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“Awl is piercing me and society”: Webtoon as a Popular Adult Education Tool in South Korea.

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Abstract: This study aims to understand the Awl, an Internet comic strip that plays a central role in increasing social debate about the rights of the working class in contemporary South Korea.

Keywords: Public Pedagogy, Popular Adult Education, South Korea, Webtoon

Recently, a high school teacher in South Korea got compulsorily transferred for showing his freshman students a TV series that originated from the Internet comics. As a complementary source to teach labor's three primary right, the teacher showed an episode which describes unionization activities of employees in a franchise grocery store. Grounded on actual stories, it carries conflicts of interests between the powerful and the powerless and allows the audience to explore struggles from labor's perspective. Nonetheless, the instruction was considered inappropriate for the first year students according to the school principal (Lim, 2016). This incident raised numerous social debates. At the center of the discussion, what constitutes appropriate knowledge for teaching and learning in the public school, is the popular culture. Certainly, the subject matter of the Internet comics went far beyond online space, turned into a TV series, provoked unspoken arguments, and unveiled the hidden ideology of school education.

The internet comic, webtoon, has become a prominent cultural industry in South Korea. Like a traditional manga, Japanese style comics published in a paper, webtoon is published in the Internet medium that provides weekly storytelling combined with speech balloons, captions, and images. It has acquired broad readership of different ages as it embraces diverse genres from fantasy to history based on contemporary Korean tastes. Most webtoon content is free, and it does not require user identification unless it contains adult content. Therefore, more than six million people read webtoon each day, with 17 million users per month (Korean Creative Content Agency (KOCCA), 2014).

Webtoon had not been paid much attention in the adult education field. Certainly, using the Internet for interacting with the comics is a new entertaining genre attributed to the rapid distribution of Smartphones, tablets, and desktop screen readings. Therefore, this phenomenon is limited to North America, Europe, and some Asian countries. The term webtoon is originated from South Korea, in North America, it refers to Digital comics, eComics, or Webcomic. Although integration between comics and ICT technology have not yet researched, comics is known to increase effective learning by helping learners to engage in the narrative. Doring (2002) used comics in her doctorate level Sociology class to objectify everyday social activities. She found that non-traditional adult learners favored this approach, readily connecting their life experience to the comics. In addition, Latin America has used comic books for popular and non-

formal education (Prins, 2010). To be specific, political progressive organizations found the possibility to communicate complex information in an accessible style. Along with the reader friendly style, comics have been used to increase consciousness of the working class poor to challenge dominant ideologies and injustices. The most prominent example, at the center of this movement, was Eduardo del Rio² in Mexico. As a renowned political activist and cartoonist, he drew his popular cartoons with political themes using stories of Karl Marx, the Cuban revolution, and antithesis for the Neoliberal Mexican doctrine.

In this paper, I will analyze *Awl*, an Internet comic strip that plays a central role in increasing social debate about the rights of the working class in contemporary South Korea. I will address following questions: How does the audience respond to, relate with, and reflect upon the narrative in the discussion board? Throughout this process, I will explore the impact of this webtoon by reviewing what type of topic is discussed in the discussion board and how online mediate learning. To be specific, I will argue that it is not only the accessibility of image narratives that attract the public, but also the combination of interactive multimedia platforms that allow passive audiences to become active participants in the discussion. In the end, I will discuss the possibility of expanding democratic social participation in relation to the theme of *Awl*.

Theoretical Framework

In this study, I will use Giroux's critical public pedagogy (Giroux, 2003) to explore how popular culture, webtoon in particular, plays a role in increasing critical and counterhegemonic possibilities through its narratives and discussion board that counter the corporate public pedagogy of neoliberalism (Giroux, 2004). Critical public pedagogy is "an extended notion of the pedagogy, solidarity, and democratic struggle" (Giroux, 2003, p.13) with collective power that can change the social environment through democratic intervention. Giroux notes this intervention as "a performative practice" (Giroux, 2004, p.61) in his explanation of new pedagogy that comes from the lived interaction of the public. By pointing out unethical and immoral issues in society, critical public pedagogy reveals to the public an alternative vision for a life well lived by emphasizing principles based on ethical belief, values, and assumptions.

Viewing popular culture through the lens of critical public pedagogy provides a collective way to resist unjust practices; the cultivation of critical thinking (Newman, 2007) is another way to achieve more democratic. In adult education, critical thinking is a method that "allow[s] that person to explore in depth her or his values or assumptions or ideologies, with the others in the group helping by asking questions and identifying how that person has constructed her or his meanings" (Newman, 2007, p.41) through reflection, observation, and commenting on one's experience. Seeing adults' experience as a source of increasing critical thinking, I will investigate the conflicts of consciousness between values and ideologies to discover the kind of critical thinking present in the discussion. Critical public pedagogy will provide a framework to illuminate a role of webtoon, popular culture in South Korea, and conflicts of consciousness will be a unit of analysis to identify critical thinking in the discussion. Analyzing asynchronous online discussion, I will examine how the audience responds to, relates with, and reflects upon the narrative based on their experiences in Korean society. Lastly, I will discuss the symbolic role and its performative practice that *Awl* is facilitating in the social sphere in contemporary South Korea.

Method

Given the focus of the study on *Awl* and audiences' responses, I decided to look at a sample of the weekly discussions on the built-in boards with the latest season which is available online. Due to the corporate business model, the portal system (*Naver*) converts the free content into a paid version when a new season comes out. In this process, the built-in discussion board disappears. Thus, accessing the discussion is only available through the latest version (Season 4 published since 2015). Considering the massive number of reactions for each episode each week from 300 to 4,000, I picked the best responses from season 4 which had received the most favorable public clicks. In this system, people can click a like and dislike button to show their agreement or disagreement, and the number for participation ranks only the top 15 replies on the main screen. For top best responses, people click on like button at most 9,926, and the least 170 heat. Considering the best replies had collected voices of the majority of readers, and assumed readers also read and respond for those best replies, I analyzed total 405 best replies (27 episode x 15 replies). Total number of words is 15,296.

Instead of interviewing the author, I read interview articles, watched television interviews, and listened to podcasts. This gave me an idea of why the author initiated *Awl* based on his family background. It also revealed how his narratives were constituted. Also, I collected newspaper articles that are associated with keywords. These external sources revealed who is employing *Awl* for what specific purposes. Ultimately, the data demonstrated issues that *Awl* casts into the Korean society, the public, and corporate responses. This data was collected from April 1st to May 3rd.

I applied the thematic coding approach (Boyatzis, 1998) to code *Awl* in three phases. In the beginning, I attempted to gain a holistic understanding of the data without imposing preconceptions. I read *Awl* and discussions multiple times from beginning to end. Then, I summarized topics and focused on the major themes of each episode. Then, I looked for overarching themes, especially for the type of events and the causes of conflicts between characters and how the participants discuss about the issue. In the third phase, I read the entire episode and discussion again to find any omitted contradictions. I found several details that I had overlooked in the second round of coding.

Findings

My analysis yielded three major themes across all sources of data. The first theme is social discussion in relation with the powerful and the powerless. The second theme is spare to share emotion like happiness and sadness. The last theme is movement beyond the online sphere.

Sphere to Share Discussion: Powerful & Powerless

The narrative of *Awl* unpacked multiple dimensions of the power relationship between employer, employees and among union members. The flow of events in the narrative specified the power dynamic mediated by money, gender, age, position, knowledge, education, physical strength, custom, and collaboration. It invited people to discuss power dynamics in the

workplace in relation to individual or social events. Adopting the conversation from *Awl*, readers discussed characters, assimilated their experiences, and brought relevant stories to the public discussion board. Readers expressed their agreement with protagonist's position by clicking the like button connected to the comment quote: "the purpose of our lives is not to receive punishment." Hitting the highest like participation throughout the four seasons, it revealed how strongly the public responded to protagonist's argument.

Bringing personal experience from the past and current workplace, the audience shared how *Awl* helped them to distance their experience from the dominant social norm.

While working as a construction worker and plant worker, I had the same thought like her...I am different from other working class. I still have a similar thought...Yet, *Awl* ashamed me about my normative thinking. Also I feel sorry to my mother who is working as a contingent worker at the department store. Thank you for providing food for thought. (YU)

In the past, I worked as a subcontract officer, a contingent worker at various corporations, and daily worker at a grocery store. Although current working conditions have improved, I cannot forget the past oppressions like unfair treatment and depression coming from unjust practices. I do not want anybody go through the same struggle. I have a will to take action, yet do not know how to organize. I learn a lot from *Awl*. (MU)

Stories of the working class, allowed the audience to share personal experiences as contingent workers. One participant said that *Awl* challenged his normative perspective that was influenced by neoliberal ideology. Now he can conceive of a working class issue as a part of social injustice. Although protagonist's lecture was a part of event in narrative, it directly taught him to contest his normative thinking. Additionally, one reader said that her experience as a contingent worker was miserable and she did not want to put others in her past position. As an individual, she cannot help finding a way to make change. However, *Awl* can give a reflection and direction.

Spare to Share Emotion: Happiness and Sadness

Unlike newspaper articles, *Awl* characters go through diverse emotional experiences following the sequence of each event. The audience also responded to the narrative with their emotion. In times of conflicts, characters express anger, frustration, and desperation. In times of victory, they become happy, hilarious, and joyful. In the discussion board, the audience attempts to engage in dialogue with characters and express their care, anger, and judgement accordingly. Interestingly, communication with imaginative characters might be awkward in real situations, yet it has become a natural reaction for many participants.

Gu, you are losing your weight and becoming fragile. Can you please live without problems until the end of this *webtoon*? (YS)

[To company] If employees maintain their human rights, do you think they are in the red party [communist]? (JA)

[To boss] This is a binary approach. According to your argument, all employees should have accepted whatever the boss requires them to do, like a slave. (EB)

Although, the audience knew Gu is an imaginative figure, they cared about his staying healthy. The audience needed him to provide legitimate knowledge to the working class. Also, when a manager rebuked the organizing effort of Lee, the audience supported Lee by rebuking his boss with sarcasm. In relating historically constructed knowledge that equates a human rights issue to the communist party, a participant expressed anger. Overall, emotional expressions were naturally embedded in audience comments, and the audience supported the union's position.

Also, the audience sympathized with the characters and expressed their emotional reactions to *Awl*'s events in relation to current experiences in society. Interestingly, the audience commented on the both pain and pleasure. Frequently, the audience commented that *Awl* broke his or her heart, provoked mental pain, caused the losing of one's breath, increased pressure in one's chest, and made them cry, due to the desperate realities that *Awl* dealt with which no one can escape.

Do you think this is a mere webtoon? You should look, this is a reality. Their story is our life. Although, you can avoid reading *Awl*, you will confront reality in your workplace. (YU)

Before I read *Awl*, I always take a deep breath. After reading, I feel pain. (SU)
This is too painful. It shows the darkest reality. Sometimes, I want to avoid it.

While others commented on the opposite emotion for the same reason. Participants said that the criticality of *Awl* made them feel happy, smile, and experience pleasant owing to its quality expression of reality. People added that *Awl* illustrated the complexity of working class situations and encouraged workers to overcome difficulties.

History repeats itself. Authorities in high positions are nasty. I want many people to read *Awl*. Revealing reality between power and powerless, *Awl* empowers us to take action to change reality. I am very pleased to read this piece. (CA)

Awl is a master piece! I am happy to read this *webtoon*. I read *Awl* repeatedly and put each conversation in my mind. I am happy to have *Awl*. I hope *Awl* will provide a stepping stone to cultivate a better workplace culture for the next generation. (GE)

In response to this double-edged emotion, joy and pain, people started to use an *Awl* as a metaphor to relate their emotional responses. Some said that *Awl* pierced their heart twofold by making them confront the realities of society while unveiling injustice within society. This sense of penetration which enabled readers to discern reality, brought pain. Also, joy comes from

making the invisible reality visible. Boring a hole so that they could perceive social injustice, *Awl* brought the audience satisfaction. In relation to the *Awl* metaphor, one audience, KI, member put a note even criticizing the overall audience. “What is the target of *Awl*? Who does it pierce?” He added that even though the audience seems to respond critically to social injustice on discussion board, nobody would take action to change practices. So, for him, *Awl* is not only for accuse social injustice but also for criticizing those who keep silent after understanding structural issues. One audience shared her *Awl* experience with different media.

I found watching *Awl* in different formats like webtoon and the television series was a different experience. When I read webtoon, I felt anger, heaviness, and pressure in my chest. Owing to the format, black and white comics, the main message touched my heart with some distance. I watched a television series yesterday and I was terrified. When a contingent worker prevented her colleague from joining the union, I thought “I will do the same thing.” Once I realized my inner speech, I was ashamed of myself. That brought me to an idea of why *Awl* is *Awl*. It pierced my heart. *Awl* does not only criticize society, but also penetrates anger and heaviness. Lastly, it allows me to reflect on my weak and selfish heart. (WH)

The emotional connection originating from criticality may not only drive from the accessibility of the narratives that deliver messages in visual and textual format. According to the newspaper article, the author had prepared *Awl* since 2008. Interviewing more than a hundred social activists and recording unionizing testimonies, the author tried to deliver the essence of the unionization experience like phenomenology. Six years of preparation to collect actual narratives of working class activists enabled him to precisely translate social realities in his webtoon. This may be one of the reasons why so many audience members confessed that it was their story which made me uncomfortable.

Movement beyond the Online Sphere

Reviews of newspaper articles revealed that *Awl* has become a social phenomenon. *Awl* covered the rights of the working class and their unionization activities that had never been discussed in a webtoon nor a television series. Therefore, it got social acknowledgement in positive and negative ways. Positively, *Awl* was awarded the best book of year in 2015. Holding both aesthetic and humorous aspects, it was recognized to have critically described social reality beyond literature. Also, the television series was awarded the Excellent Award from the Korea Communications Commission for 2016. However, it failed to get commercial promotion to either of webtoon and TV series. One newspaper article notes that corporations do not like *Awl* and that is why there is no commercial promotion. The extreme responses to *Awl* may be driven by its social impact that effectively delivers the message of support for the working class.

In addition, *Awl* has come to serve as a metaphor to symbolize a person who is not conforming to the social norm yet raises injustice issues in an organization. To discuss issues about the working class and social activism, columnists used *Awl* as a metaphor to mediate the topic. When employees attempted to organize a union, the newspaper said “like an *Awl*”. Also, this metaphor has allowed for teaching human rights issues in positive manner. A university

lecturer who had taught students about the labor's primary rights, noted in his newspaper interview that when he showed an episode in television series, people learned better than when lecturing. He said that the power of narrative can provide perspective to see the issue from the working class viewpoint.

There is a limitation to examining how *Awl* actually influenced the notion of the general public. However, analysis of the built-in comment section in the *webtoon* and newspaper articles revealed that *Awl* played a role in introducing atypical topics in an accessible format to diverse people.

Conclusion

This research may contribute to the understanding of creating critical public pedagogy through popular culture in the context of South Korea. Specifically, it may reveal how cultural platforms play a role in expanding opportunities to contest social injustice. *Webtoon* and its built-in discussion boards were thematically analyzed to understand the messages created. Also, an investigation of newspaper articles and the author's interview helped to uncover current issues surrounding the theme. This study implies the possibility of using cultural platforms as a tool to teach various adult learners especially unvoiced issues like injustice toward the working class.

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