



Readers' advisory guide development for webtoon

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47989/ir30iConf47179>

Abstract

Introduction. Readers' advisory (RA) services are one of the core information services that libraries provide. As the types and formats of the collection materials have diversified, relevant RA services have evolved accordingly. This project develops an RA guide for webtoons, emerging online webcomics that have successfully engaged international audiences with their diverse themes and accessible content.

Methods. The current study compiled the data from focus groups, semi-structured interviews, and a large-scale online survey with avid webtoon readers. Then, a webtoon expert research team reviewed the major themes identified in the empirical data and created recommendation categories accordingly. Lastly, subject matter expert consultations were performed to revise the recommendation categories.

Results. The finalized webtoon RA guide has been developed and uploaded to the institutional repository, so it is publicly available to anyone, especially librarians who are interested in providing relevant reference and recommendation services. The developed RA recommendation categories contain nine primary subjects, including art style, mood, cross-media, and representation.

Conclusion. By including accessible digital content in reference services, libraries will be able to expand their reference services beyond the physical collections and promote diverse content to their patrons.

Introduction

Webtoon is a form of online webcomic where creators share their visual storytelling sequentially in a vertical format. Originating from South Korea, webtoons.com, a major webtoon provider, was launched in the United States in 2014. Since its launch, it has rapidly grown in popularity among global audiences. As of September 2023, there were 175 million monthly active users of the platform, and over 12 million professional and amateur creators have shared their works (Webtoon, n.d). Younger adult readers, such as Gen Z (born between 1997–2012) and millennials (born between 1981–1996), have been the primary force driving readership in this new platform, including young female readers who have been neglected in the previous comics industry (Gustines & Stevens, 2022).

Existing webtoons are mostly free to read as long as one has internet connectivity. Their web-based and mobile-based application services are freely provided to anyone, though users can buy advanced access to newly released episodes. Webtoon readers can enjoy their content anywhere, anytime, with the access of their smartphones. With its convenient and accessible format, webtoon supports diverse readers' needs, including readers with reading difficulties, limited time and resources, and the need to find relatable communities (Cho et al., 2022).

As younger readers shift to digital reading platforms like webtoon, it is important for information professionals to understand these newly emerging materials and prepare for future information services that are affected by new reading needs. However, as webtoon is relatively a new, born-digital format, the research to support information professionals in this regard is still lacking.

The current research aims to solve this problem by creating a readers' advisory (RA) guide for webtoons that is supported evidentially by the investigators' recent empirical studies on webtoon readers, coupled with consultations from the subject expert reference librarians. The project's immediate impact on reader advisory practice will be to 1) promote the newly emerging, accessible graphic medium; 2) familiarize librarians with the diverse materials and topics included in webtoon; and 3) support public librarians' reference services by providing an RA guide for webtoon. Potential future impacts will be providing a framework for librarians and information professionals to explore other emerging media formats. The current research answers the following research question:

- **RQ:** What reading needs do webtoon readers have when looking for a new webtoon, and how can the Readers' Advisory guide support these needs?

Literature review

Webtoon is a new storytelling medium, and scholarly research into webtoon is likewise still in its infancy. Existing studies have examined the cultural and artistic aspects of webtoon, focusing on its transnational and transmedia characteristics (Jin & Yi, 2020; Park et al., 2019) and cultural influences on international audiences (Jang & Song, 2017), as many webtoon works originated from South Korea. Several efforts have been made to understand webtoon's roles in literacy education, as well, such as Kim's (2023) study on K-Pop fans' language learning and literacies with webtoon.

RA services connect readers with materials that meet their needs (Watson, 2000), and they have been one of the core information services libraries provide. While 'traditional' book-based RA services and relevant studies have evolved within LIS, research on RA services for emerging media and multimedia resources, such as webtoon, has not received enough attention within the LIS scholarly communities. Considering library users' born-digital material needs, as well as libraries' shift to digital services (Ex Libris, 2022), the lack of understanding of digital media and preparations for the relevant services is a problem.

Generally, RA services are developed based on the philosophy that reading has an intrinsic value and provides a specific pleasure unachievable in other ways (McCook, 1993). Van Fleet (2003) states that popular and genre fiction is valuable because it appeals to readers and should, therefore, be recommended in library services. These collections serve the needs of scholars, students, and recreational readers through the interaction of reader and text (Fleet, 2003). On a similar note, Smith and Tarulli (2015) argue that the basis of a reader's advisory services is to listen to the person and discern their likes and dislikes in literature.

Existing literature emphasizes the need to understand readers and that RA services should be based on what readers want, but current RA guides and their development often depend heavily on individual experts' subject knowledge. Nonetheless, fiction and popular culture fans have been actively developing their own recommendation and organization systems, such as Archive of Our Own (AO3), a '*non-profit open-source repository for fan-fiction and other fan-works*' (Lorigados, 2022, p.2). Noting the readers' knowledge and reading experiences, the current study develops and presents an RA guide for webtoons from the reader-centred perspective, based on the comprehensive reviews of webtoon readers' reading motivations, appeals, needs, and reading behaviours.

Methods

The current project takes a qualitative and empirical approach to the design of RA. Based on multiple sources of information from avid webtoon readers (focus groups, semi-structured interviews, and a large-scale online survey), data were inductively arranged into broad categories and deductively analysed with regard to individual webtoon titles. This led to the iterative creation, review, and revision of the webtoon guide through group discussions and with the advice of subject matter experts. The current manuscript focuses on the creation of the webtoon RA guide.

Previous phases of this study identified webtoon readers' appeal factors and their reading behaviours. These included format-specific elements such as illustration style, as well as content-specific elements such as subject, mood, characters, or use of specific tropes (Cho et al., 2022). The goal of the current project was to make that information usable for librarians by identifying specific appeal factors and other relevant categories in specific webtoon titles.

Between August and September 2023, a research team was composed of members with webtoon expertise. The data collected from the previous phases were compiled and reviewed by the entire research team to identify the most significant categories for webtoon readers to support their reading needs. Fiction classification is notoriously problematic (Beghtol, 1990). The webtoon platform already identifies several traditional access points, such as genre, author, and series. Following Almeida and Gnoli (2021), the research team chose to focus on webtoon attributes rather than subjects or genres. In addition, the research team used the words and phrases of webtoon readers to identify those attributes as a starting point for the analysis.

After the creation of several overarching RA categories, such as Complexity, Mood, Representation, and art style, four members of the research team engaged in extensive webtoon reading to understand the latest webtoon trends additionally and describe how their webtoon titles fit into those categories by creating sub-categories. For instance, the mood of one webtoon title might be light-hearted, while another might be dark and foreboding. Categories and sub-categories were reviewed and discussed weekly in a whole group setting, wherein researchers explained how and why they designated certain webtoons in different categories. In the context of this discussion, several categories were iteratively revised and refined. This process of creating the initial webtoon RA categories and identifying the appropriate webtoon titles took approximately six months.

As the next step, two subject matter experts from the American library association's (ALA) Graphic Novels and Comics Round Table (GNCRT) provided expert evaluation of the initial RA guide.

Additional feedback from this process was discussed by the researchers and incorporated into the RA guide design, resulting in the final set of revised categories and RA guide.

While the current study adopted several processes in taxonomy design, the list of terms is not closed, and these terms are not mutually exclusive. The research team expects this guide to evolve continuously as webtoon readers and media evolve.

Findings and discussions


Recommendation categories

Table 1 presents the developed webtoon RA guide recommendation categories. Figure 1 is a screenshot of a page from the finalized RA guide. There are nine first-level categories, each including second-level categories. Three second-level categories (romantic interests, disabilities, and fictional + historical) include third-level categories for further detailed recommendations. This guide does not include traditional access points (e.g., genres). Instead, using data from webtoon readers, the research team focused on why readers currently read what they read, resulting in categories highlighting these readers' motivations and needs.


First level category	Second level category	Third level category
Art Style	Early comic book	*
	Experimental	*
	Manga/Anime	*
	Simplified	*
Characters	Heroic qualities	*
	Lovable and cute	*
	Magical and superhuman powers	*
	Powerful women	*
	Quirky and funny	*
	Relatable to adulthood	*
	Villain-centric	*
Complexity	Episodic	*
	Long-running	*
Cross-media	Books/Web novels	*
	Graphic novel available	*
	Movies	*
	TV shows	*
How the story unfolds	Avoiding bad ending flags	*
	Diving into social issues	*
	Non-romantic relationship-	*
	Overcoming challenges and	*
	Power fantasy	*
	Romantic interests	Arranged or political marriages
		Friends to lovers
		Love Triangles
		Opposites attract/ enemies to lovers
		Rags-to-riches romances
Mood	Second chance at life	*
	Underdogs never lose	*
	Lighthearted, relaxing, cozy	*
	Escapist, exciting, immersive	*
	Tense, dark, suspenseful	*
	Heartwarming, healing, hopeful	*
Multimedia	Scary, dangerous, dystopian	*
	Background music	*
	Sound effects	*
Representation	Animation/special effects	*
	BIPOC	*
	LGBTQIA+	*
	Disabilities	Visible disabilities Invisible disabilities
Where the story unfolds	Another/parallel/fantasy world	*
	Mythologies/legends reimagined	*
	Fictional + Historical	Eastern aesthetics
		Western aesthetics
	What happens in schools	*
	Learning about different cultures	*
	Work and life	*

Table 1. Webtoon readers' advisory (RA) recommendation categories

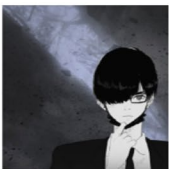
Invisible Disabilities < Disabilities webtoons feature characters with neurodivergent traits, mental illnesses, and invisible chronic or autoimmune conditions.



See You in My 19th Life
The main character remembers all of their past lives. In her current 19th life, she has the goal of meeting someone from her 18th life to reconnect with him. The other main character struggles with complex post-traumatic stress disorder.
Creator: Lee Hey [URL](#)



Serious Trans Vibes
This is a semi-autobiographical webtoon about living as an autistic trans girl, written by an author who shares those lived experiences. While some episodes are lighthearted and humorous, some dive into heavy topics related to transphobia and real-world current events. Not always a light read, but one that some trans and neurodivergent readers may find relatable.
Creator: [SophieLabelle URL](#)



Taste of Illness
This webtoon reflects on mental illness, loneliness, bullying, friendship, and love. Portraying anxiety as a black ooze that engulfs main character Yujin in moments of stress, this webtoon may be relatable for those who have had a difficult time with mental illness. It touches on difficult topics, but shows anxious readers that they are not alone in their experiences.
Creator: Ilkwon Ha [URL](#)

Figure 1. An example page of the finalized webtoon RA guide

For art style, Characters, and Mood, the research team developed second-level categories based on the reviews of the available webtoon titles as well as needs identified from the semi-structured interviews. For the Mood category, particularly, the research team additionally consulted Cho et al.'s (2023) categorizations of moods in the fiction genre to finalize the second-level categories that are consistent with the existing literature.

Many readers mentioned that they like reading webtoons for a short break and prefer works that do not require a lot of mental investment to keep track of the overall story. In contrast, some readers preferred webtoon titles with many episodes published and new episodes still coming out regularly. Due to this reading need, the Complexity category was identified, which consists of episodic and long running. The Episodic category generally does not require any prior knowledge of the webtoon work to begin reading, can be read out-of-order, or picked up at any point in the work's run. Long-running titles (with over 100 episodes) have stronger internal continuity and may require readers to start reading at the beginning of the webtoon to understand the plot.

Webtoon's immersive multimedia elements in reading engagement, such as sound and animation effects (Cho et al., 2022) and its cross-media appeals (MacDonald, 2023) have recently been highlighted. The developed RA categories include cross-media to indicate webtoon titles that are associated with different media formats, such as TV shows or movies, and multimedia to refer to works that incorporate multimedia elements for more immersive reading engagements.

The following section shares some additional challenges and opportunities encountered in the current webtoon RA development projects.

Challenges in granularity: plot/narratives, settings, and representations

The goal of the webtoon RA guide is not to replicate traditional categories of genre or provide a comprehensive list of them, which would be unwieldy to navigate. The broad category headings of

How the story unfolds, Where the story unfolds, and Representation were selected to encompass categories that respond to readers' needs as indicated by previous phases of this study and by popular throughlines in webtoon content and readership. For example, Representation was developed for readers being drawn towards webtoons, which involve characters they could see themselves in or communities that they were a part of (Cho et al., 2022), or for readers who are interested in understanding others. Creating the overarching category of Representation with subcategories addressing under-represented groups supports this need.

In How the story unfolds, the research team recognized the importance of the romance genre (Ramsdell, 2012; Saricks, 2001). However, the researchers also noted that while finding a romance story on webtoon platforms is easy, it is difficult to find a story that features family (or chosen family) relationships or friendships rather than a romantic relationship. Thus, the team decided to add the Non-romantic relationship-centred category for diverse recommendations. However, this decision leads to a discussion of challenges that the research team encountered: when developing an RA guide and recommendation categories, what is the appropriate level of granularity for a category, considering they are not meant to be an exhaustive organization schema but to be a starting point for good advisory services?

As another challenging example, the Representation category includes BIPOC, LGBTQIA+, and Disability, and the Disability category includes sub-categories, Visible and Invisible disabilities (e.g., neurodiversity, mental illness, chronic and autoimmune conditions). For Disability categories, members of these groups were consulted on the wording and how their experiences differ, which led to the necessity of separating these two groups in representation. Initial categories for Representation were at a more granular level, including sub-categories that identify different ethnicities, races, and more. Later, based on the iterative internal discussions and consultations with the subject expert librarians, the current categories were finalized at a less granular level due to the intersectionality of webtoons. Many webtoon titles tend to be diverse and include multiple themes and characters that intersect among these categories; thus, placing a title in one category over the other may result in subjective inconsistencies. Still, it may be fruitful for future studies to investigate whether a certain level of granularity in the RA guide can be more helpful in supporting RA librarians.

Conclusion

The current study developed an RA guide for webtoons as part of a larger research project to understand webtoon readers' motivations, appeals, needs, and reading behavior. The developed RA categories reflect the webtoon titles that are currently in demand and available. Categories such as Characters and Where the story unfolds strongly represent what webtoon readers are looking for now. This indicates that the suggested RA categories can and should evolve. What readers look for might change as time passes. RA services should be prepared for those changes, and so should RA tools and resources. The categories used in this paper represent the words and phrases used by webtoon readers themselves. Future research could address additional ways to incorporate user-generated categories into traditional RA services, moving beyond folksonomies to a wider integration into advisory services for multiple genres and formats.

This research does not apply only to webtoons. Reading materials, and more broadly, types of information objects in general, have evolved in new ways as their formats and platforms have diversified. This indicates that information services expected from libraries will significantly change, too. The shift may have already started; more reference services are conducted online, and more libraries provide born-digital collection access to their users, including streaming services or video games. Considering the inclusion of born-digital materials in library services that can be accessed for free not only helps the library's collection development budget and space concerns but also broadens library users' reading horizons. As media types expand, similar

discussions of appeal factors or recommendations can help library RA personnel learn how users interact with and value the formats and types of media they use.

The full version of the webtoon RA guide, including the definitions of each category and the relevant recommendations for each category, can be found at the University of Missouri's open digital repository for public use (<https://mospace.umsystem.edu/xmlui/handle/10355/102741>).

Acknowledgments

The current project was supported by the American Library Association's Carnegie-Whitney Grant.

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