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The role of media representations in webcomic company

Shuaitong Li *
Faculty of Social Science&Public Policy, Social Science, King's College London, London, The United Kingdom
* Corresponding Author Email: K23077132@kcl.ac.uk

Abstract. This essay explains the way media representations have been applied at Webtoon Entertainment Inc. (WBTN), one of the largest online comics companies that disrupted the comics business by turning them into a mobile-first, vertical scrolling system. It is a study of the revenue model adopted by WBTN, and a hybrid model that includes both free access and paid capabilities in achieving an analysis on how the business entity will be able to maximise interactions with users, in order to be financeably stable. In addition, the cross-media nature of WBTN (making webcomics turn into TV shows, films and video games) focuses much on how the media representation influences the imaginations of viewers and how it is perceived as cultural narration. This paper will discuss how the corporation employs artificial intelligence (AI) as a means of providing customized content and enhancing the user experience and how the company itself employs "glocalization," i.e. adapts the content to the local tastes. The paper also justifies the position of WBTN relative to its competitors in the digital content market and offers recommendations that will aid its business model in a bid to ensure its long-term success in a competitive global market.

Keywords: Webtoon Entertainment Inc., Digital Comics, Hybrid Revenue Model, Cross-media Strategy, Media Representation.

1. Introduction

Webcomics represent a relatively new direction of digital entertainment through the systemic changes in the ways in which comics are distributed and read. With mobile-first platforms entering mainstream, webcomics grew more available, giving a reader access to content at any point or time. This change has become one of the most popular ones on such platforms as Webtoon Entertainment Inc. (WBTN) that was established in 2004 as the subsidiary of the Korean company, Naver. WBTN was the first to introduce vertical scrolling design format, a convenient design that presented webcomics having been fun and easy to read through mobile devices [1].

This hybrid revenue model of WBTN is the most critical factor of success since it will enable the company to make its content free to access yet contain paid features so that accidental readers are not pushed to the periphery and the company has a reliable source of income with paid content [2]. The cross-media strategy behind WBTN is also felt in adapting popular webcomics into video games, TV shows and movies. This revenue diversification approach does not just aid media representation, where the representation of stories, characters and cultural narratives is delivered via varied media outlets, but also this strategy supports this way of media representation [3]. By transferring its webcomics to other forms of media, WBTN can stand a significant influence in both visualizations of identity and narration on modern form entertainment that provides the cultural narrative, in addition to perception of the audience.

Webtoon Entertainment Inc. (WBTN) depends on several dynamics of digital content funneling to succeed. The mobile-first technology has remarkably transformed the characteristics of customer interaction with the media, because the media outlets can display committed content in response to the customer preferences [4]. This has impacted the digital comics market where the ability to use them and ease of use are the determinants to enhance interaction. The concept of WBTN to keep track of devices and user interests, to suggest related content automatically, has become a typical activity of online platforms to encourage user satisfaction and interaction[5].

The hybrid model of revenue strategy, with free access and premium and paid features, offers the most popular trend in the digital content business. Studies state that this model allows access and monetization since platforms may obtain access to a significant number of subscribers at the same time, though stable revenue rates can be achieved without engagement with subscription prices [6]. Furthermore, the capability to produce successful webcomics into movies, TV shows, and computer games is another significant gauge of expanding brand awareness and creation of more revenues generation content, thereby associating WBTN as one of the trailblazers in cross-media content [7]. Further investigation is, however, needed to research on scalability and sustainability of these models to the rising competition.

As a market leader in digital comics, web comics face new challenges and opportunities against the established giants of the industry as well as emergent digital platforms. This paper will address how WBTN can enhance its business model which will enable it to retain its competitive edge and the concept of diversifying its sources of revenue which affects its media representation. Research questions are: (1) How can WBTN optimize its hybrid model to the long-term? (2) What are the strategies that WBTN should adopt in remain competitive in a highly competitive world of digital contents? (3) What can WBTN do to use its worldwide response to expand its content and develop additional IP? The study model will dwell upon the exploration of a business model of WBTN and its content processing and distribution, as well as its business growth prospects offered by mergers, acquisitions, and co-productions.

2. Overview

Since its establishment in the year 2004 through acquisition of South Korean based Naver Corporation Webtoon Entertainment Inc. (WBTN) has changed the digital comics industry sector. The platform launched a new vertical scrolling functionality, inspiring to maximize mobile reading experiences. This rapidly became the desirable trait of the platform WBTN. The mobile-first experience has enabled WBTN to tap into the mobile-oriented consumer segment, specifically younger generations that show preference in accessing content on the go. WBTN's mobile-first design played a key role in ensuring success, as the medium was a more accessible and flexible way of communicating than conventional print comics.

Firstly, WBTN relies on free content access, which served as the primary way it monetized its platform, by selling advertising spaces. To be sustainable in the long run though, it has introduced a hybrid pricing model that mixes revenues, through advertising, with an option of paid-pass or fast-pass. This enables users to acquire premium content thereby diversifying their revenue streams and the targeting of various segments of the market. This model will enable WBTN to serve the needs of casual users by providing free access and premium subscribers who have more features without content offered in the free version, in order to have a scalable business model.

An important aspect of the WBTN plan is that it uses the “glocalization” strategy because its content is adapted to the societal tastes and preferences of the local population, particularly in the markets where it operates like North America and Southeast Asia. WBTN has been able to foster a global community because of its ability to implement a local ecosystem of creators and users as it customizes its platform to meet its local needs. This approach has made WBTN a competitive platform not only in South Korea but in the global market whereby it can increase its number of users.

Besides digital comics WBTN has capitalized on its content as transmedia property. Webcomics that are successful are turned into films, television programs and computer games extending the reach of the platform and generating new sources of revenue. According to Chalaby, (2012), this cross-media approach has made WBTN become a key player in the world of entertainment, making its intellectual property to be given a long life [7].

Furthermore, WBTN has already implemented Artificial Intelligence (AI) in its working processes, especially in content production and user interaction. With AI algorithms, the platform can monitor how people interact with it and anticipate what kind of content audiences will find interesting. This guarantees that a user always comes across content they prefer. This individualized strategy has increased the retention and satisfaction of users.

3. Analysis of Current Strategy

3.1. Advantages of Mobile Terminal

Mobile platforms are basically used by Webtoon Entertainment Inc. (WBTN) because of the choice of digital content consumption. Mobile devices are flexible and convenient. Therefore, users can access content at any time and location, which is vital to such platforms. Using a mobile-first approach, WBTN has made the user experience adaptable to the mobile platform through a dedicated approach and has made it user-friendly. Mobile devices enable a reduction on the length and frequency of reading compared to computers, which need users to stay put. The mobile platform is essential in attracting younger and mobile-go users who want bite-sized information when taking short breaks. Vertical scrolling increases the utilization of the small mobile screen making reading process more comfortable, as it does away with horizontals scrolling and increases user interaction [8]. Mobile terminals are more flexible as compared to computer terminals, which are better in longer sessions where people use specific computer rooms. This ensures that they suit the mobile-first approach of web comics [9].

3.2. Advantages of Vertical Scrolling

One of the main innovations of the Webtoon entertainment is vertical scrolling, which has several important advantages that enhance the experience of using the Webtoon. First, vertical scrolling coincides with the natural movement of the human eye, therefore the most appropriate caused by hand-held devices. Vertical scrolling style enables a user to quickly go through the content in real time as compared to horizontal scrolling which may be tiresome when working with a small screen hence not applicable in practice. Vertical scrolling enhances user interactions through binge-reading (reading large portions of content in a few seconds) and non-linear storytelling (characteristic of modern digital media consumption). The structural story-telling methodology and the augmentation of user comfort on retention and engagement options on web comics form seamless user experience [10].

3.3. The Role of Artificial Intelligence (AI)

AI plays an important role during the process of improving user experiences and media representations. The platform monitors user interaction, taste and habits based upon AI-driven algorithm of the hopes that it might suggest individualized content to its user based on their individual preferences [11]. This personalization not only leads to user engagement, but also the presentation of stories and identities in the contents. Suggesting content based on different preferences, AI ensures that additional stories, characters, and culturally related narratives are presented, and the media is more diverse.

Besides, WBTN has implemented AI in the content making procedure, which examines the pattern and attractiveness of the audience to establish the favored plot lines. This will help the platform to dynamically change its content and improve its relevance and compliance with the expectations of the audience [12]. By using AI in order to master the storytelling, WBTN has enhanced presentation of various identities to an extent that the content will be natural to a universal audience.

In addition, AI generated comics have also emerged, raising new issues of creativity and authorship as media representation. This can change the manner in which stories are created by adding diversity to digital comics.

3.4. Financial Analysis

The system of hybrid revenue model implemented by WBTN to merge both advertising revenue and transactional revenue provides an ability to diversify revenue stream and also to have a sustainable revenue stream. The mainstream of revenue is the free to use material, supported by the in-app ads to maximize the possible number of users and engagement. Further, another advantage of WBTN is that there are fixed sources of revenue, as in fast-pass the players have a chance to watch premium content in front of free viewers, and this may guarantee the availability and revenue [13]. In addition to these models, WBTN has become very popular within their cross-media adaptation in-vitro which has seen the comics of even the web turned into films, television series and even video-games. This transmedia strategy does not only result in enhanced economic profitability through licensing deal or royalty, but it also creates a fairly high level of content on media presentations within the media site. The realization of content through various media enables WBTN to optimize its functioning and awareness as well as manage the cultural language and symbols within the environment of various media [14].

WBTN also faces stiff competition as a major concern. This implies that the firm should look to new types of monetization, such as merchandising or strategic marketing, to maintain financial growth and increase its presence. Such opportunities would further enhance the media representation in the platform which would allow WBTN to manipulate cultural messages and increase their power and representation in the entertainment industries.

4. Suggestions

The further evolution of WBTN should be directed at transferring simple licensing to more advanced co-productions. This is because licensing will lead to the loss of control over the adaptations and this can affect how the original piece will be represented in other mediums. Co-production will enable WBTN to provide greater control over the narrative and representation of its IP as well as the effects of a long-run office. The ethical integrity of the piece is maintained through the management of its content, as shown by Netflix, especially in terms of how it represents different cultures.

Besides, WBTN should introduce a shift in its revenue model to tune up with the dynamic reality of digital media consumption. A communication of advertisements and in-app purchasing system coupled with an IP licensing can be used to entice a broad segment of users and implement its regulation of cultural discourse. WBTN has the opportunity to align its strategies to ensure that the people who spend a lot of time on its contents also pay off the revenue.

Lastly WBTN should also venture into acquisition particularly in animation and video games. This will strengthen its presence in media representations and enable it to expand its IP into longer transmedia franchises.

5. Conclusion

This Webtoon Entertainment Inc. (WBTN) analysis depicts how the company has effectively employed its mobile-first strategy, hybrid revenue structure and transmedia strategy to position itself as a formidable player in the digital comics sector. Vertical scrolling format of WBTN has been specifically designed to fit on handset devices, improving the user experience by enabling a smooth page throughput. Its hybrid business model, which consists of free material and paid functionalities, allows free access to the project by casual users and stable income due to available advanced subscriptions. In addition, its adaptation of webcomics into films, TV series, and video games has expanded the reach of franchises and brand awareness which has made it a large player in global entertainment.

In spite of those achievements, WBTN does have problems with the long-term viability of its business model in an ever more competitive digital content environment. With the emergence of new platforms and digital media giants, the question of whether the hybrid revenue model of WBTN will be able to extend its scale is unanswered. Moreover, the effectiveness of its cross-media IP approach and how it can stay brand relevant in a fast-changing market requires further investigation. Future studies will be aimed at evaluating how WBTN scaled its revenue tactics and cross-media readjustments to guarantee long-term achievement. Though the company has recorded a remarkable growth, it should keep evolving its business strategy in order to keep afloat in the future. The drawbacks of this paper are the absence of long-term objective data regarding the scalability of the hybrid revenue model proposed by WBTN and the use of cross-media IP strategy. Also, the current dynamics of the digital entertainment industry have created the need to conduct further studies into how the strategies of WBTN will respond to the forthcoming shifts in the market.

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