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Brand Webtoon as Sustainable Advertising in Korean Consumers: A Focus on Hierarchical Relationships

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Abstract: This study explores the impacts of webtoons as branded entertainment on consumer responses in competitive advertising markets. A webtoon is a digital cartoon format developed in South Korea for Korean audience that do not read comic books often, but are heavy consumers of webtoons. Using general surveys on brand webtoons in Korea, factors influencing consumer attitudes and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) intentions were investigated. The results of this study found that there are hierarchical influences on the use of brand webtoons on consumer emotion, transportation, persuasion knowledge, and advertising believability in order. The pattern of relationships was somewhat different between effects on attitudes toward brand webtoons and eWOM intentions. More specifically, pleasure and arousal influenced both attitudes and eWOM intentions. However, dominance only influenced eWOM intentions, and transportation only influenced attitudes towards branded webtoons. Persuasion knowledge negatively influenced both dependent variables. Advertising believability showed positive influences on attitudes and behavioral intentions.

1. Introduction

As consumers try to avoid intentional commercial messages, industrial interests in covert marketing have increased to sustain advertising markets. Advanced technology becomes a double-edged sword to marketers because it provides more opportunities for marketers to deliver their marketing messages to customers, and marketers have been faced with more intense competition than ever before. Marketers keep trying to seek more effective communication tools to deliver commercial messages via various media outlets. One example of more effective advertising tactics that marketers are employing is the indirect displaying of brands or products, product placement (PPL) in TV shows [1], movies [2] and online games [3]. Nowadays, branded entertainment is gaining popularity because it can deliver commercial messages without bothering consumers [4]. Brand entertainment refers to sponsored content solely made for advertisers. It includes various content formats, but can be classified into a few of following: an ad movie, advergame, and brand webtoon, depending on to the format presented to consumers [5].

Along with advanced digital technology, multimedia functions such as moving image, sound, and visualization of texts in webtoons help readers read and understand contents quickly and easily [6]. According to Baek, a journalist from the Korea Times, the annual growth rate of webtoon industry is 8.6 percent and its industry accounts for more than 70 percent of comic market in 2017 [7]. Gaining

popularity of webtoon based on fast growing market trends and advanced digital technology will provide sustainable advertising opportunity to marketers.

Webtoons can be an effective marketing communication tool to convey marketing messages without consumers' psychological resistance. For instance, brand messages can be included in the webtoon like traditional PPL, or main characters can be used as the main endorsers of advertising. Further, independent series can be developed solely for and by individual sponsors as a category of branded webtoons. In addition, webtoons can be regarded as an environmentally friendly media platform since both webtoon users and readers use digital media platform and the fact differentiates webtoons from traditional print media such as books, newspapers and magazines. For pro-environment people, branded webtoons can be regarded as a sustainable advertising format, and they are free from the carbon dioxide production issue of print media [8].

The webtoon industry has grown as a major cartoon content generating industry. Naver Webtoon, Kakao Pages, and Lezhin Comics are leading companies in South Korea. Webtoons are not just a pdf version of comic books. It has its own audience interface. People read webtoons by scrolling pages downward. It has different ways of reading from traditional comic books. Webtoons play an important role as a content prototype for TV drama and movies. Further, writers contrive spin-off series for commercial purposes called brand webtoons in South Korea. Brand webtoon is one of the major formats of branded entertainment. Brand webtoon is an effective marketing communication content because of its popularity in Korea.

This study explores hierarchical influences on brand webtoons. The initial proposition is that emotional responses are first triggered when consumers encounter branded entertainment like brand webtoons, and then experience more involved feeling such as transportation. These emotional experiences inhibit consumer persuasion knowledge awareness. Finally, it is hypothesized that consumers reach cognitive evaluations on brands or products that ultimately influence consumer attitudes or behaviors. This study will investigate these hypothetical relationships between selected independent and dependent variables in the proposed hierarchical regression model.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Emotional Responses

Consumers' emotions have been a critical issue of advertising research because emotional changes in response to a brand can influence consumer behavior in response to advertising stimuli [9]. Traditionally, researchers focused on cognitive responses assuming the ideal rational consumer, but emotions are more valued in current advertising studies because consumers make their purchase decisions based on more emotional cues at the final moment prior to purchase. According to Bagozzi, Gopinath, and Nyer, emotions are 'mental states of readiness that arise from appraisals of events or one's own thoughts' [10]. It is well documented that consumers' emotional response can influence advertising attitude, brand attitude, and purchase intention [11,12]. However, emotions are not limited to individual reactions because individual emotions are influenced by other people around them [13]. For example, mood is an environmental emotion independent from an individual's emotions and is known to influence consumer behaviors.

Traditionally, it is acknowledged that human emotion can be an important determinant in purchase decision [14]. Scholars classify emotional responses into different dimensions [15,16]. Mehrabian and Russell introduced three emotional dimensions of pleasure, arousal, and dominance, the PAD model, to measure emotional states of environmental psychology [17]. PAD is frequently used to explain human emotion due to its extensiveness and its explanation power [18].

The relationships between affect and attitudes are well documented because affect is a main antecedent of attitudes. Advertising literature also reported that emotions influenced attitudes toward advertising and brands [19]. Patwardhan and Balasubramanian used a brand romance as a state of emotional attachment (pleasure, arousal, and dominance) and found that brand romance is an

important predictor for brand loyalty [20]. In this regard, it is hypothesized that PAD dimensions of emotion will influence attitudes toward brand webtoons.

H1-1: *Emotion will influence attitudes toward brand webtoons.*

H1-1-1: *Pleasure will influence attitudes toward brand webtoons.*

H1-1-2: *Arousal will influence attitudes toward brand webtoons.*

H1-1-3: *Dominance will influence attitudes toward brand webtoons.*

Electronic word of mouth became a popular topic in ecommerce research along with the rapid development of internet technology over the past decade [21,22]. Henning-Thuran, Gwinner, Walsh and Gremler defined electronic word of mouth (eWOM) as 'any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet' [23] (p. 39). People tend to have strong motivations after participating in eWOM when they have had positive emotions such as excitement, gratitude, happiness, or satisfaction resulting from the message content [24]. It is reported that positive emotions can generate favorable attitudes toward products [25]. The study of branded entertainment also reported that hedonic evaluations have impacts on eWOM [3]. In addition, consumers tend to adopt eWOM when they have a high level of perceived information credibility [26]. Thus, the study proposed one more set of hypothetical influences of PAD on eWOM intentions.

H1-2: *Emotion will influence eWOM intentions.*

H1-2-1: *Pleasure will influence eWOM intentions.*

H1-2-2: *Arousal will influence eWOM intentions.*

H1-2-3: *Dominance will influence eWOM intentions.*

2.2. Transportation

Enjoyment is one of the main benefits for media usage and an important motivation of media consumption [27]. Individuals who are easily immersed in the media contents tend to have more joyful experiences [28]. Content which has its own story tends to involve users easily into the story. Green and Brock introduced a concept of "transportation into a narrative world" [29,30]. It is an experience of cognitive, emotional, and imagery involvement in the story and transportation was positively correlated with perceived realism. Transportation is a form of emotional response and mental imagery creation as a response to narratives [31]. An advantage of written presentation is that people can create full of mental images with proactive engagement with the story and this active help to increase transportation [32].

People who experience transportation tend to evaluate content more favorably, and this transportation effect greatly interested advertisers. Transportation is also found to influence consumer evaluations in ad movies, one example of the branded entertainment [3]. Thus, the study proposed that a relationship exists between transportation and consumer attitudes and behaviors as the second hypothesis in exploring emotional influences of brand webtoons.

H2-1: *Transportation will influence attitudes toward brand webtoons.*

H2-2: *Transportation will influence eWOM intentions.*

2.3. Persuasion Knowledge

The development of Internet technology helped people share experiences and opinions about a product or service via eWOM as a voluntary consumer behavior [33]. Thus, consumers' persuasion knowledge is an important factor in order to understand consumers' responses to the marketing

process [34]. Friestad and Wright defined persuasion knowledge as consumers' knowledge and beliefs about the marketing system, strategies, and products [35]. For example, older adolescents tend to have fewer positive attitudes toward marketing activities than younger adolescents because older adolescents have more complicated knowledge about persuasive messages [36,37]. In addition, consumers who have a higher level of prior knowledge about a product tend to have a higher purchase intention when they have attribute-centric eWOM information than benefit-centric eWOM information [38].

In sum, knowledge is a critical element influencing persuasion. Further, persuasion knowledge is a critical concept to understanding the process of marketing communication messages. In this regard, it is proposed that activation of persuasion knowledge could negatively influence consumer attitudes and behavioral intentions of brand webtoons. Based on the characteristics of persuasion knowledge, the following hypotheses are postulated.

H3-1: *Persuasion knowledge will negatively influence attitudes toward brand webtoon.*

H3-2: *Persuasion knowledge will negatively influence eWOM intentions.*

2.4. Advertising Believability

Advertising believability is a concept that focuses on the adverting message content instead of the source [39]. According to Nielsen Global Trust in Advertising Report in 2013, advertising believability is a key in advertising effectiveness. Word-of-mouth recommendations from friends and family have the highest credibility from more than 29,000 global consumers. Consumers tend to evaluate advertising contents before they share the online content with others [40]. Personal experience related to the advertising content and consumers' familiarity with the advertising content can play a role in influencing advertising believability [40,41].

Ad believability is hypothesized as a cognitive evaluation, and as the final stage of consumer information processes in this study. In this regard, it is hypothesized that ad believability will affect consumer attitudes and behavioral intentions. Figure 1 illustrated the visual description of the research model in this study.

H4-1: *Advertising believability will influence attitudes toward brand webtoons.*

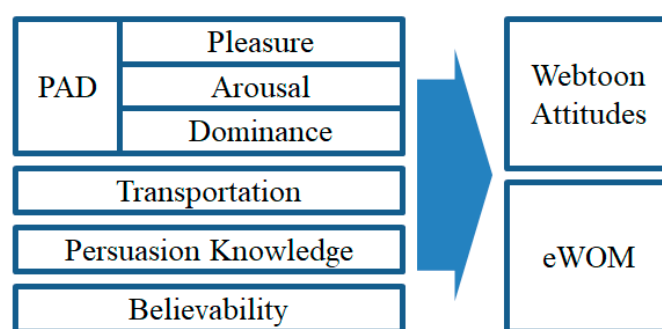**H4-2:** *Advertising believability will influence eWOM intentions.*

Figure 1. Research Model.

3. Methodology

3.1. Samples

This study used a survey research method. Using general audiences in Korea as a research sample, the hierarchical relationships were explored. Samples were collected from research panels that a professional research company provided. The gender and age of respondents were equally allocated,

using 10-year incremental segments to group people into their 20s, 30s, 40s, and 50s respectively. A total of 242 respondents participated in the survey. Among respondents, there were 119 males (49.2%), and 123 females (50.8%). Their ages ranged from 20 to 58, and the mean age was 39.5 years (SD = 10.5).

The brand webtoon, '2024' that won the grand prix in the 2016 Korean Webtoon competition, was used as stimulus in this study. It was sponsored by the Hanwha Insurance Company. The webtoon is part of the disaster genre. It has total 24 episodes, and is very interesting due to the organized story structure. A huge natural disaster occurs at the first episode of the webtoon, and people do not know what it is and what to do. As episodes pass, people were guided by the insurance company in the webtoon through a natural disaster situation. Eventually, people survived with help of the special agent that is a sponsoring company in the webtoon. After respondents read the prologue of the webtoon, they were guided to answer the questionnaire. Figure 2 showed the last scene of the first episode that the natural disaster occurred.

Figure 2. Stimulus of brand webtoon.

3.2. Measurements

This study operationally defined consumer emotion as pleasure, arousal, and dominance. Consumer emotion has been measured by various measurement scales. This study measured consumer emotion PAD scales that Havlena, William, & Holbrook used [42]. Pleasure included 'happy,' 'pleased,' 'satisfied,' and 'relaxed.' Arousal includes 'aroused,' 'excited,' 'frenzied,' and 'stimulated.' Dominance included 'in control,' 'influential,' 'dominant,' and 'controlling.'

Transportation was measured by four scales that were modified based on the original scales of Green & Brock [29]. 'I was immersed in the webtoon,' 'This webtoon stimulated my emotions,' 'When I watch this webtoon, I can easily focus on it,' 'I want to know the ending of this webtoon.'

Persuasion knowledge was measured utilizing six scales that Cambell used [43]. 'The way this brand webtoon tries to persuade people seems acceptable to me,' 'The advertiser tried to manipulate the audience in ways that I don't like,' 'I was annoyed by this brand webtoon because the advertiser seemed to be trying to inappropriately manage or control the consumer audience,' 'I don't mind this

brand webtoon; the advertiser tried to be persuasive without being excessively manipulative,' 'This brand webtoon was fair in what was said and shown,' 'I think that this brand webtoon is unfair/fair.'

Advertising believability is a cognitive aspect of consumer persuasion in the proposed research model. It was measured with 10 items that Beltramin used such as 'believable,' 'trustworthy,' 'convincing,' 'credible,' 'reasonable,' 'honest,' 'unquestionable,' 'conclusive,' 'authentic,' and 'likely' [44].

For dependent variables, attitudes were measured as 'favorable,' 'positive,' 'good,' and 'likable.' In the measurement of eWOM, this study adopted and modified four items such as 'likely,' 'possible,' and 'probable' using the sentence 'I would share this brand webtoon on my SNS' from Hong and Yang's [45].

4. Results

Hypotheses Testing

Tables 1 and 2 show the results of hypothesis test. A 4-stage hierarchal regression analysis was implemented to verify the four groups of hypotheses for each dependent variable. The analysis for attitudes was executed. In the first stage, the researchers tested a direct effect of pleasure (PL), arousal (AR), and dominance (DO), the major factors of consumer emotion. In the second stage, the researchers included transportation (TR) from another emotional perspective. In the third stage, the study included persuasion knowledge (PK), which is the most important factor. In the final stage we tested advertising believability (BE) as a cognitive response variable.

Table 1. Results of hierarchal regression analysis on attitudes.

DV	IV	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Attitudes towardbrand webtoon	PL	0.486 ***	0.355 ***	0.333 ***	0.243 ***
	AR	0.368 ***	0.224 ***	0.247 ***	0.168 **
	DO	−0.006	0.010	0.088	−0.044
	TR		0.355 ***	0.301 ***	0.263 ***
	PK			−0.167 ***	−0.106 **
	BE				0.360 ***
Adjusted R^2 = ($\triangle R^2$)		0.580	0.650 (0.07)	0.670 (0.02)	0.723 (0.05)
F		112.057 ***	112.672 ***	98.848 ***	105.781 ***

# $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 2. Results of hierarchal regression analysis on WOM.

DV	IV	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Word-of-mouth	PL	0.373 ***	0.345 ***	0.322 ***	0.282 ***
	AR	0.143 *	0.112 #	0.136 *	0.101
	DO	0.394 ***	0.397 ***	0.479 ***	0.421 ***
	TR		0.076	0.020	0.003
	PK			−0.174 ***	−0.148 **
	BE				0.157*
Adjusted R^2 = ($\triangle R^2$)		0.602	0.603 (n.s.)	0.626 (0.02)	0.634 (0.01)
F		122.359 ***	92.616 ***	81.531 ***	70.686 ***

# $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

In reviewing the first stage of attitudes toward the brand webtoon, PL and AR were variables that had a positive effect on attitudes toward the brand webtoon; the coefficient of determination of the model was 58%, which showed a quite large portion. However, DO was not statistically significant. In the second stage, the model included TR as an emotional variable. This showed a higher coefficient of determination (65%) compared to model 1, which only included PAD variables. Simultaneously, the PL and AR effect were still strong, and consumer emotion had a positive effect on content attitudes. However, the results showed that DO was still not meaningful. In the third stage, the current researchers included persuasion knowledge (PK). The results of the analysis showed that the third model had a higher coefficient of determination (67.0%) than model 2. The results of the verification on the effects of consumer emotion variables showed that PL, AR, TR, and PK had a meaningful effect on consumer attitudes. The final model included the previous model and BE which is a cognitive variable. The results of the analysis showed that the coefficient of determination was the same as model 3, and BE was meaningful with a level of significance of $p < 0.001$.

For the dependent variable of electronic word-of-mouth intentions (eWOM), PL, AR, and DO were significant in the first stage. In the second stage, TR was not statistically significant. In addition, AR, which had a meaningful effect in model 1, showed a partially meaningful effect of $p < 0.1$. In the third stage, PK also influenced WOM negatively. In the last stage, BE was statistically significant with a level of significance of $p < 0.05$. However, AR, which had a meaningful effect in model 3, did not show a meaningful effect, illustrated by its level of significance of $p < 0.5$.

5. Discussions and Conclusions

The findings of this study showed the hierarchical influences of independent variables of consumer emotion, transportation, persuasion knowledge, and believability. The influences are different depending on attitudes toward the brand webtoon and eWOM intentions. PL and AR influenced both attitudes and WOM positively, but dominance only influenced eWOM intentions. Transportation only influenced attitudes toward the brand webtoon. Persuasion knowledge negatively influenced both dependent variables, and advertising believability influenced positively.

This study provided academic implications. The results showed the hierarchical effects among independent variables on consumer attitudes and behavioral intentions in brand webtoon. As the hypotheses suggested, it was found that consumer emotions are first triggered when they are exposed to a brand webtoon based on a natural disaster story. After that, consumers reportedly had empathetical experiences that were associated with transportation in this study. During the emotional experiences, they became less sensitive to persuasive stimulus. Ultimately, they were reported to have positive beliefs about the messages. This hierarchical model explained the steps advertising consumers had for information processing of brand webtoon.

The reason that branded entertainment was regarded as effective stemmed from emotional experiences. Branded entertainment was also an entertaining content format. Branded entertainment tells stories, and provides satisfaction. These traits evoke emotional experiences that make consumers use branded entertainment voluntarily. This study proposed the role of emotion, and conformed the effects of emotions with dependent variables. An interesting result was that dominance could not influence attitudes toward content. Dominance is regarded as somewhat different from pleasure and arousal. Experiences that feel overwhelming are truly emotional, but the valence of dominance could be different from a pleasurable experience. Given that attitudes are an evaluation with some degree of favor, the influence of dominance needed to be distinguished from other dimensions of emotion. Some researchers regarded dominance as conative element; arousal as a cognitive; pleasure as emotional [46]. This interpretation explained the more intimate relationship between dominance and eWOM intentions in this brand webtoon study.

Transportation is another element that makes people like brand webtoons without creating suspicious feelings. Transportation refers to the emotional experiences that audiences feel when transported to other places via certain content formats. Generally, structured stories make people

feel transported [29]. People feel presence and flow experiences when transported. Brand webtoon equipped with advanced digital technology will provide more and better experiences of transportation for people and strong advertising effects of brand webtoon for marketers. It creates a more effective environment for sustainable advertising opportunities with BWT. This study showed that transportation experiences influenced attitudes toward brand webtoon, but could not influence eWOM intentions. This means that transportation lead to attitudes, but was not strong enough to affect behavioral intentions.

Brand webtoon lessens consumers' persuasion knowledge. Nowadays, it is hard to persuade consumers even with cutting edge advertising technology, so the main purpose of advertising creative strategy is to avoid triggering persuasion knowledge in consumers. This is why covert marketing is frequently used, and one of the reasons that indirect marketing, such as sponsorships and PPL are effective. The study found the role of persuasion knowledge in the Brand webtoon situation. The study found that consumers took branded entertainment into account without resulting in overtly negative responses.

Brand webtoon makes commercial messages believable. Emotional experiences influence consumer cognition. Believability is a cognitive response where consumers believe the proposed advertising messages, and beliefs leads to attitudes and behavioral intentions. The relationship between beliefs and attitudes or behavioral intentions are well documented in the psychology literature [47]. This study reconfirmed the traditional relationship of emotional experiences and consumer cognition in the brand webtoon.

This study has some managerial implications that can be suggested to BWT and general brand entertainment. When marketers plan to execute covert marketing like branded entertainment, the first thing that should be considered is evoking consumer emotion because emotional experiences are the first step for audience immersion into commercial content. Branded entertainment focuses more on entertainment rather than on the brand itself. This means that the content of branded entertainment should be entertaining and pleasurable. Similarly, content needs to be made with a fine level of completion that leaves people satisfied. This can be an assumption for branded content to be successful like other content in the entertainment industry. Branded entertainment is consumed voluntarily. Consumers choose to read or watch the content. In this regard, the completion of content is essential to attract consumers.

Another guideline for branded entertainment production is that content should not trigger persuasion knowledge in consumers. When users realize the content has a persuasive purpose, the content loses its use as a tool of covert marketing communication, and the positive effects might disappear. At the same time, branded entertainment should deliver trustworthy messages to consumers. By delivering trustworthy messages, the branded content could decrease any negative responses even when consumers notice the commercial nature of the content. It is true that branded entertainment is advertising, but marketers should pursue the balance between content and advertising.

This study has limitations. The findings of this study are based on only one brand webtoon, and this could limit the generalizability of the results. For example, the genre of the webtoon might influence consumer evaluations, and a variety of product categories or brands need to be investigated. Consumer message acceptance could be different between food and beverage products and insurance. These problems could be solved by future research. Further, the hierarchical model that was found in this study needs to be applied to the other forms of branded entertainment such as ad movies or advergames.

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