. Specific themes within these topics were closely associated with the elements of platformization, snack culture, and informal learning. These themes are highlighted and indicated in table 1. In this table, *Number* indicates the number of interviews that included this theme, while *Frequency* indicates the frequency of the theme appearing in the entire data set.

Participants' Demographic Profile

Of the 29 participants, the majority (20, $n = 29$) identified themselves as avid webtoon readers, while nine were casual readers. This determination was made by asking specifically how often participants read webtoon, and in the absence of a clear answer to this question, making a subjective determination based on contextual clues such as familiarity with specific webtoon titles or the amount of time per week spent reading.

Participants were asked for their pronouns at the beginning of the interview, and those who indicated they did not have pronouns later shared their gender identity through comments (e.g., "As a woman, I think . . ."). Fourteen respondents indicated that they were female, 12 indicated they were male, and three preferred they/them pronouns. More than half of the participants identified themselves as having an international or BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) background (17/29), while 12 did not. Ten participants were in the 18–25 age group, 15 were in the 26–33 age group, two were in the 34–41 age group, and two chose not to answer the question about age.

How Does the Webtoon Platform Support Readers' Engagement with the Content?

Webtoon's unique characteristics as a reading platform highlight several elements that help readers engage better with the visual narrative content, such as accessibility, consistency, reading format (orientation), and audiovisual sensation.

Accessibility

Webtoon is freely and publicly available by default. Anyone can visit their website or download the mobile application to enjoy the free series. Also, webtoon is a highly accessible reading platform, particularly compared to sources that must be paid for and obtained at a specific place (e.g.,

Table 1. Platformization, snack culture, and informal learning in identified themes and subthemes.

Topic identification	Themes	Number	Frequency
Platformization, [Snack culture]	Financial and time costs of Webtoon <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • easy to access • free to read • [short reading time commitment] 	23	86
Platformization	Extrinsic motivations for current Webtoon engagement <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • getting coins from the Webtoon app • using it for work/school presentations 	15	36
Platformization, [Snack culture]	Webtoon’s unique format/platform characteristics compared to other media <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [length of work] • sound • interactivity • user-friendliness of the platform • visual style 	29	171
Platformization, [Snack culture]	Medium for Webtoon reading that participants prefer to use <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [Smartphones] • Webtoon websites 	29	171
Platformization, [Informal learning]	Social aspects of Webtoon reading, such as [discussing with other readers and authors or exchanging information] via fan communities or Webtoon’s comment sections)	29	117
[Snack culture]	Duration of Webtoon reading <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • binge reading • constant reading all-day • [several minutes to an hour] 	29	81
[Informal learning]	Informal learning from Webtoon <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [cultures] • [languages] • [other social/political issues] 	28	224

purchasing hard copies of comic books or checking out graphic novels from a public library). There are payment options available (and some webtoon providers use subscription-based services), however, such as when webtoon readers want to read certain episodes faster or want access to the previously completed ones. P21’s comment summarizes webtoon’s strength in accessibility nicely:

I like the accessibility. Anyone can go on it and read it. Of course, there are some things that you can pay for to get early access to certain chapters and stuff, but you don’t have to. I like how easy it is to just scroll through and find a new story or a good recommendation, really just the accessibility. (P21)

All participants read the webtoon on their phones, typically through the webtoon apps. P17 was introduced to the app first and did not realize there was a website until much later on. P2 preferred the convenience and portability of accessing webtoon via phone. Most interviewees noted that the webtoon app was more usable than the Webtoon website interface; however, one participant, P8, preferred accessing webtoon via the website due to its larger screen.

On the phone, you know what episode you read last, whereas on the computer, it doesn’t really save that. (P25)

[The website is] less user-friendly, less intuitive. I remember there being more ads on the website version that would sometimes get in the way of what I was reading. (P29)

Consistency

Some participants also mentioned that they appreciate webtoon's consistency, such as releasing a new episode daily or weekly, which they consider a unique aspect of webtoon. The wait for the new episode was another appeal for these webtoon readers, building up their expectations for the next episode.

And also they have consistency when they are being released, like the ones that are always released daily, others are released weekly. Them being released in that consistent manner, it makes them to be unique. And so you are [inaudible] waiting for them, for the coming, for the new one. That is one thing I love about them. (P11)

Format

Interviewees noted that webtoon's unique format characteristics were a main appeal for them. The webtoon platform provides a common space for users to be exposed to a variety of webtoon produced by various authors and illustrators. It is designed primarily for use on mobile phones, taking advantage of the ubiquity of such devices to encourage engagement. The webtoon app's notifications of new episodes and retention in memory of previously read episodes allow readers to keep track of their reading and stay up to date with the series they follow. Further, the unique format elements (vertical scrolling, illustrations, and other effects) also encourage reader engagement.

When I read anime [manga] on my phone I have to turn my phone sideways like this, then I have to side swipe and yada yada yada. It is a process. It's not a process that's hard, but it is a process. Whereas with webtoons, I just open and then I scroll, and it's easy. So that in general is one of the best reasons why I like reading webtoons, because it's basically manga, but it's done in a mobile-friendly format. (P26)

Multimedia

Artists on this platform express their works in a variety of creative ways, which often include colorful and artistic illustrations. Many participants appreciated these visual aspects of webtoon. Several participants even stated that they would not read webtoon if they did not like the visual style, noting how important artwork is to them. The visual/artistic style of the Webtoon was a critical element for participants, especially when they chose a new webtoon to read. In addition to its artwork, some of the webtoon works or episodes sometimes provide more interactive reading experiences, such as sound effects or background music when a reader scrolls down to certain scenes. These unique features add to a pleasant and novel reading experience for users.

Platform improvements

While most participants enjoyed the current webtoon platform and were satisfied with the user interface, some of them suggested how their webtoon reading experience could be enhanced. Several participants felt the application could sometimes be clunky or buggy depending on the devices when moving on to the next episode, preventing them from having a smooth reading transition. These participants talked about webtoon's not being *on paper*, comparing the medium to other paper-based comic books and graphic novels.

But webtoon is on a website and it's typically not paper. So we have to just either scroll down or just scroll next, but usually make a make error sometimes based on the phone quality. (P16)

Some participants also complained about the digital reading experience on webtoon services. A clunky UI experience or technical glitches, such as when the application does not let participants easily return to where they were reading last time. These findings indicate that webtoon may need to

consider its unique strengths and weaknesses as a digital reading platform to provide an optimized interactive reading experience to its users.

Takeaway message for readers' advisors

Engagement is a powerful motivator for reading any format. Part of the motivation for engaged webtoon readers was the serialization of the storylines, piquing the reader's interest for the next episode. Readers in this study were open to medium and format variations from traditional books, which suggests an avenue for promotion of other reading products accessible via app, such as Libby or Hoopla. These readers enjoyed the illustrations and sound elements included in webtoon, which may indicate the need for additional advisory training for comics, manga, anime, and cartoons as the population of emerging adults grows older. However, given that these readers also had negative feedback related to platform adequacy, advisors may also wish to discuss which media are better consumed in which format (e.g., reading comics on a tablet versus a smartphone).

How Does the Length of the Webtoon Influence Readers' Engagement/Enjoyment?

Webtoon was considered an accessible reading platform to our participants both in terms of temporal and financial costs to access but also in terms of time needed for engagement with the content.

As most Webtoon is updated weekly, each episode tends to be short enough for readers to enjoy in a few minutes. The current study found that this digestible reading size positively influenced participants' engagement, which was often discussed with participants' stressful life situations or busy schedules, such as P16. Webtoon's "bite-size" stories seem to require less cognitive power from readers to enjoy the medium and help them not feel overwhelmed.

My daily life . . . is very, very stressful so probably that's the reason why I tend to feel more attracted by the Webtoon that does not have a big story because it's too much for me. (P16)

I also like the stories. They're short. It's sometimes hard to wait weekly for episodes. But they're pretty short and they don't take too much of your time. Whereas if you're reading a book you have to spend more time. This is just, you can take a 5, 10 minute break, you can catch up on all of the webtoons you're reading. (P25)

Regarding the frequency of reading and time commitment to read webtoon, most participants indicated reading webtoon weekly or more often (16 out of 29) and for several hours at a time (22 out of 29). Many read "whenever a new chapter comes out" (such as P5 and P28), while others waited "for a while, a couple months" (P29) to binge multiple chapters. P22 noted, "I prefer binge reading. When I just want to relax, I [find] a new comic and then I would binge, reading it for 50 or 60 episodes." P26 reported spending 30 minutes per day, but sometimes binge reading up to four hours upon finding a new series. Meanwhile, 10 of 29 participants reported constantly reading webtoon all day, echoing P21, who read, "anytime that I have free time, really." Despite the binge nature of the reading, many participants indicated that because individual webtoon episodes are short, readers feel like they are easier to read and keep up with.

Findings support the idea that webtoon is compatible with snack culture in terms of people's quick and frequent engagement with content. The short length of most webtoon chapters allows readers to dip into their favorite webtoon and quickly engage with the content. At the same time, the recommendation feature encourages them to seek out additional webtoon storylines to engage

with. However, findings also show that many Webtoon readers tend to binge-read, suggesting high levels of engagement with content as suggested by Pittman and Sheehan (2020):

In fact, engagement is the only motivation to predict frequency of viewing: the more engaged one feels with the story lines and the characters, the more frequently they will binge watch. It is also important to note that the motivations of using binge-watching for either a pastime or for relaxation were not significant in any of the regressions. (Discussion section, para. 3)

Takeaway message for readers' advisors

The concept of "snack culture" exemplifies how many readers engage with media, snatching brief moments to "snack" on reading between other obligations. This may partially be an artifact of interviewing a relatively young population with many responsibilities including family, jobs, and school. However, it also demonstrates a new category for reader advisory recommendations: relationship between reading time and content. Recommending shorter works that require less cognitive attention might be more appropriate for those people whose reading practices are scattered and opportunistic.

Does Webtoon Foster Interest in Learning about South Korea or its Cultural Output?

Participants in this study often mentioned how "exposure" to webtoon helped them learn in a way that was unexpected. Most participants' initial motivation for reading webtoon was not necessarily for learning; however, as they enjoyed reading webtoon, they encountered informal learning experiences. Based on the participants' comments, the identified informal learning experiences in this study are as follows.

First, webtoon readers were naturally exposed to new cultures and learned about them, including history, mythology, and societal expectations. Many of them especially mentioned learning about Korea.

I've learned the dressing code, their dishes, the kinds of food that they eat. (P11)

I've picked up on pieces of Korean culture that I won't say that I fully understand yet. . . . And we all kind of talk together about maybe where some of these tropes are coming from, where these expectations are coming from, how kind of different life perspectives are coming out. And I definitely think the webtoons have been a part of the motivation for those discussions."(P17)

Second, webtoon readers who had previously struggled with reading, in general, learned that they could enjoy reading due to webtoon's visual narrative format. While this was not a major theme in this study, webtoon readers' feeling more confident about their reading ability is consistent with the findings from the previous study.²⁵

I can see everything that's happening. I don't have to necessarily conjure it in my head. It's like being fed. (P27)

Third, webtoon readers learned about new perspectives on life by indirectly experiencing webtoon stories. This learning or realization experience often discussed understanding others, which led to conversations about appreciating diversity.

That again, remind myself that there is very important thing outside of the work in life, which is finding happiness and feeling happiness with the people that I'm close with. (P16)

I mean, because I do also read quite a few LGBTQ webtoons. And more and more artists that are in that community are making media about it. When I was growing up, it's very much just straight women

writing gay stories. Now it seems to be gay people writing gay stories. And so, reading their stories from their point of view has been an eye-opening experience at times. (P29)

Fourth, some webtoon readers were naturally exposed to learning a new language. However, since the majority of North American Webtoon readers use webtoon services with English translation, only nine participants discussed this theme.

I learn a surprising amount through webtoon. Even if there's a little sound effect and it's in Hangul, is that what it's called? I can just look it up and then I'll be like, "Oh, now I know what that character means," or what it says. It's just all the little things I think are really cool. (P21)

But whenever I read it, sometimes it would have general, well-known Korean terms. So, I was able to be like, "I read that, or I saw that somewhere else, so I understood what it meant." (P25)

Beyond readers learning about Korea, participants who closely identified themselves with Korean culture and who described their formative experiences as children noted that webtoon created a cultural connection that was also nostalgic for them.

I tend to forget about my culture and more feel close to American culture. So when I read about this read about those webtoons that refresh me and just remind my own culture background. So yeah, it's in that sense, it's a great reminder and reinforcement for even Korean who live in an outside from U.S. (P16)

Findings suggest that while readers do not seek out webtoon deliberately to learn about South Korean cultural output, webtoon use may lead to incidental acquisition of knowledge about South Korea and its culture. At least one of our interviewees engaged with other elements of Korean culture such as K-drama and K-pop, which may suggest New Korean Wave influence. For those who have a direct cultural experience with South Korea, cultural elements were more significant and meaningful.

Takeaway message for readers' advisors

Every media product is essentially a product of culture, and understanding the origins of particular products like webtoon may allow readers to learn more about the cultures that produce those products. This can be a valuable resource for instructors doing cultural study sessions who want to expose their students to more authentic resources. However, given that webtoon now has an international author and illustrator base, readers may have to depend upon librarians to determine how culturally authentic a webtoon is, and to which culture. For instance, Rachel Smythe, creator of the popular webtoon *Lore Olympus*, is from New Zealand, and the content is Greek mythology. *True Beauty*, by contrast, is written by a Korean author who used to be a model.

Discussion

The webtoon platform and content work together to build satisfaction for readers. Webtoon is designed to take advantage of the physical format of the smartphone through vertical scrolling. The serialization of the storylines means readers come back to follow the storyline, while the notification about new storylines²⁶ feeds into readers' desires for new materials. Adding other multimedia elements like sound effects or animation also differentiates webtoon from comic books and graphic novels. The ubiquity of smartphones means that webtoon is almost always accessible at times when print materials or dedicated e-readers would be inconvenient to access.

Participants in this study indicated their ages generally fall into the "Millennial" and "Gen Z" categories. However, only readers aged 26-33 and 34-41 had criticisms of the platform. This difference in awareness of the mediating technology at play could be relevant to understanding

how different generations use technology to find information and the degree of criticality, or at least awareness, applied to the discovery of media like webtoon.²⁷ This skewing may also correlate with a difference in reading interests with regard to the content of the stories readers of different ages seek, as well as the technology they use to access those stories.

Since the webtoon platform is open to any artists internationally, global webtoon readers are naturally exposed to different cultures and customs, experiencing informal cultural learning. In addition, diverse webtoon creators and webtoon work that promote various sexual orientations and romantic relationships help readers have a sense of belonging or understand more about others. This noted presence of embracing diversity in webtoon may be associated with younger generations who have been exposed to more diverse media representations. Looking at the demographic characteristics of webtoon artists in future studies may provide more context to answer if this “generational difference” is truly embedded in larger groups of people (e.g., Millennials and Gen Z). It could also answer the question of whether the differences in interest in online sequential media like webtoon have a niche market with idiosyncrasies that speak specifically to narrow age ranges.²⁸

Webtoon has been successful by adapting multiple elements into a platform to create an experience that is both “snackable” and “addictive.” Findings in this study generally support the focus on snack culture, aligning with Jin, Jang and Song, and Yecies, Yang, and Lu.²⁹ The short length and visual nature of webtoon mean that they can be read and understood quickly while people are on breaks or otherwise unoccupied, such as while they are in line or waiting for meetings.

Although one of webtoon’s major appeals is being “bite-size,” many participants in this study also mentioned they tend to binge-read webtoon and spend hours reading, which may seem contradictory. Choi, Lee, and Sun (2018) describe characteristics of binge consumers as being potentially connected to addiction, but note that there are two camps regarding the ultimate mechanism by which binge consumption progresses with regard to media use: (1) that binge-consumption is enabled by passivity and simply not having access to the executive function necessary to stop consuming or (2) that such consumption is enabled by deep immersion in the content being consumed.³⁰ The authors add that binge consumption may be related to efforts to escape reality, which was also observed in our findings. The parallel concept of snack culture would suggest that users take breaks and choose actively when to read webtoon. This points to the immersive quality of the content that encourages binge-reading related more to active interest rather than passive consumption. One differentiation between webtoon and conventional reading is that the online, easily accessible, and graphic content blends the benefits of both conventional reading and streaming platforms with ala carte content to create the ideal opportunity to binge at one’s own leisure.

Lastly, independent aspects of webtoon creation and sharing are another area that could be further investigated in future studies. Webtoon started as a genre in which amateur artists shared and promoted their creations independently. Although the platform became commercialized in several aspects as it grew, it still allows independent artists around the world to share their work to reach out to wider audiences. Artists do not have to depend on major publishing companies to distribute their work, and due to this, what they can express and how they promote their creations have become considerably more self-sufficient. P23’s comment echoes this:

And ideal part is I think the webtoon is really good and very important industry as well, and also very important platform for authors can show their creativity and their own things over there. So, thinking of like back in the time when we don’t have Webtoon, the only way an author can do and show their

things is only through like publish their own paper, like not webtoon but cartoon. That is the only way they can do. But now we have a platform, and then others can access to more. They can draw and then show, and then people love them. And then it's had more opportunity for them too, and then also more opportunity for readers. So, that is really ideal. (P23)

Webtoon's creation and sharing practices may resonate with the philosophies of *zines*³¹ in that the platform enables self-publishing, which allows independent and marginalized voices to be heard. Future research should understand if or how webtoon has democratized the publication of visual narratives and how to support future artists and readers in this regard.

Conclusion

The current study investigated how the webtoon platform and format encourage reader engagement with the material. Since the findings in this study are exploratory and represent a small sample of total webtoon users, future research should involve a broader cross-section of webtoon users to gain a fuller picture of the audience for this medium and the appeals, uses, searches, and recommendations of the webtoon.

With the increasing allocations for media collections and the need for whole-collection advisory services, libraries have tried to include various media materials in their services. Still, the support for librarians to recommend these materials may need improvement. Librarians cannot be expected to be knowledgeable about all different types of materials. Some can be subject experts in romance fiction, and some may have extensive knowledge of anime and manga, but they should not be expected to provide recommendations of any genres in any media format readily. In this regard, the continuation of readers and audience studies helps. Presenting a better understanding of emerging materials and readers can support librarians in providing enhanced services that are current and transcend genre and medium. Similar research on born-digital leisure materials like webtoons may further knowledge in this domain and prepare for future information services.

This manuscript presents webtoon's appeals stemming from its media elements, platform, and format, which emerging young adult readers appreciate. Findings indicate the need for an expansion in defining future reference services. Readers' advisory and reference services have, so far, focused on recommending materials that libraries hold as physical or digital collections. However, this may need to change in the future of advisory and reference services. Libraries have limited budgets and space, and the carefully selected collection materials reflect this. While most library patrons' recommendation requests may be satisfied within the libraries' collections today, exposure to beyond library collections might satisfy patrons' needs even further by allowing them to explore, especially when access to those materials is convenient and free. The authors in this study paid close attention to webtoons for this reason; however, other new and similar leisure materials may appear in the near future. Being aware of this trend and understanding different new genres and formats that readers enjoy may be critical in preparing quality information services.

Currently, readers and audiences use and enjoy different formats interchangeably. Book readers may enjoy listening to audiobooks or watching films with adaptation works, and people who enjoy watching anime may enjoy reading manga or webtoons. In this time of cross-media appeal, webtoon seems even more approachable for new audiences due to its easy and free accessibility that does not require too much of a time commitment, as well as its embracing diverse cultures, characters, and plots. Other reading and media materials may take a similar path in the future; accessibility, convenience, and representation of diversity may be the key elements for emerging young adult audiences that libraries can prepare to serve.

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