



Convergence through Webtoon: Representational Analysis of Select Narratives

Sarah Lalhrualtuangi¹ & K.C. Lalthlamuani²

1. Research Scholar at the Department of English and Culture Studies, Mizoram University, India.
 2. Professor and currently the Head of the Department of English and Culture Studies, Mizoram University, India.
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Abstract

Glocalisation in graphic narratives and their adaptations within popular culture reveals the dynamic interaction between global and local influences, showing how these narratives are created, distributed, and received by diverse audiences. Depending on the cultural context, the style and form of narratives vary to accommodate audience preferences. Webtoon emerged as an effective medium of representation, utilised by creators, and has gained popularity across countries with the augmentation of convergence culture. Through webtoons, timely, critical commentaries on personal and social issues have been illuminated. While these issues are fundamentally linked to the context of South Korea, the universality of the narratives and subjects allows interpretation and analysis across a broader spectrum of societies. In light of these components, this study reveals the function of Webtoon as a platform for representation and studies its influence as a contemporary storytelling phenomenon. Through a qualitative narrative approach, it incorporates empirical sources, literary and cultural theories to trace the development and aspects of the South Korean comic industry in relation to transmedia and popular culture. To support this analysis, the webtoons and their adaptations, titled *Itaewon Class* and *Lookism*, are referenced as primary sources to evaluate the nuances of the subjects they represent.

Keywords: Culture, Digital, Dynamic, Global, Transmedia.

Introduction

The growth of technological advancements continues to foster new and diverse forms of narratives, shaping socio-cultural outlook. Evidence regarding the impact of popular culture as a powerful means of representation has periodically emerged through the ingenious use of

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digital media, including audio and visual art forms, network applications, and more. Regardless of the habitual dismissal often associated with the mention of popular culture, it remains indisputable that individuals, irrespective of their national affiliation, have been affected by the economic, social and political ramifications of popular culture. From an intercultural standpoint, popular culture serves as a vital gateway to understanding diverse cultures and a lens for observing other cultural groups (Martin & Nakayama, 2021). Through music, film, television, and social media, individuals gain insights into the values and lifestyles of both the larger and minority group communities. Engaging with popular culture fosters curiosity, questions stereotypes and incites a more nuanced understanding of identity and diversity.

The initiation of Webtoon, nestled in the sphere of popular culture, is coupled with the progression of digital technology and mass culture. Webtoon is formed by combining ‘Web’ and ‘cartoon,’ coined in the early 2000s that refers to digital comics released online in chapters (Yecies et al., 2024). Park (2022) asserts that a digital cartoon is created by scanning a printed cartoon, where pages turn with the click of a button, however, webtoons differ from this format. Webtoons are rather made with digital programs which make the entire process digital, exerting a novel comic format. From creation to utilization, the Webtoon platform comprises laborious layers of planning, distribution, and copyright management. This signals the aspect of Webtoon as an amalgamation of digital elements and cultural outlooks. A crucial aspect of this interrelation is the concept of transmedia, in which Bonifazio and Vito (2021) state, “Transmedia storytelling consists in the diffusion of elements of a work of fiction across multiple channels while still striving for coordinated and coherent narration” (p. 1). Transmedia narratives endorse contribution and adaptability, closing the spatial and temporal boundaries within the story, stipulating viewpoints, and supporting audiences to effortlessly intermingle across platforms. This engaging experience allows numerous contributors, both creators and audiences (producers and consumers) to utilize their skills as a space for improving their artistry and to address individual and societal concerns.

The rise of ‘snack culture’ is subsequently linked to Webtoon. Park (2019) defines the term as “the trend of consuming short bits of content during one’s free time” (p. 5), alluding to the consumption of media content that can be completed in no more than fifteen minutes, akin to relishing one’s favorite snack. Snack culture has developed with the introduction and widespread adoption of smartphones, which facilitate ease of connectivity and accessibility. Park (2019) also mentions how Webtoon is rooted within the mobile internet ecosystem, where the potential audience is considerably larger and the duration of engagement with webtoons typically exceeds the time allocated to reading printed comics. With these aspects in mind, this study addresses the research gap on how Webtoon contributes to the broader socio-cultural medium of representation through selected texts. Utilizing thematic and contextual analytic methods, it substantiates Webtoon as an example of contemporary artistry that facilitates discourse, where narratives created by creators (who carry out the roles of both producers and consumers through engagement and participation) convey critical subjects through representation.

Literature Review

Employing a qualitative approach, Prabawangi et al. (2022) ground their research on Stuart Hall’s reception theory and investigate how *Itaewon Class* influences audience perceptions among university students in Indonesia. Their research finds moral and aspirational motivation in *Itaewon Class*, which are ubiquitous themes in Korean dramas. The theme of melodrama as a narrative device to convey racial discourse is explored in Benjamin M. Han’s (2022) research, where he argues that while *Itaewon Class* presents the issue of racism, it falls short in the lived

experiences of Black communities. Sekarningrum and Kasprabowo (2023), in their research focus on the depiction of liberal feminism, arguing against gender stereotypes and structured power relations, all while emphasizing the relevance of representation in media to advocate against the entailing discrimination. Oktaviani et al. (2024) also looks into the characterization of the five main characters in *Itaewon Class*. The examined characters are categorized into major or minor, flat or dynamic by aligning how their traits influence the narrative and how each character attunes with the drama's motifs of integrity, determination and social inequality.

Selina (2024) explores the repercussions of bullying by adopting Sigmund Freud's theory of personality through the characters of *Lookism*, conveying that it is important to thoughtfully address discrimination based on appearance and the trauma it can induce on the victims. The workings of Webtoon as a pedagogical, cultural and educational platform are also studied by Dar et al. (2023), positing that *Lookism*, with the creative use of Webtoon brings about social awareness to younger generation with regards to entrepreneurship and body politics.

While existing literature provides relevant arguments, the present study extends the scope by outlining the continuing evolution of the South Korean comic industry and Webtoon in the wake of transmedia. It employs the conceptualization of convergence and, uses empirical data and cultural concepts concerning media representation. Keeping in mind the local and global (glocal) context, it references the selected webtoons and their adaptations, accentuating the impact of popular culture and soft power, as well as issues of inequality, racism, and lookism, through the contextual background, narratives, and characters.

Theoretical Framework: Representation and Convergence Culture

Under Stuart Hall's (1997) concept of identity representation, a cycle of interconnected diagrams forms a circuit of culture: representation, identity, production, consumption, and regulation. These circuits interact and affect one another, with representation shaping an identity that emerges from a distribution stage involving production and consumption. The audience then accepts and absorbs this identity, adapting it into their own identity, reflecting a representation in a regulation that binds the community. This is particularly evident in South Korean popular culture, where media is employed to disseminate an identity represented by the idols or actors' companies, thereby amplifying their marketability. The greater the identity value absorbed by audiences/consumers, the more they attract the global market, thus increasing their economic value. The exchange at hand, according to Menawati and Putri (2023), involves an identity or meaning that captivates audiences, creating the illusion that the product is exclusively tailored for them. However, in light of convergence culture, this unidirectional flow between producers and consumers has shifted.

The nature of transmedia according to Henry Jenkins in *Convergence Culture*, is the integration of old and new media forms. Jenkins (2006) defines convergence culture as "the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences" (p. 2). It alludes to sharing slices of content in platforms, which in turn shows how global cultures influence one another. The innovative and technical advancements, how the rise of digital platforms have altered audiences' interactions and consumption of media are especially scrutinized in convergence culture. Adaptation of comics into films, hosting and participating in cosplays and writing fanfictions all signify the essence of convergence within popular culture. Moreover, convergence culture is pivotal in reinterpreting the nuances and conditions of specific communities as it creates inclusive participatory experience. This transition shows the change in behavior of consumers, where they are not just impassive recipients of media but effective

partakers in content making and spreading. Jenkins (2006) argues that convergence culture is “both a top-down corporate-driven process and a bottom-up consumer-driven process” (p. 18). Although media companies expand the flow of content for opportunities and profits, “consumers are learning how to use these different media technologies to bring the flow of media more fully under their control and to interact with other consumers” (p. 18). This method, driven by consumers from the ground up, creates space for underrepresented communities to partake in public discourse, challenge dominant narratives, and navigate against power dynamics and address biased societal norms and policies. Congruently, the discourse of social capital (Bourdieu, 1986) in light of unequal opportunities, naturalization (Bonilla-Silva, 2021) on the issue of racism and lookism (Lee et al., 2017; Spiegel, 2022) of appearance-based discrimination are accentuated in this study. As societies progress, media convergence reshapes perceptions of identity and representation through “participatory culture” (p. 3) on a glocal scale.

Trajectory of South Korean Comics

The first generation of Korean comics, known as *manhwa*, can be traced back to the 1910s (Parc et. al., 2023). *Manhwa* were illustrated in black and white and primarily focused on satirical themes, produced as brief comic strips in newspapers. From the 1960s onward, traditional comic books became a profitable business despite the growing competition from animated films. However, the Asian financial crisis that occurred between 1997 and 1998 disrupted various industries, including comic publishing houses, resulting in uncertainty for several publishers (AFP, 2015). The second generation of Korean comics arose in the early 2000s, overlapping with the formation of web portals by Daum and Naver in 2003 and 2004. Webtoon also began to serve the role of a transmedia storytelling platform during this period. Popular webtoons were adapted into films and dramas and started to contribute to their country’s economy (Joo et al., 2013). Webtoon incorporate many technical aspects that may heighten creativity, expanding genres, and enhance their accessibility, which have all palpably contributed to the popularization of webtoons.

The third generation which commenced from around 2009 to the present, is marked by the prevalence of smartphones. Due to this, Webtoon became globally recognized, with translated versions of comics being extensively made available and creators increasingly publishing their works to the platform. Transforming webtoons into film productions also create opportunities for filmmakers and television drama producers by leveraging original concepts, a solid fan base, and familiar storylines (Jin, 2020). Hence, beginning as *manhwa*, it developed into the present Webtoon that is widely consumed in the cultural market.

Artistic Facets

Since its launch on Daum and Naver, the largest South Korean portal sites, Webtoon garnered impressive interest globally (Jeong, 2020). The platform has a distinctive style as Webtoon features long strip panels, designed for downward scrolling which stands in contrast to other digital comic layouts (Kim & Yu, 2019). This vertical format enables readers to consume the content within seconds, facilitating an experience that is similar to watching a short film, which points towards the concept of snack culture. Additionally, the inclusion of nonlinear storytelling is a notable feature found in many webtoons. Utilizing nonlinearity, Webtoon emerges as a medium that enables readers to mingle different timeframes. Nonlinearity can be expressed through a range of literary and technical methods. On the literary side, flashbacks and plot twists immerse readers in a narrative that does not necessarily follow chronological progression. Components that induce surprise, shock, and the uncanny heighten the narrative

sequence, inciting readers to reassess their prior understanding of events and the motivations of characters. On the technical front, webtoons utilize innovative tools like dynamic flash animation, bringing scenes to life with movement to emotionally enrich the engagement alongside video clips and ambient sounds which add another dimension to storytelling, boosting the immersive experience. The synthesis of literary techniques and innovative technology characterizes webtoons as a distinctive transmedia storytelling platform.

The popularity of digital comic platforms is chiefly because of the waning aspect of the traditional publishing industry, resulting in a decrease in the production of hardcopy comics. This is in part, due to the challenges artists face in achieving consistency within the industry and partly due to an overall decrease in demand. Numerous skilled creators, who were previously deprived of opportunities to expose their talents through conventional publishing, began sharing their creations on platforms such as Webtoon. Digital comic platforms foster a close connection between readers and artists, offering an alternative way of creating and interpreting content, enabled by instant, positive, and constructive feedback that fuels creators' enthusiasm to create additional content (Alvarado & Jackson, 2020). Nonetheless, drawing a career out of it and making it big is another story. Elucidated on the Webtoon webpage (Webtoon, n.d.), 'Originals' in the Webtoon platform refers to webtoons professionally produced by full-time creators, while 'Canvas' encompasses webtoons created by aspiring creators. The latter may be selected for an upgradation to be part of the Originals creator followed by ad revenue sharing program once they have gained one-thousand subscribers and forty-thousand global views on a monthly basis, provided they are of legal age. Canvas functions as a platform for emerging artists, unrestricted by the constraints of formal selection processes. This accessibility allows them to create a range of content, allowing them to experiment and engage directly with their audience. Yet, the likelihood of getting financial benefits and visibility in this category is relatively low. Contrariwise, Originals creators are offered the advantages of exclusivity, monetary incentives, promotional opportunities, and a stamp of validation from the platform itself. Pursuing this route demands a thorough submission process and artistic excellence. The episodes are generally published only after the creators of Originals have completed their work in its entirety and the episodes are released weekly, which may lead to the creators working more than fourteen hours a day. While creators of Originals benefit from platform support and editorial guidance, these compensations may come at the cost of creative autonomy.

Despite the laborious criteria entailed for both Canvas and Original creators, the aspiration for their works to attain global recognition and achieve success, as well as the opportunity to adapt their comics into dramas or musicals, are sizeable motivations. Webtoon has immensely contributed to South Korea's comic market, speculating that the platform will become one of the country's core sources of future Korean cultural content, providing space for value in creative businesses and job opportunities (Kim & Yu, 2019).

Platform for Representation

Webtoon, as noted by Jeong (2020), was launched on two of the largest South Korean portal sites, generating considerable interest within the global comic industry. The substantial growth and appreciation of the South Korean entertainment sector, particularly in films, dramas (K-dramas), and pop songs (K-pop), which have steadily achieved record-breaking success both domestically and internationally, have garnered interest in the dynamics of their culture. The rise of South Korean entertainment in the form of *Hallyu* (Korean) Wave through acts such as BTS (Bangtan Sonyeondan), presently recognized as the preeminent boy band globally, *Parasite* (2019) by director Bong Joon Ho, which became the first non-English film to take home four Academy Award and the thriller drama *Squid Game* (2021), one of the most watched

Netflix series in its debut (Huang, 2022), have opened broader avenues for interpreting the impact of inter-cultural representation. The influence of the *Hallyu* Wave germinates in and across countries, including the Northeastern states of India, where South Korean cultural artefacts and lifestyle are considerably abundant (Kaisii, 2017). This dynamic flow aligns with Hall's (1997) perspective on the circuit of culture and Jenkins' concept of convergence culture. Through various forms of artistry, a specific notion of identity is conveyed by producers via media representation, which is then consumed and regulated by means of convergence, creating a community of shared interests and participatory culture.

Itaewon Class, created by Cho Kwang-Jin was first published in 2016. The English translation was made available on Tapas Media in 2021 and it was adapted into a Netflix series in 2020 after the webtoon gained substantial traction. *Itaewon Class* tells the journey of Park Sae-ro-yi, a young student living with his father, who struggles with social and financial challenges due to their disadvantaged family status. The Netflix adaptation consequently attained global recognition, facilitated by the casting of prominent South Korean actors and placing *Itaewon Class* as one of the most successfully adapted webtoons. The narrative structure and unconventional characters of *Itaewon Class* which are often absent from other South Korean comics, films or dramas, enrich the representation of the surfacing socio-cultural issues within the country. However, this study narrows its focus to the characters of Park Sae-ro-yi and Kim To-ni.

Itaewon is a suburb in Seoul recognized for its large foreign demographic, which is distinguished by diverse cultural influences. The highly cosmopolitan area is characterized by an array of clubs, restaurants, fashion boutiques from different cultures and diverse retail establishments that appeal to tourists and local patrons alike, establishing it as Seoul's vibrant and eminent area. Through its narrative and characters, *Itaewon Class* illustrates the predisposition towards prejudiced societal views within the series' setting and, by extension, societies at large. One of the key themes highlighted is the disparity in opportunities, which is represented through the experiences of the main character, Park Sae-ro-yi, who struggles to make ends meet alongside his father, Park Sung-yeol. Hall (1997) discusses the interpretative role of the camera with "its ability to influence the perceptions of the viewer" (p. 86). Taking this stance into cinematic context, the underlying motif of *Itaewon Class* is the depiction and challenge against the social hierarchical structure based on class injustice and unequal job opportunities. According to a study by Han Seungwoo (2022), parental background, which encompasses factors such as occupation and position, forms part of the contributing elements to the inequality of opportunities in South Korea. In the series, it is vividly depicted that Sae-ro-yi and his father come from humble beginnings, devoid of the wealth and privileges associated with higher social standing. Sae-ro-yi and his father's experience resonates with the concept of social capital proposed by Pierre Bourdieu. According to Bourdieu (1986), social capital is based on networks of relationships and recognition, influencing social stratification and is identified by means of genealogy, class, party, and other factors, thereby accelerating personal advancement and reproducing inequality and injustice for the less privileged. When powerlessness and injustice persist across generations of a family, removing the conditions that perpetuate them becomes increasingly challenging. Analogously, in countries like South Africa that have a record of a high injustice rate, Büttner (2025) finds that economic inequalities are positively associated with crime patterns and power abuse. Although things worked out for Sae-ro-yi in the end, his journey represents the harsh realities faced by those of lower societal status. He faced years of imprisonment and social backlash for actions he is not guilty of, confronts the morally corrupt Jang Geun-won and his father who abuse their social capital to use Sae-ro-yi as a scapegoat for their wrongdoings. Sae-ro-yi exemplifies the struggle of individuals trapped in the relatively lower strata of society, making them easy targets for

discrimination. They face a slow and difficult fight for justice, and Sae-ro-yi's journey reflects the stark reality that for those at the disadvantaged social hierarchy, equity sometimes seems to be an elusive dream.

The issue of racism is another issue addressed in *Itaewon Class*. The manifestation of racism is exemplified through Kim To-ni, a character introduced in the Netflix series. Jenkins (2006) notes, "consumption becomes a topic of public discussion and collective deliberation; shared interest often lead to shared knowledge, shared vision and shared actions" (p. 222) and here, producers' and consumers' take on convergence and the nature of transmedia through adaptation serve as a crucial point, as To-ni's character is utilized to broaden the discourse on race, identity, and representation. As a Guinean-Korean citizen employed at DanBam, he faces discrimination based on his lineage. Despite his late father being a native Korean citizen, and even after repeatedly clarifying his nationality, To-ni faces animosity, resulting in his exclusion from public spaces such as the local club. The social attitude toward To-ni's experience can be analyzed through the color blind theory, specifically within the frame of naturalization and cultural racism. Naturalization, as Bonilla-Silva (2021) explains, is a racial inequality by suggesting it is a natural, non-racial phenomenon. It normalizes racial segregation by implying that people 'naturally' gravitate toward those who are similar to them, promoting racial exclusivity. Likewise, cultural racism induces negative stereotypes to explain the position of racial minority groups in society, positioning them to have an 'inferior culture' rather than acknowledging systemic barriers. Bonilla-Silva's theory helps in evaluating the racism that remains prevalent in South Korea, observable in various domains, including workplaces, educational institutions, corporations, and the entertainment industry. Lee et al. (2024) denote that "discrimination against racially and ethnically minoritized populations in Korea is rooted in the notions of ethnic homogeneity and White supremacy" (p. 6). Multiracial individuals, especially people of color and Korean descent, faced heightened judgment due to White supremacist ideologies within the society, argued Lee et al. (2024). This prejudice, became institutionalized in the 19th century, with Black individuals unfairly labelled as inherently inferior, a stigma that persists to date (Lee et al., 2024).

Correspondingly, *Lookism* illustrates an often-understated societal issue, i.e., discrimination based on physical appearance, which manifests in bullying through verbal, physical and online means. Created by Park (Pak) Taejun, the Korean-language webtoon was released in 2014, and the English-language version in 2017. With the success of its global release, the webtoon series was adapted into a Chinese live-action drama in 2019 and an anime series on Netflix in 2022. Regardless of some variations in each version, the mutual perspective of audiences regarding the issue of appearance-based discrimination, a central theme of *Lookism*, remains prominent. Jenkins rightfully notes, "A medium's content may shift...its audience may change...but once a medium establishes itself as satisfying some core human demand, it continues to function within the larger system of communication options" (p. 14). This signifies the influence of Webtoon within convergence culture, in which the influx of adaptations allows consumers to share knowledge and participate in raising issues, including those often understated. *Lookism* centers on a high school student named Park Daniel (Park Hyung Seok in the Korean series version and Tuo Wen Shuai in the Chinese series version), who experiences bullying due to his perceived lack of physical attractiveness. His life undergoes a dramatic transformation following an uncanny incident. He wakes up one morning in an alternate body and finds that he has an ability to switch into a conventionally attractive body while his other body remains unconscious and vice versa. This study does not probe into its themes of fantasy as it focuses on Daniel's experience. It scrutinizes how the series portrays the aspects of an inequitable society founded on prejudice, affluence, and physical appearances.

The term 'lookism' was familiarized by The Washington Post Magazine in 1978. But,

it was not until 2000 that it was officially acknowledged as a form of discrimination by the authors of the Oxford English Dictionary and the American Heritage Dictionary as noted by D. Saiki (2023). Beauty is a subjective concept, and validating lookism as a form of discrimination can be challenging (Harmon, 2023). Still, awareness to some extent is crucial, as biases can result in inequitable outcomes. Spiegel (2022) argues that lookism is not just another ‘ism’ in a different form. The term is systematically linked to epistemic injustices where unattractive individuals may face hermeneutic disadvantages due to societal taboos, while attractive individuals may experience a positive epistemic bias, leading to partial self-perceptions and worldviews. Rhodes (2011) also affirms that individuals perceived as less attractive are judged with more severe penalties in court, are less likely to secure employment and promotions, and tend to earn lower salaries, notwithstanding any discrepancies in cognitive abilities.

According to Lee et al. (2017), the pervasiveness of ‘lookism’ in South Korea can be traced to the country’s economic backdrop. South Korea has undergone accelerated industrialization and urbanization over the past few decades that has led to competitiveness in the educational, labor market, and social interaction domains. Physical appearance, therefore, along with gender, race, and age, are frequently regarded as supplementary stratifying factors of qualification, Lee et al. (2017) note. Cherea Hammer (2017) notes that ‘lookism’ refers to “physical attractiveness discrimination. It is discrimination toward an individual because of the attractiveness or unattractiveness of their physical characteristics” (p. 1).

As such, lookism warrants attention akin to other social issues, particularly in countries such as South Korea, where bias toward physical appearance influences relationships, workplaces and schools (Arum, 2022). Physical attributes and visual presentations, including facial features, weight, height, hairstyle, and attire, posed as factors of lookism. In recent times, social media has been momentous in perpetuating lookism (Saiki, 2023), which escalates into forms of in-person and cyberbullying, resulting in mental health issues and, in severe cases, death among young individuals and high-profile celebrities in South Korea (Choi, 2023). In *Lookism*, the conventionally unattractive Daniel experiences persistent bullying and public humiliation at the hands of his peers due to his appearance. Lee et al. (2011) in their research find that power dynamics is one of the leading origins of bullying in South Korea; that younger children perceive bullying as less morally wrong, middle schoolers justify based on social skills, while high schoolers and adults view it more negatively and blame perpetrators. This finding evidently holds true in *Lookism*, as bullying among the characters within the confines of Jae Won High School is largely in congruence with the social influence of power and economic status. Growing up in an underprivileged background, Daniel and his single mother faced several obstacles in their efforts to meet their basic needs. The correlation of bullying and socio-economic status (SES) can vary, such as in Japan, where students with higher SES are also susceptible to verbal and physical abuse (Sanada, 2025). However, within South Korea’s landscape, as Seo et al., 2017 denote, low SES remain proportional to cases of bullying victimization. Elgar et al. (2009) also argue that based on a research conducted in thirty-seven countries, countries with elevated income inequality showed higher incidences of bullying among adolescents. This finding aligns with Jeon’s (2025) assertion that South Korea, a nation governed by *chaebols* (family-owned conglomerates), currently ranks among the most uneven societies within developed economies, due to salary gaps, household debt, and disproportionate employment conditions.

Bullying in South Korean schools has been documented since the 1950s, with the exercise of power and juvenile delinquency constituting the fundamental causes, but it is within contemporary times that the surge of crises has been raised owing to the increasing media representation and political dialogues (Bax, 2016). Apart from in-person bullying,

cyberbullying is a major concern in the technology-driven South Korea. Jeong (2024) demonstrates that with the fast-paced internet ecosystem, online violence among adolescents has become more ubiquitous, where instability in emotional factors (such as aggression and depression) and social factors (including family and peers) are prominent stimuli. While cyberbullying is not one of the central themes in *Lookism*, considering the socio-cultural context, the narrative sparks discussion on the potential of digital platforms to magnify forms of bullying and social ostracization based on appearance, with Daniel initially suffering from physical and psychological abuse due to his looks and economic background. Although the narrative of *Lookism* transcends the confines of realism, it mirrors society's bias towards financial and social status, beauty standards and the complications of body image. Daniel is only revered and appraised when he adopts his 'attractive' physique, yet simultaneously faces discrimination and marginalization when he reverts to his original 'unattractive' form. The relationship between exposure to bullying (verbal and cyberbullying) and reduced physical health (including headache, body pain, dizziness) and psychological well-being (low self-esteem and difficulty in concentration) among adolescents is also found to be extensively correlational (Hassan et al., 2024). As indicated by Choi (2023), it has also been reported that in South Korea, while policies and awareness campaigns are instigated, perpetrators often face less punishment than victims, and psychological variables including depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and suicide are witnessed among victims. Despite characters such as Hong Jay and Choi Crystal who display integrity, a higher rate of moral ambiguity is portrayed among the socially privileged characters like Charles Choi. Characters including Lee Euntae, Park Jiho and Duke Pyeon are additional examples of victims of bullying, with the penultimate ultimately resulting in death.

Discussion

As discussed, South Korea has a longstanding history of comic book publishing, dating back to some of the earliest known Korean comics (*manhwa*), and has since transitioned to contemporary digital comic platforms. Consequently, the ascent of the South Korean entertainment industry has led to an expansion in the realm of digital comics and popular culture as a whole. Hall (1997) posits that the dynamics of production, consumption, and regulation of content phenomena constitute a circuit of culture, integral to identity and representation. While dramas, films, and popular music have been vital in spreading South Korean popular culture, Webtoons, as a relatively novel artefact, not only enrich the artistic panorama of the respective country (Park, 2020) but also create an interpretative space that facilitates a circuit culture, expediting representation and discourse.

The workings of the traditional publishing industry, the notion of snack culture and the fresh interface of Webtoon are a few of the contributing factors to the rise of its platform. Equally, the cumulative progress of the South Korean entertainment business in the form of *Hallyu* Wave, which Fares (2022) also argues is inevitable, paved the way for the glocal interest, including countries like India. *Itaewon Class* and *Lookism* both exemplify the essence of transmedia in contemporary popular culture, coupled with adaptations and various interpretations in the ever-growing convergence culture. Through *Itaewon Class*, disparities in opportunities and racial issues are examined. In *Lookism*, the focus is placed towards lookism and forms of bullying, where the former issue is often undermined. The central context of study is South Korea; however, countries such as the Northeastern states of India, South Africa and Japan are also taken into account to substantiate the function of South Korea's soft power and how *Itaewon Class* and *Lookism* demonstrate the surfacing universal issues.

Conclusion

This present study underlines the function of popular culture in contemporary society, the footprint of South Korean comics, the digitization of comics, and traces the aspects and influence of Webtoon as a relatively novel industry. In light of convergence culture, it explores individual and societal issues through select webtoons, addressing subjects of social injustice and unequal opportunities related to family status, race, and lookism. The researchers acknowledge the limitations of relying on secondary sources, as they may contain subjective biases. However, a close narrative analysis of the themes of the primary sources (*Itaewon Class* and *Lookism*) and the incorporation of relevant empirical, socio-cultural, economic and psychological sources elucidate an understanding of Webtoon as a platform for representation and a transmedia storytelling phenomenon. The contextual information on how narratives in webtoons can be regarded as representations that lend perspectives on prevailing concerns in South Korea is uncovered through Hall's theory of representation, Jenkins' concept of convergence culture, Bonilla-Silva's naturalization theory, Bourdieu's social capital theory and lookism as denoted by researchers such as Hyemin Lee et. al and Thomas Spiegel. Future research could expand the dialogue by investigating the topic through both ethnographic and mixed-method research.

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Bio-note

Sarah Lalhruaitluangi is a Research Scholar at the Department of English and Culture Studies, Mizoram University. She obtained her Bachelor of Arts degree from Pachhunga University College, Mizoram, and her Master of Arts degree from Christ University, Bengaluru. She has presented at international conferences and published papers in her areas of interest, including studies of Culture, Film, and Literature.

Email ID: sarachhakchhuak7@gmail.com

ORCID Id: 0009-0006-8416-1515

K.C. Lalthlamuani is a Professor and currently the Head of the Department of English and Culture Studies, Mizoram University. She earned her Ph.D. from Mizoram University in 2012. She is the author of the book *Toni Morrison and the Politics of Narrative*.

Email ID: kayz1511@gmail.com

