

CONSUMERS' ATTITUDE TOWARDS VIDEO GAMES AND THEIR USE AS AN ADVERTISING METHOD: A PRELIMINARY STUDY

Alina Ghirvu

Department of Marketing

Faculty of Economic Studies and Business Administration,

Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, România

alina.ghirvu@ubbcluj.ro

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Abstract: *The development of new media changed radically the markets and made companies and brands to orientate toward new ways of promoting their products and services. Marketers are intensively investigating the potential of new advertising alternatives to better understand and use of the advantages offered by the interactive online environment. In the Internet context, studying consumers' perception of advertising with new media setup became very important for understanding the way that computer and video games are perceived and accepted by the public and in what ways they could be used for promotional purposes. The present paper investigates the basic elements that define opinions, feelings and attitude of consumers from Romania towards video games in general and advertising in online games in particular, trying to find and describe a series of aspects regarding consumers' grade of acceptance towards video games as an advertising tool and social acceptance of this practice. The lack of studies regarding Romanian consumers' opinions regarding video games and their use for advertising purposes justified the necessity of researches on this matter. These kinds of studies could help advertisers in choosing advergaming as a communication tool, and to take in consideration video games as part of their promotional strategy. The present study used the qualitative method of semi-structured in-depth interview and represents a preliminary study for investigating the basic elements that help in defining consumers' attitude towards the use of video games as a promotional tool. The data analyze identified six dimensions which could be used for describing the Romanian consumers' attitude towards video games. Results illustrate the essence of interviews applied on ten volunteers and show that in general Romanian consumers have positive feelings towards advertisements in video games and they are willing to accept them as long as they are not intrusive, are not disturbing the game play or there are advantages at product acquisition.*

Keywords: *consumers' attitude, video games, advertising, Romanian market*

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1. Introduction

Internet technology enhances consumers' interactive experience, allowing them more freedom in choosing the type of information they search and the moment when to receive it. The interactive communication eliminates physical, temporal and spatial barriers in a way that traditional media is unable to do. Authors defined interactivity in the marketing field, stating that this is an immediate iterative process that makes advertisers understand consumers' needs and help to learn, change, meet and satisfy these needs (Bezjian, 1998). In some opinions (Haeckel, 1998), interactive marketing focuses on exchange by managing and promoting interactivity as the essence of the process. In author's opinion, an exchange from person-to-person or person-to-technology aims to change the behavior or knowledge of at least one person (Haeckel, 1998). He considers there are in fact multiple dimensions which are representative for interactivity: degree of contingency, degree of sensory involvement, number and types of entities involved, frequency of exchange, degree of cognitive involvement, degree of synchronicity, types of media involved and content being exchanged.

Today, advertisers use Internet technology to establish new ways of reaching and communicating with their actual and potential clients. A relatively new direction was taken by advertising which uses video game technologies, like advergames and in-game insertions. Advergames are video games constructed around a brand which commissions this game, while in-game insertions represent a technique of placing brand information in a video game already created.

Online video games with advertising content have in fact multiple characteristics of online web advertising. In general, interactivity is considered an additional criterion for positive evaluation of web advertising with advantages that include the potential of consumers to perceive the information with click – through systems and the possibility to act in consensus with consumers' immediately interests. This attributes of the online environment, available also for video games, make them to be easy to accept by the general public. Players can control the amount of advertising exposure and can decide about the ads they want to watch, when to do this and for how much time, by choosing the advergence they want to play.

When a consumer interacts with an advertisement incorporated into a video game, the relevance of the ad, the importance of information and current needs will influence the consumers' general involvement with the ad. This personal implication will affect the way that consumer will perceive the value of that ad, according to his affective of cognitive needs as entertainment, informational learning, social interaction, personal identity, escape or companionship (Blumler, 1979; Katz et al, 1974; Rubin, 1981; 1983).

Studying consumers' perception of advertising with new media sets become very important for understanding the way that new media like computer and video games are perceived and accepted by the public and in what manners they could be used for promotional purposes.

2. Background

2.1 Consumer's attitude towards advertising

Today advertising is a complex business and with the improvement of Internet technology, the environment and landscape of business suffered various changes. New techniques in communication and public targeting requested studies for understanding consumers' behavioral characteristics and new approaches for satisfying consumers' needs.

In general, advertising helps in developing a strong brand image and is used to persuade, inform or remind consumers about a certain product or service. It is considered a non-personal communication in the structure of information, usually paid for and generally persuasive, regarding products, services or ideas, ordered by sponsors that use a variety of media (Bovee and Arens, 1992).

Consumer behavior studies focus on decision-making processes and actions that people use for obtaining their resources, consuming them and getting products and services they need (Blackwell et al, 2001; Schiffman and Kanuk, 1991). The origins of these disciplines are in psychology science mixed with sociology, economy and different behavioral sciences (Grunert, 1988).

More scholars and researchers become interested in understanding consumers set of actions, and become an aspect very large studies including development of efficient strategies used in influencing decisions made by consumers (Blackwell et al, 2001).

Authors (Rossiter and Percy, 1997) consider that a good communication strategy have to include three major objectives concerning consumers behavior. A marketer should not only encourage purchase, which is the main goal of a promotional campaign, but also to increase brand awareness and generate positive attitude. This three combined elements helps advertisers to conduct their public from the state of knowing about the product to a positive predisposition which helps in generate purchase (Belch and Belch, 2001).

An important attention received studies concerning consumer's attitude (Kanso and Nelson, 2007), considered the main determinant element for understanding the consumers' decision making process.

Referring to advertising industry, some authors (Bauer and Greyser, 1968) considered attitude as the audience behavior towards advertising in general. This general attitude can be described through a favorable or unfavorable response to a particular advertisement.

Mehta (2000) thinks that one of the influential indicators of advertising efficiency is consumers' attitude, as consumers' cognitive ability of decoding an advertisement message is reflected in the feelings and thought and it will influence in this way the consumers' attitude about an advertisement (Mackenzie and Lutz, 1989).

Previous studies about consumers' attitude towards advertising had mixed results. The economic context of internationalization extended the dimensions which could be investigated for helping researchers to explore the role of advertising in measuring the performance of product and services. New technologies allow consumers to access faster and easier the marketing information they are interested in (Tai, 2007).

2.2 Public acceptance of video games in the new media context

New media is a concept which includes the many forms of electronic communication that become possible due to computer technology, including informational, recreational, cultural, social, educational and commercial applications. Examples of new media include computer and video games, social networks, virtual reality environments, web sites, blogs and mobile devices. All these media are characterized by interactivity, the most important characteristic of these environments.

The industry of computer and online video games become in the last years one of the most powerful markets, overcoming the economic problems that affected other industry over time. The changes in the new markets made video games become an influential instrument for entertainment (Souri, 2007; Squire, 2003). The increasing popularity of this industry determined researchers to investigate the effects that it has over people.

Numerous authors studied video games under different aspects. Some of them analyzed the positive aspects as civic games (Kahn et al., 2008), serious games (Michael and Chen, 2006; Wong et al., 2007) and persuasive games (Bogost, 2006; 2007; 2008; O’Luanaigh, 2006; Smith and Just, 2009). Others (Anderson and Dill, 2000; Barlett et al., 2008; Smith et al., 2003; Williams, 2006) studied the negative effect over consumers, focusing on violent feelings and aggressive behavior.

Authors (Roig et al, 2009) explained that the impact of video games can be understood through the general media practices, considering the cultural aspect in which video games evolve. The particular structure and content features of video games made them useful for learning process, which could become more appealing and goal-oriented (Mitchell, 2004; Souri, 2007; Squire, 2003; Wong et al., 2007). In addition, these qualities could be used for political or social reasons. A good example of this is the video game U.S. Army which was successfully used for soldier recruitments (Reiss, 2009).

Some marketers used video games for integrating products and advertising messages into virtual environment (Bailey, Wise, & Bolls, 2009; Smith & Just, 2009; Wise, Bolls, Kim, Venkataraman, & Meyer, 2008). As this practice become more common, it started to be used as a persuasive tool. Even if video games belong to different groups, depending on their purpose – educative, entertainment, politic, social – they were adapted and orientated into persuading the players.

An author that largely studied video games (Bogost, 2006; 2007) explained persuasive games through “procedural rhetoric”, meaning that video games provide players with an environment defined by a set of rules and procedures, rather than presenting direct persuasive messages. Consequently, players become involved in the persuasion process by simply following the game rules and developing arguments by trying to accomplish the game’s goals. Other authors (Smith and Just, 2009) also supported these findings, noticing that playing certain video games types implies a persuasive player. They presented three factors that influence the level of self-persuasion in video games: integration, message autonomy and goals.

Two important research papers studied the influence that the presence of brand in online video games has on consumer attitude (Nelson et al, 2006; Bambauer, 2006). They showed that the placement of a brand into a video game evaluated positive will lead to a positive change of attitude regarding that brand. Other authors (Mallinckrodt

and Mizerski, 2007) inquired these findings, showing there is no positive effect on attitude for brands included in advergames.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research objectives

The use of video games for advertising purposes is a practice relative new. Even if previous studies showed it is efficient for promotional campaigns, in Romania this practice is poorly used by advertisers, the general tendency remaining the use of traditional media.

One important aspect that rises is not necessarily if advertisers tend to ignore this new advertising method, by using media as television, radio, billboards or magazines, but rather if this approach is dictated by the fact that Romanian public is reticent to this kind of promotion and the use of video games for other purposes beside entertainment. Even more, it is important to know in what way video games are perceived and accepted from the social perspective.

Some authors (Ducoffe, 1996) consider that the attitude towards an advertisement can be related to the attitude towards the environment that contains it and the consumers perceived value towards the advertising. Consequently, a negative opinion about video games in general will reflect on public's acceptance of them as an advertising tool, investigating this aspect is important for understanding the success rate of implementing this advertising method. The research questions gravitate around a series of aspect regarding consumers' grade of acceptance towards video games as an advertising tool, starting from the general opinions about video games as an entertaining media and the way they are perceived and accepted from a social point of view.

The lack of fundamental studies in Romania concerning advertising through online video games imposed a basic study for shaping those elements that are specific for public on this market. Therefore, this study looks to gather information of qualitative nature with the purpose of finding about respondents' feelings, thoughts and attitude towards video games in general, brand that use online games for promoting themselves and consumers' purchase intentions regarding a product or service advertised in this way. In the same time, the study is looking to determine the degree of respondent acquaintance with this advertising practice, as well as the knowledge about the basic advertising games, as advergames and in-games.

3.2 Research process

Exploring the consumers' opinions about video games in general, and their advertising potential, as well as the acceptance of using them for advertising purposes implied the use of the qualitative method of in-depth interview.

In general, in-depth interview are a good tool for obtaining detailed information about consumer's thoughts and for exploring new issues, and can be used for obtaining a complete picture about what happens in the market, providing in the same time context for other data. An important advantage of using this method instead of other qualitative methods as the focus group, is that helps the interviewer obtaining more detailed information and gain insights about people opinions, behaviors and thought in a relaxed and friendly atmosphere.

Romanian consumers' opinion regarding video games and their potential use for advertising purposes is a matter very little studied; therefore the use of this qualitative method is a good approach for gathering primary information about this subject. The selection of the respondents was based on an advert posted to an online social page. The advert contained a pre-interview of three questions with the purpose of selecting the participant for the in-depth interview based on their opinion about new media advertising and video games in general (according to table 1).

Table 1: Screening questions for participants' selection in the in-depth interview

	Question	Type of answer
1.	What is your opinion about new media advertising (social networks, virtual reality environments, web sites, blogs and mobile devices) compared to traditional advertising (television, radio, magazines)?	Free answer
2.	Have you played any video game in the last three months?	Yes/No
3.	What is your opinion about video games in general?	Free answer

The first question was designed to observe the consumers' predisposition to use new media and the preference for Internet based advertising messages. The respondents who manifested positive preferences towards this environment were considered more adequate for the in-depth interview. Those who seemed more likely to prefer traditional media weren't selected and the next two questions weren't taken in consideration for these respondents.

The second question was designed to select those who play video games, casual and passionate gamers, from those who don't have this kind of activity in their free time. A person who plays less than one time in three months can be considered a non-player, or a person who just does not like games. Consequently, those who answered with "no" at this question were considered unsuitable for the in-depth interview and weren't considered for the next question.

The third question had the purpose to separate those with strong negative opinions about video games from others with more favorable opinions. The selection based on this criterion was relevant as persons with strong conviction on a matter could be uncooperative and investigating deeper insights of these consumers would have been unreasonable for this study.

Based on the screening questions, were recruited ten volunteers which were contacted by the interviewer through the e-mail made available by the participants when they registered for the study.

The work stages included the formulation of the questions based on previous literature, the making of the interview guide and the administration of the interview with consumers. The study used secondary research to build the interview guide, which included 20 questions, divided in three categories: three demographic questions about the respondent, including the gender, age and occupation; seven questions about video games in general and ten questions about advertising in video games.

In the recent years, the way people perceive games transformed. While in the past playing video games was thought to be an occupation specific to young males, and games were in general addressing this target, now developers extended the public segment they address. Internationally, today's gamers consist in male, females, parents and seniors who enjoy playing. Consequently, the sample chosen included a larger category of respondents, with ages between 17 to 55 years (according to table 2).

Table 2: In-depth interview respondents' demographics

Respondent	Gender	Age	Occupation
1	male	24	student
2	male	26	freelancer
3	female	23	student
4	male	55	teacher
5	male	17	high school pupil
6	female	36	secretary
7	male	34	sells agent
8	female	18	High school pupil
9	female	27	public relations manager
10	male	19	student

With every individual volunteer was established a separate meeting, during two weeks period (7.01 – 21.01.2013). The meetings with the volunteers took place in a location choose by the respondents in Cluj-Napoca city, allowing in this way a relaxing atmosphere, good for free discussions on the main theme. The meetings were recorded, the interviewer taking also notes during the discussions. For their participation, the volunteers were rewarded with a free lunch at a restaurant.

The data analyze included several stages. First was the careful hearing of the recordings from the interviews and the transcription on paper of the entire dialogues with every participant. The second stage included the organizing of the information according to resembling of answers and similitude, as well as noting the key elements. The third stage included summarize of the answers and the information systemization in two main categories: information regarding the impressions about video games in general, and information about the attitude towards advertising in video games.

3.3 Results

Analyze of the interviews revealed common aspects to all the respondents, as well as particular elements. In general, the interviews showed a series of important aspect about the Romanian consumer's perceptions about video games and advertising.

Answers revealed that most of the volunteers think video games are funny, interesting and can be a pleasant method for relaxation and spending free time, during evenings or weekends.

What concerns the preference for a certain game genre, the females declared they prefer casual games such as logic games, puzzles or electronic versions of game-

board like cards, dice, Monopoly or Rummy, while male declared they prefer action games, shooters, sports or race competitions.

The participants who consider themselves as being passionate gamers think that this kind of media is more fun than any other mass-media as television, radio or magazines, while those who are occasional players prefer traditional media for relaxing, in particular television.

The social aspects involving video games suffered great dynamic changes. Respondents had very diversified opinions. Some respondents think video games are harmless, particularly if they are game-boards, other think they are dangerous for children, can induce violent behavior and could make people lazier or disconnected with reality. Some consider that video games are relaxing and fun, while others considered that video games could make people antisocial, can distract them from important activities, especially the children, and could cause dependence. Players had in general a good opinion about video games with concern to the content and the design of the game, the actual technologies offer possibility for virtual constructions very pleasant. This opinion was common to passionate and occasional players.

The viral component proved to be very poor represented, as volunteers declared they usually do not recommend games to their friends and family. Only a few, in special the young ones, said they share the game experience for attracting their friends into playing with them or challenging them into competing.

The expressed opinions about advertising in video games proved to be positive in general, as respondents tend to have positive feelings about brands that use video games for promotion.

An important aspect of this study was to investigate the public's acceptance of video games as advertising tools and implicitly the potential that the use of this practice at national scale has for implementing promotional campaigns and establishing efficient brand communication.

A first and important aspect was to establish from the start the degree of respondents' familiarization with the concepts of adver-gaming and in-gaming, the two major types of video games with advertising content. The majority of those who heard about the use of video games for advertising purposes found on their own about this from the Internet, and think though these methods are adequate for promotional presentation. Majority said they have knowledge about adverts in games, but they didn't know to give exact examples.

Most respondents think they will be annoyed if the level of adverts they see in the video games they play would increase, and will prefer to play something else. In the same time, they said they would play a game with advertising content only if that game would be very interesting, the commercials will not interrupt the game story and will not disturb them in any way. Also, they are prepared to accept the presence of advertisements in their favorite games, if this would lead to price reduction of the game or becoming free, also if they would offer advantages at the acquisition on the product in markets, reduction coupons, vouchers and discounts.

Regarding the declared purchase intention of a product advertised in a video game, only a few said they would buy such a product or service, while most of them declared they will not make such an acquisition or they are not sure yet about this.

The findings of this exploratory research revealed several aspects related to Romanian consumer opinions and attitudes about video games. These aspects can be regarded into six dimensions:

- *Entertainment dimension*: consumers consider that video games are a good modality for spending free time, for fun and relaxing, but this does not exclude traditional media, as television, radio or reading magazines;
- *Advertising dimension*: video games seem to be accepted as an alternative to traditional media and online banner ads. This acceptance is conditioned by the advertisements volume, the presence of adverts in the favorite games and the way they are integrated in the video game design;
- *Price dimension*: consumers are expected to obtain advantages as discounts and price reductions, for accepting advertisements in the video games they play;
- *Social dimension*: consumers' opinions about this aspect were found to be oscillating between considering games as fun, relaxing, and a harmless occupational hazard, and a dangerous activity which could cause antisocial behavior, distraction from important activities or dependence;
- *Viral dimension*: the coordinated of this component were very poor represented -Romanian consumers do not use to share game experience with friends.
- *Purchase intention dimension*: consumers are not willing to purchase a product seen in a video game.

4. Conclusions and further research

The present study is an exploratory research designed for obtaining qualitative information regarding the Romanian consumers' attitude and opinion about video games and their use for advertising purposes.

The six dimensions identified and explained above could be used for explaining consumers' opinions and acceptance of video games as an entertainment and advertising tool in Romanian market. The limitations of this study are given by the reduced number of interviews which provided a small amount of data on this subject. The study identified the dimensions that are important for consumers on this market, but does not offer details on how and in what conditions they could be used or improved. This study underlines the most relevant elements that have to be considered by marketers when they are planning a campaign based on video games for Romanian market. Further researches could focus on ways to find the statistical representativeness of the dimensions found, and to provide more information on ways to efficiently use this dimension when designing an advergame for promotional campaigns on this market.

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