



The impact of social setting on the recall and recognition of in-game advertising



Laura Herrewijn*, Karolien Poels

Department of Communication Studies, University of Antwerp, Sint Jacobstraat 2, 2000 Antwerp, Belgium

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ABSTRACT

The current paper contributes to the study of in-game advertising (IGA) effectiveness by investigating the 24 impact of social setting on brand awareness (i.e. brand recall and recognition) in a digital game context. 25 An experiment ($N = 121$) was conducted in which participants played a digital game containing IGA in 26 various social conditions. Results show that a person's social environment has a significant influence 27 on brand awareness and that this effect can be primarily attributed to two factors: social presence (i.e. 28 the awareness of and interaction with another person) and player interactivity (i.e. the ability to actively 29 control a digital game). Playing in a social setting seems to have a negative influence on the recall and 30 recognition of IGA, with other people serving as a distracting factor. Watching while others play a digital 31 game, however, has a positive impact on brand awareness.

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1. Introduction

Digital gaming has become one of the most popular forms of entertainment. It has evolved from a pastime predominantly favored by adolescent males into a mainstream medium that appeals to all age groups and genders (DFC Intelligence, 2011a; Entertainment Software Association, 2013). Consequently, digital games have piqued the interest of the advertising industry, which is increasingly starting to see them as a suitable medium for the incorporation of advertisements (Lewis & Porter, 2010; Mackay, Ewing, Newton, & Windisch, 2009; Mau, Silberer, & Constien, 2008). Aside from their ability to reach an ever-growing audience, digital games have the advantage of a long shelf-life and high replay value (Nelson, 2002). Moreover, they give advertisers the opportunity to integrate their brands as an integral part of the digital game experience, reaching out to players in a highly vivid, interactive and immersive entertainment environment (Mackay et al., 2009; Nelson, 2005; Schneider & Cornwell, 2005). Finally, integrating advertisements into their games also provides game publishers and developers with a means to subsidize the rising development and marketing costs of their games without having to increase the retail price, which ultimately also benefits the gamer as end user (Chambers, 2005).

An optimal exploitation of the incorporation of advertising inside digital games, or in-game advertising (IGA), would thus be advantageous for all parties involved. However, although the practice of IGA is predicted to grow steadily over the next several years (DFC Intelligence, 2011b), IGA revenues are still relatively low compared to advertising revenues spent on other media (such as television and the Internet) (DFC Intelligence, 2011b). Many advertisers still do not embrace digital games as a viable advertising vehicle because of the continuing difficulties in determining and optimizing the effectiveness of in-game advertisements (Boyd & Lalla, 2009).

In-game advertising research has shown that there is no such thing as a perfect, one-fits-all formula for the integration of effective and successful ads in a digital game context; IGA effectiveness often depends on a multitude of factors related to the context in which the ad is encountered, such as the genre of the game that is being played, the type of brand or advertisement that is integrated into the game environment, the prominence of the brand placement, the amount of congruity between the game and the brand, the amount of interactivity that is allowed, and the player's experiences during gameplay (e.g. Grigorovici & Constantin, 2004; Herrewijn & Poels, 2013; Herrewijn & Poels, 2014; Jeong & Biocca, 2012; Lee & Faber, 2007; Lewis & Porter, 2010; Mackay et al., 2009; Mau et al., 2008; Nelson, 2002, 2005; Schneider & Cornwell, 2005). Therefore, it is important to study how and under which conditions IGA is truly effective. The current paper contributes to the study of in-game advertising effectiveness by investigating the impact of an

* Corresponding author. Address: University of Antwerp, Sint Jacobstraat 2, 2000 Antwerp, Belgium. Tel.: +32 3 265 56 74.

E-mail address: laura.herrewijn@uantwerpen.be (L. Herrewijn).

important, but under-investigated factor related to the advertising context, namely the social conditions in which a digital game is played. More specifically, we examine the impact of variations in social setting on a person's awareness (i.e. recall and recognition) of brand placements that are integrated into the digital game environment.

1.1. The impact of social setting on brand awareness

Studies looking at the effectiveness of advertising inside traditional media (e.g. print, television) already showed that a person's social environment can greatly impact the processing of advertisements in terms of brand awareness (Bellman, Rossiter, Schweda, & Varan, 2012; Fay & Liebman, 2012; Keller & Fay, 2012; Moorman, 2003; Puntoni & Tavassoli, 2007). Since digital games bring many opportunities for social play and can be played in a wide variety of social situations, we expect the social component to also have implications for the awareness of brands embedded into the game world. Digital games can be played alone (i.e. single-player mode), but they are often also played together with others (i.e. multiplayer mode), either over the Internet or in the same physical space (de Kort & IJsselstein, 2008; Gajadhar, 2012). According to the Entertainment Software Association (2013), 62% of gamers play games with others, either in-person or online. In these multiplayer instances, people can work together to complete game objectives or they can compete with each other to see who is the better player (de Kort & IJsselstein, 2008; Gajadhar, 2012). Moreover, people often watch while others are playing games, for instance when observing the gameplay of other players in the spectator mode of multiplayer games or when watching friends or family members play on a living room console, possibly even taking turns so that everyone can get a shot at the game (Calleja, 2011; de Kort & IJsselstein, 2008; Gajadhar, 2012). This social component is generally described as making digital games even more enjoyable, involving and stimulating (Calleja, 2011; de Kort & IJsselstein, 2008; Gajadhar, 2012; Poels, de Kort, & IJsselstein, 2012), and consequently, it has proven to be one of the main motivations to play digital games altogether (de Kort & IJsselstein, 2008; Gajadhar, 2012; Lazzaro, 2004; Yee, 2006). Our main objective is therefore to examine how these different modes of social play (and the varying social interactions that arise from them) influence the awareness of brands inside a digital game. We distinguish between situations in which people experience the gameplay alone ("solo play" or single-player setting) and situations in which they share their experiences with others ("social play"), either in a multiplayer setting, or in a public play setting where some people play the game while others watch. Moreover, we also take into account the differences in user control and interactivity that emerge in these "playing" versus "watching" gaming situations.

1.1.1. Solo play versus social play

Advertising studies focusing on traditional media (e.g. print, television) have demonstrated that the situational circumstances a person finds himself in while being exposed to an advertisement are a central part of the advertising context, influencing brand awareness (Moorman, 2003). These situational circumstances include a person's social environment while consuming media and the advertisements that are encountered in this context. People can experience advertising messages alone or in the presence of others (e.g. when watching television commercials in the company of family or friends), and research has shown that the nature of a person's social setting can greatly impact his awareness of the brands that are encountered (Bellman et al., 2012; Fay & Liebman, 2012; Keller & Fay, 2012; Moorman, 2003; Puntoni & Tavassoli, 2005). The findings of these studies, however, can be divided into two opposing camps.

On the one hand, there is the dominant view of Baron's (1986) information processing theory of distraction, suggesting a negative impact of social setting on the processing of information. According to Baron (1986), others can be seen as a source of distraction, interfering with the processing of information and ultimately affecting our performance and experience. In line with this theory are the results from Bellman et al. (2012), who show that the presence of others while viewing television commercials reduces the processing of advertisements in terms of brand recall. This mere presence or social facilitation effect was first documented by Zajonc (1965), who argued that the mere presence of others facilitates a person's performance on easy tasks, but is detrimental for his performance on more complex tasks. According to Bellman et al. (2012), paying full attention to a television commercial is a complex task, since it is performed with limited capacity and is therefore sensitive to changes in demands. The presence of others during the exposure to a television commercial puts more pressure on a person's available cognitive resources, pulling attention away from what is happening on the screen and resulting in lower brand awareness (Bellman et al., 2012).

On the other hand, there is the social influence theory, stating a positive influence of social environment on brand awareness (Fay & Liebman, 2012; Keller & Fay, 2012). Studies putting forward this model posit that when people view television commercials in the presence of others, this delivers a clear word of mouth benefit: the presence of others raises people's emotional engagement with and response to the advertising content, resulting in them talking about and sharing the advertising content and ultimately increasing the effectiveness of the ad (Fay & Liebman, 2012; Keller & Fay, 2012).

Because digital games can be played in a wide variety of social situations, we expect social environment to also have implications for the awareness of brands encountered in a digital game environment. However, the impact of social setting on brand awareness in an IGA context has been barely studied, with the exception of one study from Dardis and Schmierbach (2012). In this study, Dardis and Schmierbach (2012) look at the effect of playing alone versus playing with a partner on the recall of in-game ads. They find that playing a game together with a friendly partner enhances individuals' ad recall, and – in line with the social influence model – suggest that this is due to the positive affective feeling that stems from the presence of (friendly) others during the game experience, although they did not explicitly measure players' emotional experiences during gameplay.

Following the results of the studies described above, we formulate the following two competing hypotheses concerning the impact of solo play versus social play on brand awareness:

H1a. Gaming in a social context will lead to lower brand awareness compared to gaming in a solo context (i.e. distraction theory).

H1b. Gaming in a social context will lead to higher brand awareness compared to gaming in a solo context (i.e. social influence theory).

1.1.2. Play versus watch

Subsequently, we propose that there will also be a difference in brand awareness in situations where people actually play versus merely watch while others play a digital game. The central factor here is interactivity, one of the characteristics that distinguishes digital games from other media by giving the user control over the environment (Nelson, Keum, & Yaros, 2004; Nelson, Yaros, & Keum, 2006; Schneider & Cornwell, 2005). In a digital game context, players are able to directly interact with the game: they can control their own actions and perceptions (e.g. by manipulating

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