

## Snack Culture's Dream of Big-Screen Culture: Korean Webtoons' Transmedia Storytelling

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The sociocultural reasons for the growth of webtoons as snack culture and snack culture's influence in big-screen culture have received little scholarly attention. By employing media convergence supported by transmedia storytelling as a theoretical framework alongside historical and textual analyses, this article historicizes the emergence of snack culture. It divides the evolution of snack culture—in particular, webtoon culture—to big-screen culture into three periods according to the surrounding new media ecology. Then it examines the ways in which webtoons have become a resource for transmedia storytelling. Finally, it addresses the reasons why small snack culture becomes big-screen culture with the case of *Along With the Gods: The Two Worlds*, which has transformed from a popular webtoon to a successful big-screen movie.

*Keywords: snack culture, webtoon, transmedia storytelling, big-screen culture, media convergence*

Snack culture—the habit of consuming information and cultural resources quickly rather than engaging at a deeper level—is becoming representative of the Korean cultural scene. It is easy to find Koreans reading news articles or watching films or dramas on their smartphones on a subway. To cater to this increasing number of mobile users whose tastes are changing, web-based cultural content is churning out diverse subgenres from conventional formats of movies, dramas, cartoons, and novels (Chung, 2014, para. 1).

The term *snack culture* was coined by *Wired* in 2007 to explain a modern tendency to look for convenient culture that is indulged in within a short duration of time, similar to how people eat snacks such as cookies within a few minutes. Snack culture describes a change in one's habit of cultural consumption. Instead of watching a film for two hours, individuals consume popular culture—music, television programs, games, and movies—in short periods, sometimes less than 10 minutes. This phenomenon is made possible by the emergence of digital technologies, particularly smartphones (Miller, 2007).

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Snack culture has become a new trend in global cultural industries. Korea has embraced this new culture, including webtoons, web dramas, and web entertainment, in the convergence of an emerging cultural genre (webtoons) and smartphones.<sup>2</sup> As one of the most wired countries in the world—the nation is among the highest in terms of penetration—Korea has advanced several cutting-edge technologies, including broadband and smartphone, and these digital technologies have significantly changed not only people's daily lives but their habits in consuming popular culture. Therefore, snack culture, originally referring to the quick habit of consuming information and cultural resources, should be considered through the interaction between culture and technology, because the meanings of time and space in contemporary societies and the commodification of leisure time in late capitalist societies have greatly shifted in Korea.

Many Koreans started to enjoy webtoons on the two largest web portals—Naver and Daum—with their notebook computers at home and work in the early 2000s. Now, on a subway, one witnesses people of all ages looking at their smartphones and scrolling down the screen quickly with their thumbs. If a smile is spotted on the smartphone user's face, it would not be far-fetched to say the person might be reading his or her favorite webtoon (E. Jin, 2014). The Internet and the smartphone have driven the growth of snack culture, and many new creators in the realm of popular culture, including webtoon, film, and drama, quickly began to use the media convergence between digital technologies and cultural content to develop a new type of culture. In other words, with the rise of smartphones, people's lifestyles and consumption patterns have substantially shifted, and in this new media environment, webtoons flourish in the early 21st century. Interestingly, this snack culture has become a new resource for big-screen culture as webtoons are being turned into films, dramas, and digital games. Seemingly tiny, trivial, and conveniently packaged culture has become a significant source for digital media storytelling.

Three developments—the webtoon, the smartphone, and snack culture—arrived in Korean society only a decade or so ago; therefore, little research has examined the sociocultural reasons for the growth of webtoons as snack culture and their influence in big-screen culture. To fill this research gap, I employ media convergence supported by transmedia storytelling as a theoretical framework alongside historical and textual analyses to historicize the emergence of snack culture. I divide the evolution of snack culture—in particular, webtoon culture and its infiltration of big-screen culture—into three periods according to the surrounding new media ecology. I examine the ways in which webtoons have become an important resource for transmedia storytelling. Finally, I address the reasons that small snack culture has become big-screen culture in the 2010s with a case study of *Along with the Gods: The Two Worlds*, which has transformed from a popular webtoon to a successful big-screen movie.

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<sup>2</sup> *Webtoon* is a portmanteau of *web* and *cartoon*—originally meaning comic strips distributed via the Internet but now via smartphone. A webtoon is a *manhwa*-style web comic that is typically published in chapters online (Kwon, 2014). As Kang (2017) explains, "web-dramas, which are original serialized dramas that are released primarily on online platforms, are a recent development of digital content in South Korea" (p. 762). Some exemplary web dramas are *Aftermath*, *Love for Ten*, and *Twenty Years Old*—all of which are less than 20 minutes per episode.

### **Transmedia Storytelling and Media Convergence**

Just as snack culture—whether webtoon, web drama, or web entertainment—has relied on media convergence, cultural production and consumption have depended on digital technologies. Snack culture is especially based on digital storytelling, defined as “a two-to-four-minute multimedia story in which photographs, film and drawings are used to convey a personal story, personally narrated by the storyteller” (Hancox, 2017, p. 53). Webtoons, which are important sources of big-screen culture such as television dramas and films, are especially interconnected with the increasing role of digital storytelling; therefore, it is crucial to understand transmedia storytelling in conjunction with media convergence.

Although media convergence has several characteristics, it is primarily about the mix of digital technologies and content for achieving endless transformation to maximize the benefits to both users (in a new way of convenience) and developers (in a new way of capital accumulation) in the digital media era (Jenkins, 2006; D. Jin, 2013). Several scholars have emphasized the nexus of media convergence and transmedia storytelling in the age of digital technologies. Among these, Freeman (2015) points out, “transmedia storytelling is perhaps the most aesthetically theorized component of media convergence, and one that has gained significant academic presence over the last decade” (p. 215). As Mikos (2016) and Jenkins (2006) argue, one of the defining characteristics of media convergence is “the flow of content across multiple media platforms” (pp. 2–3). This flow has been actualized through transmedia storytelling in the 2010s. In the same vein, Evans (2011) explains:

In essence, the term transmediality describes the increasingly popular industrial practice of using multiple media technologies to present information concerning a single fictional world through a range of textual forms. . . . It may relate to practices such as franchising, merchandising, adaptations, spin-offs, sequels and marketing. (pp. 1–2)

More specifically, transmedia storytelling is a popular technique in cultural production: “doing transmedia means to make the project’s contents available on different technological platforms, without causing any overlaps or interferences, while managing the story experienced by different audiences” (Giovagnoli, 2011, p. 17).

However, transmedia storytelling needs to be understood not only as the flow of story from the original text to several different platforms but also as the expansion or compression of the original story to fit into platforms’ unique attributes. As Jenkins (2007) argues, the media industry has rapidly changed, and, therefore, “the current configuration of the entertainment industry makes transmedia expansion an economic imperative, yet the most gifted transmedia artists also surf these marketplace pressures to create a more expansive and immersive story than would have been possible otherwise” (para. 3). In other words, transmedia storytelling as stories told across multiple media “is not just an adaptation from one media to another: it is a narrative expansion” (Scolari, 2017, p. 125).

Of course, this does not mean that all transmedia experiences are expansive. As Scolari (2013) clarifies, “many audiovisual contents, rather than expanding the story, reduce it to a minimum expression, like in trailers and recapitulations” (p. 4). In the snack culture era, the collision of old and new media

produces a large number of textual splinters (Miller, 2007); therefore, sometimes compression occurs throughout transmedia storytelling.

Meanwhile, transmedia storytelling involves not only text but also characters (Shige, 2018; Steinberg, 2012) and visual images. Thus, the current focus on the adaptation of textual stories is limited, and it does not reflect the contemporary emphasis on visual images. It is critical to comprehend that transmedia storytelling is not a simple adaptation from an original source—in particular, text—to another platform, but rather sometimes necessitates expansion and other times compression to fit into each platform's visual attributes.

Korea has recently advanced a new type of transmedia storytelling as webtoons have gained popularity. Cultural producers, such as film directors, television drama producers, and game designers, have paid attention to and adapted webtoons for their own cultural forms. As webtoons have created one of the most unique youth cultures in the early 21st century, the local cultural industries have relied on webtoons as new sources. This phenomenon is sudden and rampant. As Stavroula (2014) notes, "technology advancements have created new forms for stories," and "a digital story is a short form of a digital production narrative. Digital stories combine moving images with voice, music, sound, text, and graphics" (pp. 28–29). Webtoons are the latest and one of the most important forms of Korean transmedia storytelling (D. Jin, 2015). The discussion of transmedia storytelling in conjunction with media convergence in the cultural industry, focusing on webtoons as the central component of snack culture, will shed light on the extension of the current debates on transmedia storytelling.

### **The Evolution of Webtoons and Transmedia Storytelling in the Digital Media Era**

The webtoon-based transmedia storytelling age can be divided into three historical stages. The first generation is represented by the drawing of characters on personal home pages in the late 1990s and early 2000s. This is also the initial stage of digital transmedia storytelling. The second generation was when webtoonists started to post webtoons on Internet portals between 2003 and 2008. A few of these webtoons crossed over into big-screen culture, but generally they were not commercially successful. The third generation began with the introduction and growth of smartphones in 2009. This era symbolizes the boom of digital transmedia storytelling, both commercially and aesthetically.

#### ***The First Generation of Korean Webtoons and Early Transmedia Storytelling***

The history of webtoons begins in the late 1990s, when personal web pages were launched. The expenses of production on the Web were not as high as they were with magazines, and independent *manhwa* creators could develop new works based on their own ideas (D. Jin, 2015; K-Studio, 2013). In the 1990s, before the term *webtoon* had been coined, Korean comic artists began publishing on the Web (Marshall, 2016). Park Kwang-su's *Kwang-su Thinking*, which started in April 1997, became the first digital cartoon, and it was transformed into a play with the same title in November 2006 ("Play Kwang-su Thinking," 2009).

Chollian, an old form of Internet service engine, established Chollian Webtoon to provide webtoons to readers on August 8, 2000. The webtoon was defined as *manhwa* that was created to post on the Web

with web-focused attributes, such as vertical layout, color drawing, and speedy production and consumption (Seo, 2017). Chollian was the first to use the term *webtoon*, and *Invincible Hong Assistant Manager (Daeri)*, created by Hong Yun-pyo, became the first webtoon on this service (K. Lee, 2000). Most of the comics appearing on the Chollian Webtoon site followed conventional print formats (Cho, 2016).

Although several differences exist between print formats and webtoons, the most significant dissimilarity is the webtoon's vertical layout. Before the emergence of vertical-layout webtoons in the age of mobile technologies, including smartphones, comics writers who published their works on Internet portal sites such as N4 and Comics Today in 1999–2000 created horizontal pages that were designed to fit the landscape layout of a computer screen. Once the vertical layout was developed, it was quickly adopted by artists and it now dominates the webtoon format (Cho, 2016).

Kwon Yoon-joo—a comic artist of the new generation—created *Snow Cat* in 2001, an endearing comic about the diary of a white cat. The artist first used Cool Cat as a pen name on her home page in February 1998, but changed it to Snow Cat in August 2000. Soon after, *Marine Blues*, by Jeong Chul-yeon, became one of the most famous web comics. *Marine Blues* is a series of unconnected stories about the everyday life of Sea Urchin Boy. The popular web comic started in 2001, and several transmedia releases have followed, including online gaming in 2006 and an Android game released in 2012 (D. Lee, 2012).

In the late 1990s until the early 2000s, several cartoonists created their own web pages to showcase their works instead of trying to debut through magazines. *Papepopo Memories* by Shim Sung-hyun, *Snow Cat*, and *Marine Blues* became big hits (Age of Webtoons, n.d.; Bae, 2017). As Hancox (2017) points out, the early form of webtoon can be categorized as digital storytelling, because the creators developed cartoons for a two- to four-minute multimedia story in which drawings were used to convey a personal story on web pages. Although there were some limitations to this form, these early webtoon-like comics as snack culture became a new source of diverse cultural production. Korean webtoons opened a door to a transmedia storytelling format and have continued as new resources for many cultural forms, including broadcasting, film, and stage performance.

### ***The Second Generation of Korean Webtoons and Transmedia Storytelling***

In the early 2000s, socioeconomic milieus surrounding the Korean *manhwa* industry substantially changed, resulting in the beginning of the webtoon boom. The creation of webtoon platforms by the largest Internet portals—Naver and Daum—became a turning point. Daum created a webtoon portal in 2003, followed by Naver in June 2004.<sup>3</sup> During this era, many webtoonists published their works on these Internet portals, and some webtoonists started to receive a small writer's fee (S. K. Park, 2013; Seo, 2017).

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<sup>3</sup> In 2004, Naver Webtoon began as an in-house start-up at Naver. It established itself as its own company in May 2017. According to its website, "Naver Webtoon is dedicated to innovative storytelling that changes with the world by developing a platform where creators can truly meet their audience" (Naver Webtoon Corp., 2018).

Among the several famous webtoons that appeared, Kang Full's *Sunjeong Manhwa* reached a milestone as it attracted 2 million viewers per day on average (M. Lee, 2008). Because it was published in a vertical display, *Sunjeong Manhwa* was considered the first webtoon in the contemporary *manhwa* industry (Korea Creative Content Agency, 2016). Unlike previous digital comics, which consisted of only a few episodes, Kang Full combined epics with a vertical scroll method and started to develop a webtoon serial to be published on the site (Korea Creative Content Agency, 2015).

Webtoons now play a central role in transmedia cultural production as they are distributed through multiple platforms and have been re-created since the mid-2000s. Webtoons also have become sources for transmedia tie-ins in which several media features converge to produce novel aesthetic effects and new cultural genres (Cho, 2016). Since debuting in 2003, a sweet and wistful online comic titled *Sunjeong Manhwa* has become a pop culture phenomenon, generating countless Internet hits. This webtoon was adapted to a film titled *Hello, Schoolgirl* in 2008. The film deviated from the original webtoon but kept the webtoon's main themes intact. The director of the film, Ryu Jang-ha, preserved the original story's essence—the gradual development of love regardless of age difference (Soh, 2008).

During the second-generation era, Korean webtoons developed different features. As mentioned, it is during this stage in webtoon evolution that they began to be published in long vertical strips. In addition, they are often in color. Previous *manhwas* were usually printed in black ink due to the cost and time involved in color production. In contrast, webtoons are posted online, so there is no extra cost involved in producing them in color (D. Jin, 2015). This period saw the development of webtoons not only as new youth culture but also as a new source of transmedia storytelling.

The adaptation of webtoons into film and drama began with several webtoons developed in this period. Kang Full's *Apt* (2006) and B Class Dal-gung's *Dasepo Naughty Girls* (2006) were filmed and released at the same time (see Figure 1). Another of Kang Full's webtoons, *Ba:Bo*, started in 2004 and was adapted to a film in 2008. However, these films based on webtoons were not box office successes (J. Ha, 2016). *Dasepo Naughty Girls* originally started in 2004, and Super Action, a cable channel, made it a drama between 2006 and 2007.

One of the main attributes of transmedia is spreadability—spreading a narrative across platforms—and the Korean webtoon industry started to play a role as a source of transmedia storytelling (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013). As Stavroula (2014) points out, "transmedia is especially contextualized from a film perspective because films are key components of transmedia productions" (p. 34). Therefore, many film producers especially pay attention to webtoons. Unlike novels, webtoons consist of visual images supported by text, which are good sources for filmmakers. The adaptation of Korean webtoons, however, was limited to a few famous webtoons, and, as a reflection of the difficulty of transmedia storytelling, these movies did not achieve commercial success. For example, the narratives and plots of webtoons are sometimes quite simple and other times quite complicated, which demands that film directors and television producers expand or compress the original stories. During the process, webtoon-based films and television programs often lose the originality of the webtoons, which has created controversies among webtoon and webtoon-based movie fans.



Figure 1. Posters Apt and Dasepo Naughty Girls (see Im [2013] from <http://pss.kr/archives/10755>).

### ***The Third Generation of Korean Webtoons and Storytelling***

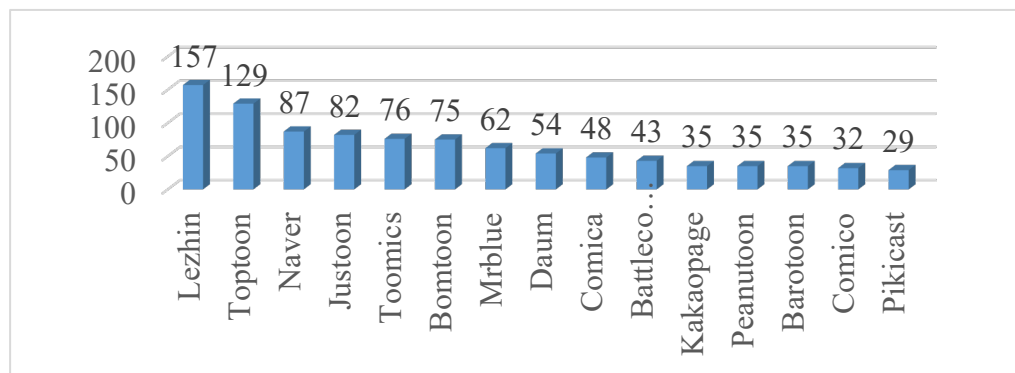
The third generation of webtoon evolution, which began in the late 2000s, characterizes the close convergence between webtoons and smartphones—a development that further drives the popularity of webtoons and webtoon-based transmedia storytelling. Korea developed its own smartphones in 2009, and webtoonists started to target this new form of digital technology, which has resulted in the growth of webtoons in the 2010s. As a reflection of the growth of smartphones, for example, people were able to read the webtoon *Misaeng* on a smartphone application that was developed and supported by the Korea Creative Content Agency two weeks in advance by paying fees. People without the app could read a free version of *Misaeng* on Daum two weeks later (Daum Webtoon, 2012). The Korean government continues to support the webtoon sector by providing financial and legal support as the industry continues to grow. In 2013 alone, the government provided \$5 million to webtoonists for the creation of excellent works (C. Park, 2016).

During this period, Yoon Tae Ho has become one of the most influential webtoonists, creating several famous webtoons, including *Moss* (2008–2009), *Inside Men* (2010), and *Misaeng* (2012–2013). The webtoon industry has continued to grow, from an estimated 529 million won in 2010 to 5,097 million won in 2018—a nearly tenfold increase (KT Economic Management Institute, 2013, 2015).

This recent period marks the boom era of webtoons and webtoon-based transmedia storytelling. For example, *Misaeng* (Incomplete Life) was turned into a drama on cable's tvN in 2014. *Misaeng* is an eponymous webtoon about the office life of a fictional trading company, portraying a hopeless intern's office life. The television series was a sensation, and it has been turned into very successful movies and television dramas.

To respond to the needs of busy digital users on the go, media content providers today release more webtoons, web dramas, and web entertainment materials that can be enjoyed in under 10 minutes on smartphone devices. Snack culture is a result of digital users' desire to enjoy cultural content quickly and on the go rather than making time for cultural consumption activities (Baek, 2014). Webtoons have become optimized for smartphones, from a prototypical webtoon with pictures and quotes on a vertical display to carrying special effects such as sound, background music, and vibration (S. Lee, 2016). Consequently, webtoons have witnessed a surge in the cultural market.

Naver and Daum continue to hold significant shares of the webtoon market; however, the webtoon portal Lezhin, with its introduction of a fee-based subscription system, has become the largest platform to publish webtoons since 2013. Lezhin published 157 webtoons in 2017—ahead of Naver's 87 and Daum's 54 (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2. Top 15 platforms for the production of webtoons in 2017 (Korea Manhwa Contents Agency, 2018).**

### **Webtoons as Snack Culture Become the Norm for Transmedia Storytelling**

Several elements explain the growth and development of webtoons as snack culture, including free content, diversity in genre, speedy publication, full color, and optimization for mobile devices. These sociocultural factors along with the rapid growth of smartphone technologies have greatly contributed to the recent surge of webtoons (D. Jin, 2015; Y. Kim, 2016). With the soaring use of smartphones, cultural content is at people's fingertips. Snack culture content guarantees convenience and entertainment in a short period of time. Prior to the emergence of snack culture, most cultural content could be accessed only through time-



consuming activities, such as going to movie theaters, reading a book for several hours, and watching television dramas at home (Y. Kim, 2016).

One of the primary reasons for webtoons' popularity is ease of access (D. Jin, 2015; Sohn, 2014). Previously, readers bought comic books or borrowed them from comic book rental stores. The growth of new platforms such as smartphones has made it more convenient for people to access webtoons anywhere and anytime. In this sense, media convergence is about the process by which digital technology adopts content not only through production but also through consumption.

A second factor in the popularity of webtoons are the diverse genres and themes that appeal to readers with varying tastes (Hwang, 2018; Sohn, 2014). Unlike the first stage of webtoon development, which focused on romance, webtoons today encompass genres such as thriller, fantasy, science fiction, and mystery. From political dramas to murder thrillers, webtoon genres have addressed several sociocultural issues that are deeply embedded in Korean society, which later make webtoons reliable sources for big-screen adaptations.

A third reason for webtoons' popularity is that the stories are more subtle than previous *manhwas*. Although the individual episodes of a webtoon are quickly digested (like snacks), the stories are neither short nor compact. The entire story is something of an epic, with diverse structures, conflicts, harmonies, and distinctive themes. But they are like snacks in the sense that people have no choice but to enjoy them bit by bit as webtoonists publish them daily. This ongoing, piecemeal consumption contrasts with, for example, novels, which can be read only after they are published in their entirety.

Fourth, Webtoons' visual images are intriguing, and many cultural producers are able to imagine the transformation of webtoons into movies and television dramas. As Zur (2017) points out, webtoons actualize their potential as sources for other cultural productions due to their distinctive story structure:

It is a storytelling mechanism that can capture complex reality and the psychological state of its characters without having to commit to one particular narrative voice. Even with minimal text, webtoons give us access to the inner state of a wide variety of characters through suggestive images. (p. 203)

Many webtoonists keep this transmedia storytelling in mind during their creation and publication. A movie critic (C. Song, 2014) indeed states that one of the main reasons for the transformation of webtoons into other cultural forms is their subject matter and themes, which are bold and interesting. When movie directors and television producers are looking for good scenarios, they often turn to webtoons.

Fifth, people's changing consumption habits have promoted the growth of webtoons. In the 21st century, many people prefer casual mobile gaming—in which games can be played in three to five minutes—over online gaming. Similarly, many Koreans like to consume popular culture in short periods, even less than 10 minutes at a time, on their smartphones (Miller, 2007).

Finally, the boom of the so-called loser syndrome among Korean youth has increased the popularity of webtoons (Ha & Lim, 2012; D. Jin, 2015). Millennials have suffered from various socioeconomic barriers—in employment, housing, and promotion at work—which make their lives miserable. Many of them feel that they are losers. These young people in their 20s and 30s show sympathy with some webtoons' loser-like characters. For example, *Misaeng* revolves around a precarious intern worker at a trading firm. Instead of portraying a white-collar worker's dream of becoming a CEO, it depicts a hopeless office worker's activities. Many people in their 20s who do not have regular jobs and instead hold part-time positions, sympathize with the protagonists and other office workers in these webtoons. Both the webtoon and the webtoon-based drama portray people who are nervous about their futures, and they appeal to audiences who are themselves either office workers or job seekers.

The loser-like syndrome is connected to "moron-taste." For example, the webtoon written by Lee Mal-nyeon titled *Lee Mal-nyeon Series* is unrivaled in terms of being moron-like. In contrast to well-organized plots—composed of introduction, development, turn, and conclusion—Lee's webtoon has introduction, development, turn, and a final step that results in either disaster or unique charm (Sora's Webtoon World, 2012). Lee's improvisation is likely to reflect trends on the Internet or funny things captured in society. Many Koreans do not have jobs after college graduation, and they see themselves as losers who pursue snack-like light humor and fun. Some webtoonists reflect this social milieu in their work, contributing to the popularity of contemporary webtoons.

Webtoons symbolizing snack culture with these characteristics have become an important part of big-screen culture with movies and dramas, and as snack culture gains popularity, it becomes a source of content for other cultural productions. Webtoons and web novels have been turned into several big-screen cultural productions. Seemingly trivial, light snack culture has addressed profoundly significant and timely sociocultural issues, making itself a valuable source for big-screen culture. As *Misaeng's* producer, Lee Jae Moon, notes, "webtoons are great resources for content producers because the original messages and episodes are already strong, and it is easy for us to add dramatics" (J. Lee, 2015, para. 7).

Of course, film adaptations of popular webtoons are not guaranteed to be financial successes; many webtoons that have been turned into films have recorded poor results in contrast to expectations. According to box office data provided by the Korean Film Council (2018), when *Apt* was screened in 2006, attendance was only 540,539, and it ranked 42nd in the box office that year. It was not until *Moss* that movie adaptations of webtoons started to achieve success (C. Park, 2016, p. 246). *Moss* (2010) was based on Yoon Tae Ho's webtoon of the same name, and the movie was directed by Kang Woo-suk.<sup>4</sup> Unlike previous movie adaptations, the scenes in *Moss* are organized in a visual format that maximizes the images of the original cartoon based on the vertical scroll-based presentation (Han & Hong, 2011, cited in C. Park, 2016). Since the successful release of *Moss*, film adaptations of webtoons have been booming by emphasizing the characteristics of webtoons and expanding on their attraction (D. Jin, 2019).

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<sup>4</sup> *Moss* is a mystery thriller film set in a small village in the countryside that portrays the cruelty of human nature. It was a commercial success, ranking fourth at the Korean box office with 3.3 million viewers.

Several movies and television dramas show off diverse genres and styles based on webtoons. *Secretly, Greatly*—about a North Korean spy disguised as a mentally deficient young man—was very successful at the box office in 2013 as the story translated to the big screen. Based on Yang Woo-suk's 2011 webtoon of the same name, *Steel Rain* (2017)—another action thriller film portraying a secret mission between North and South Korean intelligent agencies to prevent the breakout of a nuclear war on the Korean peninsula—was moderately successful. Meanwhile, *Inside Men* (2015), a new noir action film based on Yoon Tae Ho's webtoon, became a national sensation due to its focus on corruption in Korean society.

As these webtoon-based films do well at the box office, many movie directors pay attention to well-made, popular webtoons. According to Daum Webtoon (2018), for example, since starting its webtoon service in 2003, it has transformed about 280 webtoons of 500 published in total into diverse cultural forms, including film, drama, musicals, and novels (as of May 2018). Webtoons become transmedia platforms that create a virtuous cycle in which cartoon characters and stories can move into other cultural forms, such as television, films, and musicals (H. Park, 2014). In other words, film directors and television producers are increasingly keen about the possibility of commercialization and commodification of webtoons by transforming them into big-screen culture.

Bringing webtoons to the big screen offers opportunities to filmmakers and drama producers who can take advantage of the webtoons' original ideas along with their solid fan bases and familiar storylines. As You and Kang (2016) point out, this trend will continue because webtoons are a treasure trove of original stories. The increasing number of webtoon fans has also been encouraging. Unlike *manhwa*, whose audiences are mostly in their mid-teens and early 20s, webtoons' audiences span the early teens to the late 30s, overlapping with the major segment of movie audiences. In addition, webtoons are distributed through online portals, so movie producers and corporations can purchase the original stories for much less than from other resources (Y. Song, 2012). In the late 2010s, webtoons have substantially fulfilled their dream of big-screen culture. They are equipped with diverse subjects, visual and colorful images, well-made plots, and a huge fan base—features that are not evident in other original stories in novels and *manhwa*.

**Snack Culture's Dream Comes True:  
*Along With the Gods: The Two Worlds***

Although there are several successful examples of transmedia storytelling based on webtoons, *Along With the Gods: The Two Worlds* (2017), which was developed from Joo Ho-min's webtoon, is one of the most successful webtoon-based movies. *Along With the Gods* was released in December 2017 and became a huge hit at the box office. Directed by Kim Yong-hwa, the blockbuster had a production cost of \$40 million because two films were produced at the same time. The second film was screened in August 2018. The story, which blends melodrama, humor, action, and fantasy, is about a dead man who is guided by reapers to be judged in seven hells for 49 days after his death. The webtoon provides a modern twist to Korean folklore about the afterlife, depicting deceased souls who receive judgment for their actions by various gods and their courts. The text was "pretty satirical and provided some sharp commentary on the state of contemporary society, while also acting as a fascinating mini-course on traditional Korean mythology" (tipsymocha, 2017, para. 2).

The movie made some tweaks to the original webtoon story and had attracted as many as 14.4 million moviegoers as of the end of May 2018 (Korean Film Council, 2018). This is the second highest in attendance for all Korean movies thus far, only behind *The Admiral: Roaring Currents* (2014), and the highest among webtoon-turned-movies. This accomplishment certainly proves webtoons are successful transmedia storytelling sources and drives the development of this form of transmedia cultural production (M. Jin, 2017).

The movie depicts an earnest and heroic firefighter (Cha Tae-hyun) who, when he is killed in the line of duty, becomes a candidate for reincarnation. But first he must face seven judges in the afterlife who review key moments in his existence. Fortunately, Cha Tae-hyun is represented by three guardians who defend his eligibility. En route to these celestial magistrates, the four pass through perilous realms with names like the Volcano of the Damned, Murder Hell, and the Blade Forest, battling the computer-animated likes of toothy fish with humanoid heads and so-called hell ghouls with glowing red weapons vaguely resembling light sabers (Webster, 2017). Although the basic premise remains the same, there are several significant similarities and differences between the original webtoon and the movie adaptation. The director, Kim Yong-hwa, stressed:

The film version has the same storyline and characters of the original work. The only difference, if I should tell, is that the dramatic impact from the original was maximized because movies have to immerse viewers only in a limited time. I had to satisfy both of those who love the original and who haven't seen it yet. (quoted in Shim, 2017, para. 9)

Despite the director's assertion, several significant differences make the film unique on the big screen (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. Along With the Gods webtoon (left) and movie (right).

Several dimensions differentiate this webtoon-turned into film from other films. To begin with, the nature of the main character, Cha Tae-hyun (Ja-hong in the movie), and relevant plots have changed. Whereas Cha Tae-hyun's character in the webtoon was an average white-collar worker who died of work-related alcohol abuse, he is a firefighter in the film version. The protagonist's occupation plays a key role in determining how his journey unfolds in the story that deals with his afterlife. In the webtoon, the dead are all assigned defense attorneys for their various trials before the underworld's gods, but the film conflates the reaper and lawyer roles. The film also omits a key character of the webtoon—lawyer Jin Gi-han. In the webtoon, new lawyer Jin Gi-han helped Ja-hong safely pass the seven trials. In the film version, on entering the afterlife, Ja-hong is guided by three grim reapers, Kangrim, Haewonmaek, and Deok-choon.

Big-screen culture is not the same as snack culture, of course. As Franco (2015) points out, "the transmedia practice contains both continuities and contrasts with the source text, with producers' perceptions of intended viewers' preferences" (pp. 44–45) factoring into the webtoon's transformation into a film text. Hills (2015) also points out that it is inevitable to modify the original text in another platform due to narrative complexity. As webtoons such as *Along With the Gods* provide some complicated epics, cultural producers adjust the story to meet different audiences, regardless of some criticisms by popular magazines and critics who are concerned about interference with the webtoon's original meaning.

Another significant transformation is that the movie connects an unrelated subplot from the original story to the main plot of the movie by transforming a relationship among characters. A soldier in the webtoon who turns into an angry lemur after dying as the result of an accident, for example, in the movie becomes Ja-hong's younger brother Su-hong (Kim Dong-wook), who unintentionally distracts Ja-hong's trials in the underworld (M. Jin, 2017). As Giovagnoli (2011) claims, transmedia creates the original project's contents available on different platforms without damaging or interfering with the stories. Through this form of transmedia storytelling, audiences who either do or do not experience the originality of stories feel similar themes and subjects; however, once the original stories enter the transmedia storytelling process, changes are inevitable in order to appeal to different audiences.

These changes, in fact, may appeal to audiences. From the point where it is revealed that the average office worker Ja-hong from the webtoon has been turned into a righteous firefighter in the movie, the direction the filmmaker wants to take becomes quite clear: a maudlin tearjerker (M. Jin, 2017). Ja-hong as a firefighter in the movie plays a brave man who saves and helps many people; this hero becomes a noble man in hell. The film stresses the importance of fulfilling one's duties to one's parents and highlights the significance of forgiveness (M. Jin, 2017). As KayRosa's (2017) movie review explains:

The film touches upon the sensitive values that strongly evoke Korea's traditional values of brotherly love and filial piety. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that at least 80% of the audiences around me wept throughout the film; this one is a strange mix of an up-to-date superhero action thriller and a tear-jerker drama endorsing historically conservative values. (para. 4)

Merely showing the sins committed by Ja-hong to his speech-impaired mother, who is portrayed as an angel who has done nothing but unconditionally love her son, is an element powerful enough to force tears out of the audience. And Ja-hong's continuous cries for his mother throughout the journey, begging the grim reapers for the safety of his mother, is another controversial aspect that might raise eyebrows of some audiences who are not into sentimentality (M. Jin, 2017).

During a flashback in the final scene of the movie to 15 years earlier, viewers see Ja-hong planning to kill his mother following his brother's suicide because there was no hope. However, the younger brother, Su-hong, restrains him from killing their mother. Ja-hong beats Su-hong severely and leaves home because he feels guilty and never returns to his mother. When Ja-hong is confronted at the final trial in front of the king of the underworld, he almost loses his opportunity to return to the human world because of this secret misbehavior. This incident reveals the reason that Ja-hong so desperately wants to see his mother one more time: he wants to apologize for his wrongdoing. His mother then wakes and forgives Ja-hong's wrongdoing, which is seen through computer-generated imagery. The king of the underworld lets Ja-hong return to the world, saying "the people who were forgiven truly could not be asked the same sin in the underworld. Therefore, I order your immediate return to the human world." Starting as a form of snack culture, *Along With the Gods* has become a significant part of big-screen culture, and it has been turned into other cultural forms, including a musical.

Clearly, some webtoons have significant dimensions that facilitate their transition to the big screen. Perhaps the most important of these dimensions is that the subjects webtoons explore are not trivial. As the genres of webtoons vary, the themes are diverse and suitable to be turned into big-screen productions. *Along With the Gods* as a webtoon focused on justice so that the author might convey a message to readers. The movie is not much different as it shows an afterlife where people must pass seven trials focusing on murder and deception—some of the major crimes in current life. Although the movie version shifts its focus from justice to family values, these ideas are good enough for the big screen.

Webtoon-based cultural products, including movies and dramas, are popular today because webtoons reflect various real lives that many people can easily sympathize with. As Scolari (2009) argues, transmedia storytelling “not only affects the text but also includes transformations in the production and consumption processes” as producers “visualize new business opportunities for the media market as new generations of consumers develop the skills to deal with the flow of stories and become hunters of information from multiple sources” (p. 589).

Second, some webtoons, including *Along With the Gods*, are eventually adapted to long, novel-length literature. This particular webtoon has been turned into eight books. It includes several conflicts, betrayals, and harmonies, which are features of many good movies and novels. Despite being published only a few pages at a time, many webtoons are not trivial. Based on the epic themes of the webtoon version, the movie clearly connects the seemingly separate human world’s story and the underworld’s story to make the movie enjoyable and easy to understand.

Third, the movie broke new ground in the local film industry by demonstrating that a film with such a high reliance on computer-generated imagery (CGI) can be created in Korea (M. Jin, 2017). As discussed earlier, webtoons are mostly created in color, so they immediately provide vivid images to big-screen creators. Unlike novels or *manhwas*, which cannot provide this kind of visual image, webtoons have the advantage of few limitations in the expression of subjects and styles. When film and drama producers read webtoons, they are able to create their plan to use CGI based on the colorful and vivid webtoon drawings. The film *Along With the Gods* has as many as 2,300 shots with visual effects, which represents 88% of the entire movie (S. Kim, 2017). Kim Yong-hwa likely easily got ideas for visual effects because the webtoon’s visual, color images provide ample inspiration for the movie.

Last, the film’s focus on family values and filial piety is timely and desirable. As briefly discussed, the webtoon version focused on justice by portraying several social issues in Korean society.<sup>5</sup> By judging the dead people seven times, the webtoon clearly emphasized the importance of social responsibility to readers. Webtoons adapted to movies, like *Inside Men*, were numerous before the impeachment of former president Park Geun-hye. In the much liberalized and democratized social milieu, the director aptly turned his focus to family, thereby appealing to audiences of all ages—and especially families that watch together—

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<sup>5</sup> Some movies released around 2017 focus on the relationship between Korean movies and corrupt society. *A Taxi Driver*, *The Battleship Island*, *I Can Speak*, and *1987: When the Day Comes* touch on a conflict of social justice between the corrupt who are in power and the people who stand up for what is right (Jeong, 2017).

who enjoy this tear-jerking and heartbreaking movie. In this regard, *Along With the Gods* deftly connects the two main roles—Ha Jung-woo (Gang-rim in the movie) paying as an angel of death in the underworld and Cha Tae-hyun in the human world—in developing a seemingly similar but different story.

In sum, snack culture is no longer snack culture—for both readers and cultural producers. Although each episode of a webtoon contains characteristics of snack culture, as a whole, the storytelling of a particular webtoon is comparable to any serious epic. As Stavroula (2014) argues, webtoons, as the convergence of digital technologies and digital content, have created new forms of stories in the Korean context. Webtoons cater to diverse tastes because they represent various genres and subjects. More importantly, due to their vivid visual and epic images, cultural creators transform original webtoons into several cultural forms by modifying webtoons' subjects, genres, and styles. Transmedia storytelling in the era of digital media has become a norm in the cultural industries as it shifts the resources of cultural products while providing creative and converging ideas.

### Conclusion

This article analyzes the sociocultural milieu surrounding the rapid growth of webtoons representing Korea's snack culture. By developing media convergence between digital technologies—in particular, smartphones and content—it discusses the possibility of webtoons as sources of transmedia storytelling in Korean cultural industries. In the smartphone era, Korea has rapidly developed webtoons as a new form of snack culture. Although Korea created and advanced webtoons before the smartphone era with the growth of Internet portals, the country rapidly advanced webtoons after the introduction of smartphones. As smartphones have become the most significant digital technology for Koreans, webtoons as snack culture continue to grow and turn into big-screen culture. Because of webtoons' popularity, the Korean *manhwa* industry and portals have developed strategies to utilize webtoons as primary sources for several cultural forms, including films, games, and dramas.

Many cultural producers, such as film directors, television producers, and game developers, are keen to adapt and transform webtoons into films, dramas, and games. Korea's webtoons can be regarded as a transmedia phenomenon in terms of the convergence of old and new media as well as technology and content. As Jenkins (2011) explains, "transmedia storytelling represents 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. 4), and the webtoon sector has used transmedia storytelling strategies through media convergence. Digital technology has also transformed the rules of engagement and currency for other storytelling formats (Iezzi, 2006).

Because webtoons' stories are amusing and fresh and contain appealing visual images—and now even sound—the opportunity has arisen to transform them to productions on the big screen, and the reworking of webtoons has become increasingly popular in the Korean cultural industries. Regardless of some concerns—such as commodification of webtoons and webtoonists, losing webtoons' originality during the modification process, and market dominance by a few portal giants—webtoons' dream of big-screen culture will continue to grow. This new form of transmedia storytelling will be the norm in the global cultural industry as well as the domestic cultural industry in the 21st century.



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