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This is the author's manuscript

Original Citation:

Availability:

This version is available <http://hdl.handle.net/2318/1946646> since 2023-12-07T18:12:58Z

Publisher:

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Sinergie SIMA
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Bari (Italy)

29-30 June 2023

Sinergie-SIMA Management Conference Proceedings
Rediscovering local roots and interactions in management
29-30 June 2023
Mercure Villa Romanazzi Carducci (Bari)

ISBN 978-88-94-7136-3-3

The Conference Proceedings are published online on <https://www.sijmsima.it>

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Via Interrato dell'Acqua Morta, 26
37129 Verona - Italy



Sinergie SIMA
Management Conference

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29-30 June 2023

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Short Papers

edited by

*Arabella Mocciaro Li Destri, Marta Ugolini,
Angeloantonio Russo and Savino Santovito*

The Benefit Factor: Understanding the Role of Benefits in In-Game Advertising Consumers' Responses

LUCA MATTEO ZAGNI* CRISTIAN RIZZO*

Framing of the research. *Within a context in which digital games an increasingly important role, gaming is benefiting by spreading into popular culture (Hamari and Sjoblom 2017), also becoming a platform that pave the way for new opportunities for brands. Obviously, this has led to an increasing interest among brands in exploiting the popularity of video games to promote their products or services. By integrating branded content within video games, brands can reach their target audience in a more engaging and interactive way, resulting in higher brand recall and recognition (Besharat et al., 2013; Chaney et al., 2018).*

Moreover, if we also consider the fact that consumers spend around 13 hours per week on social media and 12 hours per week on video game platforms, it's clear that active engagement with entertainment is on the rise (Newzoo,2022). Gen Z consumers, in particular, spend more time engaging with games and virtual worlds than on TV, indicating that younger generations are seeking more creative styles of engagement. In fact, nearly three-quarters of Gen Z consumers actively create digital content. As a result, brands are seeking to forge impactful partnerships within the gaming industry, such as HBO's adaptation of The Last of Us and live events hosted by Fortnite and Roblox (Newzoo,2022). Through the embedment of a branded content in a digital game, advertisers expect to have an impact on cognitive, affective and conative consumers' responses (Martí-Parreño et al., 2017). Furthermore, with the rise of the metaverse and the expansion of video games toward virtual reality (VR), we can expect even richer engagement opportunities for consumers and brands alike (Dwivedi et al., 2022).

Although the coupling between product placement and video game is not a whole new topic, it is also true that video games have changed their role. Thus, in-game advertising (IGA) may represent a revolutionary concept that has the potential to change the way we think about advertising. IGA has grown in popularity in recent years as these platforms have become even more popular and immersive, such as metaverse, unveiling a great potential (Chaney et al., 2018; De Pelsmacker et al., 2019).

Imagine being fully immersed in a virtual world in which you are completing quests, and exploring new lands, when suddenly a virtual billboard appears on the side of the road promoting the latest energy drink that maybe purchased in-game and help your character in recovering stamina. This type of advertising is not only more engaging and memorable, but it also allows for a more targeted audience (Tran and Strutton 2013).

IGA can assume different formats, from product placement within the virtual game environment, to banner or video advertisements that may appear during loading screens or as pop-up notifications.

With marketers and game players acting as the actors and the game serving as the mediator, IGA provides a different type of two-sided market (Herrewijn and Poels 2013). Traditional IGA such as static virtual billboards (as in FIFA 23) or in-game product placements, is static and akin to product placement in television shows or motion pictures (e.g., the Monster energy drink placed in Death Stranding). Instead, a dynamic in-game advertising allows marketers to modify adverts via the Internet to fit geographical areas, time points, or players' in-game behavior, allowing them to run time-critical and cost-effective campaigns (Yoon, 2019; van Berlo et al., 2022)

In recent years, several studies have been conducted to understand the role of IGA in shaping consumer responses and purchasing behavior (Herrewijn and Poels, 2015; Verberckmoes et al., 2016; Dardis et al., 2018; Wang and Chou, 2019). The effectiveness of in-game advertising may depend on the characteristics of the game (Dardis et al., 2018) and the advertisement, as well as the players (van Berlo et al., 2022). Moreover, congruity and intrusiveness have a significant impact on consumer attitude towards IGA: advertisements that are congruent with the game environment are likely to be more effective as they are perceived less intrusive, favoring brand attitude and purchase decision (Verberckmoes et al., 2016; Hussain et al., 2022).

Although research contributions have increased in recent years to expand knowledge on the topic, there are also several challenges and considerations to be aware of in placing branded content in a video game, as the overall effect of IGA on consumer responses is small and varies substantially between studies (Ingendahl et al., 2023).

As motivations for playing video games involve escapism, social interaction, gratification, etc. (Cheah et al., 2022), elements that intercede with the gaming activity may result in negative effects on the motivation itself dropping them. In

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this vein, an advertised content incorporated into the game environment may be potentially more subtle and less intrusive to the viewer. If it were not so, then it would result in a psychological reactance (PR) that come out as a result of invasiveness perception of an advertisement by consumer (Brehm and Brehm, 1981; Brehm, 1966). Non-skippable online ads are an example, as consumers may perceive them a kind of forced intrusions or a threat to their freedom (Amarnath & Jaidev, 2021). Thus, an individual that perceives a branded element as an obstacle to their ability to enjoy the game, is likely to reject the advertising content as well may have negative attitudes towards brands that are perceived as too controlling or manipulative (Brehm and Brehm, 1981; Tran and Strutton, 2013).

According to the PR theory, previous research have shown that in-game advertisements (IGA) that are perceived as intrusive or disruptive to the gameplay experience may also trigger psychological reactance in players, leading to negative attitudes towards the game itself and the advertised brand (Malhotra et al., 2021). This because, interruption by an advertisement can be associated with invasiveness and feelings of annoyance, leading players to try and bypass such advertisements.

Conversely, if an IGA is perceived as entertaining, congruent with the game, or providing a benefit to the player's performance, it may attract their attention and create a positive response (Vashisht and Chauhan 2017). Although there is rapid spread of video games and an increasing interest towards this topic, the research is still at a preliminary stage as the technological advancement of games has become very rapid in recent years, opening up various opportunities for brands.

In addition, research contributions focused on consumer responses have mostly investigated the effects that in-game advertising content generates on individuals' memory and recall abilities toward brands, as well as their perceived intrusiveness and attitude (Herrewijn and Poels 2015; Chaney et al., 2018; Hussain et al., 2022; Ingendahl et al., 2023). However, they have not considered the benefits that consumers may derive from in-game sponsored branded content, as discussed by Rialti et al., (2022) in-app purchases. This makes IGAs an area of research yet to be explored.

In order to study the video game players' behavior, most research has relied on the Uses and Gratification Theory (U>) (Kaimann et al., 2018). U> (Uses and Gratifications Theory) suggests that consumers engage in media activities to satisfy a range of socio-psychological needs, which can be classified into five main categories: cognitive, personal integrative, social integrative, and hedonic (Nambisan and Baron 2009; Verhagen et al., 2015). These needs involve using media for acquiring relevant information, fulfilling personal goals such as reputation or self-confidence, building relationships and interacting with others, and finding pleasure and entertainment (Rialti et al., 2022).

Initially developed to study consumer motivation and usage of traditional mass media, such as television, U> has also been adopted to explain the motivation and benefits derived from various digital media, including user-generated content (Shao, 2009). This theory has been widely applied to investigate diverse consumer behaviors, such as participation in online communities, adoption of food delivery apps, co-creation of value in innovation-based brand communities, motivation for browsing social media pages, and luxury brand social media pages (Nambisan and Baron 2009; Verhagen et al., 2015; Ray et al., 2019; Zollo et al., 2020). By identifying and addressing the socio-psychological needs of their target audiences, companies can create more engaging and relevant media content appealing to their consumers.

Furthermore, the U&G theory has been applied in mobile gamified ads by Rialti et al., (2022), which investigate their impact on consumer's benefits and in-app purchase intention. In examining the role of benefit they found that a gamification experience of an advertised content in mobile app may favor in-app purchases but this relationship is mediated by several variables as perceived consumer-benefits, their attitude toward advertising, and the perceived advertising effectiveness. Thus, to create an effective advertising, it should be able to elicit a set of benefits dimensions which refer to social, personal, hedonic and cognitive, as well as be congruent with the context in which the branded content is embedded.

However, they investigate the role of benefit only in relation to purchase while not considering its role in consumers' perception of intrusiveness and attitude to be exposed to in-game advertisements, thereby providing opportunities to study possible different outcomes (Rialti et al., 2022). In addition, since greater entertainment and interactivity may positively foster brand perceptions (Terlutter and Capella 2013), an extension of the research context towards game environments connoted with different characteristics that may affect the entertainment is worthy (Rialti et al., 2022).

Purpose of the paper. The purpose of this research is to investigate the responses of consumers who are exposed to different types of advertising elements and how IGA may be embedded in a beneficial and non-intrusive way to avoid reactance.

In this perspective, building on Use and Gratification Theory (UGT) and Psychological Reactance Theory (PR), the research wishes to explore how consumers' experience deriving from the exposition to a variety of IGA could contribute to the consumers' benefits perception and to the perception of intrusiveness. Moreover, their attitude in being exposed to advertising content during the gameplay is also investigated. In specific, we develop three interwoven research questions:

- RQ1. Does IGA congruity and interactivity influence consumers' perceived benefit of an IGA?
- RQ2. What is the role of consumers' perceived benefits in affecting IGA attitude?
- RQ3. Does the perceived benefit influence the perceived intrusiveness of an IGA?

By answering the question this ongoing research project aims to investigate the complex relationships between congruity and interactivity, benefit, reactance, and attitude in the context of digital advertising in videogames. These variables have been studied in previous research, but little attention has been given to the benefit that a videogame player may perceived during the game experience.

Perceived benefit refers to the positive outcomes or rewards that users expect to receive from interacting with a particular advertisement. These benefits can take many forms, such as increased knowledge, entertainment, or even monetary rewards or receive personalized offers and promotions based on their interests and preferences. Previous studies have suggested that the perceived benefit of mobile advertisement can influence a user's attitude towards the advertisement, which in turn can affect their purchase intentions and actual behavior (Ham and Nelson 2016; Kurtz et al., 2021).

Thus, we aim to investigate the mediating role of perceived benefit in the relationship between congruity and interactivity, reactance, and attitude. Congruity refers to the degree of fit between the advertisement and the context in which it is presented, while interactivity refers to a behavioral element of a users' actions, as they can interact with the surrounding environment in which they are located (Flavián et al., 2019). Reactance refers to the negative reactions that users may have when they feel that their freedom or autonomy is being threatened.

By investigating the mediating role of perceived benefit, we intend to gain a deeper understanding of how these variables interact with each other in the context of digital advertising within a video game. Specifically, we expect that the perceived benefit of interacting with an advertisement will play a key role in determining users' attitudes towards the advertisement and their subsequent behavior. Ultimately, this research may have important implications for advertisers and marketers who are looking to create more effective digital advertising campaigns.

Methodology. The research adopts a 2 (IGA Congruity: high vs low) x 2 (IGA Interactivity: high vs low) between-subject experimental design in which congruity and interactivity are manipulated.

The main dependent variables that will be studied include the perceived benefit, perceived intrusiveness, and the attitude towards IGA. To study these relationships, respondents are exposed to different visual stimuli representing different types of advertisements within the game *Grand Theft Auto V* (GTA). We selected GTA as represents a realistic scenario that can be compared to real-life situations, which can help to better understand the impact of branded content on players. Additionally, the open-world gameplay mechanics of GTA make it an ideal candidate for studying how players interact with branded content in immersive, nonlinear game environments.

The study is carrying out thought the administration of a questionnaire composed by six parts, each aimed at studying each variable mentioned above.

In the first part of the questionnaire, respondents will be asked to answer a couple of question about their knowledge about the video game selected and their level of expertise. Furthermore, they will be randomly assigned respondents to one of four scenarios characterized by different condition of congruity and interactivity (high - low).

For each of the four scenarios, respondents will be exposed to visual stimuli in which different types of in-game advertising are depicted, which include both product placement and billboard advertising as a component of the game context. In each of the subsequent sections of the questionnaire, where the effects of the variables are investigated, assessments of each are made on a Likert scale of 1 to 7 (1= "Not at all agree"; 7= "Completely agree").

In the second part of the questionnaire, respondents will be asked to give their opinion on the perceived level of congruity between the advertised content of the scenario and the game theme. The congruity is studied based on the scale adopted previously by Speed and Thomson (2000) and Verberckmoes et al., (2016).

In the third part, we asked respondents to state their degree of interactivity based on four items adapted from Lee et al., (2014) (e.g. "I can interact with the advertised product in the game). In the fourth part, we investigate the benefit perceived based on items adapted from Nambisan and Baron (2009), which consider different dimension of benefit: cognitive, social, personal, and hedonic.

Furthermore, the fifth part is dedicated to the perception of intrusiveness of in IGA that may lead to a psychological reactance (Malhotra et al., 2021) relying on Li et al., (2002) scale, which include items as "The advertisement is intrusive" or "The advertisement invades the game experience". Lastly, based on Fortin and Dholakia (2005), respondents are assessed on their attitude towards IGA.

Results. The research is still in its early stages since data have to be gathered. Yet, we may discuss about our expected outcome.

First of all, we expect that an IGA with high congruity may be perceived as helpful for the game's advancement and are considered more beneficial, as fulfilling the cognitive and hedonic needs of players. In fact previous research demonstrated that having ads which is congruent with the videogame context has significant effects on how successful they are at generating positive consumer outcomes (Wang and Chou 2019). Conversely, when an IGA is perceived as incongruent with the game, it may be seen as disruptive to the gameplay experience and therefore not fulfilling any needs. This can lead to negative attitudes towards IGA itself.

Moreover, previous contributions have shown that interactivity positively promotes the purchase of virtual items and usage patterns (Wang et al., 2019) has a benefic effect on consumers, favoring the perception of informativeness (Ott et al., 2016) and attitude towards IGA (Vashisht and Chauhan 2017). Consequently, it is plausible to assume that interactive advertising content has a positive impact on consumers' perceived benefit and attitude towards IGA. Within this relationship we expected that the benefit perceived by consumers play a mediator role as when consumers have a higher interaction with products their attitude positively benefits (van Berlo et al, 2021). Ultimately, when a user perceives a positive benefit, we expect that they will perceive the advertising content as less intrusive and thus

psychological reactance will not be generated. Based on previous research, we expect this effect to be stronger for scenarios in which users are exposed to advertisements congruent with the game theme (Verberckmoes et al., 2016; Pelsmacker et al., 2019).

Research limitations. This research has some limitations which could be used as hints for future studies. A first limitation is the game context, which limits its generalizability, as game characteristics influence consumers' responses to IGA. Therefore, it would be interesting to evaluate other types of games as well, including assessing different levels of interactivity, such as virtual reality, which could change the effect of other variables.

Subsequently, future research could delve into consumers' responses to IGA through a qualitative methodological approach, as the large body of studies has been predominantly quantitative (van Berlo et al., 2022).

Managerial implications. For advertiser, to consider these characteristics of an IGA is important to cope with players acceptance, as they may resent being interrupted by ads during their gameplay perceiving ads as intrusive (Tran and Strutton 2013; Verberckmoes et al., 2016). This, results in a psychological reactance as the interactive nature of digital advertisements might be irritating and provide an overwhelming volume of information (Stewart and Pavlou, 2002). Thus, it becomes important to be able to understand how branded content can be placed within video games. Therefore, investigating consumer responses to certain advertising stimuli within a game becomes strategic for practitioners to collimate the need of brands to use new communication channels to engage consumers, with that of users to avoid invasive content.

Originality of the paper. Given that the existing literature has only partially examined the role of perceived benefit in in-game advertising through this work we intend to make step forward providing empirical evidence of the role of the benefit perceived in affecting the perceived intrusiveness and the attitude, in a different context in which characteristics may affect the involvement as suggested by Rialti et al., (2022). Furthermore, the potential for GTA's open-world gameplay mechanics to be transposed into the metaverse makes it an even more relevant example to study. As the concept of the metaverse continues to gain traction and become more mainstream, understanding how branded content can be integrated into immersive virtual environments will be increasingly important for marketers and game developers alike (Dwivedi et al., 2022).

Keywords: in-game advertising, product placement, psychological reactance, brand attitude

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