

WEBTOON-BASED TRANSMEDIA STORYTELLING AND FAN ENGAGEMENT IN THE K-POP INDUSTRY: A CASE STUDY OF ENHYPEN AND THE WEBTOON ‘DARK MOON’

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ABSTRACT

This research examines webtoons' role as a transmedia storytelling tool in enhancing fan engagement within the K-pop industry, focusing on the collaboration between the K-pop boy band ENHYPEN and the webtoon Dark Moon. By applying Henry Jenkins' transmedia storytelling principles, the Uses and Gratifications (U&G) theory, and Parasocial Interaction (PSI) theory, this research explores how narrative integration across platforms influences emotional attachment, consumption behaviour, and motivational factors in fan engagement. Using *Dark Moon* as a case study, this research combines in-depth interviews with 15 key informants of ENHYPEN's global fan base. The questionnaire included open-ended questions designed to collect the data, adopting purposive, snowball, and network sampling techniques. Findings reveal that the webtoon creates an immersive fan experience, strengthening fan engagement. Social media, music, and digital comics converge to facilitate multi-platform engagement, fostering an active, community-driven fandom. The research also demonstrates how transmedia storytelling influences fan behaviors, including music streaming, merchandise purchases, and concert attendance. This research contributes to understanding the strategic value of webtoons in artist branding and K-pop marketing, offering new insights into how transmedia storytelling transforms fan culture and creates new opportunities for commercialization.

Keywords: Transmedia Storytelling, Fan Engagement, Webtoon, K-pop, Enhypen

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INTRODUCTION

K-pop has become a global sensation, driven by catchy music, stunning choreography, and compelling visuals. The rise of K-pop is heavily supported by entertainment agencies that use strategic marketing to build successful careers for artists. Over time, K-pop companies have continuously integrated new platforms and content to keep fans engaged and expand their reach. In recent years, webtoons—online digital comics that originate from South Korea—have become an essential element of K-content's global influence. Webtoons offer a unique form of storytelling, blending art and narrative that has captured the attention of international audiences. In response to this trend, major K-pop agencies have embraced webtoons, web novels, and animated game platforms as transmedia storytelling tools.

Intellectual Property (IP) is essential for protecting and managing creative content across multiple platforms in the entertainment industry. Strong IP strategies legally safeguard characters, storylines, and designs in related media, preventing unauthorised use and maintaining brand integrity. Economically, IP drives revenue through licensing, merchandise, and collaborations, while also deepening fan engagement by providing exclusive content that builds emotional connections and loyalty (Jang & Kim, 2023). In 2021, HYBE, one of K-pop's hugely successful companies, announced plans to use its original story to develop a business using a new type of intellectual property (IP) it owns. The main idea of HYBE's original story business is the extension of artist-based content, including music and stories, with flexible applications to different media formats. Consequently, HYBE cast its artists into the original stories as part of this strategy (Kim, 2021). Among HYBE's webtoon projects, Enhypen's 'Dark Moon: The Blood Altar' has achieved significant success. Sangwoo Hwang, CEO of HYBE's story business division, stated, "ENHYPEN's Webtoon Dark Moon alone went beyond the popularity of webtoons, expanding the offline fan experiences and showing the scale-up without limit of original story IP of HYBE" (Kyungyoon, 2023). Indeed, the 'Dark Moon' series has already established a reputation for success in contrast to other HYBE webtoons, even though Enhypen is a rising group in the K-pop industry. Enhypen's commitment to maintaining the concept and expanding the storyline through the webtoon 'Dark Moon' has become one of the key strategies for deepening fan engagement.

To understand this phenomenon, entertainment companies, content creators, and marketers in the music industry require an approach that can effectively and efficiently handle transmedia storytelling strategies. There is moderate research on transmedia storytelling in the music industry, particularly in the K-pop sector; most existing research focuses on well-established groups, such as BTS. However, further research is needed into how rising groups like Enhypen utilize webtoons for fan engagement and brand development. Notably, its role in forming emotional connections and influencing fan consumption remains underexplored. This study addresses these gaps by using the webtoon Dark Moon with Enhypen as a case study to analyze the factors driving fan engagement, the emotional attachments formed through transmedia storytelling, and the influence of these factors on cross-platform consumption behaviors. Consequently, this study generates the following research objectives:

- 1) To investigate the factors that motivate Enhypen's fans to engage with the webtoon *Dark Moon* as part of Enhypen's transmedia storytelling experience.
- 2) To examine how engagement with the webtoon 'Dark Moon' affects Enhypen fans' emotional attachment to the group and analyse how this attachment influences their consumption behaviours across various platforms.

To fulfil the research objectives, this study investigates the perspectives of Enhypen's international fanbase, Engenes, and readers of the webtoon Dark Moon. This study is significant to those interested in webtoons, K-pop fandom, transmedia storytelling strategies, and the K-pop industry. The findings of this study could have practical implications for entertainment companies, content creators, and marketers operating within the K-pop industry,

providing essential insights into how to utilise webtoons in transmedia storytelling effectively. Academically, this study contributes to the literature by expanding knowledge on the effects of transmedia storytelling on fan engagement and the broader entertainment industry. Therefore, this research aims to examine the impact of webtoons and transmedia storytelling on fan engagement within the context of the K-pop industry.

LITERATURE REVIEWS

Webtoons, originating in Korea, refer to digital comics designed primarily for online platforms, often using a vertical scroll format that enhances mobile viewing (Jang & Song, 2017). The term "webtoon" merges "web" and "cartoon," and its evolution from traditional comics gained popularity in the early 2000s through digital platforms like Naver and Kakao Webtoon (Cho, 2021). These platforms not only made comics accessible globally but also enabled real-time feedback and interactive elements, thus enhancing engagement. This shift has made webtoons a powerful tool for storytelling, particularly in transmedia narratives (Augereau et al., 2018; Cho, 2021). Webtoons offer a cost-effective and adaptable approach to creating transmedia narratives, allowing stories to transition easily into television dramas and movies (Jin, 2015). Their episodic and visual nature makes them ideal for adaptations and spin-offs, contributing to the creation of extended narrative universes (Jin, 2019). Beyond entertainment, webtoons serve as cultural vehicles, helping readers understand Korean culture and facilitating cross-cultural exchange, with adaptations in countries such as France, Japan, and Indonesia (Jang & Song, 2017).

Transmedia Storytelling and Fan Engagement in K-pop

Henry Jenkins introduced the term "transmedia storytelling" in a seminal article published by Technology Review in January 2003. Transmedia storytelling involves systematically sharing a story's key elements across multiple media platforms, where each medium uniquely contributes to the narrative (Jenkins, 2003). By employing transmedia storytelling practices, a property can potentially increase its market reach by introducing numerous access points for various audiences (Jenkins, 2007). In addition, as defined by (Scolari et al., 2014), transmedia storytelling combines official media industry content with fan contributions and engagement. Scholars and practitioners in their respective fields acknowledge this approach. Since transmedia storytelling is an interdisciplinary research object, it can be explored and enjoyed from diverse perspectives.

(Burgess & Green, 2010) highlighted how music videos are crucial to transmedia narratives in examining YouTube culture. (Baym, 2018) discovered that social media allows fans to participate more actively in and expand upon these narratives. Additionally, Mark Duffett's work suggests that fans are co-producers of transmedia narratives (Cooper, 2014). From this point of view, transmedia storytelling could be considered a network of texts in different media that expands a fictional universe.

In addition, Jenkins identified seven principles of transmedia storytelling—spreadability vs. drillability, continuity vs. multiplicity, immersion vs. extractability, worldbuilding, seriality, subjectivity, and performance—that provide a framework for creating engaging, multi-platform narratives that enhance fan involvement. These principles emphasize the balance between sharing content broadly and allowing deep engagement, maintaining consistency while offering diverse perspectives, and immersing audiences in a rich, expanding narrative universe. They encourage active fan participation through fan-created content, keeping the story dynamic and layered, and building anticipation through episodic storytelling (Jenkins, 2009a, 2009b). By drawing on Jenkins's principles of transmedia storytelling, this approach can be an essential strategy for strengthening fan engagement in the K-pop industry.

Understanding Fan Behavior through Use and Gratification (U&G) Theory

Use and Gratification (U&G) theory explains how audiences actively select media to satisfy specific needs (Katz et al., 1973). According to McQuail and colleagues (1972), the theory emphasizes five key assumptions: 1) audiences are active participants in their media choices, 2) media are chosen based on the gratification they provide, 3) media compete with other sources to fulfill needs, 4) audiences can self-report their media habits, and 5) researchers should avoid judging media content based on personal bias (West & H. Turner, 2010). However, this theory also addresses critiques, particularly the assumption that all media consumption is active, overlooking passive media engagement (Mehrad & Tajer, 2016). Nonetheless, the U&G theory remains relevant in understanding the engagement patterns of fans in the 21st century (Ruggiero, 2000).

Emotional Connections in Fandom

As the Uses and Gratifications (U&G) theory explains, providing innovative and interactive content meets fans' needs for connection and engagement. Thus, understanding how these strategies foster emotional connections is essential for analyzing and improving how the industry sustains fan engagement. Regarding fan engagement strategy in K-pop, (Sara, 2022) pointed out that Korean entertainment companies use a parasocial relationship strategy between the fan and the artist. Parasocial Interaction (PSI) theory explains the one-sided relationships fans form with public figures or fictional characters, where they feel a personal connection despite the celebrity being unaware of them (Horton & Wohl, 1956). This sense of emotional attachment is crucial in maintaining fan engagement in the K-pop industry.

Integrating Theories: Aligning with the literature review, it was found that there was a relationship among Jenkins' transmedia storytelling principles, U&G theory, and PSI theory in examining how Enhypen's webtoon, *Dark Moon*, fosters fan engagement. Jenkins' worldbuilding and immersion principles help explain how the narrative universe expands across different platforms, while U&G theory provides insight into how fans actively seek and engage with content to satisfy various needs. PSI theory, in turn, explains how fans form emotional bonds with fictional characters and real idols, leading to increased participation in the fan community. Therefore, by combining these theories, this research offers a comprehensive understanding of how transmedia storytelling strategies, such as webtoons, create deeper cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement among fans. Accordingly, the conceptual framework can be drawn from the literature review, as shown in Figure 1.

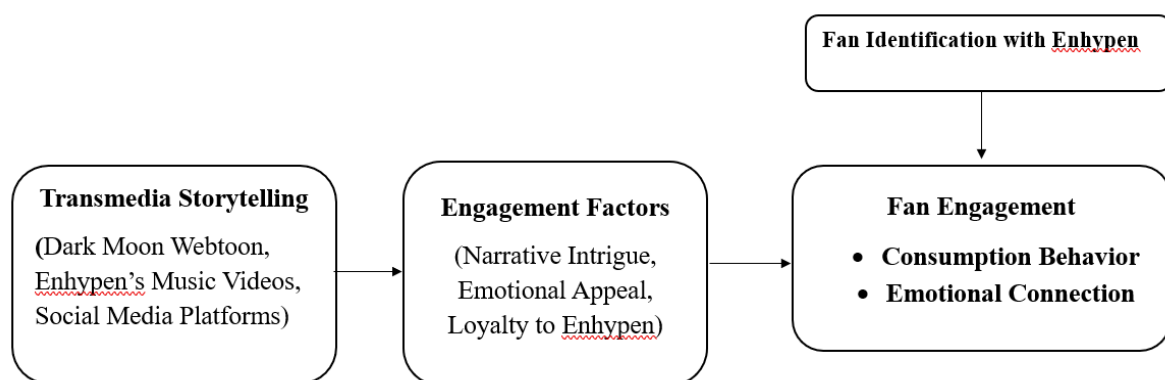


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative case study design to explore the integration of transmedia storytelling and webtoons in the K-pop industry, specifically focusing on the collaboration between the K-pop boy band Enhypen and the webtoon *Dark Moon*. The target population includes Enhypen's global fans, known as "Engenes," who engage with the band's music and

transmedia content on social media platforms such as Weverse, the Naver Webtoon application, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Data was collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews between January and February 2025. The researcher used purposive, snowball, and network sampling techniques to select 15 participants from diverse cultural and digital contexts, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of fan engagement. The final sample included fans from Korea, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, New Zealand, China, the United States, Myanmar, Thailand, and Japan, representing key regions with distinct media consumption habits. Fifteen participants in the analysis section will be identified using their coded Participant ID (e.g., P1, P2, etc.) rather than personal details. This ensures anonymity and clarity while allowing for accurate referencing in analysis and discussion. During the interviews, the researcher uses a guided questionnaire to cover fan motivation, emotional connections, and consumption behaviors regarding transmedia storytelling content. Additionally, thematic analysis, facilitated by MAXQDA software, was used to identify patterns and insights regarding fan engagement behaviors. Thematic analysis followed a five-step process, including familiarization with data, generating initial codes, identifying emerging themes, defining and categorizing themes, and writing the final report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To address the focused data objectives, this research employed both descriptive and interpretive approaches, focusing on the perspectives of key informants to capture their experiences in fan engagement.

List of Key Informants' Information

Table 1 List of Participants for the in-depth interviews (*Analysed by the author*)

Participant ID	Age Group	Gender	Country	Fan Since	Fan level	Reads Webtoon
P1	18-24	Female	Republic of Korea	Pre-debut (2020)	Superfan	Yes
P2	18-24	Female	Republic of Korea	Pre-debut (2020)	Superfan	Yes
P3	18-24	Female	Republic of Korea	2024	Devoted fan	Yes
P4	18-24	Female	United States of America	2023 or later	Superfan	Yes
P5	25-34	Female	China	2023 or later	Devoted fan	Yes
P6	25-34	Female	Japan	Pre-debut (2020)	Devoted fan	Yes
P7	18-24	Female	Saudi Arabia	Pre-debut (2020)	Superfan	Yes
P8	Under 18	I prefer not to say	New Zealand	2021-2022	Superfan	Yes
P9	18-24	Female	Myanmar	2023 or later	Devoted fan	Yes
P10	18-24	Female	Myanmar	Pre-debut (2020)	Devoted	Yes
P11	25-34	Female	Myanmar	Pre-debut (2020)	Devoted	Yes.
P12	18-24	Female	Thailand	2021-2022	Moderate fan	Yes
P13	18-24	Female	Thailand	2021-2022	Devoted fan	Yes
P14	25-34	Female	Indonesia	Pre-debut (2020)	Devoted fan	Yes
P15	18-24	Female	Indonesia	Pre-debut (2020)	Devoted fan	Yes

RESEARCH RESULTS

Keyword Analysis and Overview of Initial Coding Findings

To obtain an overview of the most prominent words in the interviews, the researcher conducted a keyword analysis using data visualization. The visualization displayed frequently mentioned words, making key themes more apparent. Using MAXQDA software, the researcher identified the most commonly used words. Before conducting the keyword analysis, the researcher

result, the fan's anticipation of the following concept reflects the compelling experience from ongoing development, where narrative continuity maintains a strong connection with the audience.

"After each comeback, I wonder, 'What concept will they go for next? How will they reveal the storyline along with the webtoon?' With ENHYPEN, the current concept is always connected to the next one. In a way, it feels like a series, where each comeback builds on the previous one. That continuity makes following their music and storyline even more exciting." (Key Informant from Myanmar, P10)

In integrating ENHYPEN and *Dark Moon*, fans derive various forms of gratification from engaging with the webtoon. According to insights from key informants, entertainment is one of the most satisfying forms of gratification for fans. The webtoon's engaging storyline, rich character development, and supernatural themes provide a source of enjoyment that complements ENHYPEN's music. Additionally, the webtoon's accessibility, being available on platforms like Naver Webtoon, makes it an easy and convenient form of entertainment that fans can enjoy anytime and anywhere. This aligns with the idea that the desire for relaxation and escapism often drives media consumption (West & H. Turner, 2010).

"I read the webtoon to understand ENHYPEN's story better and because I genuinely find it enjoyable. Moreover, I think webtoons are a light and accessible form of entertainment that you can easily enjoy daily. As long as you have a phone, you can read them anytime, anywhere. Compared to other ENHYPEN-related content, reading the webtoon does not come with a big financial burden when participating as a fan. That is why I find engaging with their universe fun and convenient." (Key Informant from Japan, P6)

Additionally, the *Dark Moon* webtoon's vampire theme, particularly, resonates with fans with an affinity for supernatural and fantasy genres. Several key informants shared their preferences and opinions as follows:

"The vampire-werewolf theme. I have always been a fan of these kinds of stories." (Key Informant from Thailand, P12)

"I enjoy personally watching group dynamics and teamwork in stories. Most storylines tend to revolve around a male and female protagonist with a romance-driven plot, but I am not really into those predictable love stories. Instead, I prefer genres like high school dramas, structured team-based narratives, and fantasy or supernatural themes that add an exciting, otherworldly element. That is why DARK MOON is a perfect fit for me—it has exactly the kind of storyline I was looking for, so I have enjoyed it a lot." (Key Informant from Japan, P6)

Another key gratification is the community and social interaction that "Dark Moon" fosters among fans. The webtoon is a common ground for fans to discuss theories, share interpretations, and connect with like-minded individuals. Creating fan communities allows fans to share their passion, exchange ideas, and feel part of a larger group, enhancing the fan experience.

*"When I first created my X (Twitter) account, I noticed a whole 'Dark Moon' webtoon fan community." It is called the **Dark Moon Lounge**. So, when I found it, I joined because I wanted to see what people were saying about it."* (Key Informant from Saudi Arabia, P7)

Furthermore, the webtoon's narrative and themes resonate with fans personally, allowing them to see reflections of their own experiences or aspirations in the story. For example, the themes of youth, identity, and self-discovery in *Dark Moon* align with the experiences of many young fans, making the story more relatable and impactful.

"There was an article in Weverse Magazine about ENHYPEN and the theme of youth—something like 'There is no definite answer.' That piece felt very connected to the webtoon. It made me realize that Dark Moon is not just an additional story but actually enhances and expands ENHYPEN's narrative. I believe that understanding this universe is essential. I would

get a general feeling from the music videos in the past, but after reading the webtoon, I now understand their deeper meanings.” (Key Informant from Korea, P1)

Main Theme: Fan Behaviour and Engagement

The engagement pathways for *Dark Moon* were diverse and multifaceted, driven by both digital and offline interactions. Based on the interviews, many fans discovered the webtoon through their pre-existing fandom of Enhypen, with some initially drawn in by the interconnectedness of the group's music videos, soundtracks and the webtoon's narrative. Social media platforms, particularly Twitter and Instagram, were crucial in spreading awareness through official announcements and fan-driven content. Enhypen members' active promotion of *Dark Moon* on platforms like Weverse further strengthened fan engagement, with their personal involvement and playful discussions about their characters adding authenticity and excitement. Peer recommendations and word-of-mouth were also mentioned, as friends and family influenced others to explore the webtoon. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic increased online engagement, as more people spent time on digital platforms. Physical promotional events, such as collaborating with Lotte World and Pop-up stores at Enhypen concerts, also provided real-world touchpoints to broaden the webtoon's audience.

"I did not usually read webtoons, but knew and liked ENHYPEN. Then, I discovered that most of ENHYPEN's music videos were connected to the webtoon's storyline. That is when I became interested in the webtoon and started reading it. (Key Informant from Myanmar, P9)

"It is also really fun to see the ENHYPEN members talk about their characters because they always joke about them." (Key Informant from Saudi Arabia, P7)

"I went to Lotte World and saw the collaboration theme with Dark Moon, and my friend told me about it, so I got to know them." (Key Informant from the Republic of Korea, P3)

The fan behaviour surrounding *Dark Moon* highlights both creative and participatory engagement with the webtoon. Based on the interview results of key informants, many fans actively contribute to the fandom through secondary content creation, such as fan art. In contrast, others appreciate the creative works of fellow fans. As a key informant (P1) from the Republic of Korea shared, *"I used to create fan art. I often draw because I want to keep seeing what I love and enjoy sharing my work with others. Sometimes, I think, "It would be great if this scene existed," so I draw it myself."* Another key informant (P4) from the United States added, *"I create fan art for both Enhypen and Dark Moon."* Additionally, key informants noted that incorporating elements from the webtoon into live performances has made the concerts feel more connected to the group's overarching narrative. As a key informant (P12) from Thailand shared, *"Before and during the concert, Enhypen introduces elements of the Dark Moon concept. Those who have read or know about the webtoon find it much more immersive."* Key informant (P5) from China added, *"All the Enhypen members fully immersed themselves in showcasing their identities in the Music Videos and real life. For example, they demonstrated their skills in concert openings, just as their characters did."* This blend of fiction and reality enhances the concert experience, deepening the engagement.

Moreover, combining music, video, and multimedia, the webtoon further enhances fan engagement by providing an in-depth analysis of ENHYPEN's music and story. Fandom is motivated by emotional ties to both the group and the webtoon characters, with many fans purchasing merchandise not just as a symbol of support, but also for the narrative immersion the items provide. Some key informants shared the following:

"I am interested in clothing merch, like T-shirts—they are practical, worth the price, and something I can wear daily. It is a great way to show my love for Enhypen and get something useful." (Key Informant from Thailand, P13)

"Honestly, having their merch makes me feel even more connected to them, so it is always worth it." (Key Informant from Japan, P6)

Additionally, several informants explained that their initial interest, often triggered by Enhypen's music videos or visual storytelling, led them to seek additional narrative information through paid content. A key informant (P6) from Japan noted, "*Naver provides the first few episodes for free, but I remember being so curious about the story that I even used cookies coins to read the additional episodes.*" This behaviour illustrates how narrative suspense and unanswered questions can drive fans to consume deeper content beyond what is freely available.

However, financial limitations, time constraints, and the need for practical purchases were noted as barriers to engagement. An informant (P11) from Myanmar shared, "*I am interested in fan art, but do not draw it myself because I am busy with my daily life and do not have enough time to invest in creating fan art.*" Financial constraints were also a significant barrier. Many informants described wanting to buy merchandise but being unable to afford it. One informant (P15) from Indonesia summarised this bluntly: "*It is the price. I am broke.*" Another informant echoed this sentiment: "*Honestly, the main reason is the price. I would love to collect Enhypen-related items, but they can be pretty expensive, and I cannot always afford them. If they were more budget-friendly, I would start collecting.*" (Key Informant from Thailand, P13) Despite the enthusiasm and emotional connection to the group, limited financial resources often prevented fans from fully participating in the consumer side of fandom. Nevertheless, several key informants expressed intentions to engage more once they achieve better economic stability, suggesting that engagement potential may evolve with personal circumstances.

Main Theme: Emotional & Immersive Fan Experience

Based on the data analysis, the interplay between *Dark Moon* and ENHYPEN's music has significantly deepened fans' emotional connections to the group. Fans often identify strongly with the webtoon characters, who mirror the personalities of the actual members, fostering a sense of immersion and emotional attachment. This connection is further reinforced as fans see the webtoon characters as extensions of the real-life idols, intertwining their emotional ties to both the fictional characters and the ENHYPEN members. The key informant (P6) from Japan expressed, "*I honestly think of the characters as the ENHYPEN members themselves. So, in the Dark Moon webtoon, there is a female protagonist named Sooha. When I realized that the characters, based on the members, are her past-life guardian knight vampires, protecting and liking her, I actually felt jealous of Sooha.*" This insight shows how deeply fans relate to the characters and the members, blurring the lines between fiction and reality.

The key informant (P8) from New Zealand mentioned that analyzing Jaan's character in the webtoon gave them a newfound appreciation for Enhypen member Jay, stating, "*Reading the Dark Moon webtoon has deepened my emotional connection to all the Enhypen members, but especially to my bias, Jay. Analyzing Jaan's character has given me a newfound appreciation for Jay, as I often reflect on what circumstances shape a character's thoughts and actions and how these experiences might impact them. This process does not just make me sympathize with a character—it helps me truly understand their mindset. Jaan's resilience and openness to trying new things are traits I also see in Jay, which has led me to view both of them as role models in my own life.*" This reflection enables fans to connect emotionally with both the fictional characters and real members, seeing them as role models and sources of inspiration, which deepens their emotional attachment to the group.

However, fans often seek a balanced approach to fandom engagement, managing the overwhelming content and setting boundaries to ensure it does not interfere with their personal lives. The key informant (P4) from the United States explained, "*Sometimes it does feel overwhelming, and I worry that the members may not be getting enough rest. I take time off social media to handle it and tell myself that I do not need to keep up with every new thing.*" This approach emphasizes the importance of self-care, ensuring that fandom engagement remains a positive experience rather than a source of anxiety.

Despite these challenges, fans also acknowledge the joy and satisfaction of being part of ENHYPEN's transmedia content. The key informant (P8) from New Zealand expressed, *"Engaging with Enhypen-related content brings me much satisfaction. While I have other interests in different media, my connection to Enhypen and Dark Moon is almost obsessive—I sometimes prioritize it over more immediate responsibilities."* This intense attachment, however, is not without its challenges, prompting many to reflect on how they can engage in a more balanced way that maintains their emotional connection while also taking care of their other life responsibilities.

Main Theme: Fan Perception & Interpretation

The key informants appreciate the unique and cohesive narrative of *Dark Moon*, which sets ENHYPEN apart from other K-pop groups with webtoons. Many fans believe that the detailed storyline and consistent integration of the webtoon into the group's music, performances, and merchandise strengthen their emotional connection to the group. Key informants also compare *Dark Moon* favourably with other HYBE artists' webtoons. As an informant (P12) from Thailand observed, *"Compared to other groups, there are not many with webtoon content to follow. I believe this allows them to attract fans who enjoy reading webtoons. The beautiful artwork and the well-developed storyline can significantly expand the fan base."* This further demonstrates ENHYPEN's leadership in this unique form of transmedia content creation.

"Most of HYBE's artists have their own unique storytelling. However, I find it interesting and unique how ENHYPEN's concept is connected to their webtoon. It is even more impressive that ENHYPEN consistently maintains its concept across different media, including its music videos, performances, and even promotional content. They stay deeply connected to the storyline, immersing me in their universe." (Key Informant from Myanmar, P11)

The alignment between the characters and the real-life members of ENHYPEN further deepens fans' emotional connections. Key informants recognize the similarities between the members' personalities and their fictional counterparts, with many noting that these traits make the characters more relatable and enjoyable. The key informants highlighted several insights on how they compare Enhypen members and Webtoon *Dark Moon* characters below:

"Sunghoon looks so much like Solon from the webtoon, especially when he has long hair—it is almost like he stepped right out of the webtoon." (Key Informant from Japan, P6)

"I think Jay's character, Jaan, has the same personality as Jay. Also, Jaan and Jay had silver hair during the 'Sweet Venom' promotions, which made me feel that the two resemble each other even more." (Key Informant from Korea, P2)

While some key informants expressed that they enjoyed the strong resemblances between the characters and the real members, they also maintained an understanding that these characters are ultimately fictional.

"Honestly, I know at the end of the day, the characters are fictional—they are not actually them. However, it is fun to compare them. When I watch their music videos, I try to see if they are playing their Dark Moon characters. Thinking about how they would act in their characters' roles." (Key Informant from Saudi Arabia, P7)

"Though they are fictional characters, I sometimes found some similarities with the Enhypen members, and I think it is cute." (Key Informant from Indonesia, P14)

These insights from the key informants suggest that, while the characters in the webtoon closely resemble the real members, fans can still recognise them as distinct from the actual members. This understanding allows fans to enjoy the story and the real-life personalities of the K-pop group without confusing the two.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

This study explored how Enhypen's webtoon *Dark Moon* operates as a transmedia storytelling tool that drives fan engagement. Through in-depth interviews with Enhypen fans from diverse backgrounds, it examined what motivates fans to engage with the webtoon, how that engagement affects their emotional connection to the group, and how it shapes their behaviours across different media and platforms. The findings reveal that the webtoon *Dark Moon* is a creative narrative and a highly effective strategy for strengthening fan relationships and influencing fan actions in the K-pop industry. Results from the data analysis showed that key informants described initial exposure to the webtoon through their pre-existing fandom of Enhypen, with some initially drawn in by the interconnectedness of the group's music videos, soundtracks, trailers, or social media promotions. The supernatural themes, including vampires and fantasy elements, appealed to fans, while some were intrigued by the connections between the members and the fictional characters. Enhypen members' active promotion of the webtoon on platforms like Weverse further enhanced fan engagement, with their playful involvement adding authenticity. Peer recommendations and word-of-mouth also played a significant role in spreading interest. The COVID-19 pandemic increased online engagement as more people turned to digital platforms. Additionally, physical promotional events, like collaborations with Lotte World and pop-up stores at Enhypen concerts, broadened the webtoon's audience. With its continuously evolving narrative, the webtoon's serial nature helped sustain fan interest, reflecting Jenkins' principles of "worldbuilding" and "seriality" (Jenkins, 2009b). These findings support the research objectives, providing insight into why fans engage in a rich transmedia experience around the webtoon.

From a U&G theory perspective, *Dark Moon* fulfilled fans' needs for entertainment, escape, and aesthetic enjoyment (West & H. Turner, 2010). It also provided cognitive gratification as fans interpreted plot twists and found connections with Enhypen's broader content. Fans also found personal meaning in the storyline, with some identifying with characters' emotional struggles and transformations. Furthermore, the webtoon fostered social interaction, as fans joined discussions, shared fan art, and read episodes with others, thereby reinforcing the fandom community. Thus, these findings indicate that *Dark Moon* was not treated as isolated content but as an extension of Enhypen's brand and concept, which deepened fan engagement with the group.

Beyond motivation, the emotional impact of *Dark Moon* was a significant theme based on the interviews. Fans often blurred the lines between fiction and reality, forming parasocial connections with the characters, which deepened over time. This emotional investment was tied to their loyalty and engagement with Enhypen, influencing behaviours such as increased content consumption and purchasing decisions. Key informants reported that reading *Dark Moon* motivated them to buy more albums, stream more frequently, and engage more actively in fan spaces. Many Enhypen fans also purchased character-themed merchandise and Webtoon coins to unlock new episodes early, demonstrating how *Dark Moon* influenced material and symbolic consumption. Moreover, Concert engagement was also impacted by *Dark Moon*, with informants describing how they recognised themes and references from the webtoon during live performances. These findings can be discussed in the context of Jenkins' "performance" principle, where fans interpret content through their knowledge across media, strengthening engagement with both digital and live platforms (Jenkins, 2009b).

Despite these positive impacts, barriers such as time constraints, a lack of creative skills, and financial limitations were mentioned as challenges. Some fans felt overwhelmed by the volume of content and struggled to keep up with all the releases. Financial constraints also limited the ability of some fans to purchase merchandise. However, many have found ways to manage these challenges. Despite these challenges, fans found immense satisfaction in their emotional connection to Enhypen, often prioritising their fandom involvement over other interests.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the growing body of research on transmedia storytelling and fan engagement, highlighting the dynamic relationship between fans, digital platforms, and narrative content. The findings of this study underscore the strategic value of webtoons in enhancing fan engagement and driving commercial outcomes within the K-pop industry. To effectively act on these findings, entertainment companies should integrate webtoons into broader transmedia storytelling strategies, aligning releases with music videos, albums, and live performances to create a cohesive and immersive fan experience. Content creators are advised to focus on narrative continuity and complex character development, which are essential for sustaining long-term fan interest. Marketers, meanwhile, should employ multi-platform campaigns that utilize social media, fan communities, and interactive events to amplify webtoon content. Additionally, offering webtoon-themed merchandise, such as collectables, fashion items, or exclusive digital content, can convert emotional investment into tangible revenue. By implementing these targeted strategies, stakeholders can effectively leverage webtoons not only as narrative extensions but as powerful tools for cultivating fan loyalty and achieving commercial success.

However, this study has several limitations that should be addressed to improve future research. First, this study relies on self-reported data collected from 15 key informants, which may introduce biases such as social desirability bias and selective memory. To mitigate these biases in future research, a mixed-method approach is recommended, incorporating triangulation through social media analytics, sales data, and behavioural tracking to provide more objective and quantifiable evidence of fan engagement. While this study included international fans from nine countries, the sample size of 15 participants limits the generalizability of the findings. Future research should employ stratified sampling techniques to ensure representation across diverse age groups, regions, and fan engagement levels in a broader understanding of fan engagement. The qualitative approach in this study provides a deeper understanding of the underlying reasons behind fan behaviours, offering insights that are difficult to capture through quantitative approaches. It enables us to explore the emotional and psychological aspects of fandom, including how fans emotionally invest in the characters and how these connections influence their ongoing engagement with the webtoon and the K-pop group. However, to strengthen the robustness of this research area, future studies should integrate quantitative data with qualitative insights. Surveys to measure fan engagement and analysis of social media metrics (e.g., mentions, shares, comments) would provide quantifiable data on fan behaviours. Additionally, exploring how pricing strategies for merchandise, albums, and exclusive content impact fan participation, especially across income groups, would enhance understanding of how engagement influences consumption patterns. Another limitation of this study is its focus on one particular fandom, which may not represent the broader trends across different K-pop groups or fan bases. Future research should include other fandoms to allow for a comparative analysis and determine if the findings are generalizable. Lastly, the strategic management of intellectual property (IP) in transmedia storytelling is critical in expanding brand value and fan engagement. HYBE's original story business model exemplifies how owning and developing IP through webtoons can create cohesive, cross-platform narratives that deepen fan loyalty and open new commercial avenues, such as merchandise, exclusive content, and collaborations. Future research should further explore the legal and economic aspects of IP management within the K-pop transmedia ecosystem.

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