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A Research on Business Models of the Free Web Content
Platforms: Cases study of the Webcomic Industry and the
YouTube channels

免費網路創作平台商業模式之研究：以網路漫畫業與YouTube
頻道為例



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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to find out the process of creating revenue from publishing free core content, that would allow the creator to continue publishing their main content for free. This process very much depends on the emergence and maintenance of the loyal fan community. Within such a community emerges a specific fan culture, not only focused on admiration in itself but also on giving feedback and inspiration. This circle of interaction can allow a satisfying stream of revenue from monetising activities surrounding the main content, thus enabling creators to be at least partially supported financially.

This study concerns two types of user-generated born-digital creative content: images (webcomic) and videos (YouTube). Its aim is to provide a set of examples of certain traits and trends, that might become a starting point towards the more detail-oriented analysis of similar ventures, which despite the differences in approach, share the visual aspect and shareability features.

Keywords: creative industries, internet, born-digital, e-commerce, webcomic, YouTube, viral content, social media, fan communities, business model, social marketing

摘要

本研究的目的是找出通過發布免費核心內容創造收入的過程，這將允許創作者繼續發布免費的創意內容。這個過程主要取決於忠誠粉絲社群的出現和維護。在這樣的社群的出現產生一種特定的粉絲文化；不僅是關注賞識這些創作，還提供回饋和靈感。在這種交叉互動中可以讓來自這些核心內容所衍生的相關活動獲得令人滿意的收入流，從而使創作者至少在財務上得到有限的支持。

本研究涉及兩種數位原生的內容類型的用戶生成：圖像（網路漫畫）和影片（YouTube）。其目的為提供一系列特徵以及趨勢的例子，這可以成為對類似產業進行更詳盡分析的起點。儘管兩種類型的創意方法不同，但仍可提供視覺方面和可共享特。

關鍵詞：創意產業，網路，數位原生，電子商務，網路漫畫，YouTube，病毒式內容，社交媒體，粉絲社群，商業模式，社群行銷

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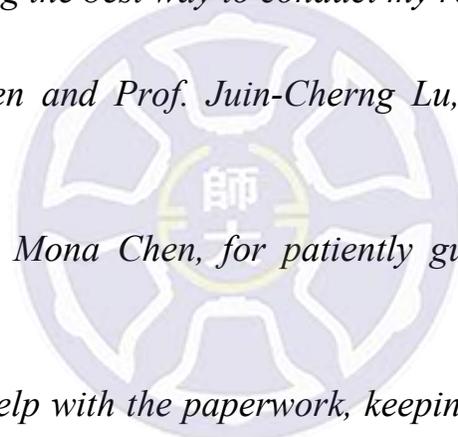


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Chapter I: Introduction

With the emergence of the Internet, plenty of creators found new ways of publishing their content and reaching wider audiences. The new online services offering space to build a personalised website, as well as video sharing services and social media, which emerged later as part of the Web 2.0 revolution, offered unprecedented possibilities. With either a simple good idea or a blessing of mother company, with a goal to present a story or educate, some creators can reach the point when pieces of their creation is sought after by the loyal audience (a fan community), which also builds on itself, sprouting new ideas from within the community, giving feedback and often inspiring new creations, and thus closing the circle. But this is not only a way to interact; some of the most hardworking and successful creators are able to create a satisfying stream of revenue from all the activities in the community, thus enabling them to become if not self-sufficient then at least partially supported financially by their creations.

The present research analyses the way online creators in chosen areas of visual arts create revenue from their free content by utilizing the fan communities built around their creations. Therefore, it touches upon the business models of such creative ventures.

1.1 Background of the study

Before the emergence of online communications, the only way for fans to meet with the favourite writer or comic book artist was to attend a comic con or a store signing. Nowadays, in the era of social media, it is much easier to interact with the author, sometimes it is even possible to get a personalised answer if the creator in question considers the comment to be worth addressing (Hart, 2013). Active and proper social media usage can close the gap between the creator and the audience, which is beneficial and sought-after by both sides. Creators may want to use social media services like Twitter, Facebook or Instagram not only to post news and run various marketing activities (polls, campaigns, contests etc) but also to initiating and maintaining a dialogue with interested users (Polańska, 2012). They can share little glimpses into their daily lives, announce their appearances on various events, post hints of their next artwork or a making-of video. Fans can share their opinions on the artwork, feedback on either artistic details or the entirety of the authors' activity, and thus both sides can stay relevant to each other (Hart, 2013). Through such activities, a loyal fan community can emerge around a particular artist or vlogger, which in turn can provide means to start monetising on the seemingly free content. It is very much an issue of maintaining a good relationship with the audience to make them feel connected and willing to support the creator in any way possible to be able to enjoy their favourite content for a long time. The process in which the relationship is maintained and monetised upon is a very interesting phenomenon and while its roots are very much psychological in nature, this study concerns itself mostly in listing the particular exchange of value that arises between the creator and the

audience.

1.2 Research questions of the study

There are plenty of issues regarding managing a fanbase and creating the revenue stream for the free web content. The general question of this research is: How do people create revenue from publishing free core content? Then, we might want to analyse the three following research questions:

Q1: How do fan communities emerge and organise themselves?

Q2: How do people utilise their fan community in order to gain revenue?

Q3: How does the revenue influence the continuing creation of core content?

1.3 Purposes of the study

The purpose of this study is to draw possibly similar conclusions from the case of two separate creative media, which despite the differences in approach, share the visual aspect and shareability features. This may or may not be the axis of the emergence of a similar style of the fan community and enables their authors to conduct similar monetising activities.

1.4 Significance of the study

Along with the emergence of Internet tools, more and more businesses decide to direct their focus on e-commerce market. The emergence of Web 2.0 and social media, provides better opportunities to access international markets in

fast and cost-effective ways (Polańska, 2012), and so the customer base for a particular product can grow exponentially. The possibility of bypassing the publisher's limitations and broadening one's audience to unprecedented scopes has created fantastic possibilities for those, whose creativity might not be able to reach the target audience using traditional channels, but whose creations might be of great value to certain consumers. This way of conducting small business is still not very well understood, as in its core it involves the fully digital content, which – what is crucial – is offered for free. Young, tech-savvy and creative people are more drawn to these new possibilities of supporting themselves by doing what they love, but may also be more prone to mistakes and losing their grip on the content they publish online if they do not understand the ways and possibilities of monetising their efforts.

1.5 Delimitations and limitations

This study concerns two types of user-generated creative content that is born-digital: namely images (webcomic) and videos (YouTube). The main reason for choosing these is the visual aspect that is the common characteristic of both. Within the very image-oriented idea of the modern digital entertainment media world, these works can be shared, understood, discussed and monetised upon in a similar way¹. The other reason is the familiarity the Author has with chosen cases from those two types of media content.

The study qualitatively analyses only a few subjectively chosen cases, and

¹ It is interesting to note that while the video industry maintains close links to audio creativity and webcomics are closely related to traditionally written stories, we can actually touch upon all four of digital channels of creation.

thus its results cannot be treated as a comprehensive source of information. The aim is, though, to provide a set of examples of certain traits and trends, that might become a starting point towards more detail-oriented analysis of similar ventures that exercise new and groundbreaking ideas of translating their activities into financial support.

1.6 Definition of terms

User-generated content (UGC), otherwise known as user-created content (UCC), is defined by any form of content that has been posted online by users of social platforms. This can include various types of content, such as text, images, video, and audio (Berthon, Pitt, Kietzmann and McCarthy, 2015). Bruns (2016) defines it as “a generic term that encompasses a wide range of media and creative content types that were created or at least substantially cocreated by (...) contributors working outside of conventional professional environments”. According to the 2007 report released by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), there are three major criteria defining the UGC: (1) it must be “made publicly available over the Internet”; (2) must reflect a “certain amount of creative effort”; (3) must have been “created outside of professional routines and practices”.

Born-digital resources are items which are created in digital form, and have not been digitized through scanning (Business Dictionary, 2019). According to Erway (2010), these items are not only created but are also managed in such form.

Generally speaking, this includes all the things that are created in digital environment: digital photographs (and video), documents, manuscripts, media publications and art, harvested Web content, electronic records, as well as static and dynamic data sets (Erway, 2010). Some of these may later be printed on paper and published in a traditional way, but are originally created and disseminated in digital manner; that is, through the Internet.

The concept of **core content** is related to “core competency”, defined as the “resources and/or strategic advantages of the business, including the combination of pooled knowledge and technical capacities, that allow it to be competitive in the marketplace” (Twin, 2019). Core content is the content that is either impossible or simply “impractical for competitors to replicate” (Reese, 2018). It is supposed to be original, created through the application of deep insight and personal skills (Hanski, n.d.). In this research, core content is understood as the creation of a particular author or authors, available online for free, around which the fan community emerges.

Webcomic is a comic strip (or series thereof) published online. It belongs to the user-generated content category and is generally considered born-digital, as it is originally meant to be published digitally² (Aggleton, 2018). There are two main types of webcomic formats: *one-shots*, in which each strip is a self-contained story, and *serials*, which follow a long-running plot with regular characters

² This study considers only webcomics of such type as the case examples. Jen Aggleton (2018) provides the detailed discussion about what does and do not belong to the term “born-digital” in the case of webcomics.

(Liming, 2012). The frequency of publication vary from creator to creator. Some webcomics are updated few times a week on a regular basis (Minna Sundberg's *Stand Still. Stay Silent*) or every few days (Jorge Cham's *PhD Comics*), and some are updated irregularly, depending on artist's inspiration (Gregor Czakowski's *Loading Artist*).

The idea of the webcomic, has been present since the beginning of the history of internet, even before the World Wide Web was created. As the access to the computer was very limited back then, most of the early webcomic creators were students of computer science related fields, drawing as a hobby, and publishing through their university equipment, as they were the only people with the substantial knowledge and access (Garrity, 2011). It was first disseminated through e-mail and subscription to Usenet groups. The break-through came with the introduction of Web 1.0 and personalised websites, which allowed for more and more people to post their creations online. Another stepping stone was the emergence of new and more advanced digital tools for graphic design. Later on, the webcomic industry received an impetus through the popularity of social media services.

Youtube (stylised as: YouTube) is a streaming video social media website. Apart from music videos, promotional videos, tv shows or other, Youtube has also been incorporating the blog culture (in the form of video blog or vlog) by heavily focusing on the notion of self-promotion (Burgess & Green, 2009). As in case of other popular social media website, like Facebook or Twitter, Youtube possesses its own specific architecture and features (Smith, Fischer, & Yongjian, 2012). According to Khan (2016), an individual user can engage with the media through

the active or passive interaction (referred to as “participation” and “consumption”, respectively). The main participatory tools are being listed as: liking, sharing, commenting, disliking and uploading. Through these, and because plenty of users are drawn to their favourite channels, the social media website can be a vessel for a very specific culture, often giving birth to loyal fan communities focused around a favourite creator.

“The Youtuber” is the term describing the user of the Youtube streaming service. In the most common understanding, though, it mostly refers to the fraction of users who upload their own creative content. The Youtube celebrity is a person whose channel has become popular among the users of the streaming platform. Some Youtubers can enjoy immense popularity, such as Felix Kjellberg, the creator of the most subscribed private Youtube channel (92,477,000 subscribers as of April 2019; Tobin, 2019) under the nickname PewDiePie.

Chapter II: Literature review

2.1 Fan culture and communities

The existence of fans has had a long history, but what has been crucial to the organisational revolution and the actual creation of the modern phenomenon known as “fandom”, was the 21st century technological leap, based on emergence of the social media, as well as advanced level of availability of new technologies related to communication. This has allowed for increased engagement and creativity of online consumers and emergence of a specific culture made by and for all who are willing to actively participate in co-creating it.

The English word “fan” comes from the word “fanatic”, which in turn derives itself from Latin *fānāticus* (“of a temple, divinely inspired, frenzied”), from *fānum* (“temple”) (WordSense.com, n.d.). It used to have very negative connotations: fans used to be treated as detached from reality or even insane, unable to focus on “serious things” (Nożewski and Trzcińska, 2016). Siuda (2010) helps us distinguish three phases of the scholarly approach to the phenomenon. First, fans were considered mentally unstable (“deviation phase”). From 1992 onwards, fans have begun to be treated as a part of the community; also their creativity and activeness started to be acknowledged by researchers (“resistance phase”). The third phase, called “mainstream phase” seeks to approach fans as a part of the of creative process and define them as so called “prosumers” – producers and consumers (Siuda, 2010). These changes in understanding the phenomenon are evolving hand in hand with the emergence of the Internet and subsequent change in fans' activities (Nożewski and Trzcińska,

2016).

Contemporary fandom can be defined as a group of people who share various cultural, social, personal, emotional and organizational relationships (Gatson, Zweerink 2004). The term "fandom" can be understood in two ways. The first one refers to “a group of people connected by displayed adoration for a selected cultural text”. The second is defined as a “phenomenon of creative and participatory involvement in the consumption of the media text” (Lisowska-Magdziarz (2017). In the context of referring to the specific cultural text, fandom is characterized by two main approaches: analytical reception of the text (affirmative fandom), as well as active developing, changing, enriching the original text, while also deepening and sharing the understanding of it (creative fandom) (Lisowska-Magdziarz, 2017). All this new content is being constantly modified and exchanged using modern technological tools, in cooperation with other admirers. This can lead to the formation of a community, members of which feel bonds over common tastes and practices, hence they can find themselves strongly identify with it. The various processes happening within the community are also augmented by high level of observation and analysis; those, in turn, may result in undertaking practical actions for the benefit of this community, as well as can translate into increased social and/or economic activity (Lisowska-Magdziarz, 2017).

Fans are becoming a huge power, and are gradually but visibly changing the structure of the Internet relationships and the entire model of creating and consuming cultural texts. As the American writer Lev Grossman wrote in the foreword to the book “Fic: Why fanfiction is taking over the world”:

[The fans are engaged in] breaking down of a long-standing state of affairs that made stories and characters the exclusive province of their authors, and that locked readers and viewers into a state of mute passivity. They turned reading and viewing from an act of silent consumption into one of active conversation. (Jamison and Grossman, 2013)

The communities revolving around the chosen creators are able to push forward the evolution of the content by supporting the creator financially, spread the word about the appeal of the content (thus acting as a marketers), indulge in meaningful discussions about the text, which can directly affect its evolution, and much more. It is thus obvious, that without modern technology and subsequent emergence of loyal fan communities, the individual independent creators would be unable to reach their target audience (often very niche) and spread the wings of their creativity, while enjoying the constant and fluent revenue stream.

2.2 Parasocial interaction

The concept of parasocial interaction is especially interesting in the context of Youtube celebrities, and as such it will be addressed here. The idea of para-social interaction was first developed by Horton and Wohl and published in 1956. The term refers to the virtual interaction between the user of mass media with the representation of particular people appearing in the media (Giles, 2002). The users respond to them as though they are in a typical social relationship. This creates an illusion of direct connection with the *persona* (Horton and Wohl, 1956).

Parasocial interaction that happens frequently can transform into parasocial relationship (PSR). PSR refers to the a one-sided relationship that a media user holds with celebrity's media *persona*. The difference between the two terms lies in a fact, that while PSI is restricted to the duration of media exposure, PSR is considered long-term (Horton and Strauss, 1957) and can continue being present beyond a single exposure (just like friendship does in a typical social setting, as it exists between people beyond their direct communication sequences). The important feature of PSR is that it is able to influence viewer's motivation, choices, and PSI processes themselves (Gleich, 1997). The increase of PSI levels may depend on content manipulation and degree of intimacy allowed by a media *persona*; also, different messages can exhibit different degrees of parasociability (Auter, 1992).

2.3 Business models in electronic economy

As our research touches upon the online activities, we should mention the nature of electronic economy or economic commerce, which European Commission (1997) defines as “doing business electronically”. It refers to all the business activity occurring on the electronic markets (Polańska, 2012), includes “electronic trading of both physical and intangible goods (such as information), and encompasses all the typical trading steps, from online marketing, through payment, support and delivery” (Timmers, 1998).

There are plenty of definitions for a business model itself, but in general it can be defined as “an abstract term referring to an undertaking, its methods and manners of operation and sources of value generated by that undertaking”

(Laudon, Laudon and Schoder, 2010). The short study by Polańska (2012) gives us a systematic insights into the types of business models used in electronic economy, although it is important to especially differentiate those which may be most often used in the context of our study. For example, Internet business models can be divided into eight groups: virtual storefront, information broker, transaction broker, online marketplace, content provider, social network and virtual communities, portal, and service provider (Laudon, Laudon and Schoder, 2010). Out of this basic typology, the type of business model relevant to our study is the “content provider”. This model assumes, that profits are earned from making a specific content available online.

The electronic nature of the Internet provides a great opportunity for business to widen their customer base and get a better understanding of customers' needs through the new communication possibilities. But typical business models are usually more difficult to adapt in order to suit exploitation of new technologies (Greenman, 2007). The marketing teams might be reluctant to use new resources, also other arguments against applying a digital business model may include “lower initial margins, high potential for failures, new and unknown distribution channels, need to reorganise scope of activity, customer service and marketing techniques” (Chesbrough, 2010; Danneels, 2004; Hedman and Kalling, 2003), also the need to fully depend on new technologies and the need for adaptation to increased interaction with users via digital tools might scare potential venturers. The application of such business model is thus much more natural in terms of the digital-born creativity.

The factors that significantly influence the business model mechanics focus on value capture and creation, and according to Dowthwaite (2013) can be

divided into activities, value, people and finance categories.

2.3.1 Activities

Activities are directly influenced by content, structure of the plan and its governance (Zott and Amit, 2009). The activities necessary for success are changing with introduction of the Internet: new products or services can be offered and the new way of carrying them out has to be acknowledged. Creators may want to sell merchandise (thematically related to popular aspects of their creations, like quotes or particular items or characters appearing in their comics or videos), they might also want to sell advertising space on their websites (Dowthwaite, 2013). Some webcomic creators might work with a big publisher for printing, some would want to save more money and retain more freedom by taking on the printing activity on their own, using services like Kickstarter to gain funding directly needed for this (Dowthwaite, 2013).

2.3.2 Value

Value can be understood as “product, profit, knowledge, information, cultural impact, entertainment, education, relationships etc”. The value network, which includes both capture and creation of value, involves business itself, suppliers, partners, distribution channels, competitors and other stakeholders (Chesbrough and Rosenbloom, 2002; Massa, Zott and Amit, 2010). The user-added value (creativity, co-creativity, innovations etc) has an especially increased importance since introduction of Web 2.0 technologies. The value in creative industries venturing online comes from the community surrounding the particular content creator (Dowthwaite, 2013). The connection between author

and reader is what matters the most. The audience involve themselves by purchasing merchandise, supporting the crowdfunding campaigns or simply by providing feedback, whereas an author takes their time to interact with fans on social media and makes use of the feedback to produce content that would be most satisfying for the reader.

2.3.3 People

It is a known fact, that in order to gain revenue, the seller must offer something that competition doesn't have, but what also has a high value for customers. In terms of market segmentation, the geographical boundaries are no more as significant in the Internet era and so creators can reach the audience anywhere in the world, on an unprecedented scale. It is now not as much a problem how to deliver an information about the product to the potential customers, but rather how to create a meaningful relationships through the Internet in order for them to become interested in a product in such a vast sea of possibilities. And so, meeting the expectations of the customers and trying to reach them on a more personal level is crucial for conducting such long-distance, widely spread business activities (Dubosson-Torbay, Osterwalder and Pigneur, 2002). The value co-creation also becomes increasingly significant (Wirtz, Schilke and Ullrich, 2010). The customers have more and more important role in the matter of upgrading the quality of goods and services through the various channels the quick feedback can be delivered through. Large web communities can become immensely valuable for the businesses they revolve around (Afuah and Tucci, 2003)

2.3.4 Finances

Successfully translating value into money is especially important in terms of selling intangible products or information. Nowadays there are numerous methods for conducting money-related activities for online businesses, including subscription, direct fees, advertisement, sponsors, commissions, collaborations and regular sales. (Dubosson-Torbay, Osterwalder and Pigneur, 2002). Selling digital items (software, music, digital artwork) cancels the issues related to physical distribution, packaging and transportation (Afuah and Tucci, 2003). Online technologies developed many new ways of conducting money transactions (Chesbrough and Rosenbloom, 2002), simplifying the process of payment and shortening the time needed for transaction to finalise.

What is important and common for both media channels, is that **their core content is always free**, and the revenue comes from all the activities around it. There might be some successful subscription models, or pay-per-view Youtube Red collaborations, but they are rare. “People expect the Internet to be free” (Jacques, 2009), and so the payed content will always lose in comparison to the free content and the power of its community. Most money in creative industries based on visual arts is thus made through selling merchandise and extra content. The creators might also be able to use their content as a sort of personal portfolio, which in case not getting enough money from, can still be a great asset for example in looking for a freelance work (Allison, 2013). They might want to go to comic conventions or any kind of media event, and promote themselves, either by simply being there for their fans or (in the case of webcomic authors) to sell some graphics or prints, often signed (Dowthwaite, 2013). Creators might also

want to invite the audience to donate on PayPal and give away bonus content as a reward.

In terms of webcomic industry, the advertising plays less and less important role in the overall revenue stream (Jacques, 2009), but the Youtube users can make most of their money from forming a partnership with the service provider. As long as the channel meets the specific requirements (at least 1000 subscribers and 4000 viewing hours in the last 12 months), Youtube creators can apply for the Partner Program. They first need to agree to the Youtube terms, then open their AdSense account and connect it to their channel, choose the best monetising option for themselves (based on the content, audience and preferences), and if their application is accepted, they will be eligible to start earning money with Youtube. There are plenty of options available: allowing advertisements to be directly displayed before or during the video, inviting users to subscribe for the Channel Memberships (which allows them to use some extra features offered by Youtube, as well as receive access to some additional content), to purchase the Super Chat options and Youtube Premium (allowing them to view videos without ads), as well as signing agreements with particular brands and endorsing their products (which is also regulated by the Youtube service guidelines). Some monetisation options are not allowed in all locations and the owner of the channel must make sure they deliver the minimum amount of proper content regularly in order to be continuously eligible to be a part of the Partner Program.

Table 2.1 The summary of the factors influencing business model mechanics focus on value capture and creation

ACTIVITIES	VALUE	PEOPLE	FINANCE
shaped by content (what), structure (how linked) and governance (who performs them) (Zott and Amit, 2009).	product, profit, knowledge, information, cultural impact, entertainment, education, relationships etc. Value network: business itself, suppliers, partners, distribution channels, competitors and other stakeholders (Chesbrough and Rosenbloom, 2002; Massa, Zott and Amit, 2010).	people involved in creation & customers (members of the audience)	successfully translating value into money numerous methods for conducting money-related activities for online businesses: subscription, direct fees, advertisement, sponsors, commissions, collaborations and regular sales. (Dubosson-Torbay, Osterwalder and Pigneur, 2002)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - selling merchandise - selling advertising space - cooperate with big publisher - start a crowdfunding campaign 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - user-added value: creativity, co-creativity, innovations, feedback, etc 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the geographical boundaries are no more as significant in the Internet era and so creators can reach the audience anywhere in the world, on an unprecedented scale - creating meaningful relationships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - core-content is always free - selling merchandise & extra content - using core-content as a portfolio - selling printed content during conventions - selling advertising space - YouTube Partner Program

Source: Dowthwaite, 2013

The business models in creative industries are especially tricky. Internet has become a groundbreaking tool for such businesses to flourish and gain momentum. But the way in which those ventures are to be managed online is very different from a regular real-life ones, especially if the product is in a digitalised form and thus very simple to copy and reproduce (Loebbecke and Powell, 2002). It is important to pay attention not as much on resources needed to create the product but on the ways to spread it around in a controlled way, especially if the product is born-digital, meaning that it has never existed in a tangible form. It is thus essential to reinforce and extend interactions with potential customers and

focus on researching and utilising their consumption patterns (Loebbecke and Powell, 2002). The social media are a great tool for not only creating a channel for customer service, marketing and feedback, but also as a way to maintain a continuous, ideally personalised interaction needed to sustain the creation of value (Greenman, 2007).



Chapter III: Research design

3.1 Methodology

To explore the basis for a typical business model, the multiple case study is approached. Such method of study should be used when answering the “why” and “how” questions (Yin, 2003). It allows for exploration of differences between chosen cases, with the goal to find similarities across them (Baxter and Jack, 2008). The comparisons drawn from this approach should make it possible to predict either similar or contrasting results (literal and theoretical replication, respectively), based on a theoretical framework (Yin, 2003).

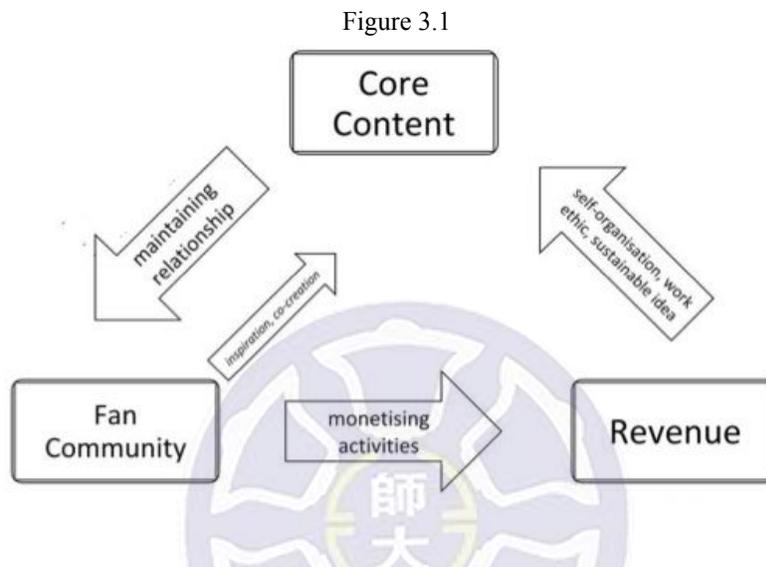
The channels used for this study has been limited to the visual media, namely webcomic and Youtube channels. The results will be divided into two categories (webcomic and Youtube channels) and later on the joint conclusion will be drawn, if possible.

3.2 Conceptual framework

Miles and Huberman (1994) mention, that “the conceptual framework serves several purposes: (a) identifies who will and will not be included in the study; (b) describes what relationships may be present based on logic, theory and/or experience; (c) provides the researcher with the opportunity to gather general constructs into intellectual clusters”. The conceptual framework does not display full and comprehensive set of relationships. It should continue to develop

along with the study when the links between constructs will emerge and solidify through the analysis of the cases (Baxter and Jack, 2008).

Following framework is aiming to analyse the relationship between three chosen aspects and answer questions related to them (mentioned in chapter 1.2).



The key to understanding the idea of the framework above is to understand that *core content* prompts the birth of *fan community*, which enables gaining *revenue* through extra activities (monetisation). This revenue can, in turn, enable the creation of more core content.

3.3 Research procedure

It is difficult to determine the thought and decision-making process without considering the context, i.e. background, environment, intentions, interactions, the actual influence of the author's creation on the audience (in this case), etc. And so, we would shortly introduce:

- a) **the creator(s)**, their habits related to work (as much as has been disclosed);
- b) **the way they distribute the content** (whether it's a personal website or a specialised hosting platform, we would first take a look at all the possibilities the service provides for the creators);
- c) **their creative content itself** (the nature and themes of core content, as well as surrounding activities);
- d) **the fan community** (its birth process, its features, the way in which the interaction with the audience has been conducted);
- e) **the marketing and monetising activities** conducted within and around the core content.

After collecting data, we would analyse it by finding similarities and differences in aforementioned aspects, and by comparing the cases according to the four factors influencing the mechanics of a successful business model (Dowthwaite, 2013). Finally, we would answer the research questions and draw the more detailed relationship between the three aspects of the framework above.

3.4 Data collection

The collection of data has been based on an individual experience and personal reception of the content throughout many years (with the exception of TwoSet Violin case, which has been explored for less than 12 months). Thus, the outline was made from memory, which served as the first blueprint of the cases.

The collection of details was a process that spanned a few months, since the first official draw of the research idea.

The research took advantage of the information freely available online. They were either disclosed publicly by the creators themselves (on their official websites, Youtube channels, social media posts etc) or made available at the statistical web services. The sources included official websites, subpages, blog posts, comment sections, additional media (Twitch videos, podcasts, etc), official social media accounts etc. In order to gain additional information, the secondary sources have been cited, such as online magazine’s interviews or comments written by fans. The data collection has not included direct interviews with the creators, as there has been no success in contacting them and receiving the additional undisclosed details. The fan community has been observed personally from within, as the writer is an active member and is aware of the characteristics of particular fandoms. Presented examples are one of many observed throughout the years.

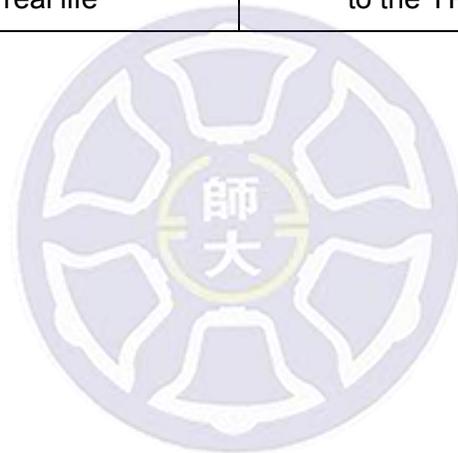
3.5 SWOT analysis

Table 3.1 Case A: Webcomic industry

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → creative freedom → high level of skill, individual style → full control over quality, quantity, frequency of posting → no fixed threshold for revenue 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → relatively low popularity of the medium → low initial exposure (reaching the recipient and initiating contact a matter of chance)
OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → low entry barrier → relatively small competition → skills and ideas > frequency of posting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → high risk of inability to monetise on the content (no guarantee of revenue)

Table 3.2 Case B: Youtube channels

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → lower skill level acceptable (Youtube's Creators Academy provides a lot of tips) → the simplicity of sharing within the social media circle → unlimited freedom of content choice, opportunity to present (or 'sell') yourself as a person 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → high threshold for revenue → extremely low chances of significant profit
OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → low entry barrier → high level of social media penetration → a relatively simple way to support parallel operations in real life 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → dense competition → high risk of burnout and decrease in quality of the content due to adhering to the YPP guidelines



Chapter IV: Case Analysis

4.1 Case A: Webcomic

Case A-1: Minna Sundberg

<http://www.minnasundberg.fi>

<http://www.sssscomic.com>

Minna Sundberg is an aspiring young webcomic creator. Born in 1990 in Sweden to the family of Finnish Swedes, she moved to Finland in 1997. In 2013 she obtained a bachelor's degree in graphic design from the School of Industrial Arts at Aalto University in Helsinki. Aspiring to become a professional webcomic artist, she undertook the “practice comic” (Sundberg, 2019), with a goal of finishing it before graduation. During that time she established the routine and work ethic that would eventually help her reach the goal: story evolved into 556-page webcomic *A Redtail's Dream* (available online in both English and Finnish language for free at www.minnasundberg.fi/artd.php). A story built around the concepts of Finnish mythology, along with her distinctive drawing style and rich-storytelling earned her a loyal fanbase and recognition in the webcomic world. In November 2013 Minna started her main project, the webcomic named *Stand Still. Stay Silent* (often abbreviated as *SSSS*), which from the beginning was met with excitement and high expectations from her fans (Sundberg, 2013). Additional recognition beyond the webcomic world came unexpectedly after one of the abundant so-called information pages of the comic (created specifically to explain the universe: geography, rules, traditions, fictional “facts” considered as common sense by the characters etc), the page showing a language tree got out to the social media and got spread around (Young, 2015), gaining praises from linguists and

becoming a catalyst of linguistic discussion, such as one in the thread “Language Family Tree” on the “r/languagelearning” forum on *Reddit*.

In 2015 Minna has been given a Reuben Award in the category of “Online Comics: Long Form” by the National Cartoonists Society for *Stand Still. Stay Silent* (Cavna, 2015).

Format

The comic is updated regularly. It used to be updated five times a week, from Monday to Friday. Since November 2016 Minna decided to dedicate one day to work on the *City of Hunger*, the computer game (Sundberg, 2016). There are hardly any instances in which the comic wouldn't be updated on time, and should such a situation ever occur, Minna would use the social media channels to inform her readers about a delay. Each update consists of one fully illustrated page with dialogues. In between chapters (consisting of about 30-35 pages) author would assume a two week break in order to rest and prepare a buffer for the next haul.

The entirety of the Minna's works is being published for free on personal website (www.sssscomic.com). *SSSS* website also provides the introductory page, archives, gallery of the works related to the main story (which are drawn as a practice in between drawing pages). Links include social media (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Twitch, also RSS feed), official forum, and merchandise store. Minna also offers a mailing list. From time to time she would devote some time to redo the website's graphics and layout. As most elements on the website are hand-drawn, it is a very rare occurrence.

According to Hypestat.com, *SSSS* website displays following statistics:

Table 4.1 “SSSScomic.com” website statistics

Daily pageviews	83,818
Daily unique visitors	22,057
Alexa rank	52,566
Est. daily adv. revenue	\$602.33

Source: <https://hypestat.com/info/sssscomic.com> (2019.7.12)

Fan base

Despite not wanting to meet with fans in person, Minna would actively take advantage of different online channels in order to enable and maintain the interaction.

a) Personal input. Apart from the webcomic itself, Minna would often write short, diary-like comment underneath a posted page, which would give the readers a small insight into her workflow, general events or mood (Sundberg, 2019). She would also often use Twitter to post short info about her daily life and trips, as well as update her followers on the comic progression. This would provide insight into creator’s daily routine and draw the audience closer to the author.

b) Lively comment section. The comment section would provide readers with the opportunity to share their insights and opinions about the webcomic, point out possible mistakes in spelling, comment on the diary posts or indulge into discussion about the storyline. It would often give birth to the fandom-only specific

vocabulary, which would later on be extensively used on the official forums. Minna would often scroll through the comment section and answer some of the burning questions. By providing a vigilant eye on the comment section, she ensures that the back-and-forth dialogue occurs and thus strengthens her connection to the audience.

c) Fan forum. The comment section quickly became unable to handle all the reader-provided content; also plenty of information provided by the author would get lost. Hence, the fan forum has been launched in late 2014 in order to collect and arrange all the content from the comment section. The forum became an official hub for the fan base activities, although the comment section has been still very active, especially among the new readers, who happened to catch up on the comic recently and/or those who were more interested on providing a direct feedback during the ongoing creation process.

d) Twitch. As a part of her interactions with the fan community, Minna would regularly (usually once a week, currently on both Fridays and Saturdays) livestream her comic creation process and practice sketching sessions, usually (but not always) related to the content of SSSS. Those would include additional graphic content, revolving around the storyline. During livestreams, Minna would open the chat and involve herself into a conversation with fans, using the headset in order to answer all the questions they might raise during the broadcast, or share the insights about her creative process and problems she has to deal with in real time.

As the fanbase created during *aRTD* progression has largely moved on onto supporting *Stand Still. Stay Silent*, the scope of Minna's business activities related to the webcomics would also evolve.

Monetising activities

1) Advertisements on the website. There are some AdSense advertisements around the comic pages, as well as ads posted by the Disqus comments service itself. The RPM (revenue per mille, revenue per one thousand ad impressions) is used to measure ad revenue. It is counted from the formula

$$Ad\ RPM = (Estimated\ earnings / Ad\ impressions) * 1000$$

(Ad RPM, n.d.).

2) Crowdfunding campaigns. On September 3rd 2013 Minna launched a crowdfunding campaign on Indiegogo in order to print the *aRTD* comic in the paper version ("Redtail's Dream - hardcover print drive," 2013). The initial goal of \$29,000 was reached in less than two days. On September 4th Minna revealed the stretched goals (promising additional value to the main print, i.e. extra pages, bookmarks etc.), which were reached on September 24th (\$60,000). In total, the campaign raised \$151,684 which represents 523% of the initial goal. Over 1200 copies of the book were preordered. All in all, 2000 books were printed, most of them sold. This overwhelming support from the fan base allowed her to not only provide high quality prints but also enabled her to become a full-time webcomic artist and focus solely on creating her second project *Stand Still. Stay Silent* for another year (Sundberg, 2014).

In September 2014 Minna launched another campaign on Indiegogo, aiming to print the first book of *SSSS*, with initial goal of \$25,000 (“Stand Still. Stay Silent - Book 1 campaign”, 2014). As before, campaign was met with great support. On October 2nd it passed second stretch goal (\$60,000). Overall, 1700 copies of the book were preordered. The campaign raised \$124,040, representing 496% of the initial goal. This had also allowed Minna to continue working on the webcomic full-time.

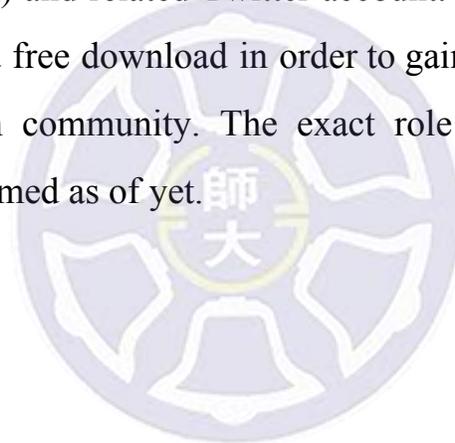
November 20th 2017 marked the third crowdfunding campaign with a goal of \$35,000 (“Stand Still. Stay Silent - Book 2 campaign”, 2017). This time, instead of Indiegogo, it was launched on Kickstarter and backed up by Hiveworks Comics (www.hiveworkscomics.com), the creator-owned publisher focusing on webcomics and visual novels. They focus on producing and selling the merchandise, created in close cooperation with the independent creators. Since 2017 they have been an official publisher for *SSSS*’s merchandise. The campaign reached its goal and first stretch point in 24h after launching (Sundberg, 2017). The second stretch goal would enable the reprint of Book 1, which was also reached soon after, along with other stretch goals. On the closing day campaign was able to raise \$250,665 (716% of initial goal) with 3,525 backers.

3) Merchandise. Using the funds from the Kickstarter campaign and profits from selling previous books, Minna was able to work with Hivemill in order to prepare merchandise to either sell in in the shop or include in a bundle for her patrons and crowdfunding community. These are not freely shared digitally and can be acquired at *SSSS*’s Hivemill store. Those include: stickers, charms, stationary set (bookmarks and postcards), plushies, t-shirts and posters.

4) Freelancing. Minna also occasionally work as an illustrator for various publications. This job is not directly related to the webcomic.

City of Hunger game

In her spare time, Minna would indulge herself in creating a game loosely based on the characters from *SSSS*, but not directly following the storyline. She would often post the updates on progression of the game on the dedicated website (www.hummingfluff.com) and related Twitter account. She would also post a beta version of her game for a free download in order to gain invaluable feedback from the members of her fan community. The exact role of the game in Minna's businessplan is not confirmed as of yet.



Case A-2: Gregor Czaykowski

<http://www.loadingartist.com/>

Gregor Czaykowski graduated from Game Development major in Media Design School in Auckland, New Zealand. Originally aiming to become a 3D artist in the gaming industry, Gregor found his passions lie more towards designing a game's interface and is currently employed in Gameloft, video game developing company (Media Design School, n.d.). Feeling a need to improve his skills, he

decided to start his personal website and called it “Loading Artist” as he believed he was “an artist in progress”:

I wanted to be a better artist and I figured I would stick with it better if I had the pressure of people watching my progress. So I decided to create an art blog where I would post my updates. (...) However it wasn't too long after making the website that I thought hey you know what I should make a comic and practice my art inside of that. Two birds with one stone sort of thing. (“Loading Artist Creator Gregor Czaykowski On His Journey Into Webcomics”, 2018)

The comic launched at January 4 2011. According to Alexa, website ranks as no. 103,518 most popular site on the internet in past 90 days (as of July 19 2019; “Loadingartist.com Competitive Analysis...”, n.d.).

Format

Loading Artist is a “gag-a-day” type of short comic. It follows adventures of an unnamed main character (possibly modeled after the author himself) and features a small number of recurring characters. On the main website it is described as being “about many things, sometimes revolving around an artist who wants to become rich and famous” (“What’s this all about?”, n.d.). Thematically, the comic is usually inspired by approaching holidays, fears and insecurities, emotion, interpersonal relationships. Great majority of the comics are comedic in nature, with only a few being somewhat melancholic (such as “In my room”, 2018). Plenty of them utilise black humour.

Comic is supposed to be updated every week, but it can go on without updates for much longer, depending on Gregor’s schedule and inspiration (or lack thereof). He would post the info about the new gag on his social media (mainly Twitter). Each strip would contain the link to the author’s website. Below the

strip, Gregor would usually add one or two sentences describing the title, process of creating or advertise new activities, as well as a list of patrons, depicted individually by the specially prepared animations.

The easy to navigate website displays the comic link as well as blog posts. Apart from the main page, the website consists of several sections: archives, store, introduction; it also provides very noticeable links to Gregor’s Twitch and Patreon.

The simple statistics showing the website traffic are as follows (Hypestat.com):

Table 4.2 “LoadingArtist.com” website statistics

Daily pageviews	39,652
Daily unique visitors	9,671
Alexa rank	103,797
Est. daily adv. revenue	\$202.35

Source: <https://hypestat.com/info/loadingartist.com> (2019.7.12)

Fan base

Gregor interacts extensively with his fans, through social media in both written and visual/audible form.

a) Comment section. The website utilises very simple commenting platform which can be accessed by scrolling down past the list of patrons. It’s relatively little active and does not contain many interactions between users, although it is definitely being in use. Main topic present in the comments is the location of a

spider, an “easter egg”-type element present in most Gregor’s strips. It has originated from the comic “Inspidered” from August 29 2012 (Czaykowski, 2012) and became a fan-favourite in 2015 (Czaykowski, 2019 [comment]).

b) Active usage of social media: Gregor is a very active user of Twitter and Twitch. He would usually post news and updates on Twitter, as well as repost fans’ tweets and react to them. Apart from Twitter, Gregors also makes use of his Instagram and Facebook, as well as often posts videos from Twitch on his Youtube channel.

c) Twitch: Gregor broadcasts his creative process, while keeping eyes on the chat and interacting with his fans. During the live drawing broadcast, Gregor would often discuss certain elements of the comic and draw inspiration from fans as to how to name the comic strip or what to include in the drawn panel (Czaykowski, 2016).

Generally streams are of various quality and are mainly used not to display author’s skills and proficiency, but mostly to interact with the audience and provide insight into his emotional state and everyday life. Broadcasts might also include comedic bits (i.e. lip-syncing to chosen songs; “Solo performance: Let It Go” [video]. n.d.), they might also touch upon different topics than webcomic; gaming seem to be Gregor’s favourite past-time, beside drawing (“Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice - Part 3” [video], n.d.).

d) Fan forum: originally created as a platform of communication for gamers, Discord is the main platform for *Loading Artist* fandom discussions. This special

channel (referred to simply as *Loading Artist* in the app search bar) was created by Gregor in order to allow his fans to interact with both him and each other. It is divided into few sections: announcements, fan chat, the special section dedicated to Gregor's posting of especially drawn birthday cakes for his Patreon supporters and regulars, as well as "expose_yourself": the platform for fans to display their own skills and advertise their Twitch channels.

Fan-created Reddit forum also exists, found under the tag "r/loadingartist". It's a place for fans to discuss Gregor comic in more preserved way, as Discord posts may easily be lost. Gregor also provides subreddit with updates on new comic strips. Compared with more dynamic Discord channel, the forum is not very active though.

Monetising activities

1) Advertisements on the website. Website hosts some AdSense advertisements. The RPM (revenue per mille, revenue per one thousand ad impressions) is used to measure ad revenue.

2) Merchandise. The official store of *Loading Artist* is accessible from the main website (<https://store.loadingartist.com/>). Merchandise include prints, clothing, mugs and pins. T-shirts with popular comic panels or quotes cost between \$20-23, hoodies between \$30-36. Mugs cost \$15 and would be often drawn within the comic strips as a form of self-advertisement. Prints are either one-panel illustrations or chosen comic-strips and go for various prices, starting from \$15. Metal pins are the newest addition to the merchandise (announced on April 17,

2019) and go for \$10.

3) Patreon. Gregor heavily promotes the possibility of becoming his “patron” and help him create more comic in his spare time. He offers plenty of otherwise inaccessible content related to each of his webcomic: doodles, clean and HD files, alternative versions, special blog posts etc. The available options are divided into four tiers, according to the level of monthly support: \$1 or more, \$4 or more, \$10 or more, and \$30 or more (“VIP pass”). The most interesting feature is available in the last tier, after purchasing which, every comic posted under a patronage will get an individual custom drawn character, permanently posted under the strip. The hidden content available on Patreon serves as a “patron-only” secret blog. Patreon gets from 5% to 12% fee (depending on chosen program) and additional payment processing fee (Sawers, 2019).

4) Affiliation. HumbleBundle is the video and computer game store. Through its Humble Partner program, it allows chosen internet personalities to participate in the profits for the products supported by them (“Humble Partner Program FAQ”, n.d.). Through clicking on the special link, available on Gregor’s Patreon, one can be redirected to the online shop in which the special offers are prepared. The default profit includes 15% of the price of the product; additionally, Humble Partner would receive \$10 for each new subscriber of Humble Monthly and 5% of Humble Store sales (only after using their affiliate link; “Humble Partner Program FAQ”, n.d.).

5) Fan meetings: Since 2012 (Czaykowski [blog post], 2012) Gregor would sometimes attend fan meetings and conventions, such as Chromacon (“6 Artist Picks for Chromacon 2015”, 2015). During the meeting Gregor would sell his merchandise and integrate with fans.

Gregor’s plans for undisclosed future would include publishing paper version of *Loading Artist* comic (Tucholski, 2012).

Table 4.3 Summary of Case A: Webcomic

		WEBCOMIC	
INTRODUCTION	NAME	<i>Stand Still. Stay Silent</i>	<i>Loading Artist</i>
	the creator(s)	Minna Sundberg (1 person)	Gregor Czaykowski (1 person)
	content distribution	- personal website - social media	- personal website - social media
	FORMAT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • updates: mon-tue-thur-fri • long-form • set of regular and recurring characters • fantasy, comedy, horror, postapocalyptic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • updates: irregular • gag-a-day • unnamed characters • slice of life, comedy, emotions
	FAN BASE	a) Lively comment section b) Personal input c) Fan forum d) Twitch	a) Comment section b) Active usage of social media c) Fan forum d) Twitch
MONETISING ACTIVITIES	1) Advertisements on the website 2) Crowdfunding campaigns 3) Merchandise 4) Freelancing	1) Advertisements on the website 2) Merchandise 3) Patreon 4) Affiliation 5) Fan meetings	

4.2 Case B. YouTube channels

Case B-1: TwoSet Violin

<https://www.youtube.com/user/twosetviolin/videos>

<https://www.twosetviolin.com/>

TwoSet Violin is the Youtube channel, created on September 9th 2013 by Brett Yang and Eddie Chen, Taiwan-born Australian violinists. Both Brett and Eddy graduated from Queensland Conservatorium (in 2013 and 2014, respectively) and since then have been orchestral musicians as well as soloists for many musical projects across Australia. In private, they are two friends since young age, connected with a passion for music and sense of humour.

According to the description on their official website, their goal is to make “classical music relevant to the modern generation through fun, humour and simplicity”. First videos posted on their channel were multi-layered violin covers of famous pop songs or film scores. They went onto incorporating vlog-like videos in which they would talk about various aspects of classical music, from concert etiquette and misconceptions about classical music, to struggles of the typical conservatory student, gaining recognition for their charisma, sense of humour and educational content.

With the raise of popularity of so called “reaction videos” genre (the videos depicting real-time reactions by various, often anonymous people; most often to certain pieces of entertainment, usually music or films) (Anderson, 2011), TwoSet joined the trend by posting their own “classical musicians react” videos (subgenre popularised by another Youtube channel ReacttotheK; Cheang, 2017),

In 2018, TwoSet Violin Youtube channel received the Silver Play Button for achieving a threshold of 10,000 subscribers (“YOUTUBE SILVER PLAY BUTTON!??”, 2018). They repeated the accomplishment following year, reaching over one million subscribers in March 2019 (TwoSet Violin, 2019 [tweet]). As of July 2019, their channel was subscribed by over 1,400,000 users. Table 4.4 displays some detailed statistics about the channel, according to Socialblade.com (up until July 12, 2019):

Table 4.4 TwoSet Violin YouTube channel statistics

Subscribers	1,454,165
Video views	242,778,539
Estimated earnings (daily)	\$157 - \$2,514.90
Estimated earnings (yearly) ³	\$56.6K - \$905,364.00

Source: <https://socialblade.com/youtube/user/twosetviolin>

Format

The new content is posted four times a week. It consists of short skits (under one minute) or longer videos (10-15min). The format is very simple and usually includes two young men sitting or standing in front of a neutral background or in a hotel room (when they are on tour). They would occasionally invite guests (such as fellow Youtuber and professional musician Ray Chen or a renowned violin soloist Hilary Hahn), or visit a certain locations, especially connected with violin music. The editing has become more sophisticated with time, emphasising the comedic moments during the interactions with each other, but the overall quality of the

³ According to Socialblade.com: “The Estimated Earnings are based on the generally accepted CPM range of \$0.25 - \$4.00. This range exists due to the many factors that influence the actual CPM you potentially receive.”

majority of their videos is often considered very rough⁴. The longer videos are hardly ever scripted and base off the natural flow of interaction. Their popular formats include “violin charades”, “TwoSet reacts” (the reviews of violin-related content in popular culture), and “Ling Ling 40 hours”, so-called “classical memes review”.

Popular themes

Brett and Eddy would often use pop culture tropes in order to explain certain issues in classical music world. Their videos with time have become more comedic in nature, while still serving educational purposes, when possible.

TwoSet would sometimes assume certain personas in their comedic skits, which would act like recurring characters (stereotypical “Asian mother” or “Viola King”). In 2017 they created a fictional character “Ling Ling”, their most well-known concept as of yet. It first appeared in the video “Different Type of Musician's Mothers” from May 15th 2017. Ling Ling never appears on screen, but serves as a genderless prodigy violin virtuoso, practicing “fourty hours a day”, a person who will always be better in whatever they undertake, and whom ambitious parents would compare their children to (Urban Dictionary, n.d.). Due to its popularity and relatability, the concept would often appear in TwoSet videos, shows, livestreams, merchandise, and has been also heavily engraved in the fan-specific set of vocabulary; it’s currently one of the most commonly used inside jokes of the fandom.

⁴ Such as the video “Brett and Eddy Interview Each Other“ from June 26th 2019, which was recorded so out of focus, that most of the comments would touch upon this particular aspect over the actual content.

Another popular quote comes from the BBC interview with Ben Lee, the former holder of “the fastest violinist in the world” title, according to Guinness World Record (“New Guinness Record...”, 2013), which was reacted to by TwoSet in their video “The World's FASTEST (and most INACCURATE) VIOLINIST!” from September 18th 2018. The sentence “If you can play something slowly, you can play it quickly” got criticised for its ridiculousness and heavily mocked, eventually becoming one of the most recognisable quotations in the fandom. Since then it has been extensively paraphrased and used in various context, even as much as being the apparent “call and response” between fans. What is worth mentioning is that the piece of apparel with printed quote is the most expensive piece of apparel in TwoSet’s t-shirt collection (\$42; “TwoSet Apparel”, n.d.)

Fan base

The fan community began forming in the comments section of their videos. The fanbase (called “TwoSetters”) would actively (and often very repetitively) react to certain quotes or concepts introduced by Brett and Eddy, which would later become a ground for fandom’s creativity elsewhere. Their fanbase mostly consists of young people, either music student or people with no previous experience in the field, but drawn in by unspecified reasons. Some of the fans quote TwoSet as influential in picking up violin or getting interested in classical music (“My son heard you playing”, n.d.). Plenty of young musicians identify with TwoSet’s creators and use the community references on a daily basis, within their fellow musician friends (“Found a twosetter on omegle”, n.d.).

a) Lively comment section. The comment section is usually the core of fandom’s

activity. The most popular comments would often lead to the creation of certain memes, which would later be omnipresent in each comment section of their channel and fan forums as an inside joke. Brett and Eddy would sometimes interact with fans through liking their comments on Youtube; they would also occasionally directly answer the comment.

b) Fan forum. Soon the special forum on Reddit platform was created (so-called “subreddit”, described as r/lingling40hrs) in order to give the community the opportunity to gather, share and vote for funniest classical music memes, memes directly connected with the channel, fanart or other fanmade content. It has also become a place for discussion about classical music, music studies as well as Brett and Eddy themselves. Community interactions use memes derived from the videos and comments, creating their own internal set of references. Every two weeks Brett and Eddy would post a reaction video to most upvoted content on Reddit and encourage fans to post more.

c) Social media: TwoSet would usually share either snippets of their videos (Twitter) or full versions (Facebook) on social media, allowing for them to be spread around. They would have limited interactions with fans via their social media accounts or private accounts on Instagram. They utilise mostly Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.

d) Livestreams: occasionally TwoSet would arrange a few-hour long livestream, such as the one commemorating one million subscribers (“1 Mill Subs”, 2019). During the livestream fans could use the Superchat option, which allows for

emphasising and sometimes pinning particular message on the top of the chat for a small fee (“Manage Super Chat...”, n.d.).

Monetising activities

TwoSet Violin has two main sources of income: Youtube Partner Program and merchandise.

1) YouTube Partner Program. TwoSet Violin channel is forming a partnership with Youtube.

2) Merchandise. The shop is available through TwoSet main website. The collection includes only apparel (t-shirts, hoodies, jumpers, caps). The most popular memes or quotes would often be used by TwoSet to create a piece of merchandise, such as highly popular “LingLing 40 hours” or “If you can play it slowly, you can play it quickly” (quotation from one of TwoSet’s most successful videos up to date, “The World’s Fastest (and Most Inaccurate) Violinist”, 2018) . Brett and Eddy would usually be seen wearing their merchandise in their videos or during the tour. The t-shirts would also be available for direct purchase during the world tour show. T-shirts would go for US\$39~42, hoodies and jumpers for US\$70, and a cap for US\$35.

3) Crowdfunding campaigns. On March 26th 2017 Brett and Eddy launched a Kickstarter campaign in order to organise the world tour, during which they would visit different parts of the world, present a musical comedy show and meet their

fans (“First crowdfunded classical world tour”, 2017). They promised to busk on the streets of Sidney, sleeping on the streets and livestreaming their efforts, until they would reach the goal of AU\$50,000 (TwoSet Violin, 2017). Totalling the Kickstarter pledges and direct donations, they managed to reach the initial goal in five days (Nguyen, 2017). This amount was supposed to fund visit to ten different cities. The stretching goals of every additional AU\$10,000 would add one more city to the tour (“First crowdfunded classical world tour”, 2017). On the Kickstarter itself they were able to reach AU\$ 56,722 from 1,256 backers. The 2017 Europe & Asia tour included 11 cities in 10 countries. In late 2018 they were able to organise second leg to the world tour, visiting more european cities, as well as Taiwan, USA and Canada (TwoSet Violin: Live, n.d.).



Case B-2: Try Guys

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCpi8TJfiA4IKGkaXs__YdBA

<https://tryguys.com/>

The Try Guys is an US-based comedy series channel, led by a group of four comedians and filmmakers: Keith Habersberger, Ned Fulton, Zach Kornfeld and Eugene Lee Yang. All four were originally employees of the internet media company BuzzFeed, and did not know each other, until in 2014 they came together to record the comedy video, for which the BuzzFeed Motion Pictures needed few daring men to be willing to leave their comfort zone in front of camera

(BuzzFeedVideo, 2014). Originally, the format was supposed to include plenty of different people, but the fans feedback towards the original group was so positive, they decided to stick together for the segment (Yamanaka, 2015). Since then, the idea established itself, and Try Guys videos became viral on social media. Audiences got attracted to the format and praised the quartet for both the comedic and educational value of their skits. Just as Keith said in one of their videos, “I’ll do it – just to learn the struggle” – and talk about it on camera (BuzzFeedVideo, 2014).

The had become the most successful act made by BuzzFeed (Barr, 2018). Their most famous videos include “The Try Guys Try Drag For The First Time” (BuzzFeedVideo, 2014) with 35 million views and highly popular “The Try Guys Try Labor Pain Simulation” (BuzzFeedVideo, 2015) with over 33 million views, part of their series on exploring the motherhood. In 2017 they received a Youtube Streamy Award nomination for Show of the Year (Jarvey, 2017).

After four years and developing a close working and personal relationship (Heard Well, 2018 [video]), in 2018 Try Guys decided to leave BuzzFeed and start their own independent production company 2nd Try LLC. They acquired the legal rights to “Try Guys” brand and left *BuzzFeed* responsible for advertising and branded content sales (Klein, 2018). In June 2018 they launched their own Youtube channel called simply “The Try Guys” and reached 3 million subscribers in three months, twice less the expected time (Heard Well, 2018 [video]). As Ned Fulmer expressed in the interview on the channel Heard Well (2018):

We weren't starting from nothing; we've already made over hundred videos together, and even though we were part of a larger company, we saw it as an opportunity to create our own platform, where we can be more directly interacting with fans.

As of July 2019, their channel enjoys over 6,100,000 subscriptions, and between 40 and 80 million views per month (Hale, 2019). Table 4.5 displays some detailed statistics about the channel, according to Socialblade.com (up until July 15, 2019):

Table 4.5 The Try Guys YouTube channel statistics

Subscribers	6,169,951
Video views	664,455,448
Estimated earnings (daily)	\$425 - \$6,795.32
Estimated earnings (yearly) ⁵	\$152.9K - \$2,446,315.20

Source: https://socialblade.com/youtube/channel/UCpi8TJfiA4IKGkaXs__YdBA

Format

The videos are uploaded twice a week, on Wednesdays and Saturdays. As they were originally the employees of a professional media creating company, their videos have always been created with high quality equipment and heavily edited, either by themselves or other BuzzFeed employees. Typically a video would last about 15~20 minutes and would usually follow the comedians prepare for and perform a certain task, usually one that demands a level of discomfort for the Guys, i.e. trying ballet, wearing high-heeled shoes, driving under influence, delivering a baby, cooking without a recipe etc. Through the course of the video, audience can observe the interactions and relationships forming between the comedians and their guests. At the end of the video, Try Guys would usually voice their opinion about

⁵ According to Socialblade.com: “The Estimated Earnings are based on the generally accepted CPM range of \$0.25 - \$4.00. This range exists due to the many factors that influence the actual CPM you potentially receive.”

the experience and share with the audience an educational aspect that they have learned. They would get more scripted with time.

Their main videos are divided into “seasons”, but the channel also includes several subsections, such as “The Try Guys: Game Time”, “Eat the Menu” (focused on Keith), “Rank King” (focused on Eugene) etc. All the videos are scripted, directed, produced and edited by Try Guys (with the help of their team). Channel also allows for individual users to post a personal videos, focused on their own lives and experiences (such as Eugene’s coming out, or Ned’s first days with his newborn child).

Popular themes

There are certain characteristics of each of their media personas, which are often treated as inside jokes by both Youtubers and fans; such as Ned’s well-known (and often exaggerated and theatrical) love for his wife, or Eugene being a “genius” and winner of most skills contests. The Try Guys would often act according to the expectations of the audience, instead of expressing their actual emotions at the given moment.

Fan base

Due to being initially exposed to social media users through already established and popular BuzzFeed Youtube channel, Try Guys gained recognition very quickly. Soon they became audience’s favourites, and their videos would go viral. Since their departure from the company, grand majority of their fans proved their

popularity by quickly subscribing to their independent channel. Fans officially call themselves “Tryceratops” and their official emblem is a colorful dinosaur.

a) Comment section. The comment sections of not only Youtube, but also other social media platforms (especially Facebook, on which their fanpage has over 3.7 million likes, as of July 2019) display big numbers of comments, but they are hardly ever interactive. People would either comment on the funny moment of the video (i.e. Olivia Marie (username), 2017), or suggest ideas for the future videos, whereas the inside jokes and cross-video related comments are rather rare. There are also plenty of comments from the people who do not display any typical fan affection towards the Youtube personas, commenting only on the act itself. Thus, comment section is not considered a stable and homogenous community.

b) Fan forum. There is not a one particular platform on which most of the fans would gather to interact with each other. Fans would create the small discussion boards and post Try Guys-related posts over all the social media platforms, especially Facebook, Twitter and Tumblr. The *Reddit* fan community (r/TheTryGuys) is small and rather insignificant, with only 917 members as of July 15 2019.

c) Social media. Each of the Try Guys would extensively use their social media to interact with fans and promote both brand-related activities, as well as personal status. As all four of them enjoy a significantly high Youtube celebrity status, they often act on their own, involving themselves in the community to various degrees.

Monetising activities

Try Guys utilise w few methods on monetising their online content:

1) Youtube Partner Program. The Try Guys channel is forming a partnership with Youtube.

2) Merchandise. The main Try Guys website serves mainly as an online store with a big collection of fan merchandise, including apparel (hoodies, tops, t-shirts, hats) and accessories (posters, sunglasses, phone cases, mugs, pillows, blankets). The merchandise sports the official logo of the Tryceratops and is shown while being modeled by Try Guys themselves. Merchandise is not related to any characteristic or quote of any particular video. The prices of the products vary from \$10.95 (poster) to \$49.95 (official hoodie) (“Products”, n.d.).

3) Sponsorship. Try Guys would sometimes provide a sponsored content on their channel, such as “The Try Guys Try Not To Die At Sea” (BuzzFeedVideo, 2016) sponsored by Sony, or “The Try Guys Try 13 Future Technologies At Google” (The Try Guys, 2019) sponsored by Google.

7) Youtube Premium. Together with Youtube, Try Guys recorded a comedy web television series, a competition reality show called *Squad Wars*. The series premiered on January 26, 2017 and has been available exclusively on Youtube Premium (formerly, Youtube Red) (Aversa, 2017). The series includes one season with nine 25 minute long episodes. It has been welcomed with mixed response

(“Squad Wars”, 2017; Camacho, 2017).

4) Patreon. Try Guys offer their fans an opportunity to receive more content by becoming their “patrons”. The tiers include Ruby Tryceratops (\$3 or more donated per month), Emerald Tryceratops (\$5 or more donated per month), Amethyst Tryceratops (\$10 or more), Sapphire Tryceratops (\$25 or more), Pearl Tryceratops (\$35 or more), Gold Tryceratops (\$100 or more) and Diamond Tryceratops (\$500 or more). The extras include access to special Patreon feed, early access to the finished videos, behind-the-scenes footage, individual mentions and shoutouts, as well as the access to the private Discord account and opportunity to directly influence the creative process of Youtubers (“The Try Guys are creating an independent digital production company, pants optional”, n.d.). As of July 2019, Try Guys’ Patreon has 4,964 patrons. Again, Patreon receives between 5-12% fee, depending on chosen program, and additional payment processing fee (Sawers, 2019).

5) Book. On January 30 2019, Try Guys release a book they wrote together, called *The Hidden Power of F*cking Up*. Book, published by Dey Street Books, serves as “an inspirational self-improvement guide” and has become a #1 New York Times Bestseller (Hale, 2019). the book is available in the bookstores in USA, Australia, UK, New Zealand, and online (including audiobook). The price is listed as \$24.00 (Amazon, 2019), but as of July 2019, it has been on sale.

6) Tour. On May 4th 2019, Try Guys announced their long awaited “The Try guys: Legends of the Internet” US tour, during which they would perform on stage and meet with the fans (The Try Guys, 2019). The ticket prices vary between

regular and VIP passes, and between locations. (“The Try Guys: Tour”, n.d.).

Table 4.6 Summary of Case B: YouTube channels

		YOUTUBE CHANNELS	
INTRODUCTION	NAME	<i>TwoSet Violin</i>	<i>The Try Guys</i>
	the creator(s)	Breet Yang, Eddy Chen + staff	Keith Habersberger, Ned Fulton, Zach Kornfeld and Eugene Lee Yang + staff
	content distribution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Youtube - other social media - personal website 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Youtube - other social media - personal website
	FORMAT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • new content: four times a week • theme: educational, comedy • short skits (<1min), longer videos (10-15min) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • new content: wed, sat • theme: comedy, educational • ~15min videos, multiple segments
	FAN BASE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Lively comment section b) Social media c) Fan forum d) Livestreams 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Comment section b) Social media c) Fan forum
	MONETISING ACTIVITIES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1) YouTube Partner Program 2) Merchandise 3) Crowdfunding campaigns 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Youtube Partner Program 2) Merchandise 3) Sponsorship 7) YT Premium 4) Patreon 5) Book 6) Tour

4.3 Results and discoveries

There are plenty of similarities and differences between cases, according to the four factors influencing the mechanics of a successful business model (Dowthwaite, 2013). We would first analyse the differences between the subcases and later on, draw conclusions for the two types of creative media channels.

4.3.1 Case 1: Webcomics

Activities

Both Minna and Gregor publish on the independent websites and are not being influenced by regulations regarding the format, length or how often they publish. The success of their works can be traced back to both high quality of the content (which can draw in audiences and keep them interested), and excessive social media presence (which can help spread the word about the content to the potential audiences, present on various social channels). Both creators perform various activities, both monetising (selling merchandise, fundraising, etc.) and those related to maintenance of a fan base (social media interactions, livestreaming, creative process input etc).

Gregor would often deviate from his webcomic content, livestreaming gaming videos or comedic or personal content. While Minna would give a certain level of insight into her daily live, all her activities online would be one way or the other connected with the webcomic creation.

Value

Both creators offer the high quality webcomic, posted one page at a time, in two different formats. Another significant difference might lie in value co-creation aspect. Gregor would often look for inspiration for his drawing in interaction with fans during his creation livestream. Minna has her idea already established and does not necessarily confront it with what audience is looking for (she would accept fan's feedback on the technical issues, though). Also, during conducting this research we have not noticed any form of significant fan creations based on Loading Artist, whereas *SSSS* stands firmly as an inspiration for many fan-made artworks (both graphic and literary; “Fanfiction: Stand Still. Stay Silent”, n.d.)

People

Both Minna and Gregor are sole creators of their core content, they administer the websites and share the updates on social media. They might get help with technical issues for the third parties though, issues like proper coding of the website, setting up Kickstarter account etc., but these are not influential to the main value that core content and related activities represent. Also, despite being from different parts of the globe (Finland/Sweden and New Zealand), both artists create a content that can be relatable or at least understood and appreciated internationally: Minna publishes in English, they use most widely used social interaction channels, and they both might offer contextual information under their comic pages in order to help the international audience better understand their content.

Finance

Both Minna and Gregor provide their core content for free; they do conduct many monetising activities revolving around said content, though. Selling merchandise (limited to mostly t-shirts and prints), accepting donations and providing advertisement space on their websites are most common activities. Gregor would also go to comic conventions, while Minna would provide her artwork for the entire website and comic-unrelated assignments, spreading the knowledge about their webcoming while also making additional revenue.

Main difference lies in the level of financial support both of them accept directly from webcomic-oriented activity. While Gregor has a day job as an interface designer, Minna's comic *is* her full-time job. The book printing activity is her main source of revenue. She is therefore much more devoted to her comic and is able to produce her core content on a regular basis, keeping her website traffic steady.

4.3.2 Case 2: Youtube channels

Activities

In terms of interactive activities, both TwoSet and Try Guys, despite reaching out to their fans online, do not involve themselves too often in direct interaction. They do take inspiration from the fan communities reactions to their content. In case of Try Guys, the direct influence the fans may have is limited to “patrons” who get the access to Try Guy’s Discord. TwoSet would usually directly apply the fans

demands, for example by creating merchandise with most well-received quote or meme or creating a video based on the most number of suggestions.

The main difference between both lies in the scope of monetising activities: besides utilising Youtube Partner Program, TwoSet limit themselves to selling apparel and performing on the world tour, while Try Guys sell merchandise, go on tour, create videos for Youtube Premium, write books, all of which while maintaining their own media company. The difference is due to the fact that Try Guys create as their full-time job, while TwoSet, beside being Youtubers are still the performing musicians.

Value

Both channels contain humour and educational values, drawing the audiences to their charismatic creators. Try Guys offer high quality videos, filmed and edited over long periods of time, giving off the tv series vibe. TwoSet present content that is much simpler, more organic in nature and much more amateur in quality. They often use a format of dialogue with the audience: they employ most parasocial interaction techniques, becoming much closer with the audience through their relatability to the viewer. User-added value is very much important for both creators, but much more so in the case of TwoSet, who directly monetise on the trends popular among the fandom. While Try Guys might receive the signals of their fans' creation and trends (The Try Guys, 2018 [video]), they would rarely include them in their videos or create merchandise based on them.

People

Both channels feature a pair or group of interacting online personalities. Both utilise the help of third parties in order to edit their videos and maintain a high output, matching the raise in popularity and demanding Youtube Partner Program standards. While Try Guys are professionals in the video editing aspect, TwoSet are highly amateur, with low budget and simple equipment.

The main difference between the channels may lie in the approach towards their audiences through the videos. TwoSet usually create the atmosphere of intimacy, talking straight to the camera or recording in the small room. The Try Guys usually focus on display, have relatively big budget and focus on interactions with each other rather than with the audience. This might make fans feel much more disconnected (see: *Parasocial relationship* chapter).

Finances

Owners of both channels are directly benefiting from partnership with Youtube. They would also sell their merchandise worldwide and provide fans from around the world the easiest possible purchasing methods. They would also go for tours and perform live for their audiences, selling some additional merchandise in the venue.

Main difference stems from the fact that “Try Guys brand” operates as a company product, while TwoSet are amateurs without any legal links to each other. Try Guys might often accept sponsored deals and have also monetised on paid subscription to YouTube Premium.

Table 4.7 Summary of the case analysis. Similarities bolded.

CASE ANALYSIS		WEBCOMICS		YOUTUBE CHANNELS	
		<i>Stand Still. Stay Silent</i>	<i>Loading Artist</i>	<i>TwoSet Violin</i>	<i>The Try Guys</i>
ACTIVITIES	similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> publishing on the independent websites not influenced by regulations success based on HQ content and excessive social media presence various activities, both monetising and maintaining fan base 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> publishing on a social media platform influenced by regulations of YPP success based on regular and often updated content no direct involvement in interaction various activities, both monetising and maintaining fan base 	
	differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> all online activities related to the webcomic creation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> often deviates from webcomic content 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> visible fans influence apparel, tour performing musicians 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> fans' influence limited to patrons big scope of monetising activities (merchandise, tour, Youtube Premium, books, Patreon) full-time job
VALUE	similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> HQ webcomic, one page at a time entertainment values 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> humour and educational values 	
	differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> long-shot format value co-creation aspect: no drawing inspiration from fans a lot of fan created content 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> gag-a-day format value co-creation aspect: often look for inspiration in interaction with fans during his creation livestream no fan created content 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> amateur in quality dialogue with the audience ("what do you guys think", "I can hear your thoughts..."), parasocial interaction techniques 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> high quality videos, tv-quality rarely include audience in their videos
PEOPLE	similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> sole creators of core content, also admins, marketers extended presence on most popular social interaction channels 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> pair or group of interacting online personalities help of third parties presence on other social media channels 	
	differences	–	–	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> amateur, with low budget and simple equipment an atmosphere of intimacy parasocial interaction techniques 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> professionals in video editing big budget focus on interactions with each other rather than with the audience
FINANCE	similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> free core content many monetising activities (merchandise, donations, ad space) 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> free core content partnership with Youtube sell their merchandise worldwide tours, live performances 	
	differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> full-time job (printed books as a main source of revenue) ensured steady traffic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> side job no steady traffic comic conventions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> no company 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "Try Guys brand" operates as a company product often accept sponsored deals

4.3.3 Comparison of two cases

Both types of media allow their creators to build their business around the free core content. Apart from creating and promoting through on various social media platforms (mainly Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Twitch), they are also personally present online for fans to reach them. All of those creators would make active use of their website, either as a main platform of displaying the content (webcomics), an online shop (Youtubers), or as an complementary source of info (both).

In terms of management of and interactions with their fan community, webcomic artists seem to have much closer relationship with their fans than Youtube creators: both Minna and Gregor monitor the comment section on their website and answer some of the questions; also both of them organise regular livestreams and involve themselves in direct conversation through chat. Youtubers seem to be much more detached (even though two cases show just how different the distance may be and how much it may be influenced by the format of the content). The reason of this discrepancy between webcomic creators and Youtubers might lie in the nature of the streaming video platform, which in itself is a type of social media and therefore is highly accessible; existing *within* the social media platform would deem the thousands of comments from more or less random users to largely get unnoticed by the creators. Webcomic creators, on the other hand, publish their core content *outside* the social media grid, thus have to actively

seek communication with fans and position themselves within chosen social media platforms in order to promote themselves.

Figure 4.1 Positioning relative to social media (current situation of most successful webcomic and videos)



Also, webcomic creators have much more freedom in creative aspect. As long as they regularly provide new content, they can freely regulate their own schedule. The Youtube Partner Program demands adhering to certain guidelines, which might prove difficult to keep up with, after passing a certain threshold of popularity on the platform. Also, as Chris Stokel-Walker describes in his article from August 12th 2018, more and more people are disseminating their creation on the platform, and as the competition on the platform rises, so does the pressure to create more entertaining and original videos, and more videos in general. TwoSet are restlessly uploading skits few times a week; Try Guys, despite providing more regular updates twice a week, admit that they are never taking into consideration the option of lowering their standards and may even operate on the border of mental stability, risking burn-out and subsequent drastic drop in views and popularity (Stokel-Walker, 2018).

Table 4.8 Similarities and differences between the cases

SIMILARITIES	DIFFERENCES
<p>① process of building business around the free core content</p> <p>② promoting through various social media platforms</p> <p>③ personally present online for fans</p> <p>④ actively making use of their website</p>	<p>✓ management of and interactions with their fan community:</p> <p>Both types of creators manage relationships with their fans, but webcomic artists seem to have much closer relationship with fans than Youtube creators.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • regular livestreams • direct conversation through chat • answering comments, tweets, reposting etc <p>Youtubers have less interactions (even though two cases show just how different the distance may be)</p> <p>REASON? <u>core content existing either within or outside of social media platform</u></p> <p>✓ creative aspect:</p> <p>Webcomic creators have much more freedom than Youtube creators.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the Youtube Partner Program demands adhering to certain guidelines • pressure to create more entertaining and original videos, and more videos in general (competition)

4.3.4 Findings

1. Web content creators, analysed in this case, publish their content for free, but simultaneously carry out plenty of activities surrounding it.
2. Those activities are related to both maintaining the relationship with their audience, as well as gaining revenue from additional content. Those two types of activities do not occur simultaneously though; the latter would be impossible to perform without a former. Thus, the ability to make revenue out of surrounding content is dependent on the level of relationship a creator reaches with their fans.

3. Fan communities usually form in the comment section of the creator's main platform, and from then on they are self-governing, meaning that they can gather on different platforms to form a more independent fan community.
4. Fan communities are transnational, identifiable, have a special set of vocabulary and references. Fans are bound together by a common feeling of admiration towards the creator.
5. Fans involve themselves in creative activities, either building on original creator's work or drawing inspiration from it. At a certain point they might be involved enough to be able to undertake economic actions (i.e. purchase of the goods or joining the Patreon).
6. Web content creators observe and react to the trends within the community, and act accordingly in order to gain profit and strengthen the relationship.
7. The revenue acquired from surrounding activities can allow creators to devote more time and resources in order to create more core content, and also to offer more attractive paid content for the audience. In certain cases a hobby can change into a full-time job.

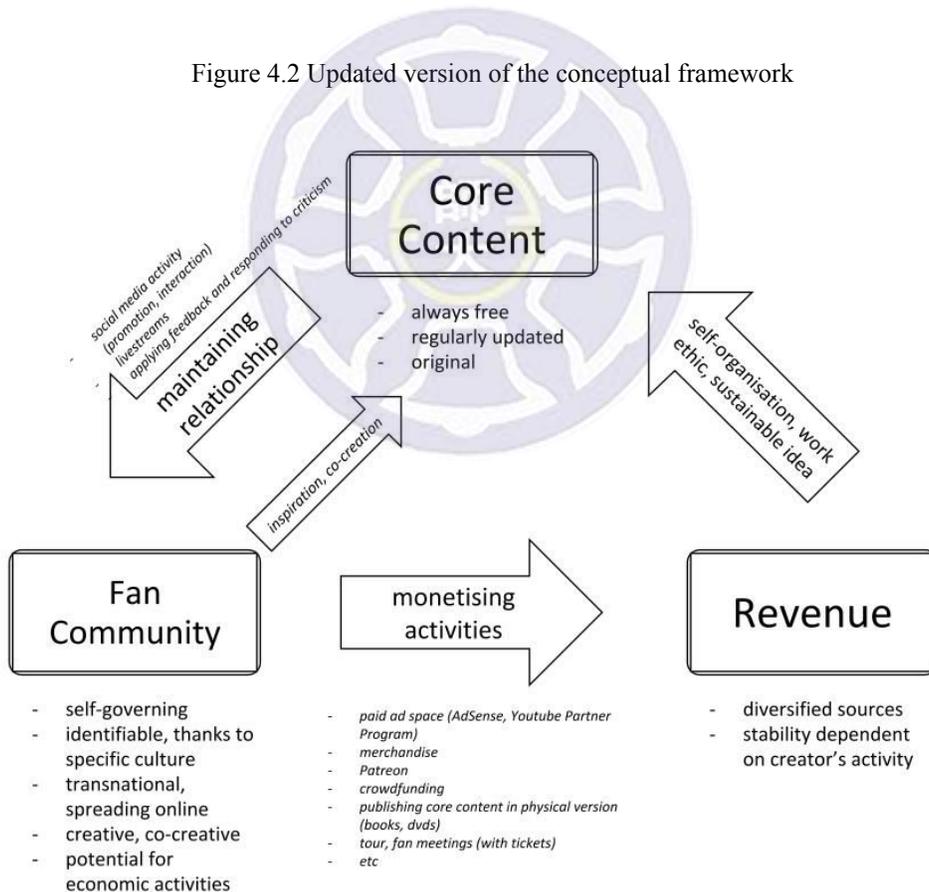
4.4 Managerial implications

Answering the research questions mentioned in chapter three might help us generate ideas for managing this special case of online business, in which one publishes their own ideas for free, but takes advantage of surrounding activities to gain profit.

How do people create revenue from publishing free core content?

Online creators publish their core content for free, but at the same time conduct plenty of activities. They are related to both maintaining the relationship with their audience, as well as strictly monetising the surrounding content (thanks to opportunities this relationship provides). Both this additional content and eventually the main content may be later inspired by or co-created with fans. The following graph shows the updated version of the main research framework, based on our findings:

Figure 4.2 Updated version of the conceptual framework



Q1: How do fan communities emerge and organise themselves?

A1: Fans may get information about the certain creator from social media channels and their communities would usually form in the comment section of the core content. After assuming a certain level of independence from the main platform (by creating a set of inside references or later, a specific culture), they might move onto the other websites, like regular forums or platforms in the like of Discord and Reddit. The “glue” between the members of the fan community is the common set of references, understood even without being active on outside forums. Community evolving around this new culture is bonded by commonly shared feelings of admiration of the work, and identification with other admirers. Its activity would evolve beyond the scope of the creator’s work and give birth to subsequent economic actions (Lisowska-Magdziarz, 2017).

Managerial implications: The successfully created community will largely manage itself (see: *SSSS* forum for the fans of Minna’s webcomics). At first, though, the web content creator should provide at least a simple platform for the fans to express their opinions and create a verbal community directly related to the creation (such as easy to use comment section right below the comic page). They should involve themselves in the interaction, meaning reading and answering to the comments (as often as possible), apply the creative feedback (i.e. getting rid of typos, or taking care of technical issues that are present in the videos, etc). Creators should devote some part of their daily schedule to observe the social media and reach out to fans at the early stages, providing them with updates and information.

Q2: How do people utilise their fan community in order to gain revenue?

A2: Creators are usually observing the fan community, making notes of the most common themes, trends and topics among the fans, and act accordingly. They would create a merchandise based on the trends (such as TwoSet t-shirt collection, based on most popular quotes from their videos), open a crowdfunding campaign for the printing of the book based on core content (Minna's Indiegogo and Kickstarter campaigns), or simply monetise on the video made entirely out of trends among fans (such as Try Guys' "Eugene Babysits Ned's Baby" video from 15 November 2018⁶ or fans suggestions for TwoSet's reaction videos).

Managerial implications: Creators have to be observant and not miss the opportunity to monetise certain content. The more interest the creator has for their fans, the more the community will grow, connected by the common goal of supporting their favourite artist and benefit from its content. Thus, the monetising activities must go in par with the trends and demands of the community; for example, the merchandise featuring the crowd's favourite quote or comic character would sell fast (i.e. TwoSet's t-shirts, *Loading Artists'* apparel and mugs). Also, if the fan community express their willingness to support the crowdfunding campaign in order to gain certain benefits, this may serve as a great signal of appreciation and ensure the success of the campaign (Minna Sundberg, TwoSet Violin). Creators should be able to notice such demand and act on bringing it to reality.

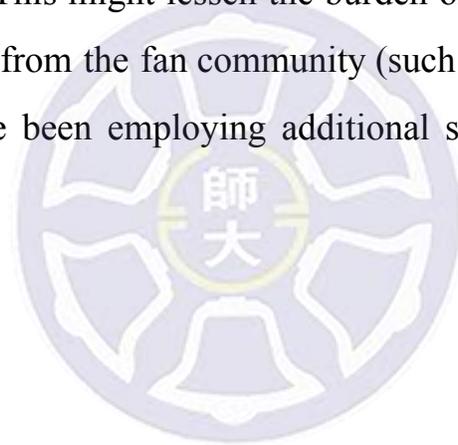
⁶ Video was inspired by the commonly fan-referenced fact, showcased in other Try Guys' videos, that Eugene Lee Yang does not enjoy the company of babies; the idea has been brought to life by highly successful Twitter campaign ("Eugene Babysits Ned's Baby", 2018)

Q3: How does the revenue influence the continuing creation of core content?

A1: Gaining revenue from the merchandise or raising money through Patreon means that the creator would be able to devote more time for creative content-related activities, especially the continuing flow of the core content. No matter whether the creator works full-time on their online content (Minna Sundberg, Try Guys) or publishes their content in their free time (Gregor Czaykowski, TwoSet Violin), the more material profit they have from monetising activities, the more time they would be able to devote to create more content and answer fan's demands. In certain cases (rare, though), overwhelming support combined with a good plan for the future activities and high level of work ethic may result in changing part-time activity into a full-time job, which could allow a creator to support themselves for the major part – such as the case of Minna Sundberg or Try Guys. Minna has admitted that the highly successful book printing campaigns have helped her organise her schedule around creating SSSS-related content full-time, without being worried about finding another steady flow of income (Sundberg, 2014). The salaries may vary according to the level of experience and location though.

Managerial implications: Higher revenue may give a creator more time to actually create, but one must first have a clear vision of how much of their life they can devote to their webcomic/channel. The long-lasting plan for the content is advisable, also the ability to control the relationship with the fan community must be included in the schedule. While Gregor creates the comic in an episodic

manner, Minna has a clear goal of finishing the story (which is augmented by her tight work ethic), and thus can manage to keep the fans updated with the new content on a regular basis. In the case of Youtubers, keeping the content engaging and fresh is the key to sustainability, but this may be of the high risk of burning out too quickly and compromising one's mental health (Parkin, 2018). Katherine Lo mentions, that the physical and mental exhaustion, stress, anxiety and pressure by the quickly developing community can put an end to somebody's career way too quickly – that's why some accounts might want to hire additional staff to manage certain aspects: editing, analysing comments or arranging sponsorship deals for example (Parkin, 2018). This might lessen the burden on actual creators, but at the same time distance them from the fan community (such is the case of both TwoSet and Try Guys, who have been employing additional staff; see: "TwoSet Violin: Apply", n.d.).



Chapter V: Conclusions and Suggestions

5.1 Conclusions

Despite different media and platforms used by both types of free web content creators, the general set of activities and rules governing the business activity as a whole is very similar. It involves providing original content regularly for free, extensive use of social media in order to reach to the audience around the world, and conducting plenty of monetising activities in order to gain profit, based on the affection of the fan community formed around the project. The exact combination and scope of those can differ from case to case. It is also very much influenced by the status the creative venture has for the creator; whether it is a full-time job aspiration-driven project or a past-time aimed at self-progress, the author's attitude will govern the willingness to carry on a certain set of activities.

Despite that, certain aspects of each media and their publishing platforms seem to significantly affect creators, in terms of managing their fan community. While webcomic artist originally produces and publishes “off the grid” of social media, they have to be constantly active and involved in the life of their fan communities, drawing their attention, sharing stories and answering fans questions, letting them know they are still out there, working for new content.

Videos already exist within the social media platform, that is Youtube; they can be easily shared by fans and in some instances quickly become viral videos. The special algorithm would recognise what content is popular and recommend more videos of the particular vlogger, drawing in potential new subscribers and creating more profit from the advertisements (Parkin, 2018). The creators, while

maybe wanting to be more involved in their fan community, might not be able (or not feel the need) to do so, due to a sudden rise in number of commenters and the pressure to create more content in order not to drown in the sea of similar creators on Youtube. Some successful Youtubers still retain a level of knowledge about the trends and demands of their audiences (such as TwoSet Violin, NikkieTutorials), others, especially those who already gained a lot of recognition, may venture too much outside Youtube and their activities might stop involve directly with the fandom (Try Guys). The extreme example of mismanaging fan community comes from the case of PewDiePie, the most subscribed Youtuber as of July 2019, who actually seems to have little to no control over his fan community⁷.

The popularity within Youtube is much more dependent on day-to-day reliability than original content (Parkin, 2018), in order to stay on top of the Youtube listings. Webcomic creators must be regular, but they can give themselves more time and space to create, as long as they involve themselves in the fandom (i.e. Gregor Czaykowski and his Twitch videos).

The fan community is extremely important, because it gives back to the creator by purchasing their merchandise, supporting them on crowdfunding platforms, willingly carries out the “word-of-mouth”-type marketing, etc. It also provides criticism and feedback, so important for the creator to grow, as well as provides ideas and builds on the *universum* by co-creating certain elements, that may also become part of fan culture (such as memes or fan fiction). It’s the fan community that allows for certain monetising opportunities to arise, and being observant and reactive to it is crucial for success.

⁷ Some of the “fans” have been accused of acts of vandalism and connected with other questionable or openly criminal activities, to the Youtuber’s dismay. See: Cuthbertson, 2019 (March 08 & March 15)

One must know how to maximise the profit from the monetising activities though; not only to gain direct profit but also to continue creating popular content, without losing its quality and appeal. The established idea, strong work ethic, strict but flexible schedule, as well as ability to gain in help from possible sponsors, all of those are crucial in creating a successful business plan, no matter how good the content is. Some creators might be able to apply all those variables into the perfect loop, propel it, and in effect become able to become full-time web content creators, hopefully doing what they love and be profitable off it.

It is extremely difficult though; according to “Creative Independent” survey of 2000 artists present on Kickstarter, 29% of respondents relied on family support and 42% relied on a day job to support themselves (“The Artists Making a Living (or Trying to) with Patreon”, n.d.). The level of skills in both creating artwork and building a fan following needs to be very high, this is also very much matter of luck and sheer persistency in creating what one loves to create.

5.2 Suggestions

The financial success as a free content creator who can sustain themselves in the long run is not easily achievable, though. Those who decide to create and share their content online for free, rarely can make any profit out of it. The majority of creators cannot reach the threshold of profitability or maintain it. That’s why more platforms such as Youtube or Kickstarter should exist in order to support those individual creators. Such services should be easily available and offer particular profits for independent creators, but should not be claiming too much control over

the content and should stay as one of the means to disseminate knowledge about the person's creative work.

In the wake of new and upcoming technologies, it may be wise to try and foresee what kind of format of both content and merchandise would be most interesting to the audience. For example, the extensive use of smartphones influences new formats of apps, and so it can influence a new format of video or a comic strip. It is not a new idea; for example, the Korean-style webcomic (referred to as *webtoon* outside South Korea) in its current most popular form is usually drawn in a format of long vertical strips in order for it to be easily read on the phone screen (Han, 2012). Despite differences between webtoon and a Western style densely drawn panels, the smartphone-friendly format might actually become attractive to some comic artists. But whether a webcomic or a video channel, focusing on smartphone users market might allow creators to develop a new and original form of storytelling, which could also be promoted and monetised upon in a completely new way (Murray, 2017).

What would also push this creative industry forward is creating new ways of monetising content. From example, microtransactions might become more widely used. Creators might be interested in the format often applied by the visual model genre of the game apps: in most of them, stories are available in its entirety for free, but the daily access is restricted to certain number of chapters or tokens. For a small price, though, a user can buy more tokens and continue the story instantly. As Jacques (2009) mentioned, people are not interested in paid content available online, but at the same time they might choose to pay a small fee in order to get a quicker access to the otherwise free content (this is already one of the profits of becoming a Patreon patron, but could be explored more extensively). Along with

the technological advancements of smartphone technology, further research might want to explore both the new possibilities and already existing ideas and formats in the context of monetising activities (especially the microtransaction technologies application) in the free web content context.

The research showed that the information about legal aspects of monetising activities sprouting from such business ventures is not easy to obtain. As our research has shown, there is a certain fixed set of activities a web content creator usually carries out, but the details on how to successfully make use of them are vague and differ from case to case. Thus, it would be advisable for the respective governments to publish a clear guide aimed at aspiring creators, in order for them to utilise their opportunities to the maximum in this small but clearly developing sector of creative industries. For example, the reason why Minna Sundberg does not have a Patreon account is because the law in Finland forbids direct donations in such manner (SSSScomic, 2015 [Tweeter conversation]). Such information can be crucial for creating a proper strategy.

5.3 Contribution

This research aimed to draw the most universal conclusion about how to maintain a successful creative project online, while also emphasising how different media and platforms might influence different approaches to creativity and gaining profits from it, especially from the perspective of managing fan communities. Hopefully, it will help independent and ambitious online creators develop more successful and stable models, which would allow them to flourish and enrich the industry. In the age of interactive, global and easily accessible media, the

opportunities for artistically inclined people are numerous, and the vast area of research should allow them to be able to put their talents to use, and be fairly compensated for sharing their creativity with the rest of the online community, and beyond.



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