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Book Author(s): Teresa de la Hera

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4. Advergames' Effectiveness

Abstract

The academic study of advergames' effectiveness has been orientated primarily toward reception analysis, in which the effectiveness of advergames is assessed by applying methodological frameworks borrowed from other fields and not specifically designed to be applied to this object of study. This chapter is centered on understanding the factors that determine advergames' effectiveness. I also carry out a critical analysis of previous research conducted on this topic. The identification of the factors that determine advergames' effectiveness and the evidence of inaccuracy in previous research are used to support my belief that it is necessary to broaden the understanding of how digital games can be used as medium for advertising.

Keywords: advergames' effectiveness, critical analysis, advergames, advertising

As discussed in the previous section, the interest of marketers in advergames has been a reality for more than three decades, and the investment in this practice is growing steadily. When planning an advertising campaign, digital games are considered as an important possible strategy, and many advertisers already view them as a new advertising medium. In addition, marketing agencies try to motivate brands to consider digital games as part of their media plan by citing statistics evidencing the growth of the game industry, the changes in the game audiences, and the increasing session lengths in online gaming. These figures are useful for illustrating the growing interest in digital games as media for advertising. However, the use of statistical data referring to broad movements in the videogame and online advertising markets is an imprecise way to evidence the potential of the digital game market as a persuasive medium (Bogost, 2007, p. 163). Additionally, the little research focused on the effects of the use of branded games as advertising strategy is, in many cases, biased, as will be discussed

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in this chapter. Therefore, the effectiveness of advergames is still unclear. The academic study of advergames has been orientated primarily toward reception analysis. However, it is usual to find articles in which the effectiveness of advergames is assessed by applying methodological frameworks borrowed from other fields and not designed specifically to be applied to this object of study. In the first section of this chapter, I identify the factors that determine advergames' effectiveness. The second section is a critical discussion of previous studies on the effectiveness of advergames.

The Factors that Determine Advergames' Effectiveness

Advergames are considered effective when they bring a tangible benefit to a brand and therefore contribute to long-term brand equity. Advergames' effectiveness needs to be distinguished from advergames' effects, which are related to the short-term influence that specific elements have on players' responses (Wright-Isak & Faber, 1997, p. 4). However, advergames' effectiveness does not come down to an accumulation of effects, but rather it is influenced by other factors external to the game. Therefore, in order to understand effectiveness, data about specific advergames' effects should be combined with a collection of facts that provide information about the probability that the target players have had access to the game, the intervening phenomena that may have affected the advergame's impact, and the net impact of those phenomena on tangible benefits (Ibid., p. 6).

Advertising has tended to be considered worthwhile if its costs are returned to the advertisers in the form of current or potential sales revenue. However, because of the multiple factors that affect advertising effectiveness and interfere in the process between message and purchase, many authors have suggested that effectiveness should be measured by looking at consumers' knowledge and beliefs (Aaker, Batra, & Meyers, 1992; Colley, 1961; Schultz, 1990). The discrepancies in the way advertising effectiveness is measured also generate differences in the way it is defined (Abraham & Lodish, 1990; McDonald, 1993; Schroer, 1990).

The marketing scholars Christine Wright-Isak and Roland Faber (1997) conducted research focused on resolving the issue of defining and understanding advertising effectiveness. They concluded that, because of its complexity, its definition should be established by the consensus of a community of professionals. Therefore, the authors examined the debate within the industry and identified five recurrent criteria considered by professionals when measuring advertising effectiveness: the campaign

objectives; the background situation; the creative strategy; the media strategy; and the evidence of the results of the campaign (Ibid., p. 12).

Previously, I have argued that an advergame is a digital game specifically designed for a brand. Thus, an advergame is an advertisement whose effectiveness depends on the five criteria mentioned above. For advertisers, it is difficult to control in advance the benefits of an advergame because they depend on many external factors. However, advertisers can use their previous experience and the results of research on advergames' effects to work on the other four criteria when designing a new game, as illustrated below, and also for designing pilot games whose validity is going to be tested.

Among the four criteria, the background situation is the most difficult factor to work with because it is composed of the personal and physical circumstances surrounding the player and the advergame in the moment the game is played. There are some elements that can be controlled by advertisers, such as the placement or the time when the advergame is released. But there are other elements that depend on external factors, such as the personal circumstances a player experiences when he or she plays the game. Additionally, there are some elements of the background situation that depend on accumulative effects of previous campaigns, such as previous brand knowledge or previous brand image.

The second criteria mentioned by professionals to measure advergames' effectiveness is the campaign objectives. Advergames can involve more than one objective simultaneously (see Eechambadi, 1993) and they can be very varied. Advergames' objectives can be focused on affecting players' feelings, attitudes, and/or behaviors toward a brand or a product (Wright-Isak & Faber, 1997, p. 4) and can be aimed at building brand identity, changing existing perceptions of the brand or product, or generating a trial purchase (Ibid., p. 6). If the advergame is part of a broader marketing mix,¹ the advertiser can consider the specific goals of the game in order to better differentiate the results generated by that specific advertising effort.

Thirdly, the media strategy is centered on when, where, and which media will be used to deliver an advertising campaign. If the brand decides to design an advergame, a digital game is the medium selected to convey the advertising message. Therefore, it will be necessary to decide which type of advergame is going to be designed and on which platform it is going to be released. In addition, if it is delivered online, advertisers should decide

¹ The 'marketing mix' concept was coined by professor of marketing and advertising Neil H. Borden, who defined it as a "a mix of marketing procedures and policies" in an effort to "produce a profitable enterprise" (1984, p. 7).

where it is going to be placed: on a microsite, in a banner, on the official website of the brand, or in a gaming portal, for instance. All these decisions will have consequences for the advergame's effectiveness.

Finally, the creative strategy determines what the advertising message will say and how the strategy will be executed. In order to decide how the creative strategy will be executed when using a digital game as a medium for advertising, it is necessary to understand the medium and to acknowledge which of its elements can be designed to convey the advertising message. Of the four criteria on which advertisers can work to improve advergames' effectiveness, this is the one that is most distinct from other media. The interactive nature of advergames is a factor that must be taken into consideration when deciding how to execute the creative strategy. The bi-directional communication process that is established within advergames means that the player's performance results in an unrepeatable message. However, there is still a lack of knowledge about the particular properties of the medium, which leads advertisers to use strategies in digital games that they use in other media without considering the specific features of the medium, in turn impoverishing the creative strategies of advergames or the way they are executed.

Therefore, the study of digital games as a medium for advertising and an understanding of which of their elements can be designed, and how they can be designed in order to persuade players, is needed to comprehend advergames' effectiveness. Chapters 6 and 7 are focused on broadening the understanding of how digital games can be used to convey advertising messages.

An Overview of Advergames' Effectiveness Research

Due to the difficulty in measuring advertising effectiveness, academic research commonly focuses on the study of advertising effects in terms of the influence that specific elements within ads have on viewers' responses (Wright-Isak & Faber, 1997, p. 4). Since advertising-effects research is centered on the impact of specific elements, its study can be accomplished in controlled assessments that utilize a limited number of exposures to single messages over short time periods. Conversely, in order to evaluate advertising effectiveness, experiments should be carried out over longer periods of time and require more executions and more exposures. Academic research, however, is frequently unable to measure the effects of multiple related messages over long periods of time, which is a determinant of evaluating effectiveness (1997, p. 6).

This section reviews previous research in the field of advergames' effectiveness and advergames' effects with the aim of demonstrating how the lack of understanding of digital games as a medium for advertising can result in biased research. In some cases, the use of methodologies borrowed from research applied to other media, which fail to consider the peculiarities of digital games as a medium for advertising, results in distorted findings. Furthermore, misunderstandings between the concepts of advergames' effectiveness and advergames' effects also lead, in some cases, to biased conclusions, which show the lack of recognition of the diverse factors that intervene in advergames' effectiveness.

In 2005, David Deal, a specialist in consumer behavior and marketing research, conducted an exploratory study that tried to investigate the ability of advergames to generate brand recall (2005). In this study, 37 online game players played two different online M&M's² advergames that were variations of the puzzle game *Bejeweled* (Popcap Games, 2001). On the same website where the games were played, banner ads of many brands were displayed. After playing both games, participants were asked to list the products, types of products, or brand names that they remembered seeing while playing. The author concludes that the exploratory study demonstrates that "advergames were found to generate significantly higher rates of recall" than banner advertisements in games, a finding that, in his words, "supports the notion of their advertising effectiveness" (Deal 2005, p. 1).

In his study, Deal mentions many possible mitigating factors to consider in the results, such as the non-representative sample of participants or the length of time spent on each website (Ibid., p.6). Therefore, he considers it as an explanatory study and proposes further research in the field. However, there are two more questionable issues in Deal's research that cause inconsistency in his results. His assertions and conclusions show a lack of understanding of the factors that determine advergames' effectiveness and also the peculiarities of digital games as media for advertising. As explained above, advergames' effectiveness depends on many factors, and therefore to evaluate advertising effectiveness, experiments should be carried out over long periods of time and require several executions and several exposures to the advertising (Wright-Isak & Faber, 1997, p. 4). Deal's research does not take into consideration any of the factors that can influence the different results in brand recall between the games and the banners, such as the background situation (Ibid., p. 12). Therefore, it is not warranted to draw conclusions about advergames' effectiveness in general from such a study.

2 M&M's is a brand of chocolate candies.

Furthermore, Deal does not mention anything about the way the advertising message is embedded within the advergame played by the participants. The author mentions only that the logo of the brand is present in the game, but he does not clarify how the logo is integrated into the game, or if there are other elements of the game that have also been designed with persuasive intentions. Moreover, the author opts for two variations of the puzzle game *Bejeweled* (Popcap Games, 2001), without explaining in what way(s) the popular game was modified and with which intentions. Nor does he mention whether the two games presented differences in the way the advertising message was embedded within them, or whether the results in recall were different or the same for both cases.

If the strategy used to embed the advertising message had been explained in Deal's study, it could have been used to draw some conclusions about advergames' effects on brand recall when placing logos in the same way that games of the sample do. Those conclusions could have been extended to other advergames using the same strategy, but not to advergames in general. However, the conclusions show a lack of awareness of the different possibilities of logo placements within digital games and the consequences that the different placements could have had on the player's ability to recall logos during performance. In sum, the lack of understanding of the medium and the factors that determine advergames' effectiveness have led to slanted research whose conclusions do not contribute to the theory in this field.

Another study that supports my assertions was conducted in 2008 by a group of scholars specialized in strategic communication (Wise, Bolls, Kim, Venkataram, & Meyer, 2008). This study tried to examine how variation in the thematic connection between the game and the brand is associated with the attitude of players toward the advergame and toward the brand. Forty participants were involved in testing four advergames. Each participant played two randomly assigned advergames, both with either high or low thematic connection. In order to measure their attitude toward the games and the brands, the authors used standard measures of attitudes that previous research³ had already demonstrated to be reliable and valid (Ibid., p. 31). The authors conclude that the analysis reveals that "the change in brand

3 The first study, conducted by Kak Yoon, Paul D. Bolls, and Annie Lang (1998) proposed a scale to measure attitude toward the brand that consists of three sets of bipolar adjectives placed on seven-point scales: Positive/Negative; Good/Bad; and Favorable/Unfavorable. The second study, conducted by Darrel D. Muehling and Russel N. Laczniak (1988), proposed a scale to measure attitude toward the ad that consists of six sets of bipolar adjectives placed on seven-point scales: Appealing/Unappealing; Pleasant/Unpleasant; Dynamic/Dull; Attractive/Unattractive; Enjoyable/Not Enjoyable; and Refreshing/Depressing.

attitude attributable to game enjoyment is stronger for product-relevant advergames than for product-irrelevant advergames" (*Ibid.*, p. 32).⁴

In this case, the difference between advergames' effectiveness and advergames' effects is clear. The research is focused on the effects of thematic relevance between the game and the brand within advergames. Nevertheless, once again the manner in which the advertising message is embedded in the game is not explained. The authors explain the gameplay of the four advergames analyzed, but they do not explain how elements within them are designed to persuade players. Therefore, inasmuch as the game sample is non-representative, the conclusions should not be extended to advergames in general because the results can be conditioned by the different ways in which the message is embedded within the game. Furthermore, the authors fail to provide the necessary information to apply the conclusions to advergames using the same strategies.

Research on advergames' effectiveness or advergames' effects is not extensive; however, it is possible to identify flaws similar to those discussed in this section in other investigations.⁵ Inconsistent results like these are not uncommon in persuasion research (see O' Keefe, 1990), which means that more complex research designs are needed. Digital games have unique properties that make them a totally different medium from others commonly used for advertising purposes. Thus, an understanding of how digital games convey meaning is particularly relevant to research on advergames' effectiveness.

A more recent study (Wanick, Stallwood, Ranchhod, & Wills, 2018), has explored the influence of visual familiarity toward brands in advergames. The study showed that visual familiarity does not affect the game experience and the attitude toward the game, but it does influence consumer behavior and brand attitude. In this study, the researchers take into consideration that visual persuasion plays an important role in advergame design, and they try to better understand the role of visual persuasion in the game. This way, they establish clear relationships between the advergame design and the effects of specific design decisions. They draw no conclusions about the effectiveness of advergames in general, but they do reflect on the effects of concrete design decisions, in this case, related to the visual design of the game. They also clearly link these effects to the specific cultural context in

4 In the study "relevance is conceptualized as the degree to which the game has a thematic connection to the advertised product" (Wise et al., 2008, p. 32).

5 Gabriel, 2010; Moore, 2006; Nicovich, 2005; Schneider & Cornwell, 2005; Winkler & Buckner, 2006; Yang, Roskos-Ewoldsen, Dinu, & Arpan, 2006.

which the game was played, and they reflect on how this context has (not) played a role in the concrete effects of the advergame.

Other recent studies have also investigated the effects of other concrete design decisions in advergames, such as character presence (Choi, Yoon, & Taylor, 2015). This last approach is not common in the study of advergames' effects and effectiveness, however; the main reason for this is a lack of understanding of how persuasion works in relation to digital games. Even though advergames are a marketing strategy that has existed for more than three decades, and investment in this practice is growing steadily, the reality is that there is little research on this subject and a better understanding of this practice is necessary to assess its scope while improving its effectiveness.

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