

Communicating Through Chaos in the Webtoon Parasocial Intimacy Chamber

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This study investigates some of the communicative practices displayed by readers of vertically scrolling digital comics known as webtoons. A big-data emotion detection technique is used to identify, categorize, and analyze the contents of more than 14 million comments posted during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors explore the technical affordances of the self-publishing CANVAS section of the Webtoons.com site to demonstrate how an expanding cohort of readers use CANVAS as a chamber for communicating feelings, sharing commiserations, and offering collegial support. In so doing, they contribute to the improvement of participants' well-being and differentiate themselves from other digital platform users who comment solely on stories, characters, and aesthetics. As such, their parasocial interaction transforms the webtoon format, which has yet to be fully investigated, into a communication platform where the "co-creating engagement" of readers generates a sense of intimacy at a distance. The conclusion

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highlights theoretical implications surrounding this communal digital technology of the self in the context of artificial intelligence.

Keywords: webtoons, emotion detection, engagement, social media entertainment, platformization

The present study shows how confessional behavior, that is, the expression, sharing, and supporting of users' emotions, via the comment-posting feature observable on Webtoon.com distinguishes this site's parasocial interactions from those found on other platforms. By focusing on webtoons, one of the fastest-growing convergent sectors of social media entertainment, we experiment with a multidisciplinary approach to global communications practice—one that is informed and shaped by changing industry dynamics. In updating existing understandings of the process of "co-creating engagement"—in which emotion plays a key role (Evans, 2019)—the present work can be taken as a companion to existing research on, for example, the "New King Kongs of the Online World" (Cunningham & Silver, 2013), the "new Korean Wave" and its transnational soft power success (Jin, 2020), as well as other forms of social media entertainment (Cunningham & Craig, 2019) that exceed far beyond the borders of Hollywood and Silicon Valley.

We argue the confessional behavior of commentators and their readers in CANVAS instantiates a mediated intimacy, thereby enabling the site to become a communal digital technology of the self (Abbas & Dervin, 2009; Aycocock, 1995; Foucault, 1988). Thriving in its own right as a social media entertainment platform for a mass online public, the user-comment section of CANVAS has transformed the site by creating an infrastructure of parasocial intimacy that affords constant and ephemeral connectivity among users. Thus, readers and registered users who are able to post comments can delve beyond their shared devotion to webtoons by exploring alternative ways of sharing feelings and caring for and supporting each other.

Some readers may wonder why scholars research webtoons and, more precisely, why bother to examine the global CANVAS site run by the tech behemoth Naver, a.k.a. the "Google+Meta+Amazon+YouTube of Korea," which has its sights on 1 billion users by 2027 (Kim, 2022). Put simply, despite the epochal shift marked by the evolution of the social media entertainment platform arena and the broader digital economy, not to mention the skyrocketing numbers of readers, research on webtoons lags far behind canonical studies of global mobile media (Goggin, 2011; Hjorth, Burgess, & Richardson, 2012), media-technology innovation in Asia (Hjorth & Khoo, 2015; Keane, 2016), and inter-Asian collaboration (Ching, Shim, & Yang, 2023; Chua, 2012). As a vehicle for transmedia intellectual property (IP)—a network of interconnected media, popular culture, and merchandise emanating from a single creative source—webtoons are cultivating new audiences and participatory cultures beyond Korea's national border. Today, webtoons far outstrip the reach of digital comics promoted by Marvel and DC, particularly in terms of the number of individual series and creator-owners of content. Unlike these abovementioned U.S.-based platforms, Korean and other international webtoon enterprises are expanding the potential of user-generated content (UGC), which in turn contributes to the generation of billions of U.S. dollars in revenues across the global cultural and creative industries while playing a significant role in the

trillions of U.S. dollars of global GDP that these industries generate annually (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2022).

In the early 2000s, Naver and Daum were the dominant Internet portals in South Korea (hereafter Korea). To increase their search engine traffic and offer expanding services to their users, Daum (in 2003) and Naver (in 2005) began featuring free access to a then-nascent, vertically scrolling Korean-born format designed for creator-owned digital comics called webtoons. Previously, a small number of print publishers of Manhwa—the Korean term for comics and print cartoons influenced by (but differing from) Japanese Manga—had begun to shape this emergent form of popular online culture in the late 1990s as part of Korea’s umbrella broadband firmament. In what amounted to an inadvertent prophecy in 2007, *Publishers Weekly* announced that some entrepreneurial Koreans had opened a niche for the burgeoning digital Manhwa sector in the United States to rescue its impoverished comics industry (Lee, 2007). Yet, the uptake of Manhwa, to which webtoons belong, was significantly slower than expected among English-language readers. Meanwhile in Korea, the domestic webtoon industry was on the rise as several enterprises were exploiting webtoon IP for consumer product tie-ins and promotions as well as feature films and television adaptations—all furnished with a variety of existing and extended webtoon characters and story worlds. Today, anyone skimming the global media streaming environment cannot miss the rapidly expanding range of shorts, feature, and serialized content with deep transmedia roots in webtoon stories.

By 2011, webtoons and webtoon platforms had begun to make a name for themselves in the Asian region and beyond. A gradually increasing number of studies have explored the webtoon ecosystem from various industrial, cultural, political-economic, and technological perspectives, including cooperative creation activities and user satisfaction (Kim, Kwon, Lee, Gim, & Kim, 2016), the glocalization of cultural content (Jang & Song, 2017), transmedia storytelling trends in webtoon-based TV dramas (Park, Lee, & Lee, 2019), the consequences of platformization on cultural production (Kim & Yu, 2019), and “the artist incubating system” (Cho, 2021, p. 75). Such studies are making rich methodological and theoretical contributions to our ever-changing interdisciplinary field. However, apart from this limited number of informative studies, numerous aspects of the “Webtooniverse” (Yecies & Shim, 2021) remain thoroughly underexplored.

In mid-2014, Naver outstripped dozens of Korean webtoon enterprises and major digital comic initiatives led by Marvel Comics, DC Comics, and ComiXology (which Amazon purchased in late 2014), after its U.S. offices launched a globally facing, free English-language platform called Line Webtoon (www.webtoons.com). Now simply known as “WEBTOON,” the site features more than 480 creator-owned A-list completed and ongoing ORIGINALS series—mostly published by Korean webtoonists who, in turn, have influenced a snowballing number of popular series by both Anglophone and non-Anglophone creators. The site differentiates itself from nearly all other webtoon platforms by enabling fans to translate select series into 30 different foreign languages and by featuring an extensive amateur section called CANVAS, the largest mediated space of its kind for uploading and commenting on creator content. This feature stimulates contributions from practitioners and enthusiasts around the world, fuelling a community that aspires to create an ORIGINALS series (even if very few succeed). Achieving this coveted “rockstar status” enables a webtoonist to earn a living from the transnational webtoon ecosystem and its transmedia activities, which were valued at an estimated US\$3.7 billion in 2021 and projected to reach US\$56.1 billion by 2030 (Allied Market Research, 2022). Despite these seemingly impressive statistics and the powerful

drivers underpinning the so-called Webtooniverse, scholars have yet to fully understand how this emergent CANVAS community communicates in a quasi-parasocial context, thereby sustaining the illusion of intimacy and occupying a very different space from the one-sided and nondialectical discourses that marked legacy media (Horton & Wohl, 1956).

Webtoon ventures and the cultivation of new platform innovations, genres, creators, and audiences have been addressed elsewhere (Cho, 2021; Park et al., 2019; Shin, 2018). However, these investigations pale in comparison with the massive volume of studies on major social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram and their socio-technological affordances. Since the late 2000s, Twitter has been conceptualized as both a public forum and echo chamber for political communication (Colleoni, Rozza, & Arvidsson, 2014; McGregor, Mourão, & Molyneux, 2017) and as a catalyst for the parasocialization of everyday communities (Jarzyna, 2021). Similarly, Facebook has proven to be a “powerful, interpellating, confessional technology of the self” (Friesen, 2017, para. 32) as well as a cross-platform social media environment that maintains characteristics of an echo chamber (Dubois & Blank, 2018). Instagram, on the other hand, has become notorious as an unintended incubator of self-harm and suicidal tendencies among youth and other susceptible groups due to its ever-expanding cache of unrestricted graphic content (Arendt, Scherr, & Romer, 2019). Among the other impacts of these digital technologies of the self, such as facilitating the spread of misinformation and other problematic content as well as the blatant exploitation of personal data (i.e., if the product is free, then the user is the product), these social networking platforms can reinforce entrenched views, attitudes, and beliefs. Certainly, this phenomenon begs further study and analysis in the webtoon context.

Continuing the existing trend of social media entertainment platform expansion, webtoon readership statistics have mushroomed since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. CANVAS webtoons are organized into 23 different genre categories—seven more genres than the ORIGINALS section, which increased in both volume and popularity after the 2020 pandemic began to spread. At the time of writing, CANVAS featured more than 159,000 webtoon series—a notable increase on the approximately 99,000 series posted when this study began in early 2021. As one might expect, engagement with WEBTOON has served as an important mechanism for mobile and online entertainment escapism as well as the facilitation of an online community. The CANVAS community posts comments for various purposes, including providing feedback to creators and instigating playful interactions with fellow readers. To strengthen the bonds between geographically distant readers and content creators, the site regularly provides reminders of the multi-millions of active readers in this community. For example, the alternating list of “Weekly Hot” series on the CANVAS landing page featured the following popular series in March 2024 (likes in millions and readership in thousands): Romance, *Boy Girlfriend* (6M, 799.9K; Pastaflavour, 2021–present); comedy, *Monsters and Girls* (4M, 446.2K; Idolomantises, 2022–present) and *Crow Time* (3.5M, 311.2K; Isa, 2021–present); slice of life, *Spicy Mints* (1.6M, 205.5K; Remmul, 2021–present) and *Mythed Up* (611.3K, 108.8K; MaccusNormann, 2022–present); and supernatural, *Eldritch Darling* (752.9K, 102.6K; mishacak3s, 2022–present). These series titles are only a tiny sample of what is on offer. The broader CANVAS community represents a vast spectrum of writing and visual styles, as well as a trope salad of posting conventions, employing a range of emojis, shorthand idioms, and slang. If nothing else, then these traits alone inspire us to peer deeper into this swelling environment.

Studies on Korean media and popular culture have long since received scant attention when compared with the plethora of research on China and Japan. Korea has long been a leading region of innovation in ICT. Readers are likely to appreciate that Korea's creative industries attract global attention for their vibrant ICT content, as well as for the economic and cultural heft of their internationalization strategies (see Jin, 2016; Yecies, Shim, Yang, & Zhong, 2020). Korean-originated webtoons—a relatively open online and mobile media platform that blends aspects of communication, digital storytelling, social media entertainment, and serialized digital comics—have yet to be studied and understood as a key energizer of Asia's globally oriented creative industries and their distinctive brands of popular culture. Major creator-centric platforms include Naver Webtoon, Daum Webtoon, KakaoPage, Lezhin Comics, Toptoon, Bomtoon, Comico, Toomics, One Store, and Justoon. These creator economy enterprises are now hosting, coproducing, translating, licensing, and investing in multilanguage webtoons as a major source of transmedia content for global audiences (Wang & Yecies, 2023).

In terms of their communicative properties, WEBTOON and several other webtoon platforms are open to immediate reader feedback, enabling creators to transform content in response to reader tastes. Some platforms have disabled the commenting tool altogether to avoid both positive and negative responses, which have become overwhelming for many enterprises and practitioners to manage. As witnessed by us at the end of 2021, WEBTOON modified its site to enable CANVAS creators to remove inappropriate comments from their series and block abusive users. This interface update was in response to the ongoing complaints by amateur creators who were being distracted from their core work and experiencing serious threats to their well-being (Canvas Team, 2021). Nonetheless, the degree of openness shown in this participatory environment and the dynamics of its communication ecology have encouraged a heterogeneous cohort of users to use the commenting feature to express a range of emotions and support for others in their wider webtoon community.

To us, this is a conspicuous and vital contribution to the process of “co-creating engagement” (Evans, 2019), in which emotion plays a key role as a form of social adhesive for communities active across the broad social media entertainment and communication domains. The following quintessential example by user AthanF was posted as an open message to both a specific creator and the community at large—of the romantic Boy's Love (BL) series, *My Weird Roommate* (Yana, 2018–present), which is about a punk rocker and a nerd who cohabit:

Dear Sakurada Yana, you probably won't read this, but I thought of leaving a record. My sister read all your comics, and she loved it. She died today, of complications of Covid. Thank you for providing some joy in her life, she was always running to read her BLs in the speed of Bi. See ya. Edit: Thanks for the sentiment, it's been rough. Appreciate the reply Sakurada, and she needed that serotonin, I believe we all here do 🙏❤️🧡💚💙💜🖤❤️
(Personal communication, June 16, 2020)

As noted elsewhere, some of the positive results of such parasocial interactions across digital media—particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic and its periods of quarantine—include the enhancement of personal well-being (Jarzyna, 2021). The above message represents a much larger world of interactions among the CANVAS community. Through a closer study of the platform and its affordances, we stand to

gain a deeper appreciation of the underlying communication dynamics of WEBTOON and some of the implications for the wider industry's ecosystem.

Research Method

To collect and analyze evidence for this study, we first developed an intelligent text analytics algorithm enabling a page-by-page search of all comments linked to the 133,000-plus titles across the 23 CANVAS genres featured on WEBTOON. Each series has a distinct URL. In this initial stage, the program identified more than 14 million messages posted in English between February 2020 and February 2021, comprising what we call "year 1 of COVID" (see Table 1). Second, the program organized the data set into 23 comma-separated values text files, enabling the data to be presented in a column-specific table-structured format. This process provided a detailed overview of the series names and their genres, episode titles, the total number of episodes, start and end dates of each series, the total number of comments in each genre, comment IDs, the total number of users posting comments, and the comments themselves, as well as the number of likes, dislikes, and responses for each comment. Third, to investigate the potential ways in which readers use the platform to communicate intimate feelings and emotions with others—beyond discussions about the stories and their potential linkages to the pandemic—users' likes (which are equated with "sympathy") were tabulated. A common name for this overall approach is "emotional detection."

Table 1. CANVAS Webtoon Genres and the Total Number of Collected Comments.²

Popularity–Ranked in Terms of Comments	Genre	Number of Series	Number of Comments
1	Comedy	29,819	5,008,229
2	Drama	12,922	3,251,300
3	Romance	18,332	2,003,345
4	Fantasy	21,290	1,971,894
5	Action	10,309	486,507
6	Horror	3,183	427,980
7	Heartwarming	3,101	342,335
8	Animals	2,644	221,013
9	Crime/mystery	2,388	189,092
10	Short story	5,008	154,544
11	Sci-fi	5,477	58,060
12	Supernatural	5,321	56,304
13	School	2,191	53,665
14	Historical	743	52,344
15	Superhero	3,458	40,230
16	Postapocalyptic	1,141	25,946

² As more than half of the series titles in the slice-of-life and all-ages genres are comprised of series from other genres, they have been excluded from Table 1.

17	Informative	1,249	20,430
18	Inspirational	1,209	16,619
19	Thriller	2,624	12,294
20	Sports	304	2,491
21	Zombies	376	636
Totals		133,089	14,395,258

A wide range of emotion-detection techniques have been developed to capture emotions and investigate their communicative patterns within diverse forms of unstructured data sources, including texts, audios, images, and videos. While text data include any type of written document—including e-mails, reviews, comments, and books—audio and sound data might comprise formal speeches or excerpts from a customer service phone conversation (Sailunaz, Dhaliwal, Rokne, & Alhadj, 2018). In addition, audio-based emotion-detection methods can be used to analyze acoustic features like pitch, intensity, rhythm, and prosody, providing significant insights into the emotional content of speech. Support vector machines, convolutional neural networks, and long short-term memory networks can be used to process raw audio data for emotion classification (Sefara, 2019), thereby enabling researchers to gain new contextual understandings of the emotions being expressed and their spatial and temporal relationships. Finally, in image and video emotion detection, relevant computer vision techniques are applied to infer emotions. These methods are based either on facial muscle movements (Zacharatos, Gatzoulis, & Chrysanthou, 2014) or more general computer vision techniques based on deep convolutional neural networks. Both techniques offer automatic emotion recognition and enhanced human-computer interactions, plus the real-time personalization of recommendations necessary for improving user experiences. These techniques open pathways for increasing the effectiveness of communication practices and artificial intelligence (AI)-generated decision making across platforms.

The present study focuses on intelligent text analytics for emotion detection. These methods, generally referred to as text-based emotion detection can be categorized into lexicon-based, machine-learning (ML)-based, and hybrids (Acheampong, Wenyu, & Nunoo-Mensah, 2020). Lexicons or dictionaries containing words and phrases associated with specific emotions are used to score text based on the presence of emotion-related terms (Zad, Heidari, Jones, & Uzuner, 2021). Machine-learning-based techniques, on the other hand, are used to create a computation model trained on a labeled data set of textual data to identify emotions in new data. Long-standing ML-based methods often use relevant ML methods such as transfer learning and deep learning (Kratzwald, Ilić, Kraus, Feuerriegel, & Prendinger, 2018). In addition, sentiment analysis methods can be used to enhance the performance of emotion-detection models (Zad et al., 2021); these are used to drive market research on consumer engagement with products, advertisements, and brand content.

In sum, we collected comments from all 23 genres to study how members of the WEBTOON community contribute to the formation of an “intimacy chamber” in which community members acknowledge signs of despair, cries for help, and self-mockery while potentially working to ameliorate them. The automated text analytics algorithm grouped all the comments that contained or related to the four distinctive dictionary groups listed in Table 2. Group 1 references a dynamic spread of terms relating to COVID-19 and

the pandemic experience. The terms listed under Groups 2, 3, and 4 are derived from the lexicon of basic emotions conceptualized in Parrott (2001), an authoritative social psychology source for investigating primary emotions and their synonymic instances. This research stage aims to identify and categorize the user comments posted during “year 1 of COVID” that contain one or more of the listed keywords associated with these affective dimensions and with emotional health more broadly, thereby indicating signs of stress including depression, anxiety, irritability, mood swings, and a generally pessimistic outlook on life. Of course, joy and love and their synonyms (e.g., happiness/happy, amused/amusing, excited/exciting, pleasure, enjoyment, entertaining, comforting, delightful, like, and fun) are also core to the established lexicon of emotions. However, an initial overview of the site’s comments revealed these terms were commonly used to express users’ affinity for a series or episode, or for webtoons more broadly, rather than to express personal emotions. As a result, we have saved a deeper investigation of the primary emotions of joy and love for future study.

Table 2. Dictionary of Search Keywords.

Group	Root Concept or Emotion	Related Keywords
1	COVID-19	COVID, virus, pandemic, outbreak, epidemic, infection, infectious, sick, sickness, contagion, contagious, illness, plague, symptoms, flu, influenza, disease, vaccination, shot, transmission, contamination, face mask, hand sanitizer, alcohol wipes, fever, temperature, hospital, doctor’s, doctor’s office, doctors, medical, surgery, condition, collapse, death, dying, dead, quarantine, lockdown, wave, unhealthy, poor health
2	Sadness	sad, lonely, gloomy, disappointed, hopeless, grieved, grief, grieving, unhappy, lost, troubled, miserable
3	Fear	worried, doubtful, nervous, anxious, terrified, scared, panic, panicked, horrified, desperate, confused, stressed
4	Anger	angry, annoyed, annoying, frustrated, frustrating, bitter, infuriated, infuriating, irritated, irritating, mad, maddening, cheated, vengeful, insulted, insulting

The text analytics for emotion detection isolated 268,2964 relevant comments containing at least one of the Group 1 “COVID words,” coupled with a keyword from one of the other three groups. Our primary research question was “How are members of this community using the commenting feature on WEBTOON to express their emotions and/or react to others doing so concerning the COVID crisis as it was unfolding?” All the sample comments included in this study (and exemplified in Tables 3 and 4) are among those with the highest number of likes.

Research Findings

By our calculations, there were more than 2 billion views and a half-billion subscriptions to webtoon series on Webtoons.com. The average number of comments posted for each CANVAS webtoon episode across this entire data set (excluding those with nil comments) was 213 and their average length ranged between 10

and 15 words. Informative, historical, and inspirational series attracted the longest comments. The comedy, romance, fantasy, and drama genres received the largest number of posts that referenced both COVID-19 and the primary emotions of fear, anxiety, anger, and sadness. The average number of replies for these comments was 37.6, and the average number of likes for comments with more than one vote was 72.5. Although the representative exchanges and sharing of emotions, shown in Table 3 and Table 4, were relatively short and fragmented, they attracted inquisitive readers who remained invisible as well as registered users who were more active because they could (and did) give likes and post replies for each comment.

Unsurprisingly, some readers posted playful comments drawing connections between a webtoon's narrative and the pandemic. Many of these comments displayed a mix of emotions and self-mockery. This aspect aside, the appearance of the keywords listed in Table 2 in highly ranked comments represents a particular type of audience chatter and extemporaneous discussion. This frequently took the form of expressions of concern—possible cries for help—interwoven with the language of camaraderie rather than commentary on the webtoon under discussion (even if the series dealt with a virus or illness). The data set contained conspicuous examples of users who used at least one of the listed keywords to offer explicit commentary on the COVID-19 pandemic as opposed to remarks about the story and plot elements or characters and artwork in the relevant webtoon series/episode. Although explicit references to “enjoyment” and its synonyms were excluded from the data collection process, the examples that were recorded were given largely in response to the negative sentiments expressed by some readers. We note that the site has recently enabled users to edit their original comments and respond to others as a kind of addendum—marked by the appearance of “Edit” in a comment.

Table 3. Representative Comments From Very Popular Series That Suggest Feelings of Sadness, Fear, and/or Anger— Selected According to the Highest Number of Likes.

Content (User Name)	Likes	Title (Creator, Country if Known)	Genre(s)	Brief Description	Number of Episodes (As of Aug 2023)	Viewing Statistics (In millions [M] as of mid-2023)
Speed of quarantine Edit: thanks for top comment and is it just me or is someone gonna read this years from now and be sorta confused Edit Part 2 I'm not trying to hurt anyone it's just a sarcastic joke because the US took so long to put us in quarantine. Sorry if I hurt you (Stevonnie4life; personal communication, April 28, 2020)	4,154	<i>Eyes on Me</i> (loonytwin)	Romance, drama, Boys' Love BL	Evan is an absent-minded young man who forms a playful and romantic relationship with a guy living at his friend's house.	342	334.9M views, 1.1M subscribers, and a rating of 9.38/10
This made my quarantine birthday a lot better 😊 edit: y'all are so sweet! 💜 (just a weeb 🙌; personal communication, May 8, 2020)	1,861	<i>Immitis</i> (Badastello)	Romance, fantasy	A wealthy, intelligent young man forms a fantastical relationship with a coffee-loving female.	93 complete	8.5M views, 100,043 subscribers, and a rating of 9.72/10
I sat in the corner of my bedroom waiting for this notification 🙄🙄 Covid19 has officially made me sad and crazy 🤔🙌 (pageT_T; (personal communication, July 5, 2020)	1,561	<i>The Fish That Loved the Bird</i> (KaseySaus)	Fantasy, romance	An unexpected taboo love story between different hybrid races: Bird people (avian) and fish people (mermen). Each is intrigued by the other and their respective foreign worlds.	275 on hiatus	35M views, 162,135 subscribers, and a rating of 9.09/10
Damn. I'm still perfecting my stick figure. How like 3 people are disliking all the comments? Has quarantine driven y'all mad? (Crusty Krabb; personal communication, April 8, 2020)	784	<i>Piece of Mind</i> (Cookie + Bex)	Romance, slice of life, BL	Jake and Ash form a close bond and face life's challenges, including mental illness and its social and cultural stigmas.	37 complete	4M views, 77,697 subscribers, And a rating of 9.39/10
oh shit save him bro EDIT: TWO TOP COMMENTS !?! thanks just made my quarantine better (:3) (BANANAS are a sin; personal communication, May 5, 2020)	680	<i>String</i> (Kikowei)	Short story, romance, heartwarming	Tangled together like an unruly web of string, Wyn and Hira become unexpected soulmates who discover the rare fortune of love.	47 complete	2.8M views, 57,550 subscribers, and a rating of 9.61/10

My school was gonna have a field trip tomorrow, but it got cancelled because too many parents were worried about the virus. Edit: ok . . . you're telling me this dumb comment about a school field trip got me top comment? What even is the logic in this? (Unicorn_Shipper6308; personal communication, March 12, 2020)	430	<i>Little Sweet</i> (VSS-I)	Drama, romance, BL	Short vignettes featuring the budding bromance between Jayden and Jeremy.	65 complete	Unknown
Can we all just take a moment to appreciate that even though the author was recovering from Covid19 they still thought about and made this comic? We appreciate you author! (Astrid_007; personal communication, April 18, 2020)	53	<i>Chad and Joe</i> (Crooked Nugget)	Comedy, slice-of-life	An unlikely friendship between two roommates who are polar opposites of each other. Solving problems and understanding each other is their comedic forte.	36 on hiatus	1.5M views, 32,408 subscribers, and a rating of 9.76/10
when you're that lonely in quarantine so you can relate to the last panel (Earthworm Sally :3; personal communication, June 8, 2020)	46	<i>I Want to Be a Cute Anime Girl</i> (Azul Crescent)	Comedy, slice-of-life	Charon's sister gave him a makeover as a girl, and he liked it. This is her journey of self-discovery and realization of her true self. Only through life's great challenges can one discover their true friends.	335	99M views, 344,359 subscribers, and a rating of 9.42/10
Quarantine gave me some time to find new webtoons and low and behold I find this MASTERPIECE!! I'm so sad I could not be here for regular updating but I absolutely fell head over heels in love with this story! AUTHOR: I think I can speak for everyone when I say we	38	<i>Honey Lemon</i> (courtneywirthit) * At the time of writing, this webtoon	Romance	Kyoungmi's life seems perfect. She has an amazing best friend and boyfriend, as well as accolades for creating a hit drama series. But life takes	34 on hiatus	5.9M views, 313,722 subscribers, and a rating of 9.65/10

miss you but your health and well being should be put ahead of everything and I hope you know that you have a whole army of support waiting for you when ever you need us, we all LOVE U!!💕💕 (baylynne; personal communication, June 4, 2020)		became an Original series due to its rising popularity.		A turn after she experiences writer's block, succumbing to the pressures to create another hit. While visiting a voguish café, she reconnects with long-forgotten classmates and rekindles some complicated memories.		
Was this inspired by the covid pandemic? I really hope the aftermath doesn't happen in real life cuz that would be so sad. (akywong04; personal communication, June 10, 2020)	24	<i>The New Norm</i> (Kha.zi.mi, Malaysia)	Postapocalyptic, sci-fi	This postapocalyptic bio-punk series explores how a DNA-altering virus threatens human existence as we know it.	63 complete	691,032 views, 20,496 subscribers, and a rating of 9.64/10
THIS!!!! THIS NEEDS TO BE SHOWN EVERYWHERE RIGHT NOW!!! THE VIRUS IS NOT RACIST OR AGAINST ANYONE. THIS IS A BATTLE WE ALL MUST FIGHT & STAND TOGETHER FOR! I LOVE THIS COMIC FOR BEING SOOO REAL . . . THIS EXACT EVENT IS/HAS HAPPENED ALL OVER THE COUNTRY AND I HOPE SOMEONE WITH COMMON SENSE DOES STAND UP EACH TIME BUT SAD THING IS A LOT OF PEOPLE STAY QUIET AND THE VICTIM JUST CONSTANTLY GET BLAMED FOR NOTHING AND HAS TO CARRY THAT. THANK YOU FOR THIS EYE OPENING COMIC 💕🌹 (HarleyHarlzQuinn; personal communication, April 1, 2020)	21	<i>Tested</i> (YgetIt.org)	Informative, inspirational	This branded webtoon is an educational public service series that depicts a diverse cast of characters who experience a range of issues, for instance, relating to the human immunodeficiency virus, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other (LGBTQ+) persons, race, sexually transmitted infections, substance use issues, etc. It is sponsored by the New York Dept. of Health and Health Resources & Services Administration, which is an agency of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.	148	1M views, 15,749 subscribers, and a rating of 7.19/10

<p>I also lost my granny to Covid on Easter Sunday. I'm sorry. It was hard for me to say goodbye to my granny with the virus going around so I wish you peace and comfort during this time. ❤️ (hiho2020; personal communication, April 15, 2020)</p>	16	<p><i>Facing the Sun</i> (ArtbyTesslyn)</p>	<p>Sci-fi, drama, Girl's Love</p>	<p>See the world and experience a range of emotions through the ethereal perspectives of a dysfunctional android.</p>	130	<p>3.7M views, 76,177 subscribers, and a rating of 9.46/10</p>
<p>Dang, this is honestly helping me cope with quarantine because at some points I just feel so bored and sad. (Cinnamxn_Bun; personal communication, June 25, 2020)</p>	12	<p><i>Chibird</i> (Chibird)</p>	<p>Heartwarming, inspirational</p>	<p>Uplifting messages from a motley crew of cute and overly positive characters, including Chibird, Motivational Penguin, Shy Ghost, Positive Bunny, Hedgehog, and others.</p>	811	<p>5.3M views, 48,410 subscribers, and a rating of 9.77/10</p>
<p>Oh no! I'm so sorry about you being sick, glad it wasn't Covid, though! But, I do think it's a good thing to distance yourself from webtoon community. I read weekly manga, so unless there's a REAL bad cliffhanger, I don't mind slower updates. I get it, this comic crap is HARD. It's not easy, and I'm so sad that the comments from webtoon have been getting to you; that these people can't understand patience, and turn their toxic behavior to the poor creators. It does more harm, than good. (Cussundria Kneal; personal communication, May 8, 2020)</p>	11	<p><i>Rephaim</i> (Bre Manning a.k.a. Brepai, Australia)</p>	<p>Fantasy, thriller</p>	<p>Enter the semi-purgatory world thrust on Andy and his ordinary life after he is murdered by an undead monster. Through this wreckage and under the control of his shadow, he intermingles and negotiates deals with ominous characters known as the Rephaim.</p>	172	<p>9.1M views, 100,410 subscribers, and a rating of 9.48/10</p>

Table 3 contains several representative types of semi-anonymous confessions, including the self-disclosure of one or more of the primary emotions under investigation. Most relevant comments were posted between March and June 2020, during the intense early period of the pandemic. While other comments with much higher numbers of likes appeared in the full data set, the examples listed in Table 3 are the most relevant because they include explicit references to COVID-19 and/or one of the Group 1 keywords from Table 2.

A range of viewpoints are expressed in these comments, highlighting the utility of reading a particular webtoon during the pandemic. At the same time, the number of likes signals some behavioral role-modeling in terms of webtoon consumption as the links between a webtoon story and its graphical elements, on the one hand, and the pandemic, on the other hand, are contextualized as rhetorical statements that question the meaning of life during a crisis. In our opinion, these communicative strategies and their categories differ from other types of confession encountered in real-life contexts, such as a confession in a legal proceeding or court case; confessions made to religious figures; person-to-person confessions; and similar statements made in various public settings. The comments posted in these public IAS fora are markedly different from conventional confessions, which follow prescriptive or socially constructed templates or are forced or obtained via interrogation and under duress (Leo, 2009).

The representative statements collected in Table 3 reflect the existence of an assumed community listener—a subtle variation on the types of unsolicited confessions people often make on other social media apps, including disclosing personal details about one's life experiences or thoughts; anonymous confessions that reveal intimate knowledge one would otherwise keep secret; apologetic confessions eliciting forgiveness or sympathy (perhaps to clear one's name in the public arena); and narcissistic statements puffing up one's achievements, successes, and material wealth.

Unlike most of the emotion-driven comments captured in the present study, these other categories of confession seek to gain the attention of readers under a particular *modus operandi*—possibly including the desire to elevate one's status as a social media influencer. Conversely, included in the sample are thousands of "happy-go-lucky" and supportive comments, which represent an attempt to overcome feelings of anger and negativity. Given the conspicuous self-disclosure present in CANVAS, these comments reveal both positive and negative sentiments that may influence the community's perspectives and the mental health of individual users. To us, the comments and confessions exemplified in Table 3 reflect a clear sense of connectedness and social support—what we could call "intimacy at a distance"—which can potentially mitigate some of the perceived negative effects of the pandemic and the stress it has caused.

Table 4. Representative Comments Displaying Evidence of Support for Users Struggling With the Hardships and Stresses of COVID-19—Selected According to the Highest Number of Likes.

Content (User Name)	Likes	Title (Creator, Country if Known)	Genre(s)	Brief Description	Number of Episodes (As of August 2023)	Viewing Statistics (In millions [M] as of Mid-2023)
I forgot about my authors note! Stay safe in quarantine everyone! Look out for your health! And for those who watched an to [sic] unlock this early, thank you so much!! It brings me a lot of rev and you've supported me greatly! Have a good day everyone x (EmiMG, message from the creator; personal communication, April 13, 2020)	12,176	<i>ZomCom</i> (EmiMG)	Comedy, slice of life	Everyday life experienced by a zombie girl and her spooky friends.	200	147.3M views, 842,008 subscribers, and a rating of 9.65/10
Who else is doing all-nighter because they have nothing to do because COVID-19? (Ugly_anime_rat; personal communication, April 3, 2020)	4,163	<i>Hafu</i> (Nitroxarts, France)	Romance, slice of life, BL	A romantic coupling between two people from very different cultural and geographic backgrounds.	228	62.4M views, 335,887 subscribers, and a rating of 9.64/10
Hey everyone! I hope you all are doing okay despite the COVID-19 pandemic. Take care of your health and keep safe. 🙏❤️ Anyways— if you are bored, hop on to my Discord chanel. here's the link --> https://discord.gg/QvsJfa Edit: I feel like most of you don't get the joke for this new episode😂😂😂. oh welp- 😞 (Ms.potitocheeps, message from the creator; personal communication, March 19, 2020)	3,053	<i>I'm Dating a Celebrity</i> (Ms. Potitocheeps)	Romance, drama	Hazel's family struggles to make ends meet. She works tirelessly toward achieving her dreams. A chance encounter with a stranger opens her eyes to the other important things in life, such as love and friendship.	45 complete	16.3M views, 337,082 subscribers, and a rating of 9.48/10
Dreaming about COVID-19 💕💕💕💕💕 #justgirlythings (Tess.eye.can👁️👄👅; personal communication, March 17, 2020)	2,805	<i>Green & Gold</i> (Lisa Brenner, a.k.a. lisadorina, Germany)	Heartwarming, slice of life	A coming-of-age story about LGBTQ+ teenagers attending a German boarding school.	126	25.3M views, 257,961 subscribers, and a rating of 9.58/10

We all had dreams before covid. Just some wouldn't happen anyway. (KandaharRac3r; personal communication, April 21, 2020)	2,293	<i>Brutally Honest</i> (Deya Muniz, Brazil)	Comedy, slice of life	A series of short (micro) episodes focusing on amusing observations in life.	306 complete	78.5M views, 343,883 subscribers, and a rating of 9.44/10
This is more important than the hurricane and pandemic that's outside rn (.weeb..; personal communication, August 4, 2020)	2,051	<i>Jewel of the Sea</i> (Gaumeo, Vietnam)	Fantasy,drama	A romantic adventure between a mermaid and a merchant ship captain – each with a complex past.	51 (moved to the Tapas webtoon platform)	4.6M views, 64,473 subscribers, and a rating of 9.63/10
Their [sic] so cute and I don't know if this is a thing but happy 100th episode edit: thank you for the likes already and I hope you are safe in this pandemic (luna eclipse; personal communication, April 19, 2020)	1,837	<i>Scripted Love</i> (misterrico)	Comedy, romance, BL	A popular content creator hires an actor to portray his boyfriend, thereby generating extra attention as an influencer.	415 complete	56.7M views, 173,532 subscribers, and a rating of 9.65/10
So someone just called me a fag and it's weird cause I've never been called that before. Edit: Ya'll are way too sweet. I am a polyamorous lesbian and I know there are a lot of people out there who have it worse than me. I mean, people die for being just who they are. That's even basically what this story is about lol. So with everything going on w/ COVID-19, BLM, pride, and just basic life stuff if you need someone to talk to e-mail me at ally.stiles@outlook.com ! (princessally2020; personal communication, June 28, 2020)	1,285	<i>Resplendent</i> (Diby Doodle)	Drama, romance	A 17th-century rom-com with a fictional backdrop.	166	8.6M views, 65,993 subscribers, and a rating of 9.39/10
LETS KICK THEM COVID-19 ASS!!111! (hanashaharudin; personal communication, April 9, 2020)	1,235	<i>Piece of Cake!</i> (Namiko07)	Romance, slice of life	Rival bakers in a small town who fall in love.	194 on hiatus	33.9M views, 347,058 subscribers, and a rating of 9.15/10

I'm reading about a pandemic during one . . . Cool. Also I love the art (Robot pretzel; personal communication, May 15, 2020)	1,149	<i>The New Norm</i> (Kha.zi.mi, Malaysia)	Postapocalyptic, sci-fi	This postapocalyptic bio-punk series explores how a DNA-altering virus threatens human existence as we know it.	63 complete	691,032 views, 20,496 subscribers, and a rating of 9.64/10
Whats WRONG WITH HOLDING HAND- remembers that there's a pandemic going around (holy_potato15; personal communication, March 13, 2020)	93	<i>(Bts) Bangtan Daily</i> (zerorangeo)	Comedy, slice of life	Comical day-to-day encounters and inside jokes involving the seven-member boy band BTS.	90 on hiatus	6.8M views, 93,010 subscribers, and a rating of 9.75/10
hey guys stay safe from COVID-19(washhhh dem handsss 🤔🤔) (D Tire; personal communication, March 27, 2020)	691	<i>Daimaou</i> (amanduur)	Comedy, fantasy,BL	A cast of obnoxious characters who compete for power and its spoils.	307	15.1M views, 94,065 subscribers, and a rating of 9.62/10
i got excited about being early til i refreshed XD Edit: I have no idea how this got T.C but thanks ya'll!♡ SPREAD LOVE, COMPASSION, UNDERSTANDING AND HUGS—when Covid is on par with the common cold lol Air Hugs until then ya'll- I hope everyone has a kicka\$\$ day.♡♡♡ (Ricka-chan; personal communication, June 17, 2020)	684	<i>Revelation of Eros</i> (AkumaYoru)	Romance, slice of life	A true story about a young man from the slums of Mexico who attends university in the United States. He is a loner who is trying to navigate the challenges of this stark new environment.	189	13M views, 103,214 subscribers, and a rating of 9.76/10
this is the most beautiful reaction I've seen to this pandemic. too many people are reacting selfishly (thes'morestroyer; personal communication, March 21, 2020)	626	<i>Everything About You</i> (Saneparza, Mexico)	Romance, slice of life	A modern love story unfolds with twists among the cuts and episodes.	62 complete	4.7M views, 49,258 subscribers, and a rating of 9.64/10

Is anyone else waiting for a Corona (Covid-19) Chan? [i.e. an anthropomorphized anime caricature of the coronavirus] (LonelyLain; personal communication, March 14, 2020)	406	<i>Meme Girls</i> (Lucius Merryweather, Denmark via Merryweather Comics studios in Tokyo & Singapore)	Comedy, slice of life	A mash of content derived from memes, gaming consoles, and websites converted into anime girls.	235	172.5M views, 1M subscribers, and a rating of 9.26/10
is our beloved author showing us the future of the world, is he showing us what Covid is going to turn into? Edit: thanks for the top comment!!! now read more webtoons!!!👍 (day dream believer; personal communication, June 12, 2020)	398	<i>The New Norm</i> (Kha.zi.mi, Malaysia)	Postapocalyptic, sci-fi	This post-apocalyptic bio-punk series explores how a DNA-altering virus threatens human existence as we know it.	63 complete	691,032 views, 20,496 subscribers, and a rating of 9.64/10

As Table 4 shows, the number of likes for these representative and often provocative comments is among the highest recorded for this cohort. Again, while this may be an obvious expectation, the rhetorical cast of many of the comments is designed to provoke a response from readers, who may in turn feel a stronger bond with and acceptance by the community and encourage others to share similar sentiments. On the flip side, such unfiltered expressions of emotion have the potential to cause increased anxiety and distress among readers who “doom-scroll” through the comments section. Threats to the mental health of WEBTOON and other social media entertainment communities surely need some nuanced attention from the platforms themselves. At the least, we believe that CANVAS has a duty of care to warn readers of the potential triggers to be found in its comments section. CANVAS might also take the opportunity to remind readers that “joy-scrolling” or “hope-scrolling” are alternative reading strategies.

When pondering how WEBTOON and its technological affordances represent an extended digital technology of the self, we considered the role of self-disclosure alongside intimacy as an emotional connection (Miguel, 2018). Might some of the social media commentators in our study be constructing artificial sentiments as if they were creating an enlarged public platform for intimacy? Perhaps. This performative phenomenon on social media platforms has been well documented (Hinton & Hjorth, 2013). In the present study, we found that the CANVAS community and its communicative practices amounted to more than the conventional parasocial interactions (and subsequent one-sided relationships) that webtoon readers imagine they have with creators and fellow readers. This community has developed a range of emotional connections with other readers that go beyond basic readership activities through active commenting and liking behaviors that substitute for actual interactions and real-life relationships. Put simply, the commenting feature in CANVAS facilitates a growing familiarity among the site’s far-flung readership, developing an imagined social community linked through the disclosure of feelings and attitudes. This phenomenon is continuously mediated and triangulated by creators, readers, and audience-turned-participants, who reproduce a sense of “intimacy at a distance” in this online/mobile chamber.

Discussion

In June 2022, a subway station in New York City featured a WEBTOON ad campaign with the slogan: “We basically invented doom scrolling” (Johnston, 2022, para. 4). Added to the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 2020, “doom-scrolling” denotes an obsessive-compulsive engagement with negative news and UGC shared on social media platforms, which, in turn, can impact one’s mental and physical well-being. Without debating the merits of WEBTOON’s provocative claim, global fans of these multi-genre, vertically scrolling digital comics have achieved a reputation as passionate consumers who have been quick to embrace the technological affordances of a myriad of Korean and foreign-language webtoon platforms around the world. Despite the apparent advantages for active creators and dedicated readers in this evolving digital entertainment ecosystem, notable elements of labor exploitation have enabled WEBTOON and its commercial rivals to benefit the most from an uneven power arrangement (Kim & Yu, 2019).

Within this bigger picture, we have demonstrated how some previously unrecognized communicative properties of the WEBTOON platform are enabling practitioners and readers to build an affective community through its CANVAS amateur/experimental creator section. By applying a text analytics algorithm and emotion-detection methodology to several million comments, we have revealed how some

active members of this community self-disclose a range of emotions and empathetic responses—despite the exploitative relationship they may have with the industry. During year one of COVID-19, their UGC and activities included frequent expressions of commiseration about the pandemic and offerings of peer support. Together, creators and readers created a chamber for parasocial “intimacy at a distance,” participating in a form of “intimacy scrolling,” which still seems relevant in 2024.

Do the interactions of the kind investigated here improve a reader’s overall well-being? Might posting comments on CANVAS be described as mindful posting or “mindful scrolling?” Perhaps. Further research on the variety of ways in which webtoon readers respond to postings featuring the primary emotions of anger, fear, and despair, as well as joy, surprise, and love, is needed to gain a fuller picture of the intimacy chamber that WEBTOON facilitates. While “doom-scrolling” has existed since the rollout of Web 2.0 social media platforms, the activities and behaviors analyzed here have mushroomed in both scope and volume during the pandemic. Integral to this phenomenon, and based on the posts aggregated and analyzed in this study, is the fact that webtoon readers and fans use the commenting feature in CANVAS as a means of communicating mutual support, providing (whether knowingly or not) an alternative to doom-scrolling and its negative effects. This is a new finding in terms of the Webtooniverse and its evolution.

However, expressions of irony, deliberately avoiding exposing depressive feelings, and/or disguising the primary emotions of anger, fear, and despair as well as joy, surprise, and love in sarcasm and jokes (or even uplifting stories) may all require more sensitive handling. As other studies have shown, social media users are often coincidentally or even deliberately exposed to such content, potentially engendering serious emotional distress and subsequent self-harm and suicidal ideation (Arendt et al., 2019). Further training is needed to improve the proposed text analytics algorithm in terms of context-based emotional detection, with the dual aim of enhancing community building and reducing exposure to self-harm in WEBTOON’s parasocial intimacy chamber.

Identifying and treating mental health challenges are complex tasks, particularly given the diverse cultural and traditional contexts in which they arise and the needs of various at-risk individuals and groups. Is the community of registered users and readers in the CANVAS community at special risk? While it is difficult to offer a definitive answer, individuals typically experience mental health challenges because of adverse social and environmental influences. Poor mental health is a human rights problem that requires systemic change in how public and health-care organizations, as well as social networking and entertainment platforms, operate and manage their responsibilities. This is especially relevant in the context of the mushrooming growth of mental health problems witnessed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Internet and the rise of Web 2.0-enabled platforms and apps have long been identified as a major source for enhancing mental, physical, and social well-being, in terms of public knowledge and the provision of awareness programs (Guidry, O’Donnell, Miller, Perrin, & Carlyle, 2021). However, early diagnosis, identification, and intervention are often hindered by sufferers’ feelings of shame in disclosing or discussing mental health challenges with service providers and health services (Wang et al., 2020). Perhaps this phenomenon helps explain why expressions of despair and disguised cries for help are regularly found in the semi-anonymous comments posted on WEBTOON. It might also explain the frequency of positive and supportive comments. Depression remains one of the most prevalent types of mental health disorders—

especially as a result of online social networking (Pantic, 2014). In the course of their activity, chat-room users—including members of the WEBTOON community—can experience a variety of negative emotions and thoughts that deeply affect their everyday lives, leading to an increased likelihood of self-harm. It behooves us to pay more attention to the communicative practices observable in this space.

On the bright side, more people in different parts of the world are using social media platforms to counter mental health stigma and talk about their experiences of depression (Fitzgerald, Yue, Wong, & Green, 2022; Liao, Zhang, & Raney, 2022). Twitter, Facebook, and Sina Weibo (in China), and now partly WEBTOON, are mediated spaces where people are increasingly choosing to reveal their emotional vulnerabilities while generating a vast collection of materials for research and potential prevention—going beyond a platform’s function as a source of “news,” public forum for the exchange of ideas, or chamber for recycled perspectives. Indeed, the final comment included in Table 3 shows how one reader of the fantasy-thriller series *Rephaim* (Brepai, 2017–2023) has chosen to draw attention to the problem of unwarranted abuse directed at creators.

In such ways, rather than using it merely as a soapbox or an echo chamber, users of Webtoon.com employ its commenting feature to acknowledge fellow readers’ struggles and express empathy for those experiencing feelings of distress and hopelessness. In turn, this triggers a measurable wave of supportive responses from their peer community, overcoming the communication gap caused by one-sided parasocial interactions between creators and readers/fans and between individuals and groups of readers/fans. The examples listed in Tables 3 and 4 show how commentators use the platform to reach out for help rather than simply expressing opinions about the stories and other features of the digital comics under discussion—or perhaps achieving a clever combination of both.

Given this dual functionality, we argue the posting function on the site acts as a parasocial intimacy chamber—a giant message board and chat room where users can semi-anonymously (via an alias) confess their thoughts, feelings, or experiences—in this case, those relating to the COVID-19 pandemic. In turn, this may be empowering users to be more open to discussing sensitive or personal topics in a community that supports them with a simple regime of likes and replies. Future research should consider the reply threads to the types of comments included in Tables 3 and 4. We wonder whether peer-to-peer communication and the perception of anonymity and privacy might encourage self-management of depression. Whether they realize it or not, these globally dispersed webtoon readers are part of a supportive community that uses the CANVAS space for this very purpose, at least in part. Further studies in these and other related domains will enable scholars and industry stakeholders to gain a deeper knowledge of what webtoon readers think about their online community and their relationship to it. While the present study did not investigate whether webtoon readers found comfort in such parasocial interactions, the sheer volume of comments on WEBTOON presents a rich field for future inquiry.

Conclusion

Through this investigation, we have documented how members of the CANVAS community have built a semi-parasocial intimacy chamber by expressing themselves and communicating a range of emotions. The data set shows ample evidence of “cries for help” and/or threats to an individual’s well-being alongside

reassuring statements from readers who empathize with those who display signs of depression. As we have signaled, social media entertainment platforms such as WEBTOON would benefit from an automated mechanism for detecting signs of depression, as well as the primary and secondary emotions of fear, anxiety, anger, and sadness that accompany it.

At this point, we had been wondering how AI could be used to assist with the curation or moderation of such posts on the WEBTOON platform and others like it. At the very least, Naver's AI-empowered "Cleanbot," which the company has innovated over several years and recently deployed across its wider portal (Lee, 2021), could be used as a "despair detection" tool in addition to functioning as a mechanism for filtering abusive and malicious comments in community fora. If sensitively deployed, such tools might hold the potential to transform doom-scrolling into a positive user experience, especially where hate speech including stereotyping, mocking, and swearing/cursing is concerned.

There are opportunities, and perhaps even a moral obligation, to use content-filtering algorithms for automatically detecting and labeling—rather than removing—potentially harmful or inappropriate content that may impact a reader's mental health. Artificial intelligence-powered mood/emotion-tracking and self-assessment chatbots can be used proactively to engage with users who are about to post inappropriate or potentially risky content, offering advice and feedback on the platform's community guidelines. In mid-2023, WEBTOON began adopting AI in a significant way by establishing a new robust AI data subsidiary called Kepler, tasked with developing advanced recommendation and curation capabilities as well as increasing the overall efficiency of its potential advertising and monetization opportunities (Choi, 2023). As other studies have found, efficacious applications of chatbot tools that can lead to social change are being developed at an accelerating pace (Baabdullah, Alalwan, Algharabat, Metri, & Rana, 2022). Employing AI technology is assumed to improve communication within communities, helping users to cope better with the flow-on effects of social media consumption while empowering them to seek help beyond any particular crisis. With such tools in place, a platform could augment the community experience beyond the supportive and encouraging "confessions" accessible on it.

How individuals and various cohorts use the digital technology of the self to construct meaning and a sense of community in everyday life continues to guide disciplinary research, and this study has analyzed commenting tools to explore this phenomenon. The detection of digitally induced depression and the negative impacts of social media has been the object of serious study for some time now, addressing the boundaries between social media usage and how users communicate their negative feelings (Coppersmith, Dredze, & Harman, 2014; De Choudhury, Gamon, Counts, & Horvitz, 2013). The self-defensive ambiguities common in social media texts, as well as the cultural contexts involved in expressing despair as a sign of depression, remain challenges for researchers. Turning to the communication of public health information via social media, illustrated narratives in digital comics have the potential to reach mass audiences through eye-catching visuals and text, combined with storytelling appeal (Kearns & Kearns, 2020). Webtoons fall firmly into this category, and their accessibility via globally accessible platforms points to the importance of gaining a better understanding of them as a digital technology of the self. In theory and increasingly in practice, social media platforms are enabling peers to express their depressive symptoms, collectivize, support one another, and discuss wellness pathways and treatment options—developments posing important future research questions about self-disclosure on social media (Nabity-Grover, Cheung, &

Thatcher, 2020). Although there is no universal model of how digital interventions might effectively meet the needs of individuals on digital platforms like WEBTOON, new forms of detection may offer a valuable resource to support social media users on mental health.

As AI platforms and technologies continue to escalate and infiltrate our social interactions, they inevitably transform the essential conditions of contemporary life and the ways people are connected to society and with each other, especially emotionally. With the increased reliance on technology and other material and natural resources, humanity must critically reconsider its coexistent relationships with nature, animals, objects, artifacts, spaces, and technologies. In parallel, the advancement and convergence of informational, communicational, and biological technologies frequently urge us to rethink what it means to be human in theoretical and practical terms. This thinking thus emerges to reconsider human identity and emotion as scalar co-creation of human and nonhuman intermediaries instead of serving as a monolithic innate development of person/selfhood. Accordingly, one is enticed to challenge conventional notions of the human subject and its relationship with the world, thereby generating a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of human connections and emotions and questioning their blurred boundaries.

As our life trajectories expansively entangle with increasing AI-driven platformed medialities, how we represent and communicate ourselves to others also traverse beyond our physical-world dwellings to intersect with multiple and dispersed individuals and social spaces. As our research findings suggest, this is typically exemplified by the confessional behavior of WEBTOON users who collectively exploit the platform as a communicative technology of the self, thereby affording them and other readers some intimacy at a distance. In this remit, users subject their emotions to particular algorithmic configurations to productively engage with other people throughout various contingencies. Therefore, the notion of distributedness lends to a more diverse and inclusive theoretical notion of communication, which allows new research to flourish.

Within the broadening body of research on the complex intersections between emotion and communication, a more flexible and evolving framework is likely to inspire new debates. By navigating the ethical, social, and political implications of these transformative changes, studies like the present investigation reevaluate what it means to be humanly emotive considering mechanical and/or technological advancements. Therefore, such research in the communications domain sheds light on the affording of alternative ways of engaging with the frontiers of AI-human convergence—especially as it shapes the process of “co-creating engagement”—in which emotion plays a key role (Evans, 2019).

Finally, we must ask: Where does a given platform’s responsibility lie in terms of intervening and responding to signs of despair and threats to an individual’s well-being, in addition to other comments and attitudes, both negative and positive, expressed by its users and wider readership? Future researchers should endeavor to collect, identify, and analyze the full threads of the comments in this data set and others like it. Reader responses to messages containing the COVID and pandemic keywords—not to mention keywords relating to other crises—plus one or more emotional keywords are likely to reveal a more nuanced understanding of other webtoon communities and their communication practices than we have been able to achieve in this preliminary study.

Ideally, community building can be enhanced by AI functionality to become a co-creational process that is based on signs of solidarity and collaboration among human users/participants as well as AI-managed infrastructures and mechanisms. While AI will not solve all problems, such developments in our study are aspects of “digital intermediation” (Hutchinson, 2023) that are yet to be fully explored. More research is needed in this area to discover how both active and transient members of social media communities react to, support, or inadvertently fuel threats to a user’s well-being, as well as stimulate “uplifting content.” We also need more rigorous debates on the roles and impacts of AI and other emotion-detection mechanisms for AI-aided or AI-driven tools for analyzing social media entertainment and communication platforms. To this end, future studies are likely to deepen our understanding of how the communication and self-expression among members in webtoon communities differ from the parasocial activities of users of other social media. Building on the uniqueness of webtoon platform technology, communities, and cultures analyzed herein can only strengthen the dynamic methodological, theoretical, and conceptual bridges between the ever-expanding Webtooniverse and our wider field of inquiry.

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