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Cultural intermediation and the basis of trust among webtoon and webnovel communities

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates some of the previously unrecognized reading, writing and sharing trends emerging across Asian-born popular digital webtoon and webnovel platforms. These particular sectors of the creative industries are rapidly becoming energizing vehicles for transmedia intellectual property (IP) – referring to a network of interconnected media, popular culture and merchandise emanating from a single creative source. Specifically, South Korean webtoons and Chinese webnovels are cultivating new audiences and participatory cultures beyond their Asian borders, and thus playing a significant economic role in the percentage of global GDP that the broader cultural and creative industries generate annually. To shed light on how this phenomenon is shifting various modes of production, this study analyses how a range of active fans, otherwise known as ‘cultural intermediaries’, have moved to the forefront of creative industry transformations while building trust among their followers and demonstrating loyalties with the platforms on which they circulate their user-created content. Taken together, the webtoons and webnovels explored highlight some of the complex impacts and tensions on the production, circulation, and translation of popular digital media in an increasingly participatory and decentralised online and mobile environments. In so doing, it introduces important global perspectives to an area of study often firmly anchored to Western cultural products and practices, thereby contributing to current discussions on the continuing transformation of creative work in Asia’s digital economy.

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Introduction

To demonstrate how the phenomenon of cultural intermediation and the basis of trust is expanding in and across parts of Asia, this article will first explore the rise of South Korean (hereafter Korean) webtoons and discuss how the prominent Line Webtoon English-language platform (www.webtoons.com) has inspired grassroots local content creation in Indonesia and Thailand. Next, it explores the circulation and crowdsourced reception of particular translated webnovels on the popular Chinese platform Qidian and the

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English-language webnovel site www.novelupdates.com, and the trust-building role of fan creators (e.g., translators, commentators and moderators). These cases are used to show how agency and trust are negotiated at a level underpinning the development of techno-emotions and social bonds in particular Asian creator-centric social media entertainment platforms. Our analysis of these domains reveals some of the individual attachments and common interests in the mediated public sphere that are contributing not only to digital disruption, but also to the acceleration of cultural production and knowledge transfer in ways that can enhance the potential for deliberative processes. Ultimately, these cases are used to define some parameters underpinning regimes of trust binding such fan communities together in fundamental ways and among diverse peoples, cultures and political economies of the region. In doing so, the authors consider some unexpected consequences of cultural intermediation and globalization and their interconnectedness with trust.

Historically, fans have been important cultural intermediaries in the global expansion of analogue as well as digital media content (Dwyer, 2019; Fiske, 1992; Wongseree et al., 2019). Thus, it is unsurprising that in the mediated public sphere fans have benefitted from and impacted on the wider digital revolution, which has both equipped and hindered their precarious efforts, ‘blurring the lines between producers and consumers, creating symbiotic relationships between powerful corporations and individual fans, and giving rise to new forms of cultural production’ (Pearson, 2010). Here, the pioneering work of Jenkins (1992) is highly relevant, as fan contributions evoke a sense of togetherness (and by extension, trust) in the shared cultural moment of ‘textual poaching’, where fan activities trespass boundaries between the interpretive work of translators and the creative deconstruction of fan-fiction writers by putting the real-world issues in dialogue with our imaginations. Through a process of culturalization, a ‘convergence culture’ (Jenkins, 2006) emerges where fans and consumers are actively engaging with one another and where participatory culture plays a large role in localizing content, while simultaneously globalizing it. As recent studies have noticed, a range of increasing fan services and their user-created content on various online and mobile platforms ‘have given birth to a new economic model for cultural production, which centers around “competition crowdsourcing,” the shifting nature of (free) labor, and popularity metrics’ (Kim & Yu, 2019, p. 10).

Fan practices in today’s digital mediasphere include volunteer translations and user commentary to actively engage with forms of media and popular culture in ways that generate degrees of trust in the user-created content which they produce, share and consume. While audiences generally remain active in their reception and meaning making of media, cultural intermediaries (Bourdieu, 1984) are fulfilling a more involved, conjoined role of producer and consumer as they simultaneously intervene in the production and circulation of digital media flows. These are pivotal roles that were once controlled exclusively by corporations, which dominated the traditional media enterprises and their distribution channels (Hutchinson, 2017; Jenkins, 1992, 2006; Terranova, 2000). Today, a plethora of user-created content found on Korean webtoon (digital or web comics) and Chinese webnovel sites have parted markedly from these older ways by popularizing and actively connecting content between volunteer and fan translators and general readers in unprecedented ways. Both webtoon and webnovel enterprises, for example, are facilitating the development of a new type of user-created content that is contributing to the explosive

growth of digital and social media entertainment in the creative sectors – playing a significant role in 3% of global GDP that the broader cultural and creative industries generate annually (UNCTAD, 2019). As part of this participatory and decentralized digital arena of user-created content, there are complex layers and tensions involving the elements of trust and distrust that warrant further analysis.

Trust and its correlative distrust have been identified as ‘technoemotions’ which shape social engagement in various digital environments (Svedmark, 2016), and both are integral to the ways in which mediated communication and associated behavior are molded on the Internet (de Laat, 2008). Consequently, trust is a fundamental element in the communication and sociality facilitated platforms, for example, on webtoon (e.g., Line Webtoon, Lezhin, Tapas, Tappytoon, Graphite, etc.) and webnovel (e.g., Qidian, Webnovel, Kakao Page, Radish) platforms, as both content and creators are initially unfamiliar to readers, publishers, agencies, and marketers prior to large-scale distribution. This type of user experience, as observed in the context of crowd-patronage platforms, is key for ‘generating recommendations for individual users, but in a more tailored way based on data about what they already support and who has been successful amongst the wider community’ (Swords, 2018).

Representative webtoon and webnovel publishing and distributing platforms of the kind analyzed in this study rely on a series of intermediary agents and recommendation cues – such as editors, critics, awards, and librarians, as well as users and user groups – that utilize commenting and voting tools on their platforms. According to Bourdieu (1984), such cultural intermediaries occupy a central place in the creative economy as workers in the production and consumption of cultural goods. In *The Cultural Intermediaries Reader*, Smith and Matthews (2014) extend Bourdieu’s concept by exploring various types of cultural intermediary and their links to economic activity. In his study of the book trade, Wright (2005) argues that the cultural industries enable cultural intermediaries to occupy a privileged role as a way of protecting themselves because of their insecure position in the workforce. In the case of Korean webtoons and Chinese webnovels, while from one perspective the cohort of active users, commentators, and fan translators we identify below could be seen as free labor, they can also be seen as invaluable contributors to the production process. Such cultural intermediaries might best be described as facilitators of cross-cultural flows. Hence, the work done by cultural intermediaries can be seen as a key part of the political economy of webtoons and webnovels as a cultural industry in Asia.

These digital media formats and their cultural intermediaries play a key role in the global diffusion of amateur and professional content and their associated fan bases. As discussed below, both the conspicuous and often inconspicuous work of selecting, assessing, and recommending webtoons and webnovels contributes directly to the building of trust in content as well as in these platforms’ whole ecosystem – to the extent that previously unknown digital content is judged, in part at least, using a bottom-up approach, resulting in the development, publication, distribution and purchase of potentially new content. As a result, the traditional agency once commanded by legacy media players and their highly controlled archives of analogue content is being disrupted and transformed across webtoon and webnovel platforms where social filtering, collective intelligence and crowdsourced taste-making are replacing the once authoritative role of publishing experts as a primary intermediary and builder of trust.

Volunteer webtoon transcreators and their dependence on trust

From the start, webtoons – a Korean-originated expression merging ‘web’ and ‘cartoon’ – have maintained a unique ‘look’ – they are primarily a vertically scrolling (rather than page-turning), full-color, serialized format with episodes that can be consumed within one to three minutes. Hence, they are ideal for accessing on a mobile (smart) phone over short bursts of time. Webtoon platforms, represented by Daum and Naver, invite cultural production by amateur, semi-professional and professional creators, who then have the opportunity to engage with millions of participating readers and fans via a system of likes and comments posted at the end of each episode.¹ (A majority of paid platforms and creators on them prefer to disable the commenting function because they are perceived as distracting and/or disruptive.) Most webtoonists write, draw, color and letter their weekly episodes on their own – unless they are very well-known or well-financed practitioners surrounded by large and/or outsourced production crews.

Since their introduction in Korea in 2003 and 2005 by Daum and Naver – Korea’s two largest internet search engines – webtoons have gradually become a transmedia phenomenon by merging old and new media in the same space. The industry experienced a major global push after the English-language webcomics site Tapastic received investment from Daum Webtoon in 2012, and Naver Webtoon launched its US outpost Line webtoon in 2014. Both sites quickly enabled digital comics readers and general internet users beyond Korea’s borders to become familiar with the unique webtoon format, which is to be distinguished from Japanese manga (and their lack of color), as well as the digital content published by Marvel Comics, DC Comics and ComiXology (including its ‘guided-view’ style).

Unlike other types of digital and web comics, webtoon fans have come to expect a regular weekly supply of stories mediated through diverse genres, including: adult (e.g., erotic, boy/girl love), adventure, biography, celebrity, crime noir, dystopian, fantasy, horror, romance, sci-fi, slice-of-life, sports, superhero, thriller, war, and wrestling, as well as a number of genre hybrids, such as romantic-comedy, black-comedy, and fantasy-romance. Other serialized ‘branded entertainment’ webtoons (known in Korea simply as branded webtoons) are quasi-advertisements that are used to promote companies, brands, and public service announcements – available either on a company website or commercial platform such as Naver or Daum.²

An increasing number of Korean webtoons with socially conscious and emotionally engaging stories have proved well suited to transmedia adaptations as feature films, television series, and web series. Finally, there are a variety of monetization and user loyalty models operating throughout the wider webtoon ecosystem, ranging from totally free to freemium – with and without embedded advertisements – to micro-payment and full subscription models, as well as numerous user loyalty programs and consumer product tie-ins, generating virtual credits that will allow access to premium webtoon episodes. Prior to the rise of pay-per-view systems, the most prevalent model had been the free content model, represented by Daum Webtoon and Naver Webtoon, which use free webtoons to drive traffic toward their many commercial services and products hosted on their giant search portals.

While webtoon platforms abound, not all platforms operate on an equal footing. In October 2019, according to Webtoonguide Webtoon Analysis Service, 19 domestic Korean

webtoon platforms held a dominant position among a total of 65 competing firms. The average monthly page views on the top five platforms were: Naver (5.8 million), Toptoon (1.9 million), KakaoPage (1.3 million), Lezhin (1.2 million), and Daum Webtoon (831 K). A majority of these online websites and mobile apps feature ‘creator-owned’ content, which also makes the webtoon format distinctive among other types of digital comics, including Japanese manga. Amalgamating statistics from all platforms, there were 2.8 billion total monthly page views by 310 million unique monthly visitors across 1,871 serialized titles featuring over 15,330 episodes (normally uploaded on a weekly basis), created by 6,827 active webtoon artists.³ As a rough comparison, there are 62,284 comic book series published by 4,621 publishers in United States.⁴ For a relatively new ‘cottage industry’, webtoons are increasingly generating attention as potentially one of the ‘*new King Kongs of the online world*’ (Cunningham & Silver, 2013).

Certainly, one of the dreams of both aspiring and established webtoonists (and the platforms representing them) is to see their creator-owned intellectual property purchased for transmedia adaptations. For example, the popular romance-thriller webtoon *Cheese in the Trap* (2010–2017) published on Naver Webtoon and Line Webtoon has been adapted into a television series (2016) and also a feature film (2018). Line Webtoon is currently hosting 301 weekly episodes of *Cheese in the Trap* in 32 different languages – all largely translated by volunteer fans. As of March 2020, the series has generated 6.1 million, 5.5 million, and 521,078 likes from registered readers on Line Webtoon in English, Indonesian (www.webtoons.com/id/), and Thai (www.webtoons.com/th/), respectively. If the number of likes reveals anything, then *Cheese in the Trap* is a very successful webtoon series in terms of the appeal and trust that is generating among its readers and a host of transmedia producers who all have their eyes on the series. Through general observations, these conspicuous figures outpace many other series on Line Webtoon. As such, the volunteer translators, or active cultural intermediaries partly responsible for this expanding reception deserve attention for their roles in facilitating appeal and trust surrounding this series.

In order to gain a better understanding of *Cheese in the Trap*’s appeal among both audiences and producers, that is, their ‘trust’ in the series, and thus its future potential as a global transmedia-IP, this study employs the following methods of basic big data research: collection, categorization, and analysis of translator/translation related data. The study utilizes supervised machine learning – with a human assisting in data classification; unsupervised machine learning – to assist with classification, clustering and prediction; and graph analysis to understand social connections between translators, translated texts, and readers/users. The dataset in this study includes: series/episode metadata, user profile, and contribution lists. Webtoon metadata consists of four raw attributes including ID, author, number of likes, and genre; the ‘number of likes’ indicates the conspicuous popularity of a particular webtoon. For the user profile, we have recorded a user’s unique ID, initial registration date, geo-location, name of translation team (if any), and primary language. Through this data collection process, the authors have begun to analyze some of the transcreation activities on this platform in some depth.

Since the launch of Line Webtoon in July 2014, *Cheese in the Trap* has attracted 2,441 volunteer fan translators who have crowdsourced the labor needed to complete full versions in Indonesian, Thai and Vietnamese, as well as several European languages. Although, the popularity of the series is highest among its English-readers, these other translated versions of *Cheese in the Trap* have begun to attract an increasing international

following. It is likely that this expanding audience endorsement of *Cheese in the Trap* at home and abroad encouraged the producers of the television and film remakes to believe that the transnational appeal of the original story was a valuable asset on which they could capitalize. Previously, this particular viewpoint about the power and utility of online viewer activity has been shown to be efficacious in the context of online television fan sites. Here, the user-created content (i.e., opinions, recommendations, votes/likes) that fans generate becomes a source of ‘value-enhancing labor for television producers’ because it enables fans to contribute directly to the circulation of discourses that enhance a program’s reputation, while generating immediate feedback for the show’s producers (Andrejevic, 2008).

Like Japanese manga, which have inspired multiple generations of content creators across the globe (Brienza, 2015), webtoons are gaining a place in the study of Asia-produced media and popular culture. As a burgeoning outgrowth of Korean pop culture across the world, webtoons are gaining increasing purchase through the inspiration of local content creation. As argued elsewhere (Yecies, Shim, Yang, & Zhong, 2019), following its launch in mid-2014, the English-language site Line Webtoon (www.webtoons.com), and in particular the site’s volunteer translation area, has contributed significantly to the increased accessibility of English and other language versions of Korean (and other) webtoons, which in turn have augmented the flow of international – primarily Western – cultural products in the region, resulting in the expanded potential for digital Asian media.

By our count, the total number of volunteer translators and translation groups across all languages on Line Webtoon number 54,350 and 4,560, respectively. This is a fifteen percent increase on the number of these ‘transcreators’ observed in early 2018 (Yecies, Shim, & Yang, 2019). The total number of Asian-language translators – from China, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam (categorized by geolocation of ID registration) – is 19,823. Among this expanding cohort of Asian transcreators, a number of Thai and Indonesian translators have created their own webtoons, which are featured on Line Webtoon.

In short, the relatively inconspicuous volunteers on Line Webtoon are making significant contributions to this particular platform, which is playing a key role in the global spread of Korean and other countries’ webtoons while expanding the larger production, distribution and consumption ecosystem. Similar to previous studies of institutions involved in cultural production such as Hutchinson (2017), these particular co-creation activities are forming the basis for cultural intermediation.

The growing popularity of Line webtoon in international markets is heavily indebted to the work of transcreators of many different nationalities who are willing to translate their favorite webtoons to share with fans in their own languages. This voluntary participatory culture, which builds upon the ground-breaking work by Jenkins (1992, 2006), has been given a boost by recent innovations in Korean webtoon and Chinese webnovel technology. In sum, webtoon user experiences are expanding beyond the traditional ways of passively receiving and enjoying content to the reader’s active participation in the story. These developments have given prominence to issues of trust in this sector of the webtoon industry. Trust operates on various levels. Line Webtoon trusts its large army of volunteer translators to generate work of reasonable quality. Artists who are working in their native tongue, and who are eager to reach and appeal to a global audience (and agree to have their webtoon translated), place their trust in the quality of the different language versions

generated. In turn readers, who may or may not be familiar with the original Korean or English-language webtoon being translated, place their trust in the fan-translated content they are consuming. This active participatory culture is adding layers of complexity to the wider webtoon ecosystem, while at the same time shedding light on aspects of the ‘cultural globalization’ process (Kluver & Fu, 2008; Tomlinson, 1999).

One example of this process is represented by a webtoonist from Thailand, Waraporn Sirilai, who has created three webtoon series of her own, and was originally inspired by the style and stories of Japanese manga.⁵ Waraporn Sirilai was discovered in the present study after noticing her series *Dream Come True* (2017–2018, 71 episodes, 675,025 likes) was one of the top Thai webtoons featured on the landing page of Line Webtoon’s official Thai site. Shortly after Line Webtoon launched its official Thai site in 2014, she was introduced to Korean webtoons and styles. Her exposure to this creative content encouraged her to study the genre, and in 2015 she became a cartoonist in her own right, eventually winning the first prize for short stories in Line Webtoon-Thailand’s regular amateur Challenge Section contest. In her opinion, webtoons and their vertically scrolling format are better suited than Japanese manga for reading on a smartphone. In becoming a webtoon artist, Waraporn Sirilai was inspired by a combination of Japanese style (e.g., cartoonist 555) and the easy-to-read Korean webtoon technology, as well as Korean stories and drawings in webtoons such as *Who Made Me a Princess* by Plutus and Spoon (available in English on TappyToon, in Korean on Naver, and in Thai, Indonesian and Traditional Chinese on Line Webtoon).

As a result of the creative work generated by cultural intermediaries such as Waraporn Sirilai and their contributions to the cultural globalization of Korean webtoons – as well as their inspiration of amateur, semi-professional and professional Asian content creators – Korean webtoons are playing a significant role in the globalization of digital media and popular culture.

Fandom and trust in globalized Chinese webnovels

Like webtoons in Korea, creative and participatory fans have become important cultural intermediaries in the development and global outreach of Chinese webnovels. However, trust-building in the transcultural and globalized context of Chinese webnovels is more complicated because fans and industries not only co-create value but they also compete for control in the cultural production process. The Chinese webnovel emerged in the late 1990s when writers began self-publishing a wide range of original works and fan-fiction in online forums. In 2003, Qidian, an online publishing site run by fantasy fans, launched a freemium plus micropayment model which allowed readers to read the first chapters of a webnovel for free while charging for access to the remainder on a chapter-by-chapter basis. Readers’ collective choices soon replaced editorial control in filtering webnovel content in Qidian. This experimental model proved commercially viable and soon became the industry standard, resulting in the rapid commercialization of the webnovel in China. As a result, genre fiction, particularly online novels released in a serialized format, has dominated the online literary sphere in China (Ren, 2019).

Today, webnovels are a vast digital publishing industry worth billions of dollars in China. There are over 6.4 million registered online writers (Cheung, 2018), 430 million active readers, and 24 million titles available (Chen, 2019). The webnovel industry has

established a series of business models that accumulate popularity of webnovels through fan communities and monetize content through multiple distribution channels, fan economy, and transmedia adaptations. This dynamic business innovation enables creative online writers to accumulate wealth through writing genre fiction, thus transforming webnovels into a lucrative business. For example, China Literature (Yuewen Group), the largest webnovels company in China, earned about RMB 2 billion yuan (approx. US\$ 300 million) from online publishing, copyright licensing, franchising and information services in 2018 (Li, 2019). Popular content nowadays appears in various media forms ranging from eBooks to audiobooks, print books, films, television dramas, games, animations, and virtual reality experiences. This range of mediums offers fans a transmedia storytelling experience that intertwines among these complementary sources.

Built on a domestic system, and similar to the Korean webtoon industry, the Chinese webnovel market is expanding internationally, driven by both industry/corporate enterprises and highly active and creative fans. As early as 2005, some leading webnovel sites started selling rights to print publishers in Korea, Japan, Thailand, and Vietnam. Webnovel content is especially popular in the Southeast Asian book markets. Between 2009 and 2013, for instance, a total of 617 webnovel titles, particularly romance fiction, were translated and published in Vietnam (Guancha.cn, 2015). Chinese webnovel companies are also making aggressive moves in international digital publishing. In 2017, China Literature launched Webnovel.com, an English-language self-publishing platform for both translated and original novels. It replicates the freemium model used by Qidian (also owned by China Literature) to generate revenue for contracted translators and self-published authors. This site published over 300 translated webnovel titles and attracted over 13 million visitors in its first year of operation (Sarmiento, 2018).

In recent years, television dramas adapted from popular webnovel titles have been aired on local TV networks and made available on video-streaming sites in many Asian countries, further expanding the popularity of webnovels internationally. Chinese companies have seen growing opportunities for expanding the transmedia content ecosystem developing around webnovels into these cultural markets. As Arian Huang, international licensing director of China Literature, put it in an interview during the London Book Fair: 'Audiences know the characters and story, so they're already sold on it. This gives us huge potential across the entire entertainment spectrum, and in different countries and languages' (quoted from Hutchins, 2018).

Apart from the top-down corporate-led development, the global expansion of the Chinese webnovel also derives from bottom-up fan co-creation. English translations of Chinese webnovels first appeared in North America around 2010, made by US fans of Chinese heritage, and were shared in popular novel forums and online fantasy communities. Many of these fan translations remained incomplete due to the sheer length of many Chinese webnovel titles. However, in 2014, RWX, a well-known fan translator, completed the translation of *Coiling Dragon*, a fantasy of 3.44 million words. Following this milestone achievement, the genre began attracting attention from Western fantasy fans. In 2015, RWX quit his job as a diplomat and established what is perhaps the first specialized site for translated Chinese webnovels, WuxiaWorld.

Today, over 200 sites are specializing in translated Chinese or Asian webnovel across the globe, mostly operated by fan communities. Popular sites include Novel Updates, Gravity Tales, Chireads (in French), Rulate (in Russian), and hui3r (in Southeast Asian

languages). This study focuses on Novel Updates, which has over 190,000 registered members, to further explore the role of fans as cultural intermediaries in translating Chinese webnovels. On Novel Updates, all titles are translated by volunteer fan translators and shared in community-sites for non-commercial purposes. The content is thus free for everyone to read. In addition to reading translated fiction, fan readers also actively engage in activities, including discussion, co-creation, sharing, and social media networking.

To better understand the cultural intermediation and the basis of trust emerging in the webnovel arena, this part of the study employs document analysis and data mining to investigate the history and developments of translated webnovels. This process has proven useful for mapping the distribution of genres and sub-genres in exemplary websites, such as Novel Updates. Inspired by ethnographic research in Internet studies, this study involves conducting non-participatory observation at Novelupdates.com, a community-based webnovel site, featuring user comments, community activities, and writer (translator)- reader (fan) interactions. Through a keyword search and also a manual search of the 500 most replied threads that are publicly available in the Novelupdates forum, the authors have selected a small number of the most relevant comments made by webnovel fans on their interpretation, attitudes and practices related to trust-building in translated novels and the factors that affect trust in a transcultural online literary community.

Novel Updates publishes webnovels translated from various Asian languages including 2,590 titles originally in Chinese (as of June 2019). Thirty-two genre labels are used to categorize the novels on the site, and each novel can attract a number of labels. Among the 2,590 translated Chinese webnovels available, romance (1,617 titles), action (1,155 titles), fantasy (1,090 titles) and adventure (903 titles) are the most popular genres. Like many fan-based sites, Novel Updates goes beyond simply publishing webnovel content; it is also bringing together literary fans and building an active community.

Through these community activities, ranging from in-depth discussion of translation issues to novel recommendations and reviews, this site has become a part of the ‘public sphere of the imagination’ (Saler, 2003) in the webnovel field. While participatory fandom is understood as a social process of negotiating meanings, communities like Novel Updates – based on translated rather than original content, suggest that a different type of meaning negotiation is at work, with a focus of selecting, assessing and filtering foreign content. The typical web 2.0 mechanisms based on reader clicks, votes and likes are still powerful in collectively ranking webnovel titles; reader comments, in particular, their positive feedback to translation, are especially important to encourage translators to complete their work.

Moreover, in the section of ‘Novel Pickup Request’, individual fans recommend interesting titles and call for volunteer translators to translate them into English. Thus, fan translators and readers are constantly engaged in social negotiation regarding the selection and translation of webnovel titles. A typical call for translation, appearing in one of the more colorful manually-selected comments, reads like this:

Best world hopping GL novel. If you like villain mcxfemale lead couple. If you like intimates between mc and female lead. You will fall in love with this novel ... I love this novel, so hilarious, sweet relationship develop between couple. Highly recommend this. Please translated this ... @ Yandere Devil.

This comment stands out for its succinct ideas; few comments in the collected dataset offer the same level of readability. Interestingly, international fans also look for good reads from

the novel ranking in the Chinese sites, for example, ‘history, what if – my favorite, ... I’ve seen this in qidian’s novel rankings, so ... I have a metaphorical itch to scratch: p) @ Lone-Wanderer23’. This comment stands out among many others because of the relatively high number of likes it received from readers.

Fans are also important navigators in the transmedia world of webnovels. Novel Updates has specialized sections dealing with transmedia storytelling, where fans share the latest news and opinions on transmedia adaptations of popular webnovels, including anime (animation), manga, game and TV and movies. While transmedia storytelling has become a defining feature of the webnovel in China, an equivalent ecosystem for overseas fans has not yet been established because of licensing and copyright restrictions. As a result, informal translation, sharing and distribution based on fan communities are playing a crucial role in connecting what would otherwise be isolated adaptations of popular webnovel titles. Fan-subtitling is another notable feature of this informal transmedia content ecosystem. In online video sharing and streaming sites, fan-translated subtitles in local languages are widely used for viewing unauthorized webnovel adaptations. Volunteer fan subtitlers are becoming popular influencers in both the webnovel and webvideo communities; for example, Jalan, a Thai fan subtitler, has translated dozens of Chinese historical TV dramas into Thai and introduced them to local audiences, attracting over 60,000 followers (Fan, 2018).

Genre fiction culture plays a special role in building trust in the transcultural webnovel system, despite different cultural contexts and a generally poor standard of translation (Sarmiento, 2018). As genre fiction (e.g., romance and fantasy), Chinese webnovels share common features of imagination, world-building and storytelling with novels in other languages and cultures. Thus, fans’ pre-existing knowledge of genre fiction helps build their trust in the Chinese webnovel stories they encounter, hoping to experience the kind of pleasure and enjoyment they expect from the genre. One representative example, @monique93 offers: ‘*It comes naturally to me. Same with English fantasy novels! It’s easy for me to imagine fantasy beasts as well*’. Also, from @ToastedRossi, who appears to have generated a following of their own:

Actually, modern wuxia works much the way you say Western stories do it: that a character gains great powers from a magical book or some sort of secret knowledge or eating some magical herb ... it sounds like their mechanics are more based on genre more so than culture or literary tradition.

On the other hand, the transcultural webnovel system is also marked by distrust. Quality and sustainability are two major concerns. User comments reveal mixed views of the quality of translation. After all, one gets what one pays for. As @ Dino Translation puts it, ‘*The question is whether a super story could be transmitted by a bad translation. Personally, I don’t think so*’. Hence, while some readers engage with the storytelling and do not care much about translation, others complain that Chinese literary expressions and cultural terms have been lost in translation. This is beginning to sound more and more like a metaphorical trap.

The traps of intermediation and the basis of distrust among ‘attention-seekers’

Studies such as Kim and Yu (2019) argue that webtoon platforms, and perhaps other platforms by extension, are at pains to maintain loyalty among their creative practitioners that

ironically are drawn to and also trapped by the ‘tantalizing promise of economic reward’ facilitated by the platform. Such content creators are singled-out for their ‘attention-seeking’ behavior. Put simply, webtoonists and other content creators on social media entertainment platforms are dependent upon the number of eyeballs and screen taps their work can generate among readers. Any intermediary (volunteer or otherwise) that can contribute to this conspicuous attention is an enabler for both content creators and platforms seeking to globalize their content. Yet, such intermediaries are rarely given monetary rewards, and thus in general they may grow to distrust the system to which they have volunteered their time and efforts. Therein lies the trap, as the interdependence between these parties requires a level of trust in the reward system, which often only involves a degree of self-satisfaction for having completed the task at hand, rather than receive (if even available) a monetary reward.

Notwithstanding, those volunteers who are doing well might be tempted to switch over and become contracted translators on commercial sites, which could interfere with a practitioner’s aspirations to rely on this precarious labor to ‘go global’, or at least to gain increased attention. Another barrier for parties in both the webtoon and webnovel sector is copyright restrictions, as fan communities are sometimes forced to remove particular shared content or publications when requested by the rights owners. For a variety of reasons, discontinuation of translation or publication of a webnovel has become a significant problem causing distrust and frustration among fans who may have been following particular stories for months or even years (Wang, 2016). On the Novel Updates site, only 451 webnovel titles translated from Chinese are marked as ‘completed’, with 1,218 in ‘hiatus’ and 1,050 still in progress (as of October 2019). This situation suggests a double-edged sword, or a trap, for intermediaries that are keen to draw attention to their skillset.

Distrust is also caused by the complex relationships between corporations and fan communities in the webnovel industry. While such interaction has long been a tradition in both print genre fiction and digital transmedia storytelling (Scolari et al., 2014), the transcultural webnovel system has some distinctive features. Fans’ creative labor and participation, ranging from fan-translation to promotion, subtitling, and even unauthorized sharing, are essential in connecting foreign audiences with the Chinese webnovel. Fan participation, either as translator or cultural intermediary, is voluntary and non-commercial, in contrast to the paid and monetary model of corporate sites. As shown in the translator recruitment advertisement: *‘We accept almost everyone, but if you are trying to find a job or is working for money then this is not the place for you. @silverbullet123’*. Quotes like this reveal the inherent trap of performing such skills without any direct financial reward.

However, both the webtoon and webnovel industries have benefited from fan communities in distributing content, understanding the market, recruiting translators, and developing a transcultural fan base. It is undeniable that webtoon as well as webnovel platforms and publishers have exploited the ‘affective labor’ (Martens, 2011) of volunteer translators and fans in all these aspects. In addition, fan user/usage data accumulated in participatory webtoon and webnovel communities are being extracted by corporations without proper regulation. In short, the divergent expectations and conflicting interests of fan communities and corporations are contributing to the atmosphere of distrust in the transcultural webtoon and webnovel systems.

While Korea is often seen as a ‘broadband nirvana’ (Goldsmith et al., 2011), the state of digital development in China likewise ‘heralds a new dawn of enhanced connectivity’

(Keane & Chen, 2017). In the fast-forwarding era of user productivity, webtoons and webnovels are enlarging domains in which media consumers actively strive to contribute to the production and distribution of media content. Empowered by democratized access to such digital technologies addressed in the present study, the proliferation of user-oriented individual and collaborative media has thus challenged corporate and state monopolies in the dissemination (and translation) of social media entertainment platforms.

Conclusion: trust and Asia's new wave of media and popular culture

Affirming the success of Korean television dramas across East Asian as part of the earlier Korean Wave, in 2008 media critics Chua Beng Huat and Koichi Iwabuchi noted 'the presence of East Asian pop culture that co-exists side by side with US domination in the global media industry' (2008, p. 12). Since then, and with the continuing advance of K-pop as well as fashion, and games, the Korean Wave has continued to gather strength, despite premature press reports in the late 2000s that Hallyu was on its last legs. Now, webtoons have joined the club, diversifying the nation's creative industries. Korean webtoons, along with Japanese popular culture represented by Manga and China's rapidly rising pop culture, are all part of a regional push to assert soft power (Chua, 2012). This rich trove of media content, and the sheer volume of user-created content it is generating, has only grown in size and scope, especially in China, since the publication of Chua's study. Cultural intermediaries of the types analyzed here have joined the ranks of the 'new wave of intermediaries operating between platforms, creators, advertizers, and traditional media' (Cunningham & Craig, 2016, p. 5420), thus playing an indispensable role in this arena while bringing a basis of trust increasingly to the fore.

Obviously, technological progress has profoundly changed the way digital media content is distributed and consumed in different individual and collective contexts. In turn, media aficionados and cinephiles have joined the co-creational labor of fansubbing, sharing personal reflections and responses to comments on and recommendations of both traditional and digital media (such as webtoons and webnovels) on a range of platforms and other social media websites. While cultural competition is fierce, and consequences of cultural intermediation and globalization more broadly are hard to trace, it has begun to benefit regional audiences across Asia by offering them a larger number of 'trustworthy' – high-quality and appealing – products to choose from. This sense of trustworthiness is based on the use-value of intercultural mediation to the user-oriented communication, rather than the reliability and quality of the wide range of user-created content. At the same time, trust (accompanied by the necessity to develop personal and professional networks with collaborative partners) has become an important constituent of co-production activities within the region (e.g., Korea–China film co-productions, international webtoons created by non-Koreans on Korean platforms in multiple languages, and fan-translated Chinese webnovels), regardless of whether such activities are pursued for commercial or political reasons. As a result, Asian media – produced for Asians and non-Asians alike – are rapidly augmenting the Western cultural products that have historically dominated regional markets.

The globalization of Asian media becomes an even more powerful force when cultural products are able to deliver the values and traditions shared in the region through

advanced technology, mature storytelling techniques and sophisticated visual styles. The representative examples explored in the present study shed new light on how a dynamic range of Asia-produced Asian pop culture is being consumed in the region – albeit in uneven ways in different forms and in different places. At the core of this study lies the investigation of broad linkages between Korean webtoons and Chinese webnovels and the various platforms on which they appear – in tandem with the general digitalization of popular culture. More specifically, the pathways to a ‘digital Asia’ are being accelerated by the often competing Korean and Chinese waves breaking across Asia, as well as some of the smaller waves that they stimulate, for example, in Indonesia and Thailand. In turn, these waves are accelerating digital interaction and integration within Asia, and thus impacting on the digital environments of people’s everyday lived realities.

Just as K-pop has brought a new dynamic to the Korean Wave, cultural production across webtoon and webnovel platforms by practitioners in dispersed geographical locations has become a new and important growth engine for Asia’s digital creative industries. Yet, despite these developments and their conspicuous contributions to digital transformation in the region, the impact of webtoons and webnovels, and their influence on the globalization of Asian media have yet to be fully investigated and understood – especially in terms of regional collaboration in the digital domain. With this in mind, the discussions in this study have been used to show how engagement between innovative digital technology and changing practices in some of Asia’s conspicuous creative industries are sparking new synergies. Whilst webtoons and webnovels are not new, the increasing participatory nature of their cultural production and consumption is energizing the social media entertainment industries in Asia and the larger soft-power digital wave behind Asia’s creative industries. As burgeoning industries that are heavily indebted to advanced technology and the internet environment, these digital platforms have also sparked issues such as piracy, censorship, datamining, and freedom of expression – questions that need to be explored elsewhere.

In a nutshell, the research in this study has attempted to analyze some of the mediating contributions of local fans, platforms, organizations and audiences within the media and popular culture arenas, rather than opt for an authoritative, top-down approach that conceptualizes globalization as a force dominating contemporary culture. Digital soft power competition in the region, particularly among Japan, China and Korea, continues unabated, offering regional audiences more choice in terms of what they can read, watch, and enjoy. This Asia-produced popular social media entertainment and culture, featuring the shared culture and traditions of the region, is rapidly offering alternatives to Western cultural products that historically have dominated traditional media sectors in the region.

Our brief exploration of webtoons and webnovels illustrates how popular Asian digital media is gaining increasing trust and purchase through its inspiration of local content creation. This burgeoning outgrowth of user-created content and technical infrastructure both hosts and facilitates a popular culture which has less reliance on the types of shared values and traditions, as compared with a ‘cross-over’ pan-Asian blockbuster film such as *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) or the more recent *Along With the Gods* (2017, and its 2018 sequel). As such, the platforms discussed in this study are expanding our nascent understanding of the globalization of Asian media, a development which is, perhaps ironically, an unexpected consequence of broader forces of globalization.

Notes

1. Posts vary from short comments such as ‘masterpiece’ and ‘no fun’, to much longer reader interpretations of an episode. Users can also ‘like’ or ‘dislike’ a comment, which, when amalgamated, rank comments in display order (similar to the up/down voting feature on Reddit), differentiating various Korean webtoon platforms from other social media forums.
2. Between 2007 and 2016, 149 branded webtoons were released in Korea, with such content increasing rapidly after 2013 when webtoons began to expand globally (KOCCA, 2018, p. 148).
3. See <https://was.webtoonguide.com/dashboard>. Accessed 23 October 2019.
4. See www.comics.org/international_stats_country/. Accessed 23 October 2019.
5. The authors thank practitioner Waraporn Sirilai for sharing her experiences of developing the webtoons *Dream Come True* and *I Wish* (2015–2016, 35 episodes, and 230,464 likes) – available on www.webtoons.com/th/.

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