



Advergaming and the effects of game-product congruity

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ABSTRACT

Electronic games transcend demographic boundaries and are a prevalent cultural phenomenon. Marketers see potential of this immersive venue as a way to reach a highly receptive audience with brand messages. Designing games around a brand – advergaming – has become a common marketing practice. However, few empirical studies have tested the effectiveness of this communication strategy in delivering the brand message. This paper serves to fill some research gaps and explores the influence of game-product congruity on brand memory and attitudes toward the game. A product-congruent advergaming is compared to a product-incongruent advergaming using a stimulus brand for a low-involvement product category. The findings indicate that highly congruent games lead to superior memory for the sponsoring brand. However, benefits of these positive memory effects may be negated by the negative attitudes players have toward the highly thematic game for a low-involvement product. Implications are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Although once considered a hobby of teenage boys, gaming has become a major source of entertainment for a demographically diverse audience; over half of Americans in all age groups play video games (Deloitte, 2008; NPD Group, 2009). Kids and moms alike interact with Nintendo Wii, micro-manage their avatar in Second Life, and download online games through their mobile device or computer. Of course, the pervasiveness of gaming has attracted the attention of marketers. Gaming provides an interactive platform to communicate with target audiences in a manner unattainable through traditional media (AdWeek Media, 2009). Marketers have therefore tapped into the phenomena and are creating advergaming hoping target audiences will find value in the entertaining message and choose to interact with the brand.

Advergaming are a specific type of online game where the brand itself is embedded in game-play. Product placements appeared in video games as early as the 1980s (Entertainment Software Association [ESA], 2009). But advergaming are an evolved form of product placement where the game is designed around the brand, rather than the brand placed in the game. Advergaming and in-game advertising (IGA) present distinctly different environments, and may not be equivalent in effectiveness (Winkler & Buckner, 2006), though research is still in its infancy.

Continued investment in gaming strategies underscores the importance of research. According to a recent eMarketer report, IGA spending is expected to reach \$650 million by 2012, with

\$350 million specifically invested in advergaming (Campanelli, 2008). However, these games are still far from a proven communication strategy (Fattah & Paul, 2002). This paper contributes to recent work (Peters, Leshner, Bolls, & Wise, 2009) by examining how congruity between the brand and content of the game impacts implicit and explicit memory for the sponsoring brand and attitude toward the game. In addition, this research can spark interest for future research to include product involvement as a moderator variable.

2. Literature review

2.1. Advergaming versus in-game advertising

As suggested by Winkler and Buckner (2006), we can differentiate advergaming from other forms of in-game advertising. With IGA, marketers buy product placement space within an existing game. Multiple brands are present and usually static in the background of the main action (e.g. buying a billboard in a car-racing game) similar to product placement in TV shows or movies (Yang, Roskos-Ewoldsen, Dinu, & Arpan, 2006). On the other hand, advergaming are custom-online games designed specifically for a brand (AdWeek Media, 2009). The brand is often central to game-play and the game is the brand message (Chen & Ringel, 2001). Advergaming are placed on the brand website as part of a larger marketing strategy and are free to play. The conceptual distinction is clear. Cognitive resources needed to play advergaming versus IGA are also likely different such that some IGA games require high levels of involvement (Grigoric & Constantin, 2004) and attention to play (Lee & Faber, 2007) compared to most advergaming (Winkler &

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Buckner, 2006). This can have important implications on information processing which we will further address.

2.2. Game-product congruity

One production feature likely to influence the success of advergames is the relevance of the game to the brand (Wise, Bolls, Kim, Venkataraman, & Meyer, 2008). For example, the content of some advergames appears to not fit well with the advertised product (Ford bowling) while others integrate the product with content that reinforces brand propositions, or conveys experiences about the product (Ford street racing). Lee and Faber (2007) coin this relationship as game-product congruity and define it as “the extent to which the product category of the embedded brand is related to the content of the game” (p. 79). They further explicated different dimensions of congruity.

This present study therefore considers Lee and Faber's (2007) four-dimensional view of congruity: functional, lifestyle, image, and advertising (p. 79). Respectively, it is assessed as the extent to which (1) the brand is perceived to be a central object used in the content of the game (2) the lifestyle associated with the content of the game matches the lifestyle associated with the product or brand (3) the brand image is perceived to contribute to the theme of the game and (4) the product category of the brand seems appropriate to be associated with the theme of the game. Congruity directly affects consumers' processing of information and has implications for memory (Lee & Faber, 2007; Peters et al., 2009) and attitudes (Wise et al., 2008).

2.3. The effects of brand placements on memory

When consumers play games, do they even pay attention to, or remember the brands advertised, or are they just focusing on game-play? Increased brand recognition and awareness is one of the goals of product placement in games (ESA, 2009). Paying attention to or noticing the embedded brands serves as a prerequisite to any positive communication effects that could result.

Most IGA research gauges awareness of the brand using explicit memory measures (Chaney, Lin, & Chaney, 2004; Lee & Faber, 2007; Mackay, Ewing, Newton, & Windisch, 2009; Nelson, 2002). Explicit memory requires conscious recollection of recently presented information, and is measured by tests such as recall and recognition (Shapiro & Krishnan, 2001). For example, in an exploratory study Nelson (2002) tested immediate and delayed free recall of branded billboards in a car-racing game. Results showed gamers can recall about 25–30% of all the brands in the game immediately after game-play and 10–15% after a five-month delay. Another study found that participants in a first-person shooter game remembered seeing billboards in the game, but half could not recall any specific products or brands advertised (Chaney et al., 2004).

Other researchers argue explicit memory measures undervalue effectiveness of game advertising. Instead, implicit memory may better gauge the influence of brand placements by detecting non-conscious memory that occurs when people are not fully attending to the ad (Peters et al., 2009; Yang et al., 2006). Using a word-fragment completion task Yang et al. (2006) found participants show higher levels of implicit memory for brands than explicit memory (recognition). Findings suggest both explicit and implicit memory need to be assessed.

A variety of individual-level variables may facilitate and/or inhibit memory effects including brand familiarity and relevance (Nelson, 2002), pre-existing brand attitudes (Mackay et al., 2009), game arousal and immersion (Grigorovici & Constantin, 2004), prior game-playing experience, product placement proximity, and congruity (Lee & Faber, 2007), among others. An underlying concern

is if game players possess the cognitive resources necessary to attend to brands embedded in a fast-paced game (Grigorovici & Constantin, 2004; Lee & Faber, 2007). These researchers found that active engagement and immersion in game-play requires high levels of involvement and negatively influences explicit brand memory. Though, concerns over limited processing capacity may diminish in the context of advergames. Indeed, research by Winkler and Buckner (2006) reveals overall high levels of brand recall for advergames compared to IGA.

2.4. Unraveling the impact of congruity on memory

As mentioned, congruity may be one important production feature that impacts the effectiveness of advergames. Literature examining the effects of congruity on memory produces two conflicting viewpoints. Some researchers argue that placing advertisements in a congruent context facilitates processing by readily conforming to existing brand expectations, or brand schemas (Moorman, Neijens, & Smit, 2002; Shamdasani, Stanaland, & Tan, 2001). A schema is a complex stored framework of cognitive knowledge that holds information about a concept, including its attributes and relations among attributes (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). These researchers claim congruent information is better remembered than incongruent because people can easily assimilate the information into the schema.

Other researchers contend that when incongruent information is novel and prominent it captures greater attention during the encoding process and leads to superior recall. Lee and Faber (2007) found support for this viewpoint and provide the most comprehensive study to date on the impact of congruity between brands and game content on memory. They test nine different brands embedded in a car-racing game and find that highly incongruent brands are better recalled (pet food brands) than highly congruent brands (gasoline). Although Nelson (2002) did not test for congruity effects, she discovered novel brands (those not typically advertised in games) fared best in short term and long-term recall. Overall, participants attend to and more deeply process brands that seem novel and do not to match the surrounding context.

Evidence suggests that congruent brands may be less easily recalled in the context of console games and other media, but the aforementioned IGA literature examines player's memory for advertisements that are merely static in the background of the action. In contrast, a majority (71%) of advergames integrates the product as a major part of game-play (Lee & Youn, 2008). Notably, Lee and Faber (2007) examine differences in placement proximity (focal or peripheral to game action). They do find that focal placement leads to better brand recall than peripheral placement, but the ads are still nonetheless background stimuli. What happens when brand information is the main action of the game, as with advergames with high game-product congruity? Based on these findings, it is reasonable to posit that actively interacting with the brand or product during game-play will lead to higher explicit memory for the ad than if it was only presented in the static background of the main action.

Initial research suggests advergames may lead to superior memory effects compared to in-game advertising (Winkler & Buckner, 2006). Advergame characteristics facilitate this effect; for example, most feature one brand and are simple and straightforward to play. Gamers may not become as engrossed in-game-play, affording sufficient mental capacity to elaborate cognitively on the game and the brand. Games that strengthen this pairing (high congruity) should result in superior memory effects though the association and activation of related schemas.

Anderson's (1983) spreading activation theory of human memory helps explain how this knowledge is represented and pro-

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