

Article

Motivation and Reuse: How Does Motivation Affect Sustainable Use Intention for Brand Webtoons?

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Abstract: This study explores consumers' motivations for sustainable consumption in the context of branded content marketing. By focusing on brand webtoons, which are one of the most commonly used formats of branded content, this study investigates the link between consumers' motivations for using brand webtoons and their continuous use intentions. The identified use motives are *entertaining information*, *social conformity*, and *convenience*, and among these three dimensions, entertaining information influences attitude towards brand webtoons and need for self-expression most strongly. Consumers' need for self-expression is found to be a potential predictor of sustainable intention to consume brand webtoons via the mediating role of attitude towards the webtoons. The findings from this study fill the literature gap in the context of content marketing by exploring motives for and consequences of consuming brand webtoons, which may, in turn, help in encouraging and reinforcing sustainable use intention for branded content. The theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

Keywords: brand webtoon; content marketing; U&G approach; need for self-expression; use motives



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1. Introduction

As marketing communication using traditional media loses its influence, branded content marketing becomes a viable approach to build brands and connect with consumers by inducing consumers to voluntarily consume and spread branded content. In marketing's toolkits, "webtoon", which is a Korean originated expression merging 'web' and 'cartoon', is establishing itself as a new form of marketing communication. Webtoons are now one of the most popular content forms consumed, particularly among the younger generations, and are growing globally. Meanwhile, "branded entertainment webtoon" refers to a webtoon planned for advertising. It can have the same appeal as a webtoon, and this type of branded entertainment has been labelled a "branded webtoon" (known in Korea simply as brand webtoon) by the industry and can be seen to illustrate a convergence between advertising and entertainment. In general, brand webtoons are quasi-advertisements that are used to promote companies, brands, and public service announcements—available either on a company website or online portal sites such as Naver or Daum [1].

Brand webtoons, as one efficient communication channel between consumers and brands, entail several advantages both from the consumer standpoint and from the marketer's standpoint. First, it is possible for marketers to use the content of cartoon, which has already been verified for popularity, for promotion at a relatively low cost [2]. On the other hand, from a consumer's point of view, the fun and emotional benefits contained in the webtoon mean its consumption has value. Another reason that enabled the rapid growth of brand webtoons can be found in the change to a new media environment: that is, as the spread of smartphones increases, the consumption of paper cartoon contents in the past in analog form has moved to the digital platform [1,2].

From a sustainability perspective, branded content (e.g., brand movies, brand webtoons, advergames, emojis, etc.) can be one of the critical success factors that help firms achieve

their marketing objectives because they should reflect the attributes of products or services to meet the business goal of the firm by inducing potential consumers to purchase products (or services); they should provide positive brand experiences related to products (or services) by successfully increasing consumer motivation to interact with the brand; and they should meet consumers' needs for hedonic pleasure and emotional release by providing multiple forms of branded content [3]. In fact, however, consumers are reluctant to regularly use the content generated by brands [4]. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that the successfulness of branded content marketing in brand building relies on ensuring consumers' repeat-purchase or continuous use of the marketing content.

Continuous use intention is a concept explaining a consumer's plan to continue use of a particular product or service [5]. Many factors have driven scholars to explore not only the reasons behind the continuous use of branded content, but also the impact of brand messages on usage intention [1,5]. Some of these factors include consumers' loyalty to webtoon writers, certain stories or topics, convenient access to webtoon platforms, and the volatility of the mobile webtoon market [6]. In recent years, the issue related to sustainable consumption of branded content has been recognized by only a few scholars. For example, Kim and Jun [6] recently investigated the ways to promote more sustainable consumption of branded content, such as SNS emojis. In their study, they assert that research on the understanding of when, why, and how consumers use brand-embedded content is crucial to ensure the successful implementation of sustainable emoji consumption [6]. More specifically, scholars investigate hierarchical influences on brand webtoons by suggesting that emotional responses are first triggered when consumers encounter the branded content, and their empathic experiences lead to sustainable use of the content [1,3,6]. Therefore, in the context of branded content marketing, it is a key challenge for brand marketers to determine the drivers of a continuous usage decision. However, very little research has sought to examine how the concept of sustainable content usage may be applied within the context of branded content marketing.

Given this focus, if brand webtoons are generally considered an effective form of branded content, it is important to understand both the antecedents and consequences of user responses to ensure sustainable usage of the content. This study will explore webtoon users' motivation to consume brand webtoons and present a theoretical model to explain the mechanism of the impact of use motives on the sustainable use of brand webtoons. In particular, this study aims to examine how the need for self-expression, one of the main psychological characteristics of webtoon users in their twenties to thirties, affects their continuous use intention for brand webtoons.

1.1. Theoretical Background

Brand Webtoons and the U&G Perspective

Webtoons (or online comics) are digital comics (with 50–60 cuts) that comprise text, images, and sometimes sound. Webtoons are more than just an online conversion of paper-based comic books. They represent a new form of content created by the mobile internet ecosystem, as webtoons are usually posted on major online portals such as e.g., Daum and Naver and new episodes are typically released on a weekly basis. Webtoons are also gaining traction among younger people in the global market [1,2,6]. For example, in Korea, webtoons have already accounted for the second largest share of time spent on apps, after videos [2]. In particular, the influence of webtoons on young consumers in their twenties to thirties, who are the main consumers of webtoons, is found to be significant [2]. It is evident that webtoons exert quite an influence on brand communication. Their functional values have made companies perceive webtoons as attractive advertising platforms. The types of brand communications using webtoons are largely divided into webtoon PPL (exposure of a specific product or brand), banner-type advertisements within webtoons, campaign webtoons, and brand webtoons [7]. Among these, "brand webtoons" refers to sponsored webtoons planned for advertising [1,2]. Unlike single-shot banner advertisements or temporary PPLs, brand webtoons are increasingly gaining attention from firms in that

they can deliver brand messages to consumers continuously rather than via one-time exposure. It is possible for firms to continuously expose brands, which are interwoven into the storyline, rather than one-time brand exposure because the stories are continuously published online.

Meanwhile, guided by the U&G perspective, consumers consume media content to gratify their needs and interests, which will influence their further motivation for the media use [8]. Previous studies have been conducted on the motivation to consume the content for entertainment, particularly content delivered via online platforms. For example, user motivations for viewing such contents as online movies, web dramas, films on a live-streaming site (e.g., YouTube) are determined as *entertainment, relaxation, fun, convenience, professionalism, usefulness, reliability, information, participation, and exchange of opinions* [9–11]. However, the user motivation for consuming each form of media content is different even for the same purpose of enjoying entertainment. This is because the motivation for the audience to use the content varies or changes according to the characteristics of different media [12]. For example, Park [13] argues that the user motive for consuming traditional TV programs is different from those using smart TV platforms. More specifically, in the case of using a smart TV, the motivational factor is named as multimedia, which reflects the new characteristics of the smart TV (which are not possessed by traditional TV), such as SNS, email, home shopping, and internet access. Another motive for using a smart TV, named as modernity, means that users feel trendy and cool while using the smart TV. In a similar vein, Leung and Wei [14] investigated user motives for using mobile phones. According to this study, the users are motivated to use a mobile phone because of its property of mobility and its ability to receive information and communication instantaneously. These user motives were not observed in the users of the home phone. Therefore, this study expects to find new motivators for consuming brand webtoons as a “snack-culture” format optimized to smartphones because they are different from the user motivations for paper-based comic books. Thus, we ask the following primary research question:

- **RQ 1:** What are the user motivations for consuming brand webtoons?

1.2. Need for Self-Expression

The U&G theory assumes that factors such as an individual’s psychological conditions, motives, and social circumstances influence his/her media use and affect his/her acceptance of media content [15]. However, no single factor to mainly drive the users’ media use has been theorized [16]. Rather, it is suggested that the interaction between user motives and psychological traits predict his/her media use behavior [16,17]. In this study, we focus on psychological predictors like need for self-expression as one of the intrinsic traits of consumers involved in the use of brand webtoons.

Everyone has a need for self-expression, and in terms of consumption behavior, the need for self-expression means purpose-oriented consumption to create an ideal self-image that they aim for. According to existing studies, as the perception of the self as a consumer becomes larger and the individual’s desire to be distinguished from other people becomes stronger, consumers exhibit a significant increase in self-expression values through the purchase of products or services [18]. Admittedly, consumers prefer brands that are perceived to be consistent with or match the image of their self, and are satisfied by purchasing them [19,20]. People consume not only the functional attributes of the product, but also the symbolic meaning of the brand. In particular, as conspicuous consumption increases, especially for people in their 20 s and 30 s, the tendency to express the individual self through the purchase of a product (or brand) is increasing [20]. As mentioned earlier, brand webtoons have a new form that combines traditional static paper comics and digital platforms. In addition, in terms of the novelty of the combination of webtoons and advertisements that are unlikely to fit with each other, brand webtoons fit the values of people in their 20 s and 30 s with a strong desire for individual self-expression [20]. In other words, the main characters in webtoons who do not like to be entangled in anything and push themselves through their own direction are accepted as the preferred ‘self-expression’

of the younger generations. Therefore, we see that the need for self-expression should be considered as a key variable in that it represents the psychological tendency of the webtoon users as well as being the reason for consuming webtoons.

1.3. Model of Sustainable Use of Brand Webtoons

In this study, we propose a theoretical framework that explains the process of consumers' decision making to use brand webtoons by starting to investigate the user motives for using the content. According to this framework in Figure 1, the following hypotheses are established.

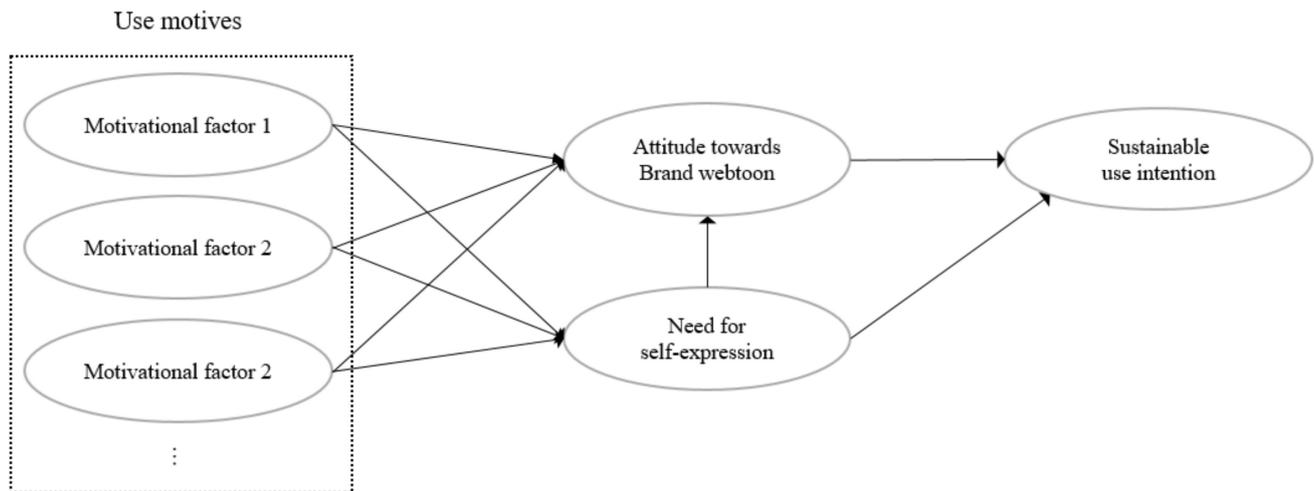


Figure 1. Proposed research model.

Hypotheses 1 (H1). *Motivational factors for consuming brand webtoons positively affect the attitude towards the brand webtoons.*

Hypotheses 2 (H2). *Motivational factors for consuming brand webtoons positively affect need for self-expression.*

Hypotheses 3 (H3). *Need for self-expression positively affects attitudes towards the brand webtoons.*

Hypotheses 4 (H4). *Attitude towards brand webtoons positively affects the users' sustainable use intention.*

Hypotheses 5 (H5). *Need for self-expression positively affects the users' sustainable use intention.*

2. Research Methods

2.1. Generation and Refinement of Motive Items

To answer RQ 1, we reviewed the existing literature on user motivations associated with entertainment consumption (e.g., music, movies, drama, exhibitions, cartoons, sports, etc.). Scholars suggest that consumption of entertainment is undertaken based on two basic motives: the search for hedonic pleasure and the search for social affirmation and learning [21]. We also reviewed the literature on new media adoption behavior [8,22–26]. In addition, since this study aimed at exploring the user motivation to consume entertainment through the online platform, we also examined a study by Kim, Lee, and Preis [27] that explored users' motivations to use online tourism services. Table 1 shows the detailed items and related studies.

Table 1. Potential motivation factors for consuming brand webtoons.

| Factor | Item | Source |
|------------------------------------|--|-----------|
| Convenience and ease of use | I read brand webtoons because it is convenient to read the comics on online media platforms. | [24] |
| | I read brand webtoons because there are very few time and space restrictions to use the webtoon platforms. | |
| | I read brand webtoons because I can read the online comics without much effort. | |
| | I read brand webtoons because it is easy to read the comics on online media platforms. | |
| Fun and enjoyment | I read brand webtoons because the storyline is interesting. | [26,27] |
| | I read brand webtoons because the storyline is emotionally stimulating. | |
| | I read brand webtoons for fun. I read brand webtoons to relax. | |
| Learning and information | I read brand webtoons to learn about the various news about brands. | [21,25] |
| | I read brand webtoons to get a variety of information about products (or services). | |
| Social involvement and interaction | I read brand webtoons at the recommendation of others. | [8,23,26] |
| | I read brand webtoons because people around me read a lot of webtoons. | |
| | I read brand webtoons so that I can discuss the story of webtoons with the people around me. | |
| | I read brand webtoons because reading webtoons through that medium is an action that matches the current trend. I read brand webtoons to keep up with other people enjoying webtoons. | |

2.2. Exploratory Factor Analysis

After the initial screening of the motive items by an expert panel, the current study involved conducting an online survey using a sample of 226 adult Koreans (115 men (53.2%), 101 women (46.8%); mean age = 34 years, SD = 7.23) who had read any webtoons at least two times. The survey respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they perceived each of the 15 motive items (see Table 1) that properly described their motives to consume brand webtoons based on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree and 7 = Strongly agree). Then, the initial motives were tested with exploratory factor analysis to determine the number and the nature of the motivational factors of users for consuming brand webtoons. We tested the appropriateness of the factor analysis and found that the results of the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure of sampling adequacy (0.92) and Bartlett’s test ($p < 0.001$, chi-square = 1934.484, $df = 66$) indicated sufficient correlations among the variables to conduct factor analysis. The factor structure was analyzed using principal axis factoring with promax rotation and a latent root criterion (eigenvalues > 1). As recommended by Hair et al. [28], three items with low factor loadings (< 0.05) were removed, after which all the remaining items exhibited factor loadings > 0.5 and no items were cross-loaded.

Then, this study named the newly constructed factors after considering the characteristics of the loaded items and the sizes of the factor loadings. The factors were named: “entertaining information” (61.40% factor loading), “social conformity” (8.47% factor loading), and “convenience” (5.82% factor loading). The total variance of the explanatory power of the three factors is 75.69% (see Table 2).

Among the identified user motives, it is noteworthy that social conformity is a new motivational factor in consuming brand webtoons. Unlike the motives for using existing new media, this result infers that reading brand webtoons through the online platform is a result of users being influenced by social pressure and the collective trends of the society. In this way, the user motivations for consuming brand webtoons, consisting of 12 items in 3 dimensions, were used for analysis. In particular, the factor of entertaining information accounts for a large portion of the total variance. Thus, it is the most important motivating factor for users to consume brand webtoons.

Table 2. Use motives for consuming brand webtoons via exploratory factor analysis.

| | Factor | Factor Loading | Eigenvalue | Explained Variance (%) | Reliability |
|--------------------------|---|----------------|------------|------------------------|-------------|
| Entertaining information | | | 7.37 | 61.40 | 0.90 |
| | I read brand webtoons to get a variety of information about products (or services). | 0.797 | | | |
| | I read brand webtoons to learn about the various news about brands. | 0.729 | | | |
| | I read brand webtoons for fun. | 0.704 | | | |
| | I read brand webtoons to relax. | 0.632 | | | |
| | I read brand webtoons because the storyline is emotionally stimulating. | 0.621 | | | |
| Social conformity | | | 1.02 | 8.47 | 0.89 |
| | I read brand webtoons so that I can discuss the story of webtoons with the people around me. | 0.820 | | | |
| | I read brand webtoons because people around me read a lot of webtoons. | 0.700 | | | |
| | I read brand webtoons because reading webtoons through that medium is an action that matches the current trend. | 0.667 | | | |
| | I read brand webtoons to keep up with other people enjoying webtoons. | 0.621 | | | |
| Convenience | | | 0.70 | 5.82 | 0.83 |
| | I read brand webtoons because it is convenient to read the comics on online media platforms. | 0.817 | | | |
| | I read brand webtoons because I can read the comics without much effort. | 0.773 | | | |
| | I read brand webtoons because there are very few time and space restrictions to use the webtoon platforms. | 0.712 | | | |
| Total variance explained | | | | 75.69 | |

2.3. Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Next, a confirmatory model with the 12 motive items was estimated using AMOS 21.0. After following the refinement process for deriving the optimal model using modification indices, the model exhibited an adequate model fit ($\chi^2/df = 1.896$, $p < 0.001$, incremental fit index (IFI) = 0.98, Tucker–Lewis index (TLI) = 0.97, comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.98, and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.062). As the IFI, TLI, and CFI met the recommended standard of ≥ 0.9 and the RMSEA met the ideal standard of ≤ 0.08 , this structure was confirmed as the motivational factor structure for consuming brand webtoons [29,30].

2.4. Hypothesis Testing

This study conducted an online survey of a sample of 400 adult Koreans (206 men (51.5%), 194 women (48.5%), mean age = 24 years) who had experienced reading webtoons at least two times. This study used a real brand webtoon which was produced by The Shilla Duty Free, South Korea's leading duty-free brand (see Figure 2). Recently, The Shilla Duty Free has been partnering with popular Chinese webtoon artists, Niu Hong Hong and Ruo Guan, to specifically target travelers in their 20 s and 30 s. The webtoons highlight nine local eateries near the retailer's flagship Seoul store, showcasing the surrounding area as a local attraction. Lee and Cho [2] suggest that actual brand webtoons should be used in research so that survey participants' experience is more realistic. This is because it is easy for the participants to guess why the webtoon was designed and why the brand

has published such webtoons only when they read those made by real brands. This study therefore used a brand webtoon of an existing brand.



Figure 2. Brand webtoon created by The Shilla Duty Free.

This study considered two aspects while selecting the stimulus webtoon for this survey. First, we determined that the webtoon writer should be well-known to the core target of webtoons aged 20–30 years. Second, the storyline should also be a subject that could be delivered through the webtoon platform. Lastly, in terms of content information, the content should not cover a specific religion, race, culture, etc. It should be a news report for the general public. Therefore, this study selected a webtoon which was created for the general public.

As part of the survey, the researchers briefly explained the purpose of this survey. Then, the participants of the survey were asked to read the stimulus webtoon, and they were asked to rate the extent to which the survey items described their experiences. Each participant completed the survey in approximately 15–20 min. The 12 motive items identified in this study were used in the survey. All the measures had satisfactory internal consistency as they all had Cronbach's alpha values >0.70 [28]. In this study, prebrand attitude (i.e., brand attitude measured before reading the stimulus webtoon) was controlled in the relationship between motivational factors, content attitudes, and need for self-expression. The pre-existing consumer attitude towards a specific brand is formed by prior product experience, belief in product attributes, and emotional reactions from existing advertisements [31–33], and it can affect purchase intent [33]. Therefore, the attitude towards the brand (i.e., The Shilla Duty Free) as an extraneous variable was measured with a three-item scale developed by MacKenzie et al. [33]. Table 3 summarizes the measures and descriptive statistics for each survey variable.

Table 3. Summary of measures and descriptive statistics.

| Variable | Scale Items | M | SD | Cronbach's α |
|--|--|------|------|---------------------|
| Entertaining information | I read brand webtoons to get a variety of information about products (or services). | 4.64 | 1.10 | 0.90 |
| | I read brand webtoons to learn about the various news about brands. | 4.69 | 1.05 | |
| | I read brand webtoons for fun. | 4.75 | 0.99 | |
| | I read brand webtoons to relax. | 4.82 | 0.95 | |
| | I read brand webtoons because the storyline is emotionally stimulating. | 4.88 | 0.98 | |
| Use motives for brand webtoons | I read brand webtoons so that I can discuss the story of webtoons with the people around me. | 4.85 | 1.05 | 0.89 |
| | I read brand webtoons because people around me read a lot of webtoons. | 4.71 | 1.12 | |
| | I read brand webtoons because reading webtoons through that medium is an action that matches the current trend. | 4.76 | 1.04 | |
| | I read brand webtoons to keep up with other people enjoying webtoons. | 4.78 | 1.01 | |
| Convenience | I read brand webtoons because it is convenient to read the comics on online media platforms. | 4.95 | 1.02 | 0.85 |
| | I read brand webtoons because I can read the comics without much effort. | 4.99 | 0.95 | |
| | I read brand webtoons because there are very few time and space restrictions to use the webtoon platforms. | 5.00 | 1.01 | |
| Need for self-expression [29] | Reading brand webtoons that I chose is to express myself. | 4.95 | 1.03 | 0.92 |
| | When I read the brand webtoons of my choice, people will think that I match the image of the main character in the webtoons. | 5.00 | 0.95 | |
| | People will think that reading brand webtoons that I chose suits me. | 4.99 | 1.01 | |
| Pre-existing attitude towards brand [33] | Attractive/unattractive | 4.85 | 1.02 | 0.95 |
| | Favorable/unfavorable | 4.78 | 1.12 | |
| | Pleasant/unpleasant | 4.65 | 1.32 | |
| Attitude towards webtoon [18] | Favorable/unfavorable | 4.92 | 1.19 | 0.95 |
| | Appealing/unappealing | 4.67 | 1.28 | |
| | Good/bad | 4.68 | 1.36 | |
| Sustainable use intention [34] | I will read the brand webtoon frequently in the future. | 4.50 | 1.26 | 0.96 |
| | I intend to read the brand webtoon again. | 4.56 | 1.24 | |
| | I would read the brand webtoon as often as I can. | 4.51 | 1.25 | |

3. Results

Based on the identified motivational factors of users in consuming brand webtoons, the proposed model (see Figure 1) was tested using structural equation modelling. The confirmation tests for the hypothesis verification model indicated that the fitness indices were acceptable ($\chi^2/df = 2.215$, IFI = 0.98, TLI = 0.98, CFI = 0.98, and RMSEA = 0.055). Thus, this model was deemed suitable for hypothesis testing.

H1 predicted that the motivational factors for consuming brand webtoons would result in positive effects on the attitude towards the webtoon. As shown in Table 4, the analysis results reveal that all three motives differently affect users' attitude towards the brand webtoon. The results corresponding to the three motives are: $\beta = 0.13$, $p < 0.01$; $\beta = 0.02$, $p > 0.05$; $\beta = 0.07$, $p > 0.05$. More specifically, this result indicates that the users' pursuit of

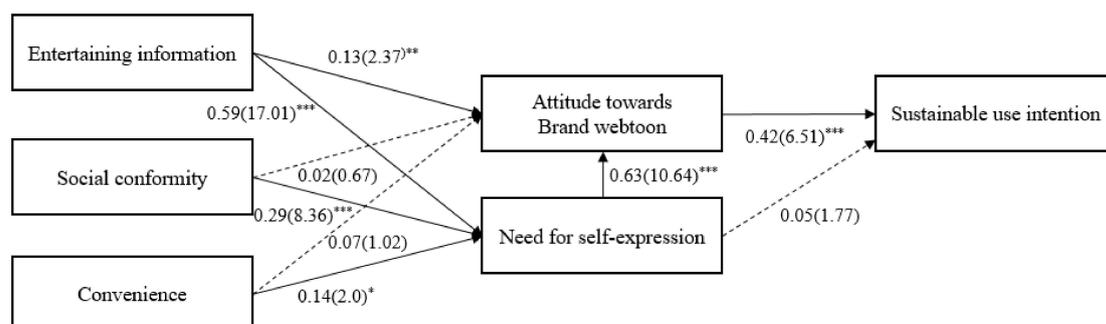
entertaining information is the biggest motivating factor that enables consumers to show a more favorable attitude toward brand webtoons. However, no positive relationship was found between the other two motives (i.e., social conformity and convenience) and the users' attitudes towards brand webtoons. Therefore, H1 was partially supported. Meanwhile, in testing of H2, the results of the path coefficient analysis fully supported the hypothesis. Specifically, the results show that the motivation for entertaining information ($\beta = 0.59, p < 0.001$), social conformity ($\beta = 0.29, p < 0.001$), and convenience ($\beta = 0.14, p < 0.05$) had statistically significant effects on users' attitude towards brand webtoons. Further, as expected, the model also revealed that the users who possess a high degree of need for self-expression tended to have a more favorable attitude towards brand webtoons to which they subscribe. Therefore, H3 was supported. In turn, the webtoon users' favorable attitude towards brand webtoons led to a higher level of their continuous intention to use brand webtoons. Hence, H4 was fully supported.

Table 4. Results of hypothesis testing.

| Hypothesis | Relationship | β | C.R. | p-Value | Supported |
|------------|--------------------------------|---------|-------|---------|-----------|
| H1 | Motivation 1 \rightarrow ATT | 0.13 | 2.37 | 0.002 | Yes |
| | Motivation 2 \rightarrow ATT | 0.02 | 0.67 | 0.505 | No |
| | Motivation 3 \rightarrow ATT | 0.07 | 1.02 | 0.309 | No |
| H2 | Motivation 1 \rightarrow NSE | 0.59 | 17.01 | 0.000 | Yes |
| | Motivation 2 \rightarrow NSE | 0.29 | 8.36 | 0.000 | Yes |
| | Motivation 3 \rightarrow NSE | 0.14 | 2.00 | 0.045 | Yes |
| H3 | NSE \rightarrow ATT | 0.63 | 10.64 | 0.000 | Yes |
| H4 | ATT \rightarrow SUI | 0.42 | 6.51 | 0.000 | Yes |
| H5 | NSE \rightarrow SUI | 0.05 | 1.77 | 0.076 | No |

Note: Motivation 1—Entertaining information, Motivation 2—Social conformity, Motivation 3—Convenience, ATT—Attitude towards brand webtoon, NSE—Need for self-expression, SUI—Sustainable use intention.

Finally, H5 deals with the causal relationships between webtoon users' need for self-expression and their continuous use intention. Unexpectedly, need for self-expression was not significantly related to the users' intention to use brand webtoons. Therefore, H5 is not supported (see Table 4). We further examined the mediating effect of consumers' attitude towards brand webtoons on the relationships between their need for self-expression and sustainable use intention for brand webtoons. To this end, it was confirmed that need for self-expression had a direct and significantly positive effect on the webtoon users' intention to continuously consume the webtoons. As shown in Figure 3, the results indicate a full mediating effect of the webtoon attitude that the higher consumers' need for self-expression, the more they show more favorable attitude towards brand webtoons, which in turn positively affects their sustainable use intention for the brand webtoons. The final effect model is presented in Figure 3 (path coefficients are standardized values and t -values are mentioned in parentheses).



$\chi^2/df = 2.215$, IFI = 0.98, TLI = 0.98, CFI = .98, RMSEA = 0.055
 (* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$)

Figure 3. Results of hypothesis testing.

4. Discussion

While there is the growing interest in academia and industry about branded content marketing, understanding what contributes to the sustainable consumption of branded content remains a matter of debate and investigation. Under such situational awareness, this study started with the U&G approach and identified intrinsic motives for consuming brand webtoons, one of the most commonly used formats of branded content, and presented a theoretical framework explaining webtoon users' continuous use intention. With regard to the identified motivational factors of consumers for consuming brand webtoons, the most salient reason for consumers to read brand webtoons is to gain 'entertainment' and 'information'. Admittedly, the 'entertainment' and 'information' motivation seems to be similar to the general motives for using traditional media such as television, newspaper, radio, magazines, and internet [34–37]. However, the individual's motivations for entertainment (relaxation or fun) and information were not clearly separated in the context of brand webtoons. According to the result of the exploratory factor analysis, this result implies that consumers, in addition to having the functional motive for information seeking for the purchase (or use) of a brand, also have a motive to pursue pleasure while reading an interesting, enjoyable, and entertaining webtoon comic. In a broad perspective, therefore, it is reasonable to assume that user motive to use branded content reflects a mixture of utility and hedonism.

This study clearly shows that users' attitude towards brand webtoons is an important factor in their continuous use of the webtoon content. In addition, according to the study results, webtoon users' need for self-expression is fully mediated through the users' favorable attitude towards the brand exposed in the webtoon content to generate sustainable use intention for brand webtoons. In line with the previous research [35,36], it was also reconfirmed in the interactive media context that consumers' need for self-expression affects their use intention indirectly via favorable brand attitude (see Figure 3).

This study has several theoretical and practical implications. First, this is the first study to identify consumers' motivations for reading brand webtoons based on the U&G perspective. The proposed model integrates intrinsic motivation factors (i.e., entertaining information, social conformity, and convenience) as predictors of sustainable consumption of brand webtoons into a theoretical model, and the model shows that the user motives affect positive user attitudes towards brand webtoons and their need for self-expression. Previous studies simply discussed the importance and effectiveness of brand webtoons in terms of brand evaluation and purchase intention [1,2,18]. Therefore, there is a lack of discussion on how consumers perceive the brand placement in webtoons and how the sustainable usage intention is made. This study is meaningful in that it demonstrates the cognitive mechanisms involved in generating continuous use intention regarding brand webtoons by adopting the concept of need for self-expression. The identification of this underlying mechanism is a distinctive contribution of this study. In particular, a remarkable finding from this study is that the motive of social conformity is a new result that is not found in the previous U&G literature about understanding gratifications stemming from traditional media (or media content) use. This motivational factor is different from other factors in that it is a social motive. This indicates that webtoon users are particularly influenced by their social peers to consume the webtoon content (e.g., the newest episodes of popular webtoon series) and the motive to do so is positively related to their intention to continuously consume it for various purposes. This study extends prior research on consumers' media consumption and media-related behavior based on a web-based platform. In doing so, this study enables the understanding of consumers' behavioral intentions towards specific branded contents such as brand webtoons by employing the U&G approach as the theoretical framework to explore their motivations for consuming the media content. Second, in the context of a content marketing plan or strategy, this study is significant as it has confirmed that consumers express their self-concept through a variety of products and services they use, express their individuality, and form an emotional bond by identifying themselves with the chosen brand [2,37–39].

Further, this study provides the following practical implications. First, the findings in this study have important implications for marketing practitioners who consider employing webtoons as a content marketing tactic. Marketers would be well-advised to publish brand webtoons that possess both entertaining and informative properties for consumers to generate positive attitudes towards the webtoon content. For marketing practitioners, this means that in addition to being entertaining, brand webtoons should provide enough brand-related information to the readers to bring them into the favorable state of optimal brand experience. As discussed, since brand webtoons should be regarded as commercial products, it is important for brand marketers to understand consumers' psychological attributes that help in encouraging and reinforcing sustainable use intention for brand webtoons. To that end, this study concentrates on the impact of consumers' need for self-expression involved in building their responses to brand webtoons: attitude towards webtoon contents and intention to reuse the webtoons. Although most extant research focuses on the influence of brand webtoons on promoting brand messages, this study examines the direct as well as mediating role of the psychological factor (i.e., need for self-expression) that leads to positive consumer outcomes in the context of webtoon marketing. In particular, the findings obtained in this study highlight that there definitely exists the possibility that consumers are more likely to generate reuse intention of brand webtoons when they feel that connection with the brand is formed and the brand placed within webtoons helps them to achieve their ideal self. Further, the findings of this study imply that brand webtoons, as one of the typical forms of branded content used to engage consumers with a brand through interactive, entertaining media content, can be a sustainable business model for firms to achieve their marketing objectives, in particular in ensuring that consumers continuously use the webtoon contents.

This study's limitations and suggestions are as follows. First, there might be possible extraneous variable effects that could not be controlled in this study. Therefore, to increase the generalizability of the findings, it is recommended for the future studies be conducted in more controlled research settings. For example, future research should discern the possible effects of other individual variables (e.g., age, gender, experiences of reading webtoons). It is also possible that the frequency of survey respondents' webtoon subscriptions or consumption had a certain level of influence on the response. Further, researchers in this area are advised to employ a subset of the sample to participate in the research with incentivized stakes, and that using data derived directly from webtoon platforms where participants can read brand webtoons would yield more convincing data. Second, we used self-reported measures of psychological responses after game play, which may have caused common method bias. In addition, follow-up studies on various product categories such as fashion, finance, beauty, automobiles, and alcohol should be carried out in the future. Moreover, future studies can develop a research design for integrating quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis to examine the relationship between causal variables and brand webtoon outcomes. For example, using fuzzy set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA) would be beneficial as a tool for in-depth and case-oriented research. In addition, future researchers may also obtain benefits from the use of experimental or quasi-experimental designs. Despite these limitations, we believe that this study will meet the urgent need to establish a theoretical framework to explain users' perceptions of and responses to brand webtoons.

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