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**Conference Paper**

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23rd Biennial Conference of the International Telecommunications Society (ITS): "Digital societies and industrial transformations: Policies, markets, and technologies in a post-Covid world", Online Conference / Gothenburg, Sweden, 21st-23rd June, 2021

**Provided in Cooperation with:**

International Telecommunications Society (ITS)

*Suggested Citation:* Nam, Jinyoung; Jung, Yoonhyuk (2021) : Examining fan participation in the digital media: Fans' transcreation of webtoons, 23rd Biennial Conference of the International Telecommunications Society (ITS): "Digital societies and industrial transformations: Policies, markets, and technologies in a post-Covid world", Online Conference / Gothenburg, Sweden, 21st-23rd June, 2021, International Telecommunications Society (ITS), Calgary

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/238041>

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# Examining fan participation in the digital media: Fans' transcreation of webtoons

Jinyoung Nam<sup>1</sup>, Yoonhyuk Jung<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

The rising popularity of webtoons, a popular type of digital content, led to emergence of an interesting phenomenon known as transcreation. Transcreation indicates fans' twofold activity of translating and recreating webtoons into a new language, while maintaining originality of the content. Although transcreators are playing a significant role in facilitating the spread of webtoons in the global market, the role of such transcreators has received scant attention. By employing the means-end chain approach through laddering interviews, the study explicates fans' goal structure in transcreation of webtoons. This empirical study provides insights into fans' involvement in the digital media industry.

**Keywords:** Webtoon industry, Transcreation, Fandom, Fan participation, Digital media, Goal hierarchy, Means-end chain

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## 1. Introduction

Webtoons, which are composed of the terms ‘web’ and ‘cartoon’, take the form of images that are uploaded, circulated, and published via the internet. While digital comics refer to the digitally web-uploaded and scanned version of printed comics, webtoons, from their origin are digitally produced online and published in the web or mobile-suited platforms (Pyo et al., 2019). In the form of images, Webtoons deliver short episodes in mobile-optimized layouts and are serialized weekly, usually lasting over two months or several years (Keane et al., 2018). Webtoons converge with other business domains, including publishing, movies, dramas, and games, based on source as the intellectual property (Naver, 2018). Webtoons are becoming a vital part of the growing global media industries. Reflecting on the popularity of the webtoon platform, Line Webtoon marked 67 million monthly active users worldwide by the year 2020 (Park, 2019). Animated series such as ‘God of High School’, ‘Noblesse’, and ‘Tower of God’ based on Line Webtoon’s most popular webtoons have been produced in the global market. Therefore, as sources of transmedia storytelling, webtoons show their potential as the key transmedia intellectual properties in the global media industry (KOCCA, 2018).

In the context of webtoons, fans or transcreators who engage in the transcreation community are important contributors to the growth of the webtoon industry. Line Webtoon, the most dominant player in the webtoon industry (Line, 2018) offers ‘Webtoon Translate’, which is a crowd-sourced platform that enables volunteer webtoon transcreators to legally transcreate webtoons into 32 different languages (Yecies et al., 2019b). Fans who share their common interests through transcreation are prosumers who recreate and participate in fan-related activities. Despite fans’ significant contribution to the webtoon ecosystem, our understanding of transcreation is limited. Therefore, the study investigates the goals that fans seek in transcreating webtoons, and how each goal may be associated with another through the goal hierarchy approach. To achieve the objectives, we identify the goal hierarchical structure that enables the discovery of the theoretical mechanism for research and understanding of fans’ transcreation behavior. The study contributes to the theoretical framework by enhancing understanding of fans’ participation in fandom practices, but also provides useful insights to practitioners for developing approaches that maximize fans’ involvement in the global media industry.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Webtoons in the global media industry**

The new media era has offered diverse types of digital content, reflecting on the growth of the entertainment sector in the digital industry (Shim et al., 2020). Webtoons are emerging as one of the most widely consumed form of entertainment in the digital media sector, following video streaming (Park, 2020). Webtoons are referred to as digitally published cartoons or comics in bite-sized formats, which are readable via the Internet or mobile devices. In the global webtoon market, Line Webtoon is the largest webtoon platform with more than 64 million monthly users in 60 countries across Korea, Japan, United States, and countries in Southeast Asia, after launching its global service in the year of 2014 (KOCCA, 2020). Webtoon operates French and Spanish services from the year of 2019, taking advantage of new opportunities in Latin America and the European markets. Line webtoon, available through the web (<https://www.webtoons.com/en/>) or the application, operates its services in various languages. Line Webtoon focuses on mass amateurization, where non-professionals can produce and publish their content on Canvas, which is a self-publishing section on the platform for amateur webtoon creators. Once the webtoon titles in the Canvas mark more than a thousand subscribers, creators have choices to apply for the revenue sharing program, which is part of the creator rewards program (Webtoon, 2020). On the Originals of the Webtoon platform, it licenses content from professional webtoon creators, offering creators with direct marketing supports. By the year 2020, 1 million webtoon titles have been serialized, with 12,000 creators in Canvas and 2000 creators in Originals. Webtoon platform procures both amateurs and professional comic artists to be involved in the labor pool that aggregates new audiences in the webtoon industry (Kim & Yu, 2019).

### **2.2. Transcreation**

With increasing media consumption and the growth of online platforms, there has been an increase in voluntary fan activities in the digital environment. Transcreation is defined as the fan's dual activity of translating and recreating, which refers to translating media content to a new language, and at the same time, maintaining the originality of the meaning of the text (Yecies et al., 2019a). The term 'transcreation' indicates participation, or rather empathy, in the process of translating and recreating the language itself, while the tradition holds (Lal, 1972).

Transcreation of webtoons is an emerging phenomenon arising in the media sector and this legalized process is exclusively available through Line Webtoon Translate. Line Webtoon Translate provided by Line Webtoon enables fans to participate in the localization process of content involving 32 different languages. A total of 54,350 transcreators and 4,560 teams from across the world participated in the process by 2019 (Shim et al., 2020).

Transcreation is similar to fansubbing, referring to non-professionals' reproduction of popular video and audiovisual products, which are translated, subtitled, and shared with others (González, 2007; Wongseree et al., 2019). The fansubs enable non-professionals to increase the exposure of unlicensed foreign TV programs and movies in other countries. However, the difference is that fansubbing involves risks regarding copyright issues, with the sole purpose of making contents accessible to other countries (Lee, 2012), whereas transcreation is a legalized practice made available through Line Webtoon Translate. So far, only a few studies have examined the role of the transcreators, and their contribution to the webtoon industry. Yecies et al. (2019b) explored transcreators' role in generating value in the global media industry. Shim et al. (2020) demonstrated cultural intermediation by examining the role of active fans and the webtoon platform as part of the creative industries. Therefore, although some studies have introduced the role of webtoon transcreators, no studies have revealed the underlying goals behind transcreation, which we seek to explore.

### **2.3. Goal hierarchy theory**

The study employs the goal hierarchy approach, which has been an important framework used in research to understand individual's choice-making by connecting their actions to their self-knowledge (Cropanzano et al., 1993). In other words, goal hierarchy draws upon the basis that human behavior is organized in a hierarchical structure, which is used to enhance understanding of consumer's decision-making (Lawson, 1997). Goals act as the motivational and directional factor for understanding consumer behavior (Gutman, 1997). Accordingly, the goal hierarchy theory takes on diverse theoretical perspectives from psychology, including cognitive-neuroethology (Gallistel, 1985), personal construct theory (Kelly, 1955), human principles, personality, and the cognitive structure (Reynolds & Olson, 2001). The more practical goals indicate lower-level goals, and more fundamental goals are abstract and higher-level goals (Kelly et al., 2015). In other words, hierarchically organized behavior is organized into the how, what,

and why of the behavior (Pieters et al., 1995). This hierarchical view of goals is broadly employed in research fields, such as users' goals in mobile marketing (Huang et al., 2019) and social networking platforms (Jung et al., 2017). Based on the hierarchy of goals, the study employs the means-end chain approach to enrich understandings of the fans' goal-attaining process.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1. Means-end chain approach**

The study employs the means-end chain approach (MEC), which stems from the foundation framework of goal hierarchy theory. The notion of the MEC approach has been extended to various domains, especially to studies of consumer's goal-directed behavior (Pieters et al., 1995). The means-end chain technique takes the form of three stages, which are laddering interviews, content analysis, and the creation of a hierarchical goal map. The approach looks into the consumer's decision-making process through understanding user's relationship from the object's attributes, consequences, and values (Kaciak & Cullen, 2006). However, approaches can be different, according to what these varying abstract levels may represent. This study thus adopts an alternative MEC approach by employing the network theory, which is that the abstractness level of each goal is measured to locate the element in the hierarchical goal map, instead of using the three pre-specified levels (Scott, 1991). The MEC approach has been used in several domains of consumer research and the information technology user domains. For example, Xiao et al. (2017) examined the hierarchical structure of user goals and their behavior in the online group buying context, while Jung et al. (2017) examined users' hierarchical goal structure in consumption of Facebook.

#### **3.2. Study participation**

The participants in this study are webtoon fans who have experience in transcreating webtoons via the Line Webtoon Translate platform. The participants were recruited voluntarily by sending messages to transcreators via the Line Webtoon Translate platform. A total of 32 webtoon fan transcreators participated in the laddering interview. The interviews were conducted voluntarily. The interview was conducted in English, which was composed of both e-mail and a chat interview, where the interview consent form and the laddering questionnaire were sent via

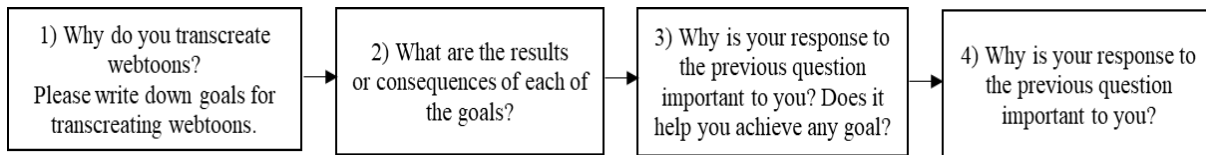
e-mail in advance for participants to fill out. The questionnaire was followed by a chat interview, lasting approximately 40 minutes, which aimed to provide clarification of responses based on the laddering questionnaire. The demographics of participants are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. Demographics of participants**

		N	%			N	%
Gender	Male	6	18.8	Webtoon usage	1-3 times a day	10	31.3
	Female	26	81.3		4- 6 times a day	4	12.5
Age	<17	2	6.3		Everyday	18	56.3
	18-25	21	65.6		Asia	18	56.3
	26-35	8	25.0	Region	North America	1	3.1
	36-45	0	0.0		South America	4	12.5
	46-55	1	3.1		Europe	8	25.0
			Australia		1	3.1	

### 3.3. Laddering Interview

The first stage involves the laddering interview, which is the step-by-step and detailed interviewing process that aim to explore individuals’ translation of meanings of products or objects into meaningful associations (Gutman, 1982). The laddering questionnaire was used to understand fans’ goals behind transcreation of webtoons. Figure 1 illustrates the laddering questions that were used in the interview.



**Figure 1. Laddering questions**

### 3.4. Content analysis

The next stage of the means-end chain technique is the content analysis, which is the coding for the responses to the interview questions. More than two coders coded and compared the data, and the inter-coder reliability was checked to examine the consistency of the coding work. A total of 17 codes were extracted. The two coders were in agreement for 313 of the 341 codes or categories (Cohen’s Kappa=0.91), which indicated an appropriate acceptance level of inter-rater reliability (Fleiss, 1981). Table 2 shows the final codes generated from the content analysis.

**Table 2. Codes**

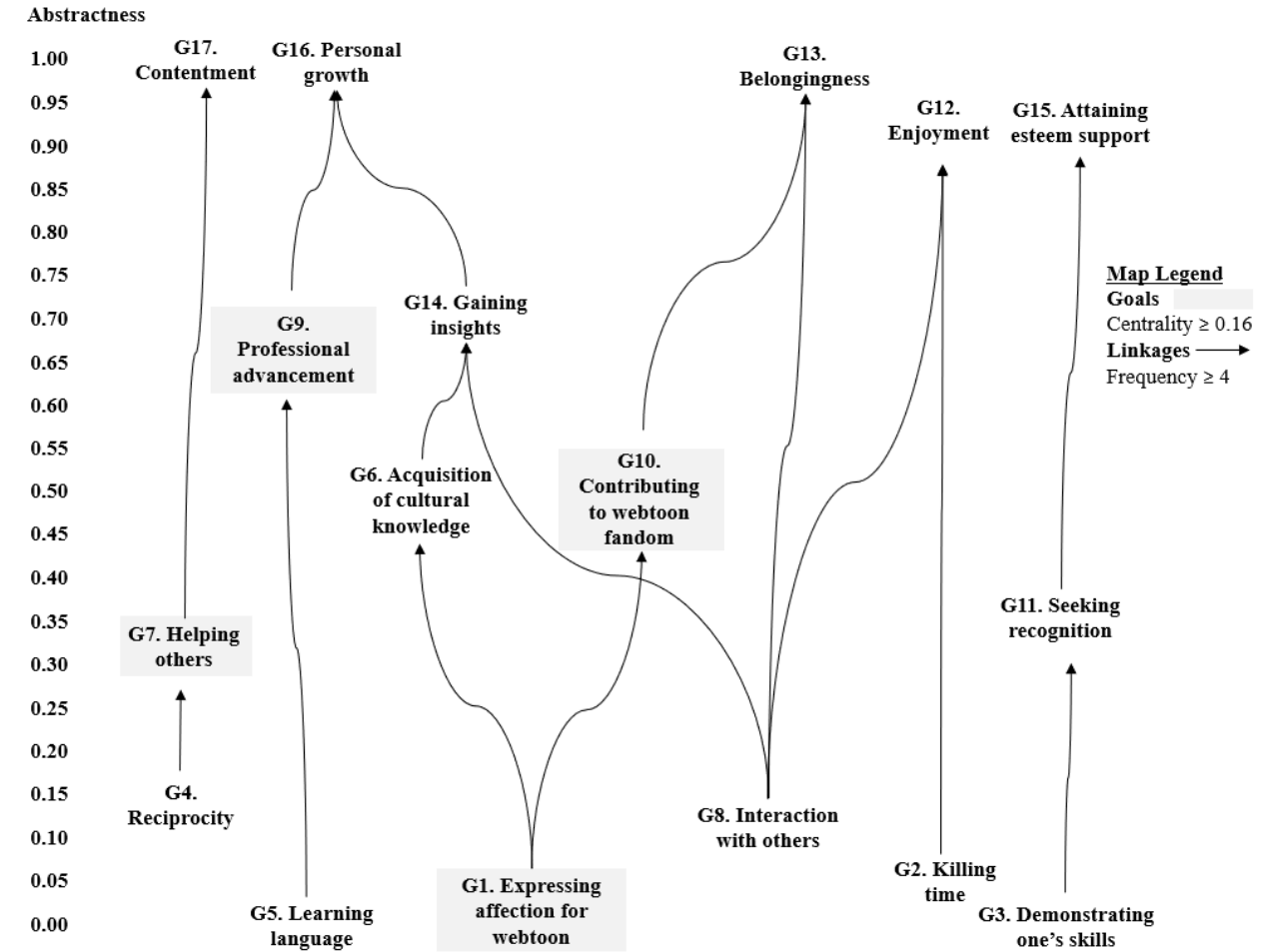
Codes	Description	Examples	
G1	Expressing affection for webtoon	Affection towards webtoon	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• My love to webtoons.</li> <li>• The style and art attract me to Korean webtoons.</li> </ul>
G2	Killing time	To pass time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I transcreate webtoons in my free time.</li> </ul>
G3	Demonstrating one's skills	Demonstration of ones' ability in language skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I have talent in foreign language and my own native language.</li> </ul>
G4	Reciprocity	To give back to the community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Giving back to the community.</li> </ul>
G5	Learning languages	Learning languages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning another language.</li> </ul>
G6	Acquisition of cultural knowledge	Acquiring knowledge about different culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acquiring cultural values presented through webtoons.</li> <li>• It enables me to understand more about Korean Wave.</li> </ul>
G7	Helping others	Form of prosocial behavior	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To help other people understand webtoons better.</li> </ul>
G8	Interaction with others	Communicate and interact with others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I can share our ideas regarding the story.</li> </ul>
G9	Professional advancement	For advancement of one' career	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I to want to work in the translation field.</li> </ul>
G10	Contributing to webtoon fandom	Engage in immaterial labor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I hope that webtoons can gain more love from people.</li> </ul>
G11	Seeking recognition	Gaining recognition from others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Readers started to recognize me as a transcreator.</li> </ul>
G12	Enjoyment	Fun, amusement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I gain enjoyment and fun out of transcreation.</li> </ul>
G13	Belongingness	To seek for belongingness in a community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It feels great to be in the community.</li> </ul>
G14	Gaining insights	Gaining new experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I gain new perspectives from learning about culture.</li> </ul>
G15	Attaining esteem support	Gain sense of respect, confidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I feel appreciated when I gain comments such as "Thank you translators!"</li> </ul>
G16	Personal growth	Has feeling of continued development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• For personal development.</li> </ul>
G17	Contentment	Contentment that arises from fulfillment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It warms my heart to read the comments appreciating the transcreation.</li> </ul>

### 3.5. Hierarchical goal map

The final step in the means-end chain approach involved generation of the relational structure of fans' transcreation goals. The coded responses to the three basic questions produced a ladder of codes, where the responses to the first question became an initiating point that elicited higher-level goals. This alternative method does not classify responses into three pre-defined groups, but rather generates a hierarchical structure with the code's abstractness level. The abstractness level of each code is estimated by in-degrees and out-degrees calculation in the



implication matrix (Pieters et al., 1995). The hierarchical goal map (Figure 2) was generated according to the aggregated data in the implication matrix.



**Figure 2. Hierarchical goal map**

#### 4. Results and discussion

The hierarchical goal map in Figure 2 illustrates goals that fans attain when transcreating webtoons into various languages, and the relations between goals. The hierarchical goal map reveals a total of 17 goals that fan transcreators seek for. The findings show that out of the 17 goals, there are 6 preliminary goals (G1-G5, G8), 6 mediated goals (G6, G7, G9, G10, G11, G14), and 5 end goals (G12, G13, G15, G16, G17). In the hierarchical goal map, four goals of *Expressing affection for webtoon* (G1), *Helping others* (G7), *Professional advancement* (G9) and *Contributing to webtoon fandom* (G10) were the most central goals that were mentioned as

means, comprising of 27% of all linkages. Among them, *Contributing to webtoon fandom* (G10) had the highest centrality value (e.g., 0.19).

The explanation of the important linkages are summarized as below. *Learning language* strongly associates with the core goal of *Professional advancement*, and ultimately leading to the abstract goal of *Personal growth*. The ultimate goal of *Personal growth* can also be achieved in another route of goals. First, learning the language is a preliminary goal that transcreators seek when transcreating webtoons. *Learning language* is a means to the core goal of *Professional advancement*. Many participants specified that language improvement would enable them to achieve their goals of working in the field of translation in the future (“If I were to pursue a career as professional translator, this can be my reference”). Therefore, transcreators improve their language skills to utilize it as an opportunity to obtain career-related benefits, which confirms Nov (2007)’s findings of seeking for development of their career as one of the goals of participation in voluntary online platforms. Ultimately, transcreators view that *Professional advancement* contributes to the goal of *Personal growth* (e.g., “It helps me learn and overcome many obstacles that I impose on myself”). Accordingly, developing language skills for one’s advancement in a career is considered a way to attain personal development (Ryff, 1995).

Another means for *Personal growth* is *Expressing affection for webtoon*, which acts as one of the preliminary and central goals, mediated by *Acquisition of cultural knowledge*, leading to *Gaining insights* and ultimately, to the abstract goal of *Personal growth*. Transcreators show their liking towards the webtoon itself, implying that they are attracted to the webtoon that portrays diverse genres, interesting stories, and art styles. By transcreating their favorite webtoons, transcreators express their passion for learning about the culture, societal norms, and values (e.g., “It lets me know more about other cultures”). Particularly, acquiring knowledge on culture includes gaining a deeper understanding of the media contents regarding Korean popular culture. Fans’ desire for cultural acquisition implies formulating positive attitudes towards the Korean Wave, reflecting on the popularity of entertainment-oriented contents, signifying the growth of Korean cultural industries (Jang & Paik, 2012). Thus, our findings imply that transcreation of webtoon exemplifies transnational cultural consumption (Jin, 2018), where webtoon acts as a gateway to the consumption and further to the understanding of the culture. Finally, acquisition of cultural knowledge is a means to gain insights, leading to broadening their perspectives. These findings demonstrate that transcreators aim to learn about the culture

embedded in webtoons which enables them to gain new perspectives. By gaining insights, transcreators feel that they achieve *Personal growth*, a sense of development in oneself.

*Expressing affection for webtoon*, one of the central goals, is an important preliminary goal that not only associates with *Personal growth* but also acts as a starting means that contribute to the ultimate goal of *Belongingness*. *Expressing affection for webtoon* leads to the most central and core mediating goal of *Contributing to webtoon fandom*, which in turn connects to the ultimate goal of *Belongingness*. Their affection enables them to contribute and support the expansion of webtoon fandom, where fandom is defined as a subculture based on collective identification among individuals who identify themselves with others through appreciation in a media product (Jenkins, 2006). In this case, transcreators desire to take a part in popularizing webtoon and the webtoon authors. This finding confirms the argument in the study of fansubbing, where the purpose is “to make a contribution in an area of particular interest and to popularize it in other countries, making it accessible to a broader range of viewers” (Bogucki, 2009, p. 49). Ultimately, transcreators’ participation in immaterial labor, in the popularization of webtoons enable them to achieve the final goal of *Belongingness*. Building a stronger fandom implies that transcreators can strengthen a sense of belongingness in the fan community. Fans’ sharing constitutes emotional attachment, authenticating a sense of belongingness with fandom (Wang, 2019).

Finally, *Demonstrating one’s skills* leads to the ultimate goal of *Attaining esteem support*, mediated by *Seeking recognition*. Fans desire to demonstrate their skills in languages, which they desire to demonstrate to others when transcreating webtoons (e.g., “I have talent in a foreign language and my native language”). With individual’s ability in languages, they express their desire for the need to be recognized for the efforts put behind transcreation (e.g., “I can show it to others and say “Look, I translated it!”). Recognition is defined as a “public expression of appreciation given by a group to individuals who undertake desired behaviors” (Fisher & Ackerman, 1998, p. 264). Users act positively to others’ recognition, supporting prior research that social rewards such as recognition or approval are key to users’ contribution to online communities (Jin et al., 2015). Specifically, transcreators attain esteem support which aims to “enhancing how others feel about themselves and their attributes, abilities, and accomplishments” (Holmstrom, 2012, p. 78). Esteem support enables transcreators to raise their

confidence, especially when members in online communities provide appreciative comments to individuals' suggestions (Liu et al., 2020).

## **5. Implications**

The research takes on several theoretical implications. First, as elucidating fans' transcreation that is the emerging phenomenon in the global webtoon ecosystem, this empirical work filled the gap of research on webtoons. Despite the growing popularity of webtoons in the international market, research on fans and their critical role in co-creating values to the expansion of the webtoon industry are scant. This research demonstrates the most significant, yet overlooked contributions made by the transcreators in Line Webtoon Translate. This is the first empirical study that takes on a goal-oriented perspective from transcreators, providing a holistic picture of the hierarchical relations of goals behind the fan transcreation of webtoons. The existing literature on webtoons and transcreation is still nascent and needs diverse ways to provide insights into this rising phenomenon in digital media.

The findings of the study also revealed the importance of fandom. Particularly, transcreation plays a vital part in the expansion of fandom, signified by the association revealed between fandom and the high-level construct of belongingness. We find that affection for webtoon is a meaningful means to fans' contribution to fandom. This understanding implies that transcreators express strong attachments to their favorite media texts, which enables them to contribute to fandom through building strong emotional connections and developing close interrelationships in the network (Wongseree et al., 2019). Transcreators' strong psychological connections to fandom enable them to build a transnational communities that is based on a shared cultural identity that is beyond national boundaries (Cho & Cho, 2015). We demonstrated that the relationship between fandom and the construct of belongingness is adaptable to varying contexts, not limited to webtoons.

The study also provides useful implications to the management of webtoon platforms, especially in strengthening the crowdsourcing platform that maximizes transcreators' participation. In Web 2.0, the key component that determines the emerging presence of webtoons is crowdsourcing, where audience participation significantly contributes to the increasing value of webtoons. This crowdsourced transcreation platform not only manages relationships between

transcreators and readers but shows its potential as an economic space. Further, reflecting on fans' extrinsic goals such as recognition and professional advancement, crowdsourcing contests may be applicable. The implementation of transcreation contests or a type of reward system that offers career advancement opportunities can act as a way of recognizing their overlooked contributions. This type of reward system may maximize fan-industry collaboration, as it is known that fans enthusiastically seek recognition by the industry, although they are also driven by voluntary motivations (Ito, 2012). This leads to the need for effective designs of recognition systems desirable for maximizing fan participation in online platforms.

The study is not without limitations. The study suggests that transcreations exemplify fan participation in the webtoon industry; however, it may also be regarded as a type of digital microwork wherein laborers engage in the digital work for low levels of compensation or for free (Aytes, 2013). The findings further give rise to discussion on possible concerns of transcreations as old forms of digital labor or even exploitation. Future research is required to examine possible negative or antagonistic aspects of transcreation, contrary to the means-end chains ladder in the original sense.

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