

Do Webtoon-Based TV Dramas Represent Transmedia Storytelling? Industrial Factors Leading to Webtoon-Based TV Dramas

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With the rise of mobile media and snack culture, the webtoon has become a leading form of popular culture in Korea. Korea is also producing a growing number of webtoon-based TV dramas. If the proliferation of the mobile phone and the migration of traditional cartoonists to the mobile platform contribute to the emergence of the webtoon as a source for creative stories, it is the industrial factors and considerations that promote the practice of webtoon-based drama production. The following industrial factors lead to webtoon-based TV drama production: the success of earlier webtoon-based dramas (e.g., *Misaeng* and *Cheese in the Trap*), the limited pool of top drama scriptwriters, the use of the webtoon as a cost-saving option (as opposed to hiring a top scriptwriter), the strategy of reducing the risk of hiring a mediocre scriptwriter, the use of the webtoon as a deal point when production companies pitch a show, and the effectiveness of promoting TV dramas on the basis of a webtoon's existing reputation.

Keywords: webtoon, webtoon-based drama, transmedia, cross-media adaptation, OSMU

With the proliferation of mobile devices and snack culture, the webtoon (a type of online comic) has become a leading form of popular culture in Korea. In 2017, a total of 1,759 webtoons were published on various online platforms, such as Naver, Daum, Lezhin Comics, and Toptoon (Korea Manhwa Contents Agency, 2018). In response to webtoons' increasing popularity, TV production companies, broadcasting stations, and webtoon platforms are actively seeking opportunities to transform webtoons into TV dramas. The huge successes of the drama series *Misaeng* (tvN, 2014) and *Cheese in the Trap* (tvN, 2016), which are based on webtoons of the same titles, have accelerated the trend of turning webtoons into TV dramas (Baek, 2016).

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Critics and scholars have discussed the reasons underlying the popularity of webtoons in Korea (Doo, 2017; E. Jin, 2014). However, few studies have identified the industrial context and production practices that motivate the TV industry to utilize webtoons as a source of TV drama storytelling. On the basis of in-depth interviews with individuals closely involved in the production of webtoon-based TV dramas, we investigate the industrial context of the collaboration among webtoon platforms, broadcasting stations, and production companies. This study is driven by our particular interest in the transmedia potential of webtoon-based TV dramas in the age of convergence culture (Jenkins, 2006). Is the use of the webtoon narrative across different media platforms indicative of the larger phenomenon of transmedia storytelling? Or is webtoon-based TV drama production part of an industrial practice of cross-media adaptation or OSMU (one source multi use)? An examination of the production practices specific to the Korean TV industry reveals the factors that encourage or preclude the transmedia potential of webtoons.

The Korean Webtoon Industry: An Overview

The Korean webtoon can be traced back to the early 21st century, when Korea's largest portal websites, Daum and Naver, launched their webtoon services (D. Jin, 2015). In 2003, Daum introduced Korea's first webtoon service, Daum Webtoon, and began its free content service. Naver implemented a similar service when it launched Naver Webtoon in 2004. From 2003 to 2014, Daum published about 500 webtoons, acquiring a monthly readership of 3 million to 4 million people (S. Lee, 2016). Similarly, as of 2014, Naver Webtoon had published 520 webtoons and attracted roughly 6.2 million visitors daily (S. Lee, 2016). The Korean webtoon market has grown rapidly, becoming an industry leader among Korea's creative industries and a nascent global player competing with major comic markets abroad (Lynn, 2016). Exhibiting a staggering market size of roughly US\$37 million in 2015, the webtoon market was expected to double to US\$79 million in 2018 (KT Economic Management Institute, 2015).

Riding the wave of Korea's rapid technological development, these platforms provide their content beyond the Web to smartphones, connecting webtoonists and their work to an unprecedented number of people (D. Jin, 2015). Some of the most popular webtoons published on these platforms attract millions of viewers daily. For example, *Misaeng*, which was shown on Daum Kakao from January 2012 to August 2013, attracted 500,000 regular subscribers and has a remarkable record of having reached 10 million views in a single day (KT Economic Management Institute, 2015).

In 2013, independent webtoon platforms were established, adding diversity and vitality to the Korean comic scene, which had been dominated by Naver and Daum. In 2013, Lezhin Comics by Lezhin Entertainment was established as a paid content distribution webtoon platform. Many other platforms—including Toptoon, Toomics, and Kakao Page—have adopted the same system (Korea Manhwa Contents Agency, 2018). Departing from Naver's and Daum's free content service system, Lezhin was the first webtoon platform to introduce a paid online content service (Ramirez, 2017). The service is implemented in three stages: initial free service, partial payment, and fully paid service (J. Jang, 2015). The company's model proved to be a great success, with sales soaring from KRW 980 million (US\$832,000) in 2013 to KRW 31.8 billion (US\$27 million) in 2015 (Ramirez, 2017). Naver and Daum have implemented a paid content service system on some of their contents in a trend toward paid content being introduced by more content providers in Korea (Hong, 2017).

With the introduction of new webtoon platforms—a total of 30 now bolster the industry—the number of webtoons has doubled each year (S. Lee, 2017). Until 2012, only about 200 webtoons were published each year. But following the birth of independent webtoon platforms, the number of webtoons increased to 343 in 2013 and to 719 in 2014. The total number of webtoons published between 2013 and 2017 amounted to 6,882. The year 2017 was a particularly prolific year for the webtoon industry: 1,759 webtoons were published, with more than 2,950 webtoon artists working across various webtoon platforms (Korea Manhwa Contents Agency, 2018).

The Transmedia Potential of Webtoons

The optimistic prospect of the Korean webtoon arises from the markedly growing diversification of webtoon content to dramas, movies, animation, games, and musicals. S. Han (2014) has reported on webtoons' potential as transmedia storytelling sites, noting that some webtoons are planned from the onset to easily adapt to transmedia texts. According to Han, Lezhin Entertainment is taking steps to move beyond OSMU strategies, as it plans to collaborate with CJ ENM to create webtoons suited for transmedia stories, which will later be expanded into films. Another notable transmedia project is the collaboration between Neowiz Games and Naver, which has transformed the webtoon *Sound of Heart* into a game of the same name (Y. Lee, 2016). Also, the popular webtoon *Along With the Gods* was adapted into a musical in 2015 before its transition to the big screen in 2017. When *Along With the Gods* was released as a blockbuster film in 2017, it was an epic success. Attracting more than 14.4 million viewers, it ranked second in Korea's all-time box office records (Na, 2018). The film's sequel *Along With the Gods 2* (2018), released on August 1, 2018, dominated Korea's box office, selling 3.85 million tickets within the first week (M. Jin, 2018). Other webtoon-based movies that have fared extremely well include *Moss* (2010), *Secretly, Greatly* (2013), and *Steel Rain* (2017)—all proving the potential of webtoons as a primary source for Korean films (Na, 2018).

In addition to movies, many successful TV adaptations of webtoons have been produced, making webtoons a popular primary source for Korean dramas. Since 2013, about 40 webtoon-based dramas have been produced (see Table 1).

Table 1. Korean Webtoon-Based TV Drama Series, 2013–2019.

Title	Webtoonist	Dates aired	Network
<i>Flower Boys Next Door</i> (이웃집 꽃미남)	Yoo Hyun-Sook	January 7–February 26, 2013	tvN
<i>Misaeng: Incomplete Life</i> (미생)	Yoon Tae-Ho	October 17–December 20, 2014	tvN
<i>Dr. Frost</i> (닥터 프로스)	Lee Jong-Beom	November 23, 2014– February 1, 2015	OCN
<i>Hyde, Jekyll, Me</i> (하이드 지킬 나)	Lee Choong-Ho	January 21– March 26, 2015	SBS
<i>Hogu's Love</i> (호구의 사랑)	Yoo Hyun-Sook	February 9–March 31, 2015	tvN
<i>A Girl Who Sees Smells</i> (냄새를 보는 소녀)	Seo Soo-Kyung (Man Chwi)	April 1–May 21, 2015	SBS
<i>Orange Marmalade</i> (오렌지 마말레이드)	Seok-Woo	May 15–July 24, 2015	KBS2
<i>The Scholar Who Walks the Night</i> (밤을 걷는 선비)	Jo Joo-Hee	July 8–September 10, 2015	MBC
<i>Last</i> (라스트)	Kang Hyung-Kyu	July 24–September 12, 2015	JTBC
<i>The Awl</i> (송곳)	Choi Kyu-Sok	October 24–November 29, 2015	JTBC
<i>Cheese in the Trap</i> (치즈인더트랩)	Soonkki	January 4–March 1, 2016	tvN
<i>My Lawyer, Mr. Jo 1</i> (동네변호사 조들호 1)	Kim Yang-soo (Hatzling)	March 28–May 31, 2016	KBS2
<i>Lucky Romance</i> (운빨 로맨스)	Kim Dal-Nim	May 2–July 14, 2016	MBC
<i>Hey Ghost, Let's Fight</i> (싸우자 귀신아)	Im In-Su	July 11–August 30, 2016	tvN
<i>The Gentlemen of Wolgyesu Tailor Shop</i> (월계수 양복점 신사들)	Lee Jong-Kyu	August 27, 2016– February 26, 2017	KBS2
<i>Sweet Stranger and Me</i> (우리 집에 사는 남자)	Yoo Hyun-Sook	October 24–December 13, 2016	KBS2

<i>Save Me</i> (구해줘)	Jo Geum-San	August 5–September 24, 2017	OCN
<i>Avengers Social Club</i> (부암동 복수자들)	Sajatokki	October 11–November 16, 2017	tvN
<i>Confession Couple</i> (고백부부)	Hong Seung-Pyo, Kim Hye-Yeon	October 13–November 18, 2017	KBS2
<i>My First Love</i> (애간장)	Kim Byoung-Gwan, Kim Hee-Ran	January 8–February 6, 2018	OCN
<i>What Is Wrong With Secretary Kim</i> (김비서가 왜 그럴까?)	Kim Myung-Mi	June 6–July 26, 2018	tvN
<i>Your House Helper</i> (당신의 하우스헬퍼)	Seong Jeong-Yeon	July 4– August 29, 2018	KBS2
<i>My ID Is Gangnam Beauty</i> (내 아이디는 강남미인)	Gi Maeng-Gi	July 27–September 15, 2018	JTBC
<i>Clean With Passion for Now</i> (일단 뜨겁게 청소하라)	Aengo	November 29, 2018– February 4, 2019	JTBC

Misaeng (2014) and *Cheese in the Trap* (2016), which have been adapted to TV drama series, aired on cable network tvN. Each program enjoyed viewer ratings of over 7%, which is rare for shows on cable TV. In 2018 alone, more than five webtoon-based dramas were planned; the most recent, *What Is Wrong With Secretary Kim*, ended with a viewer rating over 8%, outperforming many popular webtoon-based dramas. Alongside the commercial success of webtoon-based dramas and movies in recent years, S. Lee (2018) describes 2017 as a year of “pilot content” for the Korean webtoon market, as numerous webtoons have participated in OSMU and transmedia projects by expanding the webtoon story to secondary media contents. One notable example is the Super String project—a content collaboration among Naver Webtoon, content corporation YLAB, and film company Young Film. The project, which is still in its development stage, will integrate popular webtoon characters from *Blade of the Phantom Master*, *Reawaken Man*, and *Terror Man* into a single narrative space (S. Lee, 2018). This grand transmedia project plans to expand the webtoon narrative into films and games, creating a universe similar to the cinematic universes of Marvel and DC Comics.

In addition to the collaboration, Naver has reported its plan to establish a corporate body called Naver N that will adapt webtoons to TV dramas and films. Park (2018) observes this move as an attempt by Naver to become a Korean-style Marvel. Kwon Mi-Kyung, former head of the Korean Film Business Department of CJ ENM and an illustrious figure behind Korea’s biggest box office hits, including *Ode to My Father* and the *Roaring Currents*, was hired as the new head of Naver N (Na, 2018). By acquiring the intellectual property rights of webtoons, Naver is attempting to capitalize on their transmedia potential.

Similar attempts have been made by CJ ENM, whose TV network OCN (Orion Cinema Network) has brought together major heroes and villains from six of its popular dramas to the webtoon series *Original Sin* (Cho, 2018). *Original Sin* is an unprecedented case of universe building in Korea, with the superhero multiverse extending the stories of the main characters beyond the narrative of their respective dramas. Because CJ ENM is the parent company of OCN, with its own game, music, entertainment, and movie industry, future transmedia franchises are expected to arise from its current endeavors.

Transmedia Storytelling and Cross-Media Adaptation

Transmedia storytelling is a concept most comprehensively theorized by media scholar Henry Jenkins, who describes highly integrated works with narratives expanding across films, games, and novels in the age of media convergence. In his Web log titled "Confessions of an ACA Fan," Jenkins (2007) defines transmedia storytelling as "a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience" (para. 2), with each new medium making distinctive contributions to the overall story. Therefore, there is no single text in which viewers can acquire all the information they need to understand the whole story. For example, Jenkins (2006) explains how, in the world of *Matrix*, numerous texts are integrated to create a narrative so expansive that it cannot be captured within a single medium.

However, at the same time, each medium needs to be self-contained. This entails that a story introduced to different media—films, TV, video games, comics, and novels— provides viewers with different entry points into the storyworld in a way that each medium can be enjoyed separately. As Jenkins (2006) explains, "Each franchise entry needs to be self-contained so you don't need to have seen the film to enjoy the game and vice versa," with each product being "a point of entry into the franchise as a whole" (p. 96). Transmedia theorists and practitioners highlight these characteristics of transmedia storytelling (e.g., unique contributions and points of entry), which can offer audiences a "new level of insight and experience" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 96), purportedly making the practice fundamentally different from cross-media adaptation.

The theorization of transmedia storytelling developed in tandem with the exclusion of cross-media adaptation to distinguish the transmedia phenomenon from other similar, long-standing practices of employing multiple media platforms in the unfolding of the same storyworld (Dena, 2018). Jenkins (2009) differentiates the two practices: Adaptation "reproduces the original narrative with minimum changes into a new medium and is essentially redundant to the original work," and transmedia is an "extension which expands our understanding of the original by introducing new elements into the fiction" (para. 11). Therefore, transmedia practice has firmly established itself as an extension process rather than an adaptation practice, because the latter was regarded as simple retellings of the same story (Bourdaa, 2013; Evans, 2011; Phillips, 2012). However, many adaptation theorists have challenged such distinctions, maintaining that adaptations are neither redundant nor mere retellings. Instead, adaptation "always involves (re)interpretation and (re)creation" (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 8) and constantly engages in balancing the elements of familiarity and novelty (Wells-Lassagne, 2017). Dena (2009) regards adaptation as part of the transmedia phenomena as it can have "many roles in the meaning making process" (p. 149), resonating "with the spirit of transmedia, in which each medium is seen as an equally viable expression of a fictional world" (p. 158).

Recently, transmedia theorists have softened their stance on the “no-adaptation rule,” acknowledging that adaptations are rarely simple retellings of the story (Harvey, 2015; Jenkins, 2011). Jenkins (2017) has noted,

Those of us who study transmedia (and fan fiction) and those who study adaptation are asking a related set of questions, though as of now we are often talking past each other, because our terminological and methodological assumptions lead us to underestimate the materials the other is studying. (para. 10)

The no-adaptation rule no longer seems to sufficiently characterize transmedia storytelling, because transmedia extensions do a bit of both, grounding themselves in the original text while engaging in the extensions of the storyworld in adherence to transmedia sensibility (Dena, 2018; Jenkins, 2017).

In Korea, the theorization of transmedia storytelling is still in its early development stage, and several studies focus on differentiating the practice with the more prevalent OSMU projects. Korean media scholars have employed the similar rhetoric of the no-adaptation rule by excluding OSMU projects from the transmedia phenomenon and defining the former as a replica of the original source across different media and transmedia texts as novel additions to the original storyworld dispersed across multiple media (Han & Nam, 2009; M. Lee, 2014; Shin & Kim, 2010).

The Importance of Capital and Intellectual Property Rights in Transmedia Storytelling: The Case of Marvel

The launch of the Marvel Cinematic Universe by Marvel Studios in 2008 is a prime example of fictional world building through transmedia storytelling. In 2008, Marvel Studios commenced its universe with the feature film *Iron Man* (2008), followed by films exclusively centered on Marvel characters (Ritcher, 2016), such as *The Incredible Hulk* (2008), *Thor* (2011), and *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011). Other films in the franchise that have assembled the superheroes together include *The Avengers* (2012), *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), and *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018).

Marvel’s world building illustrates the importance of capital in transmedia storytelling. The Walt Disney Corporation’s 2009 acquisition of Marvel Studios galvanized Marvel’s Cinematic Universe as Disney released many commercially successful films and created games based on the universe. More importantly, Walt Disney Corporation’s reclamation of Marvel’s previously relinquished film rights of some of its major characters is expected to enrich and enhance the universe. When Marvel was at the brink of bankruptcy in the 1990s, it sold off the film rights of some of its most popular superheroes—*Spider-Man* to Sony and *X-Men* and the *Fantastic Four* to Fox. Fragmented film rights meant a splintered universe as many of the Marvel stories were unable to be told on the big screen. For example, Marvel’s crossover comic story *Avengers vs. X-Men* could not transition to the big screen (Abad-Santos, 2017). Also, the crossover comic book event *Captain America: Civil War* has been told without X-Men and the Fantastic Four, integral characters who all exist in the comic world (Abad-Santos, 2017).

In 2016, Disney proposed to acquire 21st Century Fox, a deal that will bring *X-Men*, *Fantastic Four*, and the other previously Fox-owned Marvel characters back to Marvel Studios (Abad-Santos, 2017). Also, the cinematic universe has recently incorporated Spider-Man, which had belonged exclusively to Sony Pictures Entertainment until 2015 (Ritcher, 2016). This incorporation makes *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (2017) the first Spider-Man movie in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (Ritcher, 2016). Although it is unclear when these newly incorporated characters will be seen in Marvel's Cinematic Universe due to Fox's previously set schedule for its film projects, Disney's acquisition of Fox marks the first time in Marvel's history that all the major superheroes and villains will exist in the same cinematic universe (Abad-Santos, 2017). With all its superheroes under the same roof, the Marvel Cinematic Universe illustrates the indispensable role of intellectual property in transmedia storytelling.

Transmedia Audiences

Audience behavior in this changing media terrain has been of increasing interest to media scholars (Atkinson, 2014; Evans, 2011; Simons, 2014). In her research of *The Inside*, a social film project led by Intel and Toshiba, Atkinson (2014) introduces a concept called "dramatic community," which she defines as audience members "who take on a range of different performative identities within the social media spaces of an online fictional arena" (p. 2002). *The Inside* enhanced the performativity of audiences as it invited them to participate in the protagonist Christina's quest to escape from an unknown location through a combination of puzzles, games, and role-playing opportunities.

Jenkins (2007) has indicated an increased performativity on the part of audience members in transmedia environments as transmedia texts "provide a set of roles and goals which readers can assume as they enact aspects of the story through their everyday life" (para. 10). Würfel (2014) makes parallel observations in her study of transmedia appropriation by German adolescents as they partake in transmedia storytelling in the construction of their identity. Transmedia appropriation, according to Würfel, refers to the ways that people engage and consume popular media contents born out of technological and content convergence. She notes that a substantial number of German adolescents actively engage in transmedia appropriation by consuming their favorite media content across a wide range of media forms alongside the primary source. For example, they participate creatively in Web logs and other online forums related to their favorite media contents.

However, unlike the optimistic discourse surrounding the increased interactivity and performance of transmedia audiences, some research has revealed a different perspective. Evans (2011) investigates the telling difference between audience response and industrial expectations. In her case study of two transmedia projects—the Flash games of *Spooks*, a British TV series, and mobisodes of U.S. counterterrorism serial *24*—Evans finds that audiences felt their enjoyment was compromised by discrepancies between the original content and their secondary extensions. For example, some viewers reported feeling uncomfortable experiencing the discrepancy between the spectator role given to viewers in the series *Spooks* and the active participant role required of them as game characters in the Flash games. In the case of *24*, some lukewarm responses noted that the mobisodes did not adapt the split-screen structure of *24*. The audiences' mixed responses indicate that they expect a certain level of consistency between the original content and its secondary forms.

Method

The purpose of this study is to identify the industrial factors that promote webtoon-based drama production practices. What are the industrial contexts in which webtoons have become a critical source for TV drama productions? What are the main issues that arise when webtoons are turned into TV dramas? Are webtoon-based dramas indicative of transmedia storytelling? Or are they part of the continuing tradition of cross-media adaptation?

We conducted nine in-depth interviews with 10 individuals who work at webtoon platforms, cable TV stations, and production companies. All respondents have been closely involved in the production of webtoon-based TV dramas as producers, directors, and webtoon producers (see Table 2). Their experience helped us map out the industrial practices and the contexts in which many webtoons have been made into TV dramas. While the interviewees offered a variety of information, such as the procedure of acquiring webtoon TV rights, we particularly probed the industrial implications of the recent expansion of webtoon businesses by asking questions such as the following: Why are drama producers and directors interested in webtoons? What benefits do the webtoon platforms and production companies gain when they sell and obtain webtoons' TV rights? What are the advantages and challenges of turning webtoons into TV dramas? The interviews were conducted at the participant's office or at a coffee shop, and each interview lasted about 60–80 minutes.

Table 2. Interviewee Information.

Interview number	Interviewee	Company type	Position
1	A	Webtoon platform	Producer
2	B	Cable TV station	Drama director/producer
3	C	Drama production company	Producer
4	D	Drama production company	Producer
	E	Drama production company	Producer
5	F	Drama production company	President
6	G	Drama production company	Producer
7	H	Cable TV station	Drama director/producer
8	I	Webtoon platform	Vice president
9	J	Webtoon platform	Webtoon producer

Note. A director is widely referred to as a producer in the Korean TV industry because the director oversees all aspects of TV production. For this article, we make a distinction between director/producer and producer. A producer in this study refers to a person whose main task is to find novels, foreign shows, web novels, or webtoons to be made into TV dramas.

Webtoons as a Basis of TV Dramas

Webtoons have emerged as an important source for creative stories. In Korea, the proliferation of mobile devices fostered the so-called snack culture, describing web-based cultural content that can be consumed in minutes (Chung, 2014). The weakening of the comics publishing market has also galvanized the migration of traditional cartoonists to the webtoon industry. Since the webtoon industry is not only a

lucrative market but also has relatively low barriers to entry, many young creative storytellers have pursued careers as webtoonists. Moreover, compared with comics and TV dramas, the webtoon is a medium that can convey innovative stories and unconventional characters with more freedom from editorial intervention and production budget constraints (e.g., webtoonists can draw whatever they imagine and upload the content to an online platform). Interviewee J stated that audiences are attracted to the unique methods of webtoon storytelling that depart from conventional narrative structures. For example, the protagonist in webtoons often dies, and the villain turns into a hero. There is no clear boundary between good and evil. All interviewees commented that they were most impressed by the webtoon's imaginative ideas and narratives that go beyond their expectations.

It has been a common practice in the Korean TV industry to use various forms of popular culture—such as novels, comic books, and Japanese and American TV dramas—as the basis of drama series. Given that the webtoon is “a warehouse that contains numerous story ideas” (Interviewee C), it comes as no surprise to learn that most TV production companies have several employees and interns who specialize in reviewing almost all webtoons published on major webtoon platforms to find ideal candidates for adaptation to TV dramas. Many webtoon platforms have a division that recommends promising webtoons as sources for TV dramas to production companies and broadcasting stations.

The Korean drama industry has relied on the live-shoot system, which involves hectic schedule changes and last-minute script changes (Kil, 2017). Although the system is notorious, it has the advantage of allowing the directors and writers to integrate audience feedback and alter the development of the drama—just as Brazilian telenovelas are heavily influenced by audience feedback (Rosas-Moreno, 2014). For example, plotlines can be changed to satisfy audience requests and increase the screen time for popular characters. The entire series may be shortened or lengthened based on the drama's popularity. The fact that the webtoon actively reflects audience feedback also makes it an ideal source for TV dramas. Each episode links to a message board where viewers can leave comments that webtoonists can incorporate into subsequent episodes. Since the webtoon platforms have immediate access to audience demographics (e.g., age, gender, viewing patterns), they can develop recommendation systems for viewers and effectively decide when to upload particular webtoons that cater to audiences' tastes (Interviewee J). According to Interviewee F, both webtoons and TV dramas take audience feedback seriously, but webtoons are much more responsive because webtoonists can read the comments immediately. He considers popular webtoons exemplary sources for TV dramas because their popularity implies that they contain many story components that a large audience finds attractive.

The Cost-Effectiveness of Webtoon-Based Drama Production

The most important factor underlying the increasing number of webtoon-based TV dramas has much to do with the limited pool of top TV scriptwriters, widely referred to in Korea as “level A” writers. TV drama is regarded as a writers' medium due to its heavy reliance on the writer's competence. The production context of the TV industry in Korea also contributes to the importance of scriptwriters. Under the circumstances in which approximately 80% of drama series are outsourced to independent production companies (S. Jang, 2018), a large number of production companies must compete for available broadcasting time slots for TV drama series. Typically, production companies start their drama production

only after a TV station agrees to broadcast the TV drama series and provides them with sizable budgets. Therefore, production companies must succeed in selling their program ideas to TV stations.

In the process of pitching a drama to a TV station, the scriptwriter's reputation is critical. Along with casting, the scriptwriter is a determining factor when TV stations make a purchasing decision. Traditionally, three terrestrial television networks in Korea—SBS, MBC, and KBS—have been the main outlets for TV dramas. Cable channels have also started to broadcast drama series. For example, OCN began to present original drama series in 2006. JTBC started to showcase quality drama series in 2011. Most importantly, tvN, a channel owned and operated by the media giant CJ ENM, began to broadcast drama series. While these cable channels appear to give more opportunities to production companies (and thus less competition), the competition among production companies has become fierce for two reasons. First, the number of production companies has increased. There are more 100 production companies that have produced at least one TV drama series in the past three years (Interviewee D). Top entertainment talent agencies, such as SM, YG JYP, and FNC, have joined the drama production business because they can easily cast their own actors. Second, top scriptwriters have become difficult to hire because they are few in number. As most interviewees mentioned, a TV station will buy a drama idea immediately if it is written by first-rate writers, such as Kim Eun-Sook, Park Ji-Eun, Noh Hee-Kyung, Kim Eun-Hee, and Kim Soo-Hyun, each of whom has written many hit dramas.

Because only a few production companies can manage to hire top scriptwriters, most production companies prefer to base their dramas on popular webtoons instead of working with someone whom they consider a mediocre writer. Since the webtoon is one of the most popular forms of culture in Korea, production companies can strategically utilize the success of celebrated webtoons as a way to sell drama ideas to TV stations. Almost all webtoon-based drama productions are retroactive. New production companies also use the TV right of a webtoon as an opportunity to enter the TV industry (Interviewee D). Television networks have also recognized the value of the webtoon as a source of drama series after the huge success of webtoon-based dramas such as *Misaeng* (tvN, 2014) and *Cheese in the Trap* (tvN 2016). TV stations give serious consideration to ideas for webtoon-based dramas, because successful webtoons are deemed to have a solid narrative structure and attractive characters. As the president of a drama production company explains,

My company doesn't have renowned scriptwriters to work with. This is a big weakness. Since TV stations do not trust unknown writers, I use the reputation of the webtoon instead of persuading TV stations to buy my drama idea. Webtoon indeed serves as a powerful weapon for production companies. (Interviewee F)

Using webtoons reduces the risk of relying solely on a mediocre writer's original drama script. Production in Korea begins two or three months before the drama series airs on TV. Typically, production companies complete the production of two to four episodes before the air date, and the rest of the episodes are written, filmed, and edited as the series airs. While the live-shoot system has some advantages (as discussed earlier), it also creates the likelihood that the scriptwriter will fail to meet expectations, because she or he must work on several episodes within limited time constraints. When there is a lack of trust for lesser-known writers, using a webtoon as the basis of a drama series reduces the risk of the story going off

track, because a popular webtoon already has an established narrative that has proven successful. In other words, the webtoon serves as a safety net for both production companies and TV stations when they work with mediocre scriptwriters. As explained by a drama director/producer at a cable TV station,

For an original drama script, only the scriptwriter knows how the story will unfold in the later episodes. A story can head in the wrong direction, or end unexpectedly on a shock twist. But if a drama is based on a webtoon, we don't have to worry about this uncertainty because we already know the overall story of the webtoon. A webtoon is like an "insurance." (Interviewee H)

Webtoon-based drama production has many strengths in terms of cost-effectiveness. Instead of hiring top scriptwriters for an original drama series, a production company can save its production budget by purchasing the TV rights of a webtoon and hiring a writer to adapt the webtoon to a TV drama script. According to interviewees, the price of TV rights for a webtoon to be turned into a drama series of 16–24 episodes normally ranges between US\$20,000 and US\$100,000. Then an adaptation writer is paid about US\$5,000–\$10,000 per episode. Given that a production company normally pays well-known writers US\$20,000–\$30,000 per episode for an original drama script, the cost of creating webtoon-based drama scripts is half the cost of creating original drama scripts.

Drama production based on webtoons is also cost-effective because it can substantially shorten the length of time to develop TV scripts. To create an original drama series from scratch, it typically takes a year to construct an overall story structure and complete scripts for two episodes. This preproduction time can be reduced to half for a webtoon-based drama because the content of a story and the main characters are already available (Interviewee G). Long-running webtoons with more than 100 episodes are ideal for TV remakes. For example, the webtoon *Cheese in the Trap* has been running for seven years with over 200 episodes and thus has a vast amount of raw material to choose from for the 16-episode series (Interviewee E). Interviewee B regards the webtoon as a "treasure" because it offers numerous story elements—settings, characters, events, and dialogues—for creating attractive TV drama series. Relatively flexible in subject and content, the romantic comedy genre is preferred for TV remakes because cost-effectiveness is a major driving force for webtoon-based drama production. Romantic comedies are not only popular among mainstream TV audiences; they also require a smaller production budget to remake compared with other genres, such as science fiction, action, and fantasy. Interviewee H stated that popular martial arts webtoons are unlikely to be turned into TV dramas because of their high production costs. Interviewee C explains,

There are webtoons not suited for TV remakes. If the main character is an animal, an alien, a flying fairy, a senior fighter, or a man with supernatural power, the webtoon has little chance to be made into a TV drama, because the story is difficult and costly to portray on TV.

Webtoon-based dramas also have advantages in marketing. Based on a webtoon's reputation, TV stations can easily build hype leading up to the drama's launch. Usually, when news is released about popular webtoons being adapted to dramas, the webtoon-based drama goes viral before its air date. Webtoon fans often participate in the so-called virtual casting, a practice of fans sharing comments online on the casting that they would like for the TV remake of a webtoon. Virtual casting by fans is helpful not only for the promotion of

the drama series but also for producing a drama that satisfies the fans. Interviewee H stated that he did in fact cast the main actor for a webtoon-based drama who had ranked number one in virtual cast lists. Interview H discussed how the reputation of a webtoon facilitates the promotion of its TV remake:

A familiar title matters. Let's say you hear the TV drama title *The Birth of a Married Woman*. If it is a title no one has ever heard of before, you need to explain to everyone what the story is about, what role the married woman plays. But when the drama is based on a popular webtoon, I don't need to explain in detail. Moreover, the fans of the webtoon are expected to watch its TV remake.

Due to the economic value of webtoons, production companies rush to purchase the TV rights of webtoons. Famous webtoons are preferred because their reputation helps promote their TV adaptations. Intense competition to acquire TV rights of hit webtoons results in production companies being quick to purchase the TV rights of a webtoon after publication of its third or fourth episode. It is common for several production companies to compete for TV rights. In the case of the webtoon *Hogu's Love*, more than 10 production companies submitted bids for the webtoon's TV rights (Interviewee E).

The Transmedia Possibility of Webtoon-Based TV Dramas

Central to transmedia storytelling is the expansion of the storyworld. Jenkins (2007) claims that "transmedia stories are based not on individual characters or specific plots but rather complex fictional worlds which can sustain multiple interrelated characters and their stories" (para. 4). In other words, each text from different platforms must contribute to the overall story. Our interviews suggest that the process of turning a webtoon into a TV series is adaptation that does not take full advantage of the potential of transmedia storytelling because the TV series rarely expands the storyworld. The general perception in the TV industry is that the audience evaluates the quality of the webtoon-based TV drama on the basis of its fidelity to the original webtoon. The importance fans place on fidelity resonates with one of the core principles of transmedia storytelling: the effort to "construct a very strong sense of continuity" (Jenkins, 2009, para. 17), which generates coherence with the original source. Accordingly, dedicated fans evaluate how consistently the webtoon world is portrayed in the drama remake. However, the fidelity Korean fans seek is not the plausible continuity of the narrative of the webtoon to its drama adaptation but rather the faithful reproduction of the webtoon world in the drama remake. It is the outward believability of the webtoon characters and their stories that most concerns fans, not the continued extension of the webtoon storyworld in the drama narrative. Thus, it is a common practice for TV producers and directors to cast actors who physically resemble webtoon characters for the TV remakes. In addition, production companies have begun to hire webtoonists as TV drama scriptwriters to improve the drama's fidelity to the original work. According to Interviewee F,

For the TV remake of *My ID Is Gangnam Beauty*, my company hired the webtoonist as one of the drama scriptwriters. My experience tells me that a big gap is created when TV scripts are adapted from a cartoon or a webtoon. So to reduce this gap, I thought it would be best to have the original story creator participate in the development of the drama scripts.

Fans' prioritization of fidelity to the original webtoon has been especially vocalized in their reactions to *Cheese in the Trap*, one of the webtoon-based dramas mentioned earlier. Although successful, the drama version of *Cheese in the Trap* infuriated hardcore webtoon fans (widely labeled as 'Chee mothers' because they are like nagging moms), who thought that the drama had completely distorted the original story. The plotline of the drama in the later episodes focused on Baek In-Ho instead of Yoo Jung, the lead character in the original webtoon. Alongside devoted fans, actor Park Hae-Jin, who took the role of Yoo Jung, also publicly expressed disgruntlement over his reduced screen time (Interviewee A; Interviewee E). Rather than perceiving the drama's emphasis on the perspective of another character as what Jenkins (2007) would describe as a "unique contribution" to the webtoon storyworld, dedicated fans regarded the change as a distortion of the original story. Accordingly, *Cheese in the Trap* set a precedent for the TV industry to refrain from significantly changing a webtoon's plotlines or character roles. Due to fan reactions to *Cheese in the Trap*, production companies perceive a high risk of significantly modifying an original webtoon.

The difficulty in expanding a webtoon's storyworld in a TV drama also has much to do with webtoonists' objections to the drama departing significantly from the original webtoon. Famous webtoonists, such as Yoon Tae-Ho and Kang Full, do not want to see their webtoons altered extensively for TV audiences. For example, Yoon Tae-Ho rejected all the offers from production companies that wanted to create a drama based on *Misaeng* because they wanted to turn the webtoon's realistic portrayal about office workers' everyday life into an office-themed TV drama peppered with romance. Instead, Yoon sold the TV rights to a production company that promised to adhere closely to the original webtoon with no romance (Interviewee H). Interviewees generally attributed the success of the TV remake of *Misaeng* to its quality of being true to the original. Although *Misaeng* is discussed as Korea's first transmedia franchise (Kim, 2016; Seo, 2015), our interviews reveal the difficulty in balancing the two factors—fidelity and novelty—that contribute to the difficulty in making novel extensions to the webtoon storyworld.

One TV drama has not been discussed in previous studies but is noteworthy for its attempt to realize the potential of transmedia storytelling through a webtoon. The producer of *The Village: Achiara's Secret* (SBS, 2015) collaborated with KToon (a webtoon platform) to create a prequel. The 16-episode webtoon series titled *The Village: Achiara's Winter* explains the backstory that led to the events in the original drama narrative. This was the first innovative attempt to expand the TV drama narrative to a different platform, and no other drama has followed suit. Since the webtoonist does not own the TV rights in this type of project, he or she is not incentivized and thus does not wish to participate. For this reason, the producer of *The Village* had difficulty finding a webtoonist who was willing to create the prequel.

Inspired by Marvel and DC Comics, major webtoon platforms have grand plans to utilize their webtoons to expand their businesses. They have recruited TV and film producers to get involved in the production of webtoon-based TV dramas and films. Most notably, Naver (the largest portal website and the third largest webtoon platform) coproduced the TV remake of *Sound of Heart* (Interviewee J). In addition, major webtoon platforms seek the possibility of acquisition or joint ownership of the intellectual property rights of webtoons (currently held exclusively by the webtoonists) so that they can expand their business to include licensing, TV and film production, publishing, game production, book publication, and merchandizing (Interviewee I). For example, Lezhin Comics changed its name to Lezhin Entertainment to redefine its identity as a global entertainment corporation.

Webtoon platforms benefit from the synergistic effects of webtoon-based drama production. Despite the platforms' lofty ambitions, their immediate goal is to increase the number of webtoon viewers by drawing TV audiences to webtoon platforms. The case of *Misaeng* illustrates the marketing power of webtoon-based dramas. Thanks to the success of its TV remake, Yoon Tae-Ho sold more than 2 million copies of the nine-volume book version of *Misaeng* (Yonhap News Agency, 2014). Since many webtoon platforms require readers to pay to view webtoons, webtoon-based dramas can substantially increase revenues by attracting TV audiences who wish to watch the original webtoon (Interviewee, D). According to Interviewee J, "The webtoonist was about to end the story of *A Girl Who Sees Smells*. But the platform wanted to extend the publication while the TV remakes air to maximize the synergy effects."

Conclusion

Why have webtoons transitioned to the TV screen? Overall, our participants from broadcasting stations and production companies considered the production of webtoon-based TV drama as part of existing practices of cross-media adaptation of popular cultural forms, such as novels and comic books. According to the interviewees, the webtoon medium itself has no intrinsic characteristics that make it an ideal source for TV remakes. The number of webtoon-based TV dramas has increased in recent years simply because the webtoon has emerged as a leading form of popular culture that contains innovative, unconventional stories.

If the proliferation of mobile phones and the migration of traditional cartoonists to mobile platforms contribute to the emergence of the webtoon as source for creative stories, it is the industrial factors and considerations that promote the current practice of webtoon-based drama production. More specifically, the following industrial factors lead to webtoon-based TV drama production: the success of earlier webtoon-based dramas (e.g., *Misaeng* and *Cheese in the Trap*), the limited pool of top drama scriptwriters, the use of the webtoon as a cost-saving option (as opposed to hiring a top scriptwriter), the strategy of reducing the risks of hiring a mediocre scriptwriter, the use of the webtoon as a deal point when production companies pitch a show, and the effectiveness of promoting TV dramas on the basis of a webtoon's existing reputation.

Despite the changes that are made during the process of turning a webtoon into a TV drama, a television remake of a webtoon more closely resembles cross-media adaptation than transmedia storytelling, because the diversification is in the form of adaptation and not expansion. We do not consider such adaptations transmedia storytelling, because the original webtoon narrative rarely expands the storyworld across different media, which is a critical requirement of transmedia storytelling. For TV producers, fidelity to the original webtoon is an important criterion for evaluating the quality of webtoon-based TV dramas. Moreover, the attempt to modify the plotlines or to assign different character roles tends to result in strong resistance among original webtoon fans. As seen in the controversy surrounding the TV remake of *Cheese in the Trap*, a considerable number of audience members neither sought to engage in the narrative development of dramas nor exhibited a desire to participate in the expansion of the fictional world. In other words, not all audiences partook in transmedia contents with equal enthusiasm and engagement as predicted by webtoon-based drama producers. Therefore, the practice of maximizing fidelity, such as hiring the webtoonist as the TV drama scriptwriter, precludes the possibility of expanding the original webtoon.

Marvel and DC Comics have motivated Korean webtoon platforms to adopt transmedia strategies and business models. While the transmedia business is still at an early stage, a few webtoon platforms, such as Naver and Lezhin Entertainment, have long-term plans to capitalize on intellectual property rights. While Korea has witnessed the expansion of webtoon businesses into TV drama and other areas, including video games and animated films, the potential for transmedia businesses is nevertheless limited in Korea because most Korean webtoon platforms lack capital and do not possess the intellectual property rights of webtoons. Therefore, the imminent goal of the webtoon platforms remains confined to increasing webtoon sales by encouraging TV drama fans to pay to watch the original webtoon.

Our study suggests that the availability of multimedia platforms and advanced digital technologies does not necessarily enable transmedia storytelling when the expansion of the storyworld is constrained by the fans' prioritization of fidelity, various industrial factors, and the lack of ownership of intellectual property. To realize the transmedia potential of webtoons, it is imperative for TV producers to take advantage of the full potential that transmedia storytelling can offer to webtoons and TV dramas. Additionally, webtoon platforms need to bring more capital investment and acquire or co-own the intellectual property rights of webtoons that webtoonists currently own exclusively.

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