

Dear WEBTOON: Stop Teaching Us That Abuse Is Romance

Dear WEBTOON,

I grew up on your platform.

I've read over 500+ webtoons, getting lost in vivid stories of fantasy, action, or romance. I recommended it to friends, stayed up late reading episodes, and rooted for my favorite characters. But somewhere along the way, something changed for the worse. I soon found myself questioning why I, along with millions of other readers, was rooting for characters who would be horrible people in real life.

The romance webtoons you promote nowadays have changed— and not for the better. They no longer just rely on melodramatic plots and tropes. Now, many revolve around plots of sexual assault, emotional abuse, and toxic power dynamics. Of course, Webtoons with this kind of content are acceptable as long as they cover these topics properly. The problem is that you, WEBTOON, are constantly promoting webtoons that frame these toxic relationship dynamics as a wanted romance.

Take the webtoon *To You Who Doesn't Love Me*. The male lead withholds affection, dismisses the female lead's feelings, controls the relationship, and manipulates her into believing his coldness is her fault. He makes it clear that she is chasing someone who does not treat her as an equal. This is consistently promoted as a relationship people would want, and there is no mention of the idea that love should require mutual respect.

This is a serious problem as your audience is young. 70% of your users in the US alone are under age 24. Many of us are reading your stories before we have experienced love for ourselves. Before we know how love should and shouldn't feel like. As Sophie Haigney writes,

healthy relationships require partners that “enhance our lives,” that people should be “emotionally safe.” That mutual respect, safety, and growth of healthy relationships is precisely what these problematic webtoons erase.

Sure, you slap trigger warnings on before each episode, but they are highly ineffective. A vague warning before an episode can’t prevent readers from getting exposed to content that normalizes coercion or teaches readers to mistake control for love. The warnings have become repetitive, making them easy to scroll past and impossible to take seriously.

You have the power to fix this. You could stop categorizing harmful dynamics as romance. Heck, you could even introduce a dark romance genre, so people can steer clear of these webtoons. You could include unavoidable warnings before a specific scene appears and have the option to skip it. Most importantly, you have thousands of beautifully written stories with healthy romance and incredible plots. Why not promote those instead?

WEBTOON reaches millions of teenagers. With that reach comes influence. And with influence comes responsibility. Every story you promote teaches us about something— whether it’s about love, relationship health, or what an ideal relationship looks like.

We deserve love stories that show us what love looks like, not ones that teach us to accept abuse.

Sincerely,

A Passionate Teen Reader