



## Does game rules work as a game changer? Analyzing the effect of rule orientation on brand attention and memory in advergames



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### ABSTRACT

In advergames, marketers typically use a brand execution strategy of enacting the game rules and embedding the targeted brands in these rules to achieve the brand effectiveness. Despite the extensive use of this mode of gameplay, the current understanding in this area lacks clarity. In this context, the present research examines the importance of rule orientation as a mode of gameplay, its boundary conditions which strengthen this rule orientation, and the mechanism through which the application of rule orientation enhances gamers' brand attention and memory. Results from two experimental studies conclusively prove that use of rule orientation positively influences gamers' brand attention and memory. Results also suggest that rule orientation boosts the gamers' brand attention and memory when it is presented in a high brand-game goal congruent and in a high game autonomy mode. In addition, the results also support that rule orientation enhance the gamers' attention and memory when it designed as high brand-game goal congruent along with a highly brand integrated mode. The effect of rule orientation and its boundary conditions creates brand attention and memory through the gamers' perception of the flow experience. Thus, the study findings suggest that marketers can use rule orientation along with high brand-game goal congruence, high autonomy, and high brand integration because this mode of gameplay creates a very strong form of brand attention and memory.

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### 1. Introduction

Technological developments have changed the way firms communicate with their target audience. One such improvement in communication is placing the targeted information in entertainment/infotainment media which firms' prospective customers often interact with. The same advances in technology also gave an opportunity to firms' targeted audience to block firm-specific brands (ex: advertisements, advertorials) that they do not want to see during their media interaction so as to concentrate on the desired program without any deviations (Lee & Faber, 2007). As a result, brand effectiveness in non-traditional entertainment media has become questionable. This phenomenon forced companies to search for newer platforms that do not demarcate between entertainment and information sharing. Advergame is one such

innovation where the advertisement is integrated into the game itself. Thus, communicating branded brands through advergaming has become a popular medium lately. This mode of entertainment cum communication platform has become familiar due to the extensive reach of the internet (Herodotou, Winters, and Kambouri 2012). Prevailing studies report that targeted audience accepts firm-specific communication more readily when placed within the game context than when placed in isolation such as commercials or interstitials (Chaney, Lin, and Chaney 2004; Lewis & Porter, 2010; Nelson, Keum, and Yaros 2004).

Advergaming demand series of player selected decisions during the gameplay. The outcome of these decisions will either lead to winning or losing the game depending upon the series of decisions made by the player during the gameplay. The limited set of decisions (reflected in actions/choices) which the game player can make at different phases of the games are called game rules (Colby, 2014; Gee, 2003). In a rule-oriented advergame play, the game does not present the player with explicit brand claims and arguments about the firm/its products during their gameplay; rather, the brand is embedded within the game rules. Subsequently, by

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observing the game rules, the game player comes to interact with brand-specific brand embedded within the game (Smith, 2010). Game developers often use this rule oriented game enactments in creating awareness about subjects such as creating awareness amongst targeted customers about firm-specific products/services, publicizing agenda in political campaigns; enlightening citizens about pressing sociological/environmental issues, etc. For example, the online rule based game, 'Congo Jones and the Loggers of Doom', actively involves rules in gameplay such as an invitation to jump logs, climb waterfalls and evade chainsaws to help forest people and save their lands, etc. The core objective of this game is to allow the gamer to enact the rules and thereby achieve brand goals (e.g., create awareness about the protection of the planet's last rainforest frontier). This perspective of rule-oriented game enactment and the brand execution indicates a new way of brand representation and this has overruled the traditional brand communication modes through the spoken words, writings, images, or moving pictures (Bogost, 2007; Colby, 2014).

The current research focuses specifically on the rule enacted gameplay, i.e., presenting the branded brand as a set of rules in a game that requires the gamers to interact with the game rules to complete the gameplay. The operating premise of rule-based gameplay is that rule-based games are more successful, leading to better brand evaluations and prolonged attention and retention of communicated brands. Despite the large body of research that examines different characteristics of the game on gamers' brand related attention and memory, it remains unclear how the use of game rule orientation as a mode of the brand execution influences consumers' game embedded brand attention and memory. Thus, our primary research questions are: whether such presentations of rule-based gameplay affect the gamers' brand attention and memory of the branded brand; if so, how? Subsequently, we probe into required conditions in which rule-based game execution enhances the brand attention and memory in the game players.

The central premise of this study is that execution of rule-oriented game play may affect gamers' persuasion through schema-based processing. This proposition has been supported by the past researchers who state that people use schemas which help them make sense of their immediate interactive environment and in turn, reflects in their actions or behaviours (e.g., Fiske & Linville, 1980; Schank & Abelson, 1977). Thus, we propose that when gamers are exposed to rule-oriented gameplay, they will elicit brand related schemas more often, thereby leading to a heightened level of brand attention and memory about the firm-specific communication. Further, following schema-congruity arguments (Meyers-Levy & Tybout, 1989), we propose that perceived congruity resulting from a match between the game goal and (firms) brand goal provides more brand-related attention and memory. Conversely, perceived incongruity may lead to reduced levels of brand attention and memory. Besides, this schema-congruity may be further strengthened to create strong brand related attention and memory if the gameplay imparts higher autonomy to the gamer during the gameplay. We define autonomy within the game rule context as the extent to which the rule-oriented game can make brand related claims without relying on any outside information.

The degree of game autonomy is not, however, the only conditional factor which strengthens the effect of schema congruity to create brand attention and memory of embedded brands in the game. Schema literature supports that categories are stored in memory in a stronger fashion when an item is perceived as having a stronger fit the evoked category (Fiske, 1982; Fiske, Pavelchak, & Sorrentino, 1986). Thus, we propose that when the brand is highly integrated (versus low integration) with the gameplay, it will elicit stronger (weaker) category associations. Accordingly, we

propose that an exposure to rule orientation with higher brand-game goal congruence in high brand integrated gameplay results in higher levels explicit memory, such as brand attention, recall and recognition.

Further, based upon experience flow literature (e.g., Nelson, Yaros, and Keum 2006; Steffen, Mau, & Schramm-Klein, 2013) and excitation transfer theory (Zillmann, 1971), we presume that the game rule orientation and its boundary conditions which strengthen the gamer schemas creates brand attention and memory through an intervening mechanism of gamers' game flow experience. Flow experience explains a state in which the game player is completely absorbed by the advergaming in order to solve the challenges evoked by the exposure of rule-orientation during the gameplay. Indeed, this assumption is supported by prior studies (e.g., Grigorovici & Constantin, 2004; Nelson, Ronald, Yaros, & Keum, 2006), that gamers' perception of flow experience plays a pivotal role between game related characteristics and game players' brand related attention and memory in in-game advertising. In support of this, Steffen et al. (2013) found that while considering the outcomes of advergaming, it is essential to consider the intervening effect of gamers' perceived flow experience. Thus, in this paper, we consider game players' flow experience as the important intervening mechanism which transfers the simultaneous impact of rule orientation and its conditions and strengthens brand attention and memory.

We examine our research propositions through two experimental studies. In study one, a between-subject experiment is conducted to examine how the use of rule-orientation and the conditional effects of brand-game goal congruity and game autonomy influence gamers' brand attention and memory. Further, we also consider the intervening role of flow experience the above-said conditional effects and brand attention and memory. In study two, which is an extension of study one, we examine the conditional effect of brand integration, instead of game autonomy as a boundary condition that determines the interaction effect of rule orientation and brand-game goal congruity in influencing gamers' brand attention and memory. This understanding contributes to both theory and practice. From the theoretical point of view, the study contributes a framework that depicts the role of game rule orientation in facilitating firm-specific communication within advergaming. Our study also confirms the conditions which further strengthens the gamers' brand related schema to increase the effectiveness of the communicated brand. From a managerial perspective, this study provides directions to game developers, media planners, and advertisers regarding the use of rule-based advergaming to leverage the effect of their targeted brand communication.

## 2. Literature review & hypotheses formulation

### 2.1. Advergaming

Promoting the branded messages through games, called as advergaming, is a new form of advertising used by marketers to promote their products or services (Sreejesh & Anusree, 2017). In this mode of brand communication, brands are embedded with an entertainment media, such as games, wherein the game player during the gameplay is exposed to both the game and the firm's brands simultaneously (Bellman, Kemp, Haddad, & Varan, 2014). This game embedded brand communication enable the advertisers to promote their brands through mixing both entertainment and information sharing, thereby presumed to get a strong brand attention of the embedded brands among the game players (Yang, Roskos-Ewoldsen, Dinu, & Arpan, 2006). The core objective of this mode of entertainment cum promotion medium is to obtain brand

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