


Effect of Social Environment on Brand Recall in Sports Video Games

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ABSTRACT

Studies have shown that in-game advertisements can be effective. However, these studies typically examine single player scenarios. This study aimed to investigate the effects of social dynamics on brand awareness of in-game advertisements in sports video games. Two studies were conducted with soccer and basketball simulation games. In each study, participants were split into two groups where they either played against a computer-controlled opponent or against another player. For both studies, independent-samples t-tests were conducted to compare the recall rates between both groups. Both studies showed similar findings where respondents in the single player group reported higher recall and recognition rates when compared to respondents in the multi-player group. These findings suggest that the social environment can affect the effectiveness of in-game advertisements.

KEYWORDS

Advertising, Brand Awareness, Experiment, FIFA 18, NBA 2K19, Recall, Recognition, Sponsorship

INTRODUCTION

The computer and video game business is a major industry. In 2018, video game sales in the United States exceeded US\$43.4 billion. More than 160 million adults in the United States alone play video games. In addition, three-quarters of all Americans have at least one gamer in their household (Entertainment Software Association, 2019). While gamers come from all age groups, they generally belong to younger age groups with an average age of about 33 years (Entertainment Software Association, 2019). Consequently, many organisations have viewed product placements in video games or in-game advertisements as a viable new platform in marketing communications. This is especially so with organisations keen to access the younger demographic segment of the market (Chaney, Lin, & Chaney, 2004; Cianfrone, Trail, Zhang, & Lutz, 2008; Clavio, Kraft, & Pedersen, 2009; Leng, Quah, & Zainuddin, 2010).

Sports video games are popular with gamers (Crawford & Gosling, 2009). They are regularly listed among the top best-selling games in the United States. In 2018, basketball simulation game NBA

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2K19 and American football simulation game Madden NFL 19 were listed as the 3rd and 4th best-selling titles for the year. FIFA 19, a soccer simulation game, came in at 14th place. The combined sports and racing game genres also accounted for 16.9% of the video game market in 2018. This was just behind action games (26.9%) and shooter games (20.9%) (Entertainment Software Association, 2019).

The use of product placement or in-game advertisements in sports video games is acceptable to gamers. As sponsored brands are commonly found within actual sports competitions and venues, the appearance of such advertisements in games can elevate the realism of the game. Hence, in-game advertisements allow organisations to deliver their promotional messages effectively (Cianfrone et al., 2008; Clavio et al., 2009; M. S. Kim & McClung, 2010; Nelson, Keum, & Yaros, 2004; Nichols, Farrand, Rowley, & Avery, 2006).

There have been many studies conducted to examine the effectiveness of in-game advertisements. Specifically, the studies have examined the rate of brand recall and recognition in sports video games (Cianfrone et al., 2008; Dardis, Schmierbach, & Limperos, 2012; Glass, 2007; Y. Kim & Leng, 2017). Many of these studies have examined single player scenarios. However, the presence of other gamers is a central component in playing games (Sweetser, Johnson, & Wyeth, 2012; Sweetser & Wyeth, 2005). A recent industry survey found that 63% of gamers in the United States played with other players (Entertainment Software Association, 2019). As such, it is necessary to examine whether the effectiveness of in-game advertisements is affected by the social environment when the game is played in the presence of other gamers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Balasubramanian (1994) defined product placement as a paid product message aimed at influencing audiences via the planned and unobtrusive entry of a branded product into a movie or television programme. While product placement was first introduced in other media, it eventually made its way into video games as in-game advertisements. Game developers realised that brand owners will be willing to pay to have their brands featured in their games, especially when the games appeal to the same target market as the brand (Nichols et al., 2006).

As in-game advertisements became a staple in marketing communications, there has been many studies conducted to examine its effectiveness. Many of these studies have focused on brand recall and recognition. In general, the studies have concluded that the rate of brand recall and recognition can be lower when compared to other media (Y. Kim, Walsh, & Ross, 2008). However, the rate of recall can also be raised by making the brand more prominent in the game or through repeated exposure (Chaney et al., 2004; Dardis et al., 2012; Y. Kim & Leng, 2017; M. Lee & Faber, 2007; Leng et al., 2010; Nelson, 2002; Schneider & Cornwell, 2005; Yang & Wang, 2008).

Lang (2000) has suggested that people are information processors. According to the Limited Capacity Model of Mediated Message Processing, a person's ability to process information is limited. When a person allocates more cognitive resource to a task, it inevitably means that less cognitive resource can be allocated to other tasks. As such, some studies have found that gamers who are highly involved when playing games are likely to have lower rates of recall and recognition of in-game advertisements (Chaney et al., 2004; Herrewijn & Poels, 2013; M. Lee & Faber, 2007; Yoo & Peña, 2011).

This also explains why several studies have found that familiar brands are more likely to be recalled when compared to unfamiliar brands (Y. Kim & Leng, 2017; Leng et al., 2010; Schneider & Cornwell, 2005). Familiar brands already exist in the minds of gamers. Hence, they require less cognitive resource to process the brands due to perceptual fluency (Acar, 2007). Consequently, gamers are more likely to recall them.

Interestingly, brands that are irrelevant to the game can also lead to higher rates of recall and recognition. This is because gamers do not expect such brands to appear in the game and are

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