

BACHELOR OF ARTS IN MULTIMEDIA STUDIES
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BACHELOR OF ARTS IN MULTIMEDIA STUDIES

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**GUTOM: ANALYZING READER'S EXPERIENCES TOWARDS EMOTIONAL
HEALING AND RESILIENCY IN WEBTOON SERIES**

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September 2024

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This paper prepared by **NORIANNE ENERO** with the title: “**GUTOM: ANALYZING READER’S EXPERIENCES TOWARDS EMOTIONAL HEALING AND RESILIENCY IN WEBTOON SERIES**” is hereby accepted by the Faculty of Information and Communication Studies, U.P. Open University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Course.

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Biographical Sketch

Norianne O. Enero is a 4th year college student at University of the Philippines Open University where she currently takes her Bachelor Degrees in Multimedia Studies. She has a keen interest for Filipino mythology and folklore, and reimagining them into fantasy, creative stories through a decolonizing perspective.

Norianne has published her webtoon titled *Gutom: The Tale of the Wandering Manananggal* inspired from Filipino folklore. In developing the webtoon, Norianne has developed storyboards, scripts, moodboards, and an art style to create a compelling story to global audiences. Norianne plans, after graduation, to explore more on Filipino mythology and folklore, and create impactful fantasy narratives using webtoons.

Acknowledgement

I would like to express my sincere gratitude for my professors, classmates, and all those who have contributed and aided in my learning. Without you, I would not be able to have endless opportunities to showcase my talents, and work. I would also like to give thanks to the Filipino people who made my education possible. I created the webtoon series in mind of its impact towards Filipino audiences, and of our cultural representation and empowerment.

I am grateful for all my friends, and loved ones who have expressed and showed their support and encouragement as I fulfilled the completion of my creative project. Your care, and support have tremendously given me the strength, courage, and the safe place to talk about my troubles and wins in my life. Thank you for believing in me.

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Abstract

Creative narratives are powerful psychological tools that shape an individual's thinking, influencing their knowledge and emotions (Gupta & Jha, 2022). Webtoons increases emotional engagement of the readers, and can be used as a literary tool to educate students in a classroom setting (Dar et al., 2023). So, what if there was a webtoon that contains positive themes of self-discovery, emotional healing and resiliency, and mature themes such as abuse or domestic violence. How will the readers react or perceive the characters, and the themes in the story?

This study employs a qualitative research design, utilizing thematic analysis as the primary method to identify and interpret recurring patterns within the data. The data would be the opinions, and thoughts of the participants towards the themes, and characters in the webtoon series, *Gutom: The Tale of the Wandering Manananggal*.

Keywords: Webtoon; Emotional engagement; Creative narratives

I. INTRODUCTION

Rationale

For the author and millions of people, COVID-19 was a time of loneliness and isolation. The author, faced with her struggles in life, wanted to escape. But of course with strict lockdown restrictions in Quezon City and the dangerous epidemic in the air, Norianne Enero, in her house, created a world called *Bluebell Woods* that came to life through drawings and stories.

By creating *Bluebell Woods* and the *Clementine House*, the author gets to release her emotional and mental pain by creating narratives that resolve her adversities and painful memories and create a sense of hope for the future. The pen was used as a tool to change her lonely reality.

Some years later, the real world started somehow getting better. The lockdown restrictions were being lifted, people were allowed face-to-face interactions, and the author had enough of only living through pen and paper. She grew out of the old story and started seeing the symbols, and meanings in her story. With new realizations and personal development changing her state of mind, she decided to change the story into one that explores emotional resiliency, empathy, and self-compassion as tools for psychological healing. Miss Enero is also fond of Filipino folk tales, and mythologies. As such, fictional settings are used to portray emotional resiliency, trauma, abuse, and self-compassion.

She then expanded the world of *Bluebell Woods* into a world named *Diwa* where Filipino folk tale characters and mythologies are reimagined. She integrated her culture into her coping mechanism which is creative writing, art, and fictional stories.

Statement of the Problem

Furthermore, this webtoon series aims to help raise awareness of mental health and illustrate coping tools in overcoming adversities, or life tragedies through storytelling and the characters of the webtoon. Furthermore, to measure the emotional impact and influence of the webtoon story, *Gutom*, this study investigates the following questions:

1. What are the thoughts, reflections, and responses of the participants towards sensitive scenes?
2. The story concludes with overcoming adversities, what are the participant's reactions or attitudes towards the main character's emotional journey?

Objectives

This study aims to explore how participants emotionally engage with and respond to sensitive themes in fantasy narratives and to analyze the participants' thoughts and reflections on the development of the story. Lastly, to investigate how they apply creative narratives to their lives.

Significance of the Study

The study aims to provide insights into how webtoon readers respond to webtoon fantasy stories with sensitive themes. The study and the creative project would reveal the reactions, and philosophies of the participants towards a story of characters who struggle with their adversities. Through analyzing the participant's responses, we can identify the relationship between stories and the readers.

Scope and Limitations

Scope

The study will analyze which creative elements and themes left an impact on the participants the most. Participants would be ages 18 and older who have read every episode of the webtoon. A sample size of 25 participants will be gathered in order to identify common themes and responses they share.

Limitations

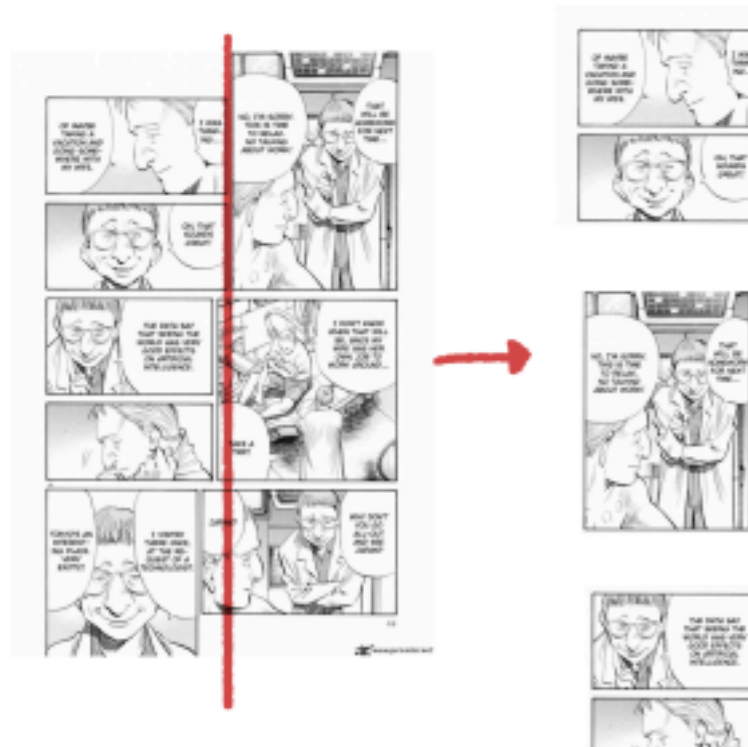
The target respondents are qualified to read the webtoon online. Thus, there might be a sampling bias due to a limited representation of readers, where the respondents would only be those who have access to technological devices and the internet. Survey questionnaires would be used to question the participants regarding their thoughts. The questionnaires and the webtoon involve exposure to sensitive content that may trigger distress or discomfort among the participants, thus triggering warnings, and ethical protocols will be implemented in respect for and care of the participant's mental and emotional well-being.

II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Webtoons as Multimedia Storytelling

According to Module 1 of MMS 100, what characterizes multimedia are the integration of media modalities, and interactivity (Maranan, 2019b). Webtoons have graphics, text, and even music that readers can turn on and off. Besides from this interactivity function, readers can ‘heart’, comment, and subscribe to each manga episode. Through the comment section, readers, and even authors can leave their thoughts, and opinions to discuss with their fellow readers.

Webtoons are digital multimedia products that create a new form of reading experience. In the artistic process, artists develop their intuition, and skills to layout visuals and text in a vertical way, adapting into a new, modern reading experience that traditional manga does not have. Here is a difference between the traditional one (left) to a vertical format (right):



(Macarenaoftime, 2021)

With traditional manga, the information is more compact, but with the vertical layout, the information is dissected per part without overwhelming the

reader. Nevertheless, from the comparison shown above, the visual elements, and the text have to be presented in a way that engages the reader and prompts them to scroll down.

Creative Stories as Psychological Tools for the Development of Mental Well-Being

Creative narratives are considered to be powerful psychological tools known to shape an individual's thinking, and responses to specific topics (Gupta & Jha, 2022). These narratives could shape an individual's external worldviews and their perspective on their own identities. With its influence, creative narratives were used for therapy to stabilize harmony between the individual and their adversities or internal conflicts (Gupta & Jha, 2022). Online, there is a YouTube platform called Cinema Therapy where Decker, a licensed therapist, and Sewright, professional filmmaker identify tools in the stories of heroes, villains, and side characters that people can use to improve their mental and emotional well-being (Cinema Therapy, n.d.)

Movies were authored to represent a reality. For example, the Hunger Games is a story representing war, corruption, exploitation, oppression, and power. But it also represents resiliency and compassion. Through this represented reality, individuals experience the story themselves through a safe space by sitting on a sofa and watching the screen.

Comics are also known to hold psychological tools for healing. A development of comics would be a new type originating from South Korea, called Webtoon. Compared to traditional comics, webtoons are read vertically from top to bottom instead of in a traditional manner. The company has over 86.5 million

readers who can access dozens of stories with a variety of genres online (2023, Jobst).

Gutom: The Story & Meaning Behind the Title

“A manananggal with bloodthirsty hunger finds an engkanto who accidentally awakens her memories of humanity.”

In the beginning, Adalana had blurred memories of her humanity. She remembered her days of humanity, which were vibrant in her childhood. However, she no longer remembers the joys of her childhood. Her perception of humanity is strongly tied to her childhood days. And since this character realizes she is not a kid anymore but rather a monster, she dismisses and neglects her humanity. She now views herself as a monster with a reckless hunger to eat and eat, to always satisfy that (*gutom*) hunger.

Until an *engkanto* put a spell on her, making her unlock her deepest memories from her childhood. She remembered her mother comforting her whenever she woke up from a nightmare. She remembered the day she was turned into a monster. A memory she repressed and had forgotten.

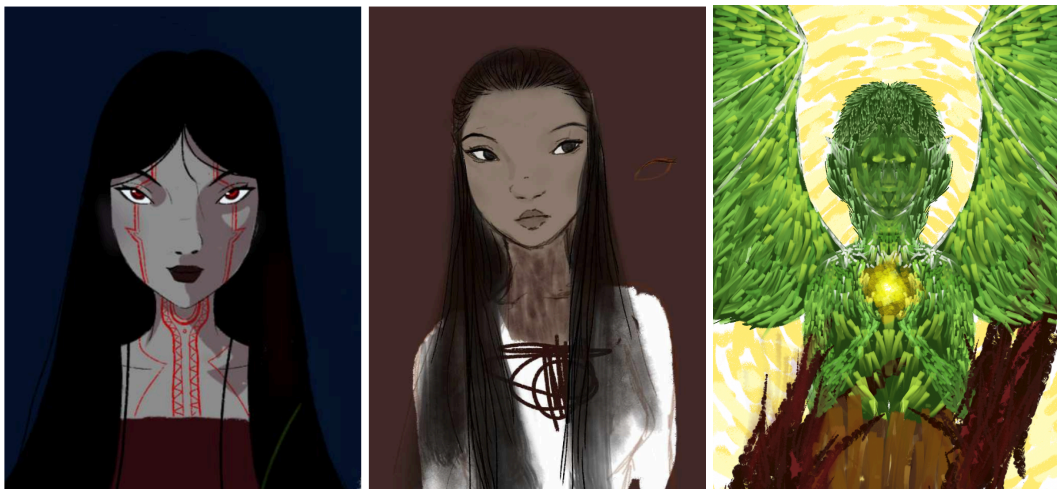
In the fantasy haze of memories, Adalana finds her childhood self. Seeing her old self become so different from the cheery one, she leaned down and hugged her tightly. She embraces herself tenderly as she accepts the good and bad memories, unlocking sympathy for the events she went through. This sympathy becomes a moral compass. She looks the kid-*engkanto* in the eye, realizing it is a helpless kid like her who needed protection from a monster'. Adalana's starvation is now eased and filled with the development of her empathy and compassion once more.

Adalana does not transform back into a human. She stays as a *manananggal*. A symbol of how traumas and memories are lasting as the battle against negative thoughts and intrusive thoughts will be there too, along the journey of self-development and

emotional healing.

There are many characters in the Filipino mythology, but I chose the *Lambana* for my love of fairies, and decided to put a twist into their lore. In addition, the creative choice for Adalana to be a *manananggal* is to challenge the reader's perspectives. Will they still be able to connect with the character or empathize with the character? In Filipino culture, there is a deep-rooted fear surrounding *manananggals*; this creative choice then seeks to challenge the reader's perspectives and beliefs. A *manananggal* is dismembered from the waist, which led me to believe that there is a missing part between the waist and the upper body of the *manananggal*, therefore creating an assumption that the missing part is their humane spirit, gone from between the waist and the lower body. Thus what remains is a void hunger that enables them to pursue violence, rage, and death.

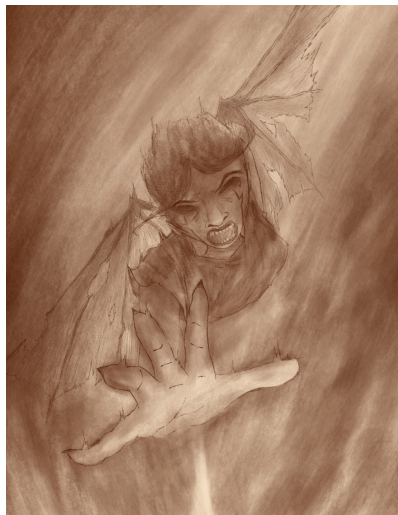
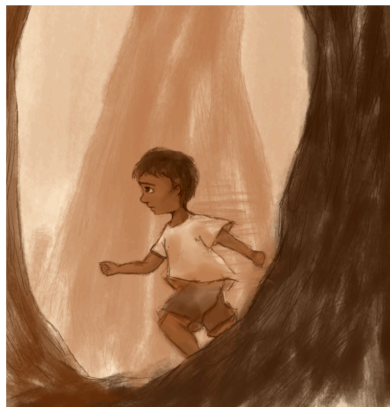
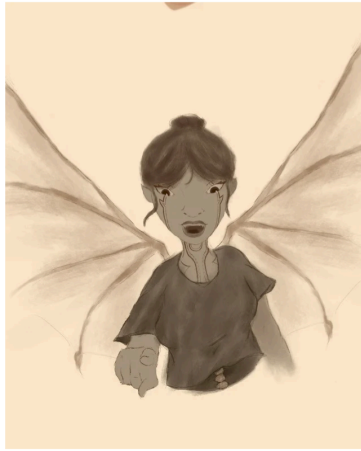
Webtoon Art Style



These art styles are drawn during the implementation stage. It explores different kinds of art styles that could be adapted into the webtoon, but also is a learning experience on how to create a webtoon comic and export the file.

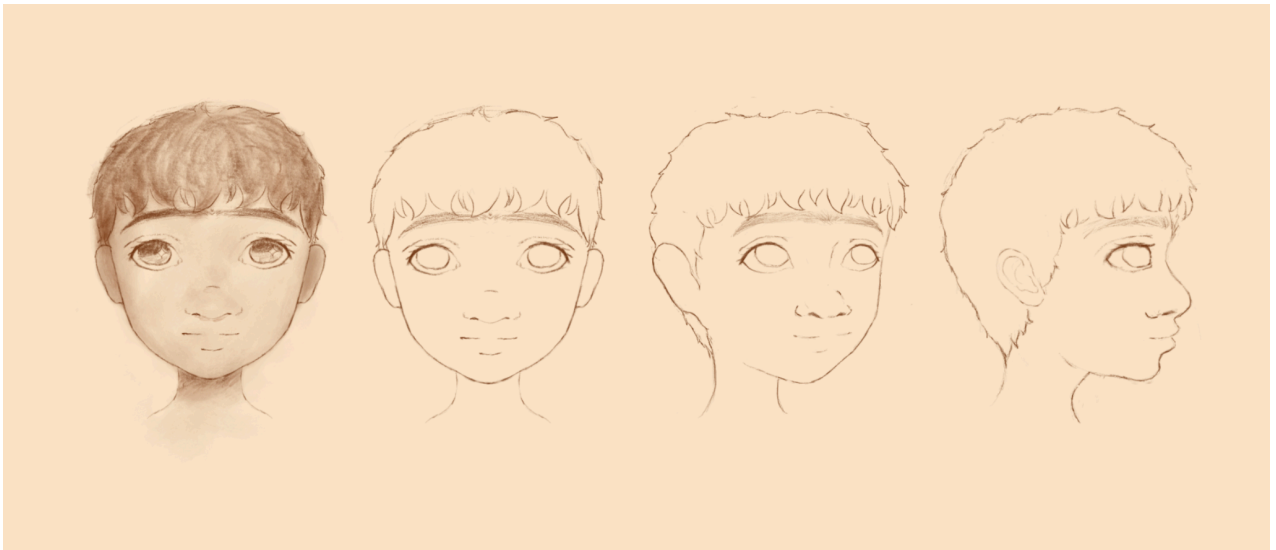
Since the webtoon has drama and would portray sensitive scenes. The best style for this theme would be sepia, with an accent of red. The

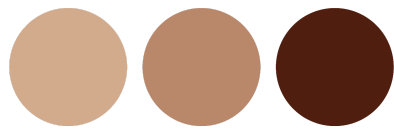
pictures below show the development of this art style to the current one.



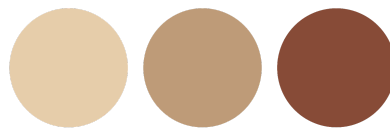
The art style for the *manananggal* takes in vintage and old-style vibes. It was sepia-colored, with a highlight on the color red. Red here represents rage, blood, and hunger, but also life and santan flowers.

Here are the concept models and art design for the main character, and the side characters.





Manananggal



Human

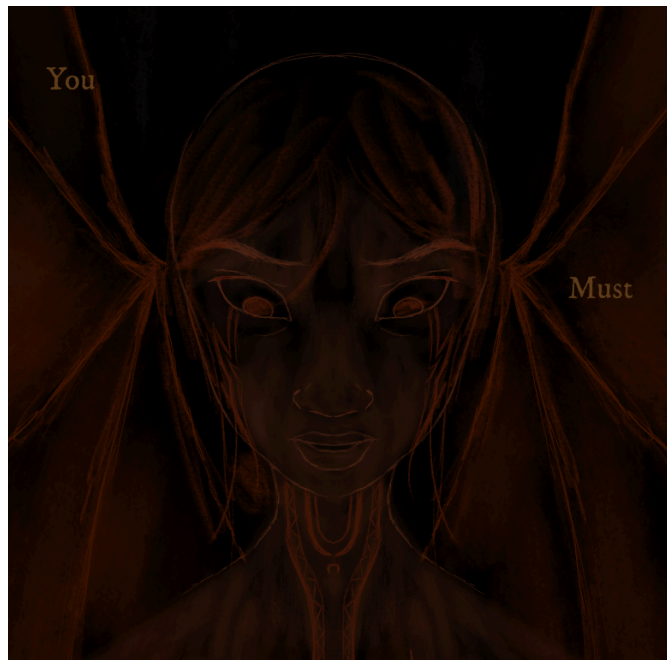
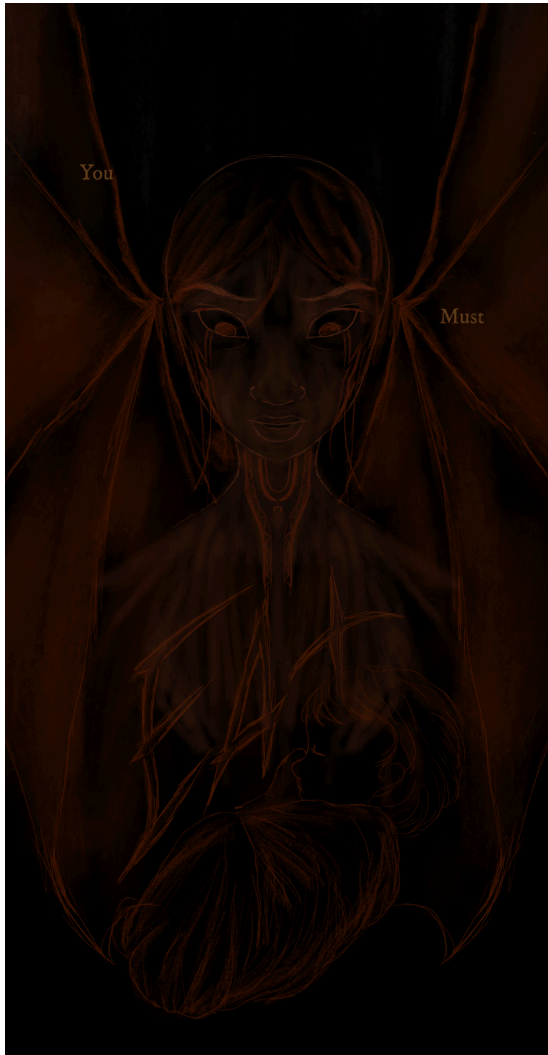


Nature

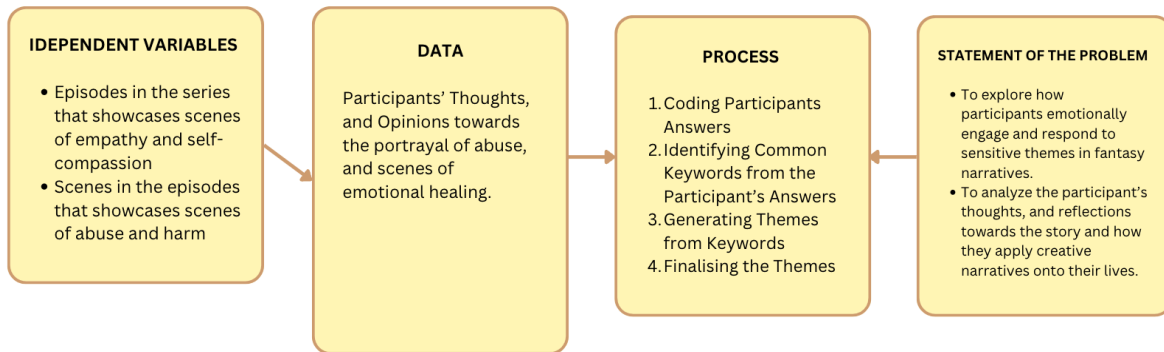
There are different color palettes for humans, monsters, and natural backgrounds in order to differentiate the identities among the three. These palettes are made in order to bring coherence and harmony.



However, as the episodes go on, the palettes are now used to paint and color good memories and bad memories, rather than specifically for an object. The palettes are adapted to convey a good, warm, and beautiful memory to bad ones. And when it is a gruesome act or a gruesome thought, the canvas goes black with a lineart and shadings of red.



Conceptual Framework



The framework above shows the independent variables, the data gathered from the respondents, the process used to analyze the data, and the statement of the problem. Each of these variables has an arrow that relates it to the next one. Therefore, we can see the structure of this conceptual framework. First, the plot points of the webtoon story affect the data of the respondent's answers to the webtoon story. The plot points are an independent variable since the participant's thoughts would not change the story itself since it is already authored. The third part is the thematic analysis of the data and generating themes from the said data (Scribbr, n.d.). Finally, the arrows on the objectives are pointed towards the process. This is because the objectives are independent variables that cannot be changed based on the outcome of the process. The study was conducted to achieve the objectives, and the process reflects this.

Operational Definition of Terms

Abuse

Abuse in this study would be defined based on the types of abuse shown in the webtoon. These abuses are emotional abuse, abuse of power, religious abuse, and acts of physical abuse.

Adversities

Adversities in this study will be defined in the context of the webtoon series. Adversities, therefore, are defined as emotional conflicts, moral dilemmas, and emotional, spiritual, and physical trauma that the fictional characters have experienced.

Emotional Healing

Emotional healing is the process of regulating painful experiences or memories while using tools such as self-compassion, empathy, and acceptance. In the webtoon, it does not necessarily show the entire emotional healed resolution of the character, but it shows that the main character is beginning her emotional healing (Patnaik, 2023; Blanchfield, 2024).

Resiliency

Emotional resiliency is defined as the skills to process difficult, challenging, or negative experiences and respond with positive coping tools (The Children's Society. n.d.; Chowdhury, 2024) .

III. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adapts a qualitative design and the use of thematic analysis. Questionnaires were made to recognize patterns of themes and ideas the respondents perceived from scenes of adversity and emotional resiliency. To analyze the participant's responses, thematic analysis was used in order to understand their perception of the story. Using thematic analysis, responses are categorized into similar, recurring patterns with the respondents' thoughts, opinions, and ideas.

Locale of the Study

The study is conducted in the Philippines, during the 3rd Trimester AY 2023-2024. The webtoon is uploaded online, thus there was an open case for respondents from overseas as there is an expectation for local respondents.

Respondents of the Study

The respondents of this study are Filipinos who are eighteen years old and above. This chosen age range is used since the webtoon contains mature themes and depictions of abuse, and distressing events. The respondents are required to have read chapters one to four of the webtoon series.

Sampling Procedure

The respondents of the study are chosen through random sampling. The number of respondents are five participants. The research utilises thematic analysis in understanding the data. The participants would answer in long-form sentences therefore, there is already a large pool of data that can be coded and generated into general

themes.

Data Gathering Procedure

The first part of the data gathering procedure is publishing the webtoon on Tapas and promoting it on my art social media accounts. The second part of this procedure is the dissemination of the surveys online, being posted on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Surveys are also sent to academic messenger chats and to the UPOU discord server. Thus, the survey is open to the general public. The questionnaires are online surveys that consist of paragraph questions measuring their understanding of the story and the characters.

Data Analysis

The participant's responses are analyzed through thematic analysis. After the participants have given their answers, the researcher proceeds in identifying common keywords or concepts that the participants have. After the coding phase, the next step is generating themes. The last part is the finalisation of the themes where the generated themes, and the raw data of responses would be reviewed again to prevent misinterpretations.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The respondents are Filipino readers who are ages 18 years old and above. Wherein this section will present the thematic analysis of the participants' responses. It examines the data and discusses key understandings of the participant's emotions, ideas, thoughts, and opinions towards the characters, the story, and the themes in the story itself. It gives a holistic explanation of how the participants perceive the elements of the story.

Table 1

What are your thoughts towards the anti-hero who is a <i>manananggal</i> ?	Code
I think the anti-hero was in a lot of pain .	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Afflicted person
The <i>manananggal</i> is born to be one. She can't resist to eat people as she is born to be one .	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Powerless • Trapped
A victim of circumstance	
It is rare to see a <i>manananggal</i> in webtoons, especially as an anti-hero . The webtoon promotes local folklores from the Philippines.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unique Character • Cultural Representation • Cultural Promotion
It was a very unexpected turn of events, making it very intriguing .	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interesting story
Theme	Oppressed victim, trapped by her own nature and not by her own choice.

This question analyzes the respondent's perception of the anti-hero demonstrating monstrous characteristics. In spite of her monstrous characteristics, the readers have developed sympathy and empathy towards the character. The general

theme of the Adalana's identity is an **oppressed victim, trapped by her own nature and not by her own choice.**

Table 2

What do you think of her character? Her motivations, and goal?	Code
I think her character is okay. From what I read, I believe her character wanted to be at peace, bathed in warm light , not in darkness. I am not sure about her motivations and goal.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Optimistic thinking ● Unclear goals
She wants to live just like anyone else and what makes her live is to eat people.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Human-like
I think she's just hungry , like all <i>manananggal</i> does. I don't think they do it out of evil, but it's just their nature.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Not-evil
Wanted change . Her goal was to survive and at the same time to end her ordeal.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Unique Character ● Cultural Representation ● Cultural Promotion
I interpret her character as one that is distressed about her fate and identity . There isn't much to go on about her motivations and goals since it was more of an introductory tale of how she came to be a <i>manananggal</i> . Although I can sense the agony that comes with her trying to satisfy her hunger.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Anguish ● Existentially troubled
Theme	Hopeful and resilient character, dealing with internal troubles.

This question measures the participants' perceptions of Adalana's *character*. The difference with this question from the former one is that this is the part where the respondents define who the character is separately from her being a *manananggal*. **The respondents perceive her as a hopeful and resilient character, dealing with internal troubles.**

Table 3

How does having a 'monster' as the main character make you feel? Does this make you comfortable? Uncomfortable? Happy? And why?	Code
Having a 'monster' as a protagonist is always interesting to me because the story can unfold in many different ways.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Interesting story
It makes me feel curious of what she will be in the future or what her story is.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Curiosity ● Looking forward to potential character development
I believe some monsters are more comforting, or can be a comfort character, because their appearance or struggles can be a metaphor for what we feel in reality .	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Reflections
The monster represent my hindrances challenges and trials in life . It makes me happy, for the reason that I can relate somehow, not being as manananggal but as a person that wanted to free from those "monsters" in life and not just to live with it.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Reflections to personal struggles ● Connectedness to the character ● Desire to have a similar redemption arc like the main character. ● Unique Character ● Cultural Representation ● Cultural Promotion

<p>Generally, it piqued my interest to read more about the character. It didn't really make me feel uncomfortable, nor did it make me happy. It was more of a curiosity about how the author would portray the protagonist and how they would interpret what it feels like to be a <i>manananggal</i>. I will admit that I don't know much about Filipino mythology, so it was something that felt new and unfamiliar to me, but nonetheless intriguing.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sparked curiosity about filipino mythology and of the story • New and unfamiliar towards the story
<p>Theme</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotional engagement • Reflection • Self-Perception

This question measures the participants' emotional responses. This explores the respondents' feelings and analyses their thoughts. The general theme of the data is that **the respondents created their own reflections from their personal experiences and expressed strong curiosity to the development of the character.**

Table 4

<p>We saw that the monster was a human before, how do you feel that Adalana is someone considered to be 'no longer human'?</p>	<p>Code</p>
<p>I am curious as to how she will navigate her new life as someone 'no longer human.'</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Curiosity
<p>I felt more curious what the reason is which might be from the drink. But the storyline gave me an urge to read the next chapter to know more of the reason/s why.</p>	
<p>I like seeing metaphors in stories. In this story, her Manananggal form could be her losing her</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critical thinking • Enjoyment in story metaphors

sense of childhood innocence. Or, something happened to her when she was a child that made her no longer human.	
scared	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fear
Overall, I felt a wave of sympathy for the character; it must have been a traumatic and utterly confusing experience for her to encounter as a child. In this sense, I could imagine how hard it would have been for her to continue with the life she has now that she is a "monster."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sympathy • Curiosity
Theme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-Awareness • Emotional connection to the main character

This question measures the participants' reaction and thoughts towards the resolution of a distressing event. This explores the respondents' feelings and analyzes their thoughts. Based on the data, the **event triggered the participants' own personal experiences and made them self-aware of their feelings**. The data further proves that **the respondents developed sympathy for the main character**.

Table 5 & Table 6

The questions in Figure E and Figure F probe the respondents' perceptions towards the mother and father. From the data, **the respondents express sympathy and understanding towards the mother; towards the father, they express moral and empathetic outrage**. Moral outrage is directed anger towards the act itself, whereas empathetic outrage is towards the consequence of the act (Hechler and

Kessler, 2018). Most of the respondents identify the mother as a victim, whereas the father is identified as abusive.

<p>What do you think of her decisions, and of the situation they are in? You may cite any emotions that you felt while reading the webtoon.</p>	<p>Code</p>
<p>I believe the mother was stuck between a rock and a hard place. However, I believe she chose the lesser evil.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Sympathy and understanding towards the Mother and Adalana ● Reason for the mother's choices
<p>This might be an eye opening to some that an abusive husband does affect it's wife mentally and emotionally which can make he wife think of an escape for her and her children.</p>	
<p>I feel sad for Adalana, and pain for her mother. The story is a metaphor for domestic abuse faced by women and children. Domestic and violent abuses are common in Filipino households, sadly. Some patriarchal households are toxic. It could also be because the father in the story regrets marrying Adalana's mother. The mananangal form can also be a metaphor for some status or racial prejudice.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Metaphor of social issues
<p>The graphics was excellent.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Excellent graphics
<p>It felt very upsetting to see this happen. The mother took it upon her hands to irreversibly decide for her daughter's fate. But also, I can understand why she acted rashly, seeing the abuse that she experienced from the husband; she was perhaps desperate at this point. It was this desperation that implied that the abuse was not a one-time thing, which was sad and</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Abuse ● Pity and sympathy

frustrating to think about. I pity both the mother and the daughter in this light.	
Theme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sympathy

The <i>father</i> have acted violence upon his wife, and daughter. What do you think of his decision and actions? You may cite any emotions that you felt while reading this scene.	Code
It always angers me when men hurt the women and girls close to them. I felt that he should be the one gaining a curse , not Adalana.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anger • Angst • Empathetic Outrage
I felt like his actions wasn't new to him and he's been abusive to his family which is the reason of the mother's decision of becoming a monster .	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cause & effect
I'm not sure why he hurt them, but it is common... Sadly, for some Filipinos to experience this.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unsureness towards the father's actions • Sadness and empathy towards Filipinos in real life
It was inhumane and outrageous for the father to inflict such abuse to both his wife and daughter. With that, I purely feel enraged of the father's intolerable and unjust behavior and actions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Moral outrage
Theme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anger

Table 7

<p>In Chapter 4, we saw that the monster regained back her 'human' characteristics. When you were reading this chapter, what were your thoughts towards her development?</p>	<p>Code</p>
<p>I was a bit relieved that she is slowly getting better and reclaiming her true self. The illustration of her reaching out felt warm.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive character development
<p>She has come to forgiveness and acceptance which results her to be born again with no grudge and be free to just be herself.</p>	
<p>She was not a monster, it was just a pigment of her imagination.</p>	
<p>I didn't know that she was the mother, I thought it was Adalana growing up and accepting that she had escaped her past.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Redemption Arc
<p>It was honestly surprising to me that the story shifted in that direction. It's still unknown to the readers why such development occurred except when an entity intervened. It was a glimpse of redemption—not quite entirely a second chance, but a small ray of hope for the main character, seeing how she did not want to live with herself. It was like a symbol that there was still a grace for her to change back, or that her past self is not completely lost.</p>	
<p>Theme</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive character development

The questions in Figure G examine the respondents' perceptions of character development. From the data, **the respondents express sympathy and understanding towards the mother, whereas towards the father, they express moral and empathetic outrage.** Most of the respondents identify the mother as a victim, whereas the father is identified as abusive. Moral outrage is directed anger towards the act itself, whereas empathetic outrage is towards the consequence of the act (Hechler and Kessler, 2018).

The results show that the respondents:

1. Demonstrate critical thinking, developing their own analysis of the characters, setting, and webtoon's narrative.
2. The respondents have shown emotional understanding and developed an emotional connection towards the characters and to the story.
3. Examining the data, the respondents express their personal connection to the story or the characters and make insightful responses integral to their self-reflections.

V. SUMMARY, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The creative project explored the relationship between the webtoon and the readers through gaining insights into the readers responses towards the characters, stories, and positive themes, as well as sensitive or distressing themes such as depression and abuse. To analyze the data, thematic analysis was used to code themes and identify similar responses from the participants. The results showed that the participants responded to the victims in the story with empathy and positivity, whereas towards the abuser, the participants responded with moral anger and dislike. When it comes to sensitive themes in the narratives, the respondents expressed distress towards portrayals of abuse. On the other hand, the participants showed an increase in interest in the anti-hero's future, hoping for positivity and character growth.

However, the respondents also expressed confusion regarding the story's plot. In examining the data, the respondents have misconceptions about the plot twist, saying that the anti-hero is the mother, when in fact, the one who turned into a *manananggal* is the daughter, Adalana. A respondent also gave advice on improving the webtoon's format. This means there is a need to develop and improve the webtoon's storytelling in order to give clear information. Furthermore, this also shows that the respondents have shown confusion and misunderstanding of the characters' identities, creating a flaw in the gathered data of their understanding towards the plot twist.

The webtoon is inspired by Filipino mythology and folklore; it uses artistic elements and metaphors to represent themes, ideas, and social issues. This study proved that the readers will connect to the themes, ideas, and characters in a webtoon and proceed to actively engage in a critical manner when it comes to understanding the webtoon.

For future researchers and webtoon artists exploring the topic, it is recommended to conduct further analysis in measuring the reader's comprehension and understanding of the webtoon's plot and its characters. This is so that, upon using thematic analysis, there will be limited flaws in the gathered data. Another recommendation is measuring the reader's emotional engagement through quantitative means in order to establish statistical evidence of their emotional experience.

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APPENDIX A

Survey Form: Ethical Caution & Warnings

A gentle reminder that this survey explores mature and sensitive themes of abuse, violence, and other potentially triggering content. If you find it difficult or uncomfortable to answer, please feel free to stop the survey at any given time.

Your responses will remain confidential and will only be used for research purposes. Answering this survey will take about ten to fifteen minutes to complete. There are no right or wrong answers; kindly answer as honestly as you can.