Korean webtoons are built for the way many people now read comics: casino on phone on a phone, one screenful at a time, with a thumb-driven scroll instead of a page turn. In coverage of the format, the *South China Morning Post* (SCMP) has helped draw attention to webtoons as a distinct part of Korea's creative industries—not simply printed comics displayed on a screen. Their vertical format, digital distribution, and close fit with mobile habits are central to understanding their appeal.



That mobile-first approach has practical consequences for artists, editors, and anyone adapting comics for a small screen. A reader needs to understand the image quickly, follow the story without awkward zooming, and keep the artwork clear of app controls and other interface elements. Those are not decorative details; they shape whether a comic feels easy and immersive to read.

Below, we look at the design principles behind **smartphone-ready webtoons**, including visual hierarchy, legibility, interface space, and recognisable silhouettes. We also consider how to assess a chapter in a phone or mobile browser—and how to use Unsplash as a source of visual reference without mistaking a mood board for a finished comic.

From the SCMP conversation to the reader's screen

When discussing **South China Morning Post webtoons**, it is useful to separate the broad story of the medium from specific design advice. SCMP coverage situates Korean webtoons within a growing cultural and commercial landscape. The format's mobile suitability is an important part of that story: a long, vertical canvas can fit the natural rhythm of scrolling on a smartphone and make digital reading feel different from reading a conventional printed page.

That does not mean every webtoon automatically works well on a phone. A vertical canvas can still contain lettering that is too small, panels that are too crowded, or dramatic images that lose their meaning when viewed at ordinary mobile size. The format provides an opportunity, not a guarantee. Good mobile design comes from decisions about pacing, contrast, scale, and where the reader's eye should go next.

For creators, the useful question is not just "Is this comic vertical?" It is "Can a reader understand this scene at the size and speed at which they will actually read it?" That question is especially important for **scroll-down comics**,

where composition unfolds in sequence and the gap between panels can control suspense as much as the art itself.

Visual hierarchy: give each screen a job

Visual hierarchy is the order in which the artwork invites a reader to notice things. In a phone-sized panel, a face, a hand, a speech bubble, and a background detail may all compete for attention. If they carry equal visual weight, the reader has to work out where to look. If one element clearly leads, the scene is easier to read and more emotionally direct.

Build around a clear focal point

Each panel or short sequence should have an understandable focal point. It might be a character's expression, a crucial object, or the point of impact in an action scene. Scale, placement, contrast, and surrounding negative space can all draw attention to it. A brightly coloured object on a muted background, for example, is likely to register quickly—but only if other bright elements do not compete with it.

Creators can check the hierarchy by shrinking a page or screen capture to the approximate size it will occupy on a phone. At 25% zoom, the broad shape of the composition should still make sense. At 50%, the main action and reading order should be apparent. At 100%, lettering and details should be comfortable to inspect. This simple three-step review catches problems that may disappear when artwork is viewed at full size on a desktop monitor.

Use vertical pacing deliberately

In scroll-down comics, the distance between images is part of the storytelling. A short gap can make actions feel connected; a longer stretch of empty space can slow the reader down or delay a reveal. But empty space should have intent. If every transition uses a long blank run, the scroll begins to feel like filler. If there is no breathing room, important emotional beats may be rushed together.

Think of the screen as a moment in a sequence, not merely a container for a fixed number of panels. The reader's thumb is always ready to move; composition and spacing can reward that movement by revealing information at the right moment.

Small-screen readability and legibility

Legibility is more than choosing a large font. It depends on the relationship between lettering, contrast, line length, balloon shape, and the artwork behind the text. A speech balloon that looks comfortable on a desktop can become cramped on a phone. A caption placed over a detailed background can become difficult to parse even when its letters are technically large enough.

- **Keep dialogue concise.** Long passages in a small balloon make the reader stop and decode the text rather than follow the scene.
- **Separate text from busy art.** Use a solid or sufficiently opaque balloon, or reposition the lettering where the background is quieter.
- **Check contrast.** Text and important symbols should remain distinguishable in ordinary lighting, not only on a bright studio display.
- **Test at realistic size.** Preview the chapter in a phone or mobile browser instead of relying only on a large monitor.

- **Respect reading order.** Balloon placement should make it obvious what to read first, particularly when several characters speak in one scene.

Testing on an actual device also reveals small but consequential issues: a bubble may sit close to the edge, a line break may create an awkward orphaned word, or a pale colour may wash out when the screen brightness is low. A phone browser is useful because it lets a creator inspect the art within a realistic viewport. Check both portrait orientation and the way the page behaves when the browser's own interface is visible.

Legibility also matters for readers who use larger text settings, screen magnification, or other accessibility features. A mobile-first comic should not assume that every reader has perfect vision or reads under ideal conditions. Clear contrast and uncomplicated lettering benefit nearly everyone.

Leave room for controls, rules, and balances

Webtoons are often read inside apps or browser pages that add their own interface: navigation, episode controls, progress indicators, menus, and sometimes promotional or account information. A comic panel that fills the entire available width may still be partially obscured or visually crowded by those elements. The artwork needs a safe visual area, especially near the screen edges and around prominent text.



This becomes more important when a reading experience includes interactive or transactional features. If an interface displays a balance, a purchase option, access rules, or the cost of unlocking an episode, those details should be clear and separate from the story. Readers should not have to guess what a button does or infer a price from an unclear icon. When money is involved, legible labels and transparent rules are basic usability requirements—not optional polish.

For publishers and product teams, the comic and the interface should be tested together. A chapter can look excellent as a clean image export and still feel cramped once the reader encounters real controls. Check whether a navigation bar covers a balloon, whether a progress marker competes with the art, and whether the reader can distinguish a story element from a tappable control.

Mobile element What to check Why it matters Speech balloons Text size, contrast, edge clearance, and reading order Readers should follow dialogue without zooming or guessing. App controls Spacing between artwork and tappable areas Controls should not cover important story information. Prices and balances Clear labels, visible

amounts, and understandable actions Readers need to understand real-money choices before tapping. Panel transitions Scroll distance and continuity between beats Spacing shapes pace, suspense, and comprehension.

Recognisable silhouettes and shapes

At a small size, a character's silhouette can communicate before facial details do. A distinctive hairstyle, coat, posture, or prop helps readers identify who is in the frame, even when the figure occupies only a small part of the screen. This is valuable in action scenes, crowded compositions, and moments when the reader is moving quickly through the chapter.

Silhouette clarity is not an argument for making every character look simplistic. It is a reminder that identity should survive reduction. If two characters share similar outlines, clothing, and poses, colour alone may not be enough to distinguish them—particularly for readers with colour-vision differences or on displays with subdued colour. Varying body language, accessories, hair shape, and costume structure creates more reliable visual cues.

Creators can test this with a quick thumbnail or silhouette pass. Fill the figures with a single dark tone and view the scene at phone scale. Can you tell who is facing whom? Is the action readable? Does the key object stand out? If not, adding more detail may make the panel busier without making it clearer. Often, a stronger pose or a cleaner separation between shapes will solve the problem.

Using Unsplash as a reference tool

Unsplash can help with mood and visual research: a creator might search for lighting, architecture, clothing textures, landscapes, or the atmosphere of a particular location. Reference images can be useful for planning a palette or understanding how light falls across a scene. They can also help teams communicate a visual direction before artwork begins.

However, reference material should support design rather than replace it. A photograph may contain too much detail for a phone-sized panel, or its composition may not guide the eye in the order a comic needs. Treat an Unsplash image as a prompt for study, not as a finished panel layout. Simplify, redraw, and check the result at mobile size. Creators should also review the image's current licensing terms and follow any relevant attribution requirements.

A practical smartphone-readiness checklist

Before publishing a chapter, review it in the environment where readers are most likely to encounter it. A desktop preview is useful, but it cannot fully replicate thumb reach, browser chrome, screen brightness, or the pace of a real scroll. A brief device test can identify problems before they affect the reading experience.

1. **Open the chapter in a phone or mobile browser.** Use a typical portrait-sized viewport and check how the page loads and scrolls.
2. **Review at 25%, 50%, and 100% zoom.** Look for strong overall composition, clear focal points, and comfortable detail.
3. **Follow the story with one thumb.** Notice whether controls are easy to reach and whether scrolling reveals panels at a natural pace.
4. **Read every balloon without zooming.** Check contrast, line breaks, and balloon order against the artwork.
5. **Inspect interface collisions.** Confirm that navigation, episode controls, and account or payment information do not obscure story content.

6. **Reduce the art to silhouettes.** Make sure characters, gestures, and important objects remain recognisable.
7. **Check the chapter in less-than-ideal conditions.** Test at lower brightness and consider whether pale text or subtle shapes still hold up.

The takeaway

The lasting lesson from the **South China Morning Post webtoons** conversation is that Korean webtoons are more than comics arranged in a tall file. Their mobile-first format connects visual storytelling with the habits and constraints of digital reading. That connection helps explain why the medium has become a notable part of Korea's creative landscape, while also setting a high bar for design.

Strong **smartphone-ready webtoons** make their focal points obvious, keep lettering readable, reserve space for controls, and use recognisable shapes to guide the eye. They treat vertical spacing as part of the story and test the finished experience on a real screen. For creators of **scroll-down comics**, that is the practical standard: the reader should be able to move through the chapter with a thumb while remaining fully immersed in the scene.