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ONLINE EDUCATION PLATFORMS AS EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

ПЛАТФОРМИ ОНЛАЙН-ОСВІТИ ЯК ЕФЕКТИВНІ КАНАЛИ КОМУНІКАЦІЇ

The article examines the emergence, formation and development of online education in the world and in Ukraine; research also reveals the origin of the largest massive open online course (MOOC) studios, the evolution of online courses and the variety of online courses at present. In addition, the article is also focused on specifics of Ukrainian MOOC studios in comparison with western MOOC studios. The pace of implementing e-learning into Ukrainian higher education institutions is also revealed, so as the corresponding legislative and motivational components of the process. In addition, the article reveals the essence of media commercialization – activities aimed at receiving profits due to the influence upon media audiences; the article also examines the expediency of ordering and placing online courses at interactive education platforms with a view of receiving advantages by businesses; advertising’s necessity of authenticity, so as the benefits of native advertising embodied in online courses are examined as well.

In order to justify the need for commercialization of modern informational media resources (in particular, online education studios), “EdEra” organization was taken as the example. This organization appeared in Ukraine as one of the first online education studios and managed to earn the recognition of several hundred thousand Ukrainian educators as of 2019. Currently “EdEra” produces online educational courses upon the order but it considers creating its own courses (meaning they belong to “EdEra” and no one else). In order to reveal the essence of media-commercialization, the article provides arguments in favor of promotional materials’ shift to the content of educational online courses, particularly EdEra’s; it also revises modern Internet advertising methods that prove to be obsolete and non-effective. In addition, the essence of authentic advertising was disclosed and proposed for the commercialization of educational online courses. Also, the article discusses the dynamics of the Internet usage in Ukraine and worldwide, and promotes changing of the advertising approach in regard to the development of Internet ad blocking technologies. Taking into account modern trends of the advertising development and growing popularity of the non-traditional (digital) education, the article suggests the expediency of commercializing educational courses for the online education studios worldwide and for “EdEra” organization in particular.

Keywords: online education, interactive education, non-conventional education, digital learning, online courses, distance learning, media commercialization, e-learning.

У статті розглянуто появу, формування та розвиток онлайн-освіти у світі та в Україні; розкрито походження найбільших студій онлайн-освіти (massive open online courses studios), еволюціювання онлайн-курсів, та різновиди онлайн-курсів станом на сьогодні. Також розглянуто специфіку діяльності студій онлайн-освіти в Україні та їх відмінності порівняно із західним зразком. Темп упровадження e-learning у українських закладах вищої освіти, разом зі супроводжуючими легітимними та мотиваційними факторами, також розглянуто. Окрім цього, у статті розкрито суть медіа-комерціалізації, тобто діяльності пов'язаної з отриманням прибутку завдяки впливу на медіа-аудиторії; досліджено доцільність замовлення та розміщення онлайн-курсів на інтерактивних освітніх платформах з метою отримання вигоди для бізнесу. Також у даній статті розглянуто поняття аутентичності реклами, досліджено потребу перетворення суто рекламного матеріалу у корисний та життєвий; зазначено переваги нативної реклами, втіленої в освітніх онлайн-курсах.

Для обґрунтування необхідності комерціалізації сучасних інформаційних медіа-ресурсів (зокрема, студій онлайн-освіти), у статті було розглянуто українську організацію "EdEra". Дана організація з'явилася у національній сфері онлайн-освіти однією з перших і встигла здобути визнання у декількох сотень тисяч українських освітян станом на 2019 рік. Наразі "EdEra" випускає освітні онлайн-курси під замовлення і розглядає можливість випуску авторських курсів (тобто власних). Щоб розкрити суть медіа-комерціалізації, у статті наведено аргументи на користь перенесення рекламного матеріалу у контент освітніх онлайн-курсів, зокрема студії онлайн-освіти "EdEra"; також доведено застарілість сучасних способів Інтернет-реклами. Крім того, було розкрито суть аутентичної реклами та запропоновано варіанти введення подібної реклами задля комерціалізації освітніх онлайн-курсів. Також у статті розглянуто динаміку використання Інтернету в Україні та світі і наведено аргументи на користь зміни рекламного підходу у зв'язку з розвитком технологій блокування Інтернет-оголошень. Поєднавши сучасні тренди розвитку реклами та темпи зростання популярності нетрадиційної (тобто цифрової) освіти, у статті доводиться доцільність комерціалізації освітніх курсів для студій онлайн-освіти світу та, зокрема, організації "EdEra".

Ключові слова: онлайн-освіта, інтерактивна освіта, нетрадиційні форми навчання, цифрова освіта, онлайн-курси, дистанційне навчання, медіа-комерціалізація, e-learning.

Introduction. In today's world, the Internet can be used as the primary means of instruction and education, and online learning (e-learning) only validates it. In its broadest terms, online education means acquiring knowledge through the use of instruction provided via the Internet. It encompasses a tremendous number of topics, subject areas, disciplines and degree programs. And although online education has changed the concept of teaching and learning, and has revolutionized many personal and professional areas, its commercial potential hasn't been scaled enough yet. For instance, the massive open online courses (MOOC) have become a free tool of supplementary education. In western countries they are commercialized by different commercial services as examinations, post-exam certificates, additional progress tutorials or commercial propositions of students to their potential employers [15]. Usually such type of educational online platform has a big number of readers (students) who can also be target audiences for different advertisers. Therefore, MOOC can have another effective ways of their commercialization.

In Ukraine ways of e-learning development have been investigated in many scientific works by such authors as Scherbina O.A., Kukharenko V.M., Maljukova I.G., Bogachkov Yu.M., and others. Most of their studies are about practices of e-learning implementation in the educational process and technical features of software [15]. But topics of e-learning commercialization have not been highlighted enough.

Task formulation. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to explore a commercial potential of online education platforms.

Methodology. The methodological framework of this research is based on related theoretical materials, a number of articles about online education and MOOC providers, as well as articles on media commercialization. The methods of the system analysis, the comparative analysis method, the association method, the analogy method, the analysis of statistical data are used in the article.

Research results. Online education is about taking a course, earning a degree or participating in any other kind of educational endeavor via the Internet. It is often mentioned that online education requires Internet access. But some claim that online education had appeared before the Internet was even invented. At the time when the Internet was not known, online education was more of a research experiment [1].

For instance, the year 1976 is notable because of the first virtual campus, Coastline Community College in California, USA, which had come to life. It offered its degree programs entirely through telecommuting courses. They were transmitted by telephone, television, radio, etc. After the appearance of the Internet in the 1980s, online education began to be offered in a number of American universities. In 1985 Nova Southeastern University in Florida, USA, offered its first ever accredited online program.

As it can be seen, online education finds its roots in the USA as the essence of universities' telecommuting programs. The contemporary online courses (widely accessible and not tied to schools' curriculums) appeared 23 years later when the Khan Academy had been founded. And it is of great importance to highlight the sequence of events that has led to the formation of the first-ever MOOC studio.

In 2001, Wikipedia was launched, – a multilingual, web-based encyclopedia. Wikipedia quickly became an extremely popular platform to look for information online. As of 2019, Wikipedia comprises more than 40 million articles in different languages with 500 million unique visitors per month. This data proves that the demand for web-based information has begun to amplify noticeably, and it was only a question of time for the supply to cover it.

Another memorable event for online education took place when Youtube was born in 2005. One of the first video sharing services has provided lots of videos. And if initially the society underestimated the potential of YouTube as an educational tool, Youtube has lately proven to be one of the most important educational tool of our time [2].

Consequently, web-based information and online video functionality had shortly integrated into online courses. Such format of online education penetrated not only into schools classrooms but households as well, which seemed uncanny at first. More and more people discovered the benefits of learning unconventionally (or e-learning, which means outside of educational institutions). Promptly enough, numerous audiences started to resort to the Internet at their spare time not only for fun but for educational purposes as well [3]. And this number continues to increase.

Finally, in 2008, Mr. Salman Kahn founded the Khan Academy – a non-profit educational organization that provided accessible online courses. The foundation of the Khan Academy that uploaded its educational video content on Youtube, established the modern form of online courses which were then called “tutorials”. The concept of the Khan Academy was to offer anyone, anywhere, access to a vast catalog of educational content. That was a powerful agenda and exciting news for people in developing and developed countries, who wanted education but could not have afforded it or even gained access.

It took 4 years for other “game changers” to appear. In April 2012, Coursera – an online learning platform was launched. It partnered with a variety of universities and other organizations that aimed to place their online courses on the platform. A month later, in May 2012, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard University created a similar project – edX. It hosted online university-level courses on a wide range of disciplines to a worldwide student audience, including some courses offered at no charge.

In Ukraine online education began to develop in 2008-2010 by some Ukrainian universities in Kyiv, Kharkiv, Lviv. In 2014 a non-governmental organization “EdEra”, inspired by the success of foreign countries in the field of online education, launched its web site where it offered a number of online courses in different disciplines. Among many missions EdEra had put in place, the main one was defined as the promotion of non-conventional education.

Non-conventional education means it has stepped aside typical in-class lessons and moved to an Internet-based educational platform. However, a combination of online and offline classes is another side of non-conventional education. As of 2019, an increasing number of educational institutions has been digitalizing half of their courses in order to make them more appealing to millennials [4]. Such approach neither denies the effectiveness of a conventional “tete-a-tete” model of offline education nor claims it is a good plan to go only with it. Essentially, it suggests expanding the learning process by using both online and offline approaches in combination. One of the benefits of such combination is that teachers and students can resort to online resources in order to maintain teaching materials up-to-date. In the 21st century, it is incredibly difficult for education systems to keep up with the flow of

information that is being outdated at an alarming pace. That is why it is crucial to have access to Internet resources, which provide continually updated information [5].

Besides promoting non-conventional education among self-motivated Ukrainians, EdEra offers free of charge online courses in the Ukrainian language. In addition to that, EdEra provides higher institutions and organizations with an opportunity to use their educational courses if they are interested in them.

EdEra has received more than four dozens of orders to develop online courses since the beginning of its operation. Customers define a discipline, share their expectations, and pay for what EdEra is in charge of – development of courses and hosting. The production process takes place at an educational online studio and is performed by content developers or invited teachers, using webcams and some easily learnable software, and produced content is uploaded to YouTube with links embedded in EdEra's website.

Generally, depending on the situation, the majority of online courses are conducted exclusively through assigned lessons and assessments administered online. Others take the form of remote lessons where students join their class via cameras in their laptops, and the teacher administers the educational process from his own computer. Other courses are a combination of the two types, requiring students to do a fair amount of independent research.

It is worth mentioning that foreign leading MOOC platforms act upon different patterns in comparison to Ukrainian ones. Such MOOC giants as Coursera and edX simply provide web hosting for external, usually schools' courses, which means they do not develop courses. It is evident that in Ukraine such approach would not be prospective since local universities are not capable enough of developing achievement-oriented web-based courses [6]. On the one hand it can be explained by inflexible position of most universities' teachers, their insufficient technical background level that may not be enough for developing online courses, and absence of teachers' motivation to advance e-learning in their universities because that would assume their intellectual property to become commercialized [10]. So it requires some time for universities' motivation policy to be modified, and for teachers' mindsets to be changed [11]. And on the other hand, Ukrainian legislation in terms of managing distance education is not perfect enough and continues to develop [12]. Therefore, Ukrainian MOOC studios such as EdEra and Prometheus have developed most of their courses by themselves, in partnership with individual progressive teachers and field experts. Obviously, this is an absolute departure from a classical western model of offering and running educational web-based courses. But the Ukrainian way of distance education development corresponds to the three-step model of distance learning courses commercialization [13] that assumes the effectiveness of the collaboration between e-learning platforms and progressive teachers, experts and some universities.

To explain what makes online courses that are developed by Ukrainian MOOC studios fit for commercialization purposes, several points in favor of commercial and advertising potential of e-learning need to be made. Commercialization is a common approach aimed at supplying goods and services and making profits. The root of commercialization is commerce.

Commercialization of media relies on the main means of mass communication (broadcasting, publishing and the Internet). Media commercialization is a concept that has to do with the restructuring of media structures and contents to reflect their profit-seeking goals. The increasing popularity of media commercialization can be explained. First of all, because of the media's pivotal role in its ability to mobilize the thinking process of millions [7]. Second of all, because of an extraordinary role of the Internet – the most utilized media in today's world.

According to Internet World Stats, in the USA around 96% of the population has Internet access. For Ukraine, this percentage is estimated at 93% [8]. Drawing upon numerous statistics, the report of IWS provides a concise overview of the Ukrainian Internet usage dynamics.

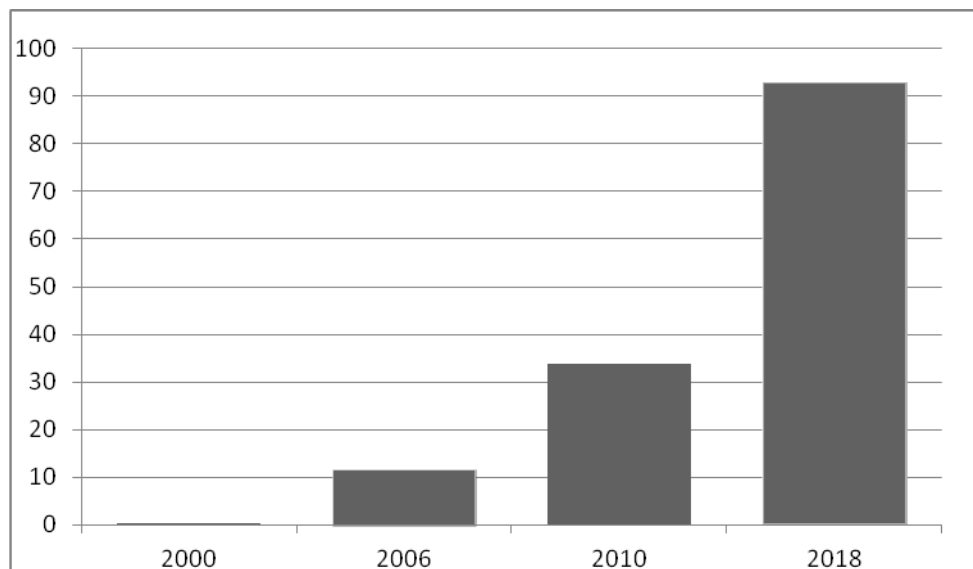


Figure – The percentage of Internet Users in Ukraine

In the early 2000s, Internet penetration in Ukraine was low, due to the lack of telecom infrastructure, high fees, and low PC ownership. In 2019 a shocking number of 40,912,381 Internet users has proven to exist. It creates a vast opportunity for companies that seek recognition and sales increases, so far as those goals can be achieved with the help of the Internet.

Of course, this 93 % does not necessarily have anything to do with online education. Nevertheless, according to Alexa.com, EdEra's website is at the 566th position in Ukraine, its daily page-views per one visitor reach 7, and the time spent by

one visitor is 12:40 minutes on average. So, in this situation, the only question is whether companies are farsighted enough to use this information for their advantage. The potential is definitely feasible and such approach has a high probability of success in shaping consumer loyalty.

The sponsorship of educational online courses has not been widely used among commercial organizations yet. But with contemporary advertising approaches getting outdated [17], companies should think about such scenario. Collaboration with MOOC studios is a promising alternative to established advertising approaches. Commercial organizations only need to place an order, choose a topic of the course, agree on the format of the project, and decide the way they want the brand name and product range to be naturally highlighted in the course material.

Besides, it is argued if e-learning tends to be more popular in the West than in Ukraine [6]. Prometheus, another Ukrainian MOOC studio, has gathered more than 115 thousand registered listeners over 3 years. Given the volume of the Ukrainian-speaking audience, it turns out that Prometheus is growing faster than Coursera and edX, whose rates, considering the volume of the English-speaking audience, are significantly lower. This means that Ukrainian e-learning market is rapidly expanding in contrast to western e-learning markets that hold steady [14]. The reason why online education is so popular in Ukraine can be also found in a series of negative stereotypes about the lack of quality offline education in contrast to the West. Some Ukrainians think that the conventional education system is not ideal and gladly accept an innovative substitute embodied in online learning.

Another fact that stands in favor of online education's commercialization with online advertising is that in 2016 the usage of ad-block software grew by 30% reaching 615 million devices globally. In Ukraine nearly 13 % of users are reported to block ads, which means that Ukrainians do not really tolerate popping advertisements and try to get rid of them [9]. That should only incentivize companies to look for other alternative advertising options.

Nowadays a lot of attention is paid to advertising's authenticity. With the development of ad-block software, it has become more difficult to attract consumer's attention. This is why it is important to seek for more subtle advertising approaches, which are partially embodied in the native advertising. Native advertising is a form of paid media where the ad experience follows the natural form and function of the user experience in which it is placed [18].

Consumers obviously do not want the brand to aggressively attract their attention. But if the company is able to offer a worthy media material, the audience's attitude usually changes for the better. Promotional material should not lack a component of usefulness, because no one likes to spend time reading a purely promotional article. Information should be relevant and complement the material. In

such case, consumers are most likely to check it, and hence there is a higher likelihood of increased brand recognition and sales growth.

Media commercialization in Ukraine takes place in traditional mass media members, such as print media, the press, photography, advertising, cinema, broadcasting (radio and television) and, most importantly, the Internet. And educational online platforms such as EdEra and Prometheus can emerge upon an increasingly salient role in propelling the process of media commercialization forward.

Referring back to EdEra's customers, their core constitutes non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and profit-seeking companies, with NGOs prevailing. And when the motivation of NGOs to sponsor educational online courses is in promoting socially important issues, companies, on the other hand, seek brand recognition and sales increase. Therefore, it is evident that companies would consider sponsoring educational online courses if there was proof of their advertising effectiveness.

The main advantage of the described advertising approach to e-learning commercialisation is its subtleness. When popping online advertisements seem pretty much intrusive, inserting a reasonable amount of information about the company and its products into an online course would be perceived by customers more preferably. Another advantage is that students may not suspect that the course was developed because of the company's commercial intent: company's willingness to contribute to youth's personal and professional development is much better reasoning.

According to the founder of Prometheus, the most popular disciplines for Ukrainians to study are quite similar to Western trends [16]. These are IT, business orientation courses, and vocational disciplines that allow students to master a new profession, for instance, as a graphics designer. For instance, let's imagine the graphics design company "X" decided to apply a new advertising plan. The goal was to familiarize customers about its new tablets, tailored specifically for beginning graphic designers. "X" ordered an educational online course in EdEra, outlined expectations, specified the commercial intent, and paid for it. The course would be free of charge, widely accessible and therefore, appealing for those who are interested in graphics design. After the course was developed and placed on EdEra's webpage, it enrolled students who were getting familiar with "X" company, its products and values throughout the curriculum. In the best-case scenario, the effect of such advertising approach would lead to better brand recognition, tablets and related products sales increase, and customers loyalty generation.

Of course, the realization of such plan does require a lot of creativeness from both companies and educational online studios. But given the facts, the idea of online education to become a media commercialization tool does present a good chance to appear.

Conclusions. The online education concept has lived for years, although it is still a lot to explore. Today's online courses can take many forms, but the essence

remains the same: online learning makes people's lives easier. In the future online education might replace traditional programs because of its convenience and proved effectiveness. But as it was revealed in this article, online education can be so much more. In the modern, media-driven society, it can be a very effective tool to reflect a number of organizations' profit-seeking goals. Creating an online course or an online program gets to play a small role in the media commercialization side of online education, shaping the course of online learning for the students of tomorrow.

To summarize, online education should be recognized for its ample commercial potential for a number of reasons. First of all, e-learning has proven to be extremely popular as of 2019. Second of all, existing advertising approaches do not live up to commercial organizations' expectations anymore. Advertising should now be more authentic, almost indiscernible, so consumers do not feel abused by it. Therefore, the future of started research will be into looking for ways to embody companies' commercial purposes in online courses, keeping in mind native advertising principles.

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