

A Study on Kitschy Characteristics and its Consumers of Webtoon

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ABSTRACT

Most of cultural area which people enjoy and consume is kitsch culture, though the culture is barely acknowledged. In this multimedia era, people create, publish and enjoy contents of 'webtoon(web+cartoon)', which is relatively faster and more convenient to enjoy comparing to published cartoon. Contrarily to its physical growth, the webtoon shows difficulty in advancing with other genres, is full of irritative factors and contents, and has tough time to become more sophisticated one. This study derived characteristics of kitsch in webtoon, suggested the way of webtoon as an art by analyzing conditions and usage motivation of webtoon. The conditions of kitsch are uniformity of mass consumption, popular vein, catharsis, vicarious satisfaction, immediate feedback-requiring image flood, and reproduction of techniques. The usage motivations of webtoon are studied as pursuit of information, entertainment, relaxation, socialization, convenience, and effectiveness. Usage motivation factors in webtoon and kitsch culture are almost identical. Contrary to its past of being underestimated and vulgarly considered, kitsch is acknowledged as an 'kitsch art'. By studying the process of becoming an art, the study has its purpose to suggest the experimental and developing way to make webtoon be acknowledged as 'webtoon art'.

Key words: Webtoon, Kitsch, Kitsch Art, Multi Media, Design, Consumers of Webtoon

1. INTRODUCTION

Many cultural contents have been born and newly changed due to the expansion of mass consuming society and the multimedia era. However, most of the cultures are kitschy and the life of modern people is kitschy. Kitsch is low quality art and it can be referred to as work of art or an object which is low-brow style and has popular appeal. Nisku mentioned that talking about the freedom from kitsch and the outside of kitsch is as hard as talking about outside of capitalism. Hence, studying kitsch is about researching modern people's life and its way of expression.[1]

It is hard to imagine living without media in the

modern society and the media has been closely intertwined with people's life. The "Webtoon" is one of the fasted growing media and it has more expanding subscribers than comic books. It means that a new kitschy cultural contents have been built as a way of escaping from an ordinary life.

Various forms of digital cartoons have appeared through popularization of Internet PC in mid-to-late 1990s, digitalization of analog contents and being able to see offline contents online. The early stage of webtoon consisted of simple sections which were created by anonymous netizens and it had been spread via personal webpages, internet groups and the message boards in popular websites. In May 2014, there were over 1,200 webtoons

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published on the internet and according to Koreanclick, as of February 2014 in Naver and Daum which are the top two portal websites in South Korea, the number of webtoon users were 6.3 million people and the number of page view was 900 million per month.[2] The fact that webtoon's influence and the status as a new media had been acknowledged through several factors such as cartoon industry, creation environment and the consumer culture.[3] However, in order to find a solid identity it is required to plan in a long term. Otherwise, the webtoon's growth trend would cease if we only follow short-term popularity and pleasure with the absence of planning. One of the advantages of webtoon is the fast communication with subscribers as it is a two-way communication media. On the other hand, one of the webtoon's disadvantage is unlike the initial planning, the plot can be changed because of the lack of planning time for updating and also the lack of completion due to unexpected results.

The term "Kitsch art" was used to disparage handcraft, design and forgery and to distinguish from high quality art and nowadays modern people live within the kitsch culture. For example, not only in TV dramas and popular songs but also the classic music which people can easily enjoy with CD or mp3 are kitsch art. The artwork of Picasso and van Gogh hanging in the living room are almost same as the original work because of development of printers and they are also products of kitsch art which rebirthed for commercial purposes. Since modernism, kitsch culture or crafts which had been regarded as low-grade have become a genre of art. However, for the same artwork, one thinks it is an art but the other think of it as kitsch. Kitsch would not be recognized by the people who do not have artistic refinement. This report will study kitschy characteristics, how kitsch has become "kitsch art" and its consumers and also find directions for improvement of webtoon.

2. THE THEORETICAL BACKGROUND OF KITSCH

2.1 Kitsch's origin of word and idea

The word of Kitsch was used when artists denigrate the quality of art and devaluate the artistic forgeries. In 1922 according to Avenarius who defined the root of the word "kitsch" for the first time, kitsch was originated from 'sketch' in English and 'skizze' in German and it indicated cheap painting. Verkitschen in German means 'sell something cheap' or "selling for its scrap value". It has a different word of origin from sketch but both of the words have the nuance of 'cheap' in the meaning. There is another perspective that kitsch has a same root with koloportage which means a popular novel. Kitsch firstly indicated transportation or form of dealing and it was a neutral word but later on it referred to cheap products. Since late 18th century, in accordance with spread of popular literature, kitsch has become an idea of objection of art in the process of idealization of art from the conservative artistic party. First of all, it is controversial that kitsch is an object or an attitude. When you think of so called 'barbershop's painting', this emotional kitsch is kitsch as an object. The objects which make people consume emotions in substandard degree and catch someone's eyes regardless of joy, sorrow, thrill or fear have be-



Fig. 1. The parody of (the Creation of Adam) in a commercial advertisement.

come kitsch. If you see kitsch as an attitude, on the other hand, kitsch can appear in every form of art in various ways. Relating kitsch with art is one of the fundamental ways in understanding kitsch but it is not easy to define what art is, eventually understating kitsch gets lost in its way. For instance, in the past it was kitsch and now it has been evaluated as an art. The other way around is also possible. Depending on the purpose of use, the true art can be kitsch.[4]

2.2 The background of occurrence of kitsch

Kitsch appeared as a hobby of middle-class and its expression of leisure hedonism in own inimitable way.[5] Kitsch is based on mass production and consumption. In the age of mechanical reproduction, art was able to be processed in mass production and working class citizens who accumulated wealth were ready to spend. To divide the experimental art around this period from the classic art, the word of kitsch has started to be used.[4] As kitsch is very closely related to economic development, existence of kitsch in the Second World and the Third World can be regarded as token of "modernization" without a question.[5] In addition, kitsch correlates with modernity in early 20th century. One of the significant features of this era is that working class citizen has become main agents socially and culturally and mass production has become available by development of techniques.

2.3 Conditions of kitsch

2.3.1 Mass consumption

The market logic is maximizing interests and to be able to do that by securing as many clients as possible. In these circumstances, kitsch has standardized and have become common. However avant-garde and elitist criticize that kitsch has commercialized and standardized the sensitivity and it has corrupted art with aesthetic pleasure and catharsis.

2.3.2 Isolation and Narcissism culture

The modern society is future-oriented and aims at reality and the society intrinsically makes people personally feel and experience random and temporary things. Kitsch is based on longing for a beautiful world contrary to an ordinary life, vicarious satisfaction and hedonism hence, it is connected naturally with insecure subject and narcissism culture.

2.3.3 Change in the way of perception

Modern people's sensitivity is exposed to 'flooding of fragmented images requesting prompt response' and the modern people's body get used to the situation, therefore it can exist naturally.

2.3.4 Democratization of reproduction and image

'Democratization of image' is impossible without spread of image, the development of reproduction techniques make the democratization of image possible.[1] It was possible for kitsch to encroach in everyday life as the reproduction techniques democratized the image. Common people who would like to escape from monotonous life would regard art as an entertainment and pleasure, easy to approach, rapid and predictable effects (More interested in getting immediate capital than gaining honor), author's 'commercial spirit' and etc. They are all part of repeating elements when you try to define kitsch with a perspective of social studies.[9] Additionally, Karsten Harries defined the characters of kitsch as opened indeterminacy, emptied "hallucinatory" power, false dream and easy "catharsis" and they consist the essence of kitsch.

2.4 Kitsch and Art

Popularization has a huge impact on every art. On top of that, it does impact on the visual arts. A simple act of copying an art in quantity for the commercial purpose will make the image kitschy. [5] It can be stale in post-modern perspective

where the opposite relationship does not exist any-
more whether it is kitsch or art or high quality or
low quality.

Philip Crick said that “art is the truth and kitsch
is false, if an art’s scent existed through the artistic
distance then the scent of kitsch denies the artistic
distance, if art is transcendental then kitsch is
pseudo-transcendental, if art is inner-directed then
kitsch is outer-directed, if art is creative then
kitsch is conventional, if art is good then kitsch
is bad. The two, art and kitsch cannot be separated
from each other and in common notion art has the
positive values of an artistic creation and kitsch
has the negative values.” And that kitsch and art
both comprises of each other but does not win over
each other and are distinguished by the five criteria
below.[6]

Pop art does not exclude common people’s pref-
erence and it actively involves pop culture and
consumer society. For example, Roy Lichtenstein

changes animation which is a representative of pop
culture to art. Pop art embraces a lot of commercial
perspectives and everything that we can find in
everyday life can be an object of art. 1990’s kitsch
stands on the extension line with Pop art but it
uses kitsch more specifically and consciously and
it moves a step ahead of Pop art. At the boundary
line between kitsch and kitsch art, the final deci-
sion might be dependent on consumers.[4]

In fact, lots of modern art is related to kitsch.
In other words, the modern art is extended distance
of kitsch. Because of the extended distance, the
modern art can have freedom and liveliness which
kitsch does not have. Of course the modern art and
kitsch have a soliloquy in common. The modern
art might be mesmerized by a new form of kitsch.
[7] At the exhibition of modern art which has been
regarded as high quality art, after appreciating
works, visitors only can go out once they pass
through endless copies and souvenirs that are not

Table 1. Philip Crick’ s criteria for art and kitsch

Art	Kitsch
Not a result of consideration but of natural occurrence, no operation nor stance of authority	Result of dissolute and indulgence, greater than real therefore false
Not closed nor reductive, invitation for a critical mind	Final, non-mystical, explicit, emotional clear boundaries
Self-directed and a fruit of creation	Double negativity, error in proposing itself as art
Interdependent coexistence of structure and decoration	Simple coexistence of structure and decoration
Suggestion through historical validity, no suggestion without truth	Irrespective of tradition, derived from suggestion of the past



Fig. 2. Kitsch artist Jeff Koons’ artwork (Balloon Dog in Versailles where a byword for conservatism).



Fig. 3. Andy Warhol 'Campbell's Soup Cans' and Lichtenstein 'Refrigerator'.

related to the artist's works of art. They can be understood as products of kitsch in the form of comfort and pleasure.

3. WEBTOON'S MEDIUM CHARACTERISTICS

3.1 Webtoon's concept

'Webtoon' is an abbreviation for the words web and cartoon and it represents 'Cartoons which have been created in order to be published on the web in accordance with web's attributes'. The first appearance of the term of 'Webtoon' in Korean media was in Hankyoreh newspaper dated Aug 16 2000. At that time a portal site which was run by 'Cheollian' started a new internet cartoon service and the service's name was 'Webtoon'. Webtoon has been popular since cartoons have been published in big portal websites from early and mid-2000's. The authors of webtoon have made good contents and have greeted golden age because of well payment from the big portal websites. The term of webtoon was used to distinguish from the published comic books as the purpose of the webtoon was created to be seen on the web. However after appearance of smart media, the concept of webtoon has been extending and it is defined as creative goods which combined story, drawings and ICT techniques organically.[8]

3.2 Characteristics of webtoon

Webtoon (digital cartoon) is fundamentally different from analogue contents in form, technique, duplication speed and restriction. First, in terms of

form, the data of digital contents cannot be seen with the naked eyes. Second, you need a special device if you want to open digital content data. Third, copying is easier than the original analogue contents and the time of copying is shorter than the one for analogue contents. There will be almost no loss of the original data after copying. Fourth, Storing is easy as it is digital data and it can be stored permanently.[9]

3.3 Development of webtoon industry

The published comic book contents were digitalized with the development of IT techniques in late 1990's. However, the digitalized comic books were scanned illegally and they were shared through P2P websites. Hence, because of the side effects, it caused the stagnation of market and they lost their footing. Due to the change of digital circumstances the published comic books decayed and a new media was on the rise and that is webtoon. The early stages of webtoon were becoming popular among the authors who used to be marginalized by the original cartoon production system. They made digital cartoons about their ordinary life and published on their private homepages. Webtoon, unlike published comic books, required the high level of labor intensity as the author himself/herself had to make them using digital authoring tools. To be in inverse proportion, works such as additional modifying, revising, reproduction and editing have become very easy. Based on this, webtoon has low barriers of entry for new authors and a content can be made of one's creativity only and it is a very cost effective cultural content in relation to manpower and cost.[3]

3.4 Problems of webtoon industry

Webtoon is published live in real time and it makes harmful contents to be loaded without any censorship. There are over 600 webtoons being published serially per week and the situation has come to where 'over production pattern' needs to

be reviewed.[2] Portal platform operates in the center and it causes excess competition between the portal websites providing webtoons and it mass-produces webtoons without planning. Due to the lack of planning it focuses on circulation rather than creativity and webtoons have become commercialized which only follow trend and also being provocative, raunchy and lack of completion.

4. KITSCH AND ITS CONSUMERS

4.1 Kitsch-Menschen

In 1930's Broch brought to a conclusion that Hitler is a worshipper of kitsch when he confronted with Nazism. He made a term called 'Kitsch-Menschen'. Kitsch will be born and exited after existence of 'Kitsch-Menschen' who desire and enjoy kitsch.[4]

Basically the cultural industry specifically has an interest in supplying processed products which induce relaxation in the culture market. In 1941 Adorno already thought that desire of public on refreshment and amusement is an outcome of existing modes of production and also one of the distinguishing products. Adorno re-formalized the famous theory by Marcs which in the context of culture the modes of production not only manufactures regular products but also generates desire towards the products. He also stated that "the clients themselves who listen to popular music is a product of the same principle and object as to manufacturing popular songs. The power of production process expands over the gap of time showing 'free things' on the surface. People request impetuously the ones they want to gain by all means." In the past, success or failure of competition between artists in free market was decided by intellectuals but on the other hand now it has become to suit powerful men's tastes. Kitsch is based on significant psychological discovery which almost everything related to art culture directly and indirectly can be changed to consumables like any other commod-

ities. The culture industry exists to imitate, copy, reproduce and standardize everything consumers enjoy to meet the demands of today's compulsory consumers' esthetical demand.

Kitsch-Menschen is a person who try to experience as kitsch even though works and situations are not kitsch and it unintentionally creates parody of aesthetic responses. For instance, Kitsch-Menschen as a tourist makes not only cultural monuments but also especially the magnificent sight like Grand Canyon which has been advertised as a rare attraction into 'kitsch'. A characteristic of Kitsch-Menschen is that he/she has irrelevant hedonistic ideas on which one is artistic and beautiful. Kitsch-Menschen wants to pass his/her leisure time enjoying maximum excitement with a minimum of effort for a reason that it can be analyzed historically, sociologically or culturally.[4] For Kitsch-Menschen, enjoyment without effort is ideal. Psychological and sociological elements that apply to kitsch consumption bring the existence of those kitsch mall.[10]

4.2 Usage motivation of acceptance of webtoon

Midum Choi(2014) confirms that webtoon's usage motivation consists of 'informativity', 'entertainingness', 'relaxation' and 'sociality' which can be found in usage motivation for various media such as television, internet, cell phone and SNS. In other words, people use webtoon to gain various information(informativity), to gain entertainment (entertainingness), to ease tension and rest (relaxation) and for smooth personal relationships (sociality). Informativity and sociality means that as cartoon contents environment has changed from printed media to web the consumer's spending way has become active. For example, webtoon has a characteristic that author and readers communicate through comments. In terms of entertainingness and relaxation, the usage motivation has been drawn from results of surveys and the answers were the following; 'I read webtoon in order to gain

Table 2. Elements of kitsch and usage motivation of webtoon

Element of kitsch	Usage motivation of webtoon
Standardization of mass consumption	Informativity
Modification of story	Entertainingness
Cathartic character of art	Relaxation
Vicarious satisfaction	Sociality
Flooding of fragmented images demanding prompt response	Convenience
Mechanical reproduction	Effectivity

joy.’, ‘I read webtoon as I want to read cartoons which are updated regularly.’, ‘I read webtoons as it is free or low cost.’, ‘I read webtoon for refreshment.’ And ‘I read webtoon to kill time.[11] Mintae Kim (2013) researched in terms of ‘pursuit of information or interrelationship’, ‘pursuit of composure’, ‘entertainment and convenience’ and ‘effectivity’[3].

4.3 Common ground between Kitsch–Menschen and usage motivation of acceptance of webtoon

There are some elements of kitsch that are almost same as webtoon’s usage motivation, which are informativity, entertainingness, relaxation, sociality, convenience and effectivity. The elements are standardization of mass consumption, modification of story, cathartic character of art, admiration for the world which oppose with ordinary life, vicarious satisfaction, flooding of fragmented images which demand prompt response and democratization of images due to mechanical reproduction.

5. CONCLUSION

Contrarily to its rapid growth of webtoon with strong kitsch factors, the way to enhance its artistic factors in webtoon is scarce. The Study identified characteristics of recipients in kitsch art, and compared with usage motivations analysis of webtoon recipients, to come up with ways to enhance artistic factors in webtoon.

As can be seen in Table 2, conditions of kitsch is identical to usage motivations of webtoons.

According to DMC MEDIA(2014), a research about usage characteristics of web portal services by devices, webtoon is referred as more popular service than video or music services. Approximate number of webtoons on the Internet is 11,200, the number of users of webtoon is 6.3 million, and the number of page view of webtoon is 900 million.[2] The faster the feedback of consumers become, the more rapid growth of webtoon market is shown. Fast feedback of consumers’ taste can be a strong point of webtoon, but sometimes this point brings side effects; being too trendy due to consumer-dependent cash flow, or providing scarce opportunity to grow together with other genres. Kitsch culture and webtoons are made of consumers needs and wants. That is to say, consumer usage motivation has power to change their quality and characteristics. Thus, in order to enhance webtoon as an art, attitude of recipients (or consumers) is momentous. Moreover, authors of webtoon should be beware of being trendy with too much unique, irritant and amusing points. With endeavor of creativity and solid identification to verify stories and designs to enhance webtoon as an art, not only window effect, but ‘webtoon art’ will come up as ‘kitsch art’. As independent movies, profound research to acquire independence in webtoon will be studied with quantitative research about webtoon recipients and the government policy.

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