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The issue of children in promotional message in computer game

Magdalena Hofman-Kohlmeyer

Faculty of Informatics and Communication, University of Economics in Katowice, Poland

E-mail address: magda-hofman@o2.pl

ABSTRACT

The growing ranks of enterprises decided to make use of various type of in game promotions in their marketing strategy. Vast part of this promotional message is geared toward children and adolescent. There are a two important issue to bring up. Firstly, how children understand the promotional message featured in game environment and whether it is really effective marketing tool. Secondly, what are current ethical and legal problems and concerns about this new means of marketing communications targeting children? The analysis of literature review indicates that there is a real dilemma how to create a successful promotion in compliance with ethics and legal framework.

Keywords: in game advertising, advergence, children

1. INTRODUCTION

The number of brands that include promotion in game in their advertising strategies increase all the time. Vast number of those targeting children. It is vital to know whether in game advertising is really effective in the context of children (Rosado R., Agante L., 2011).

Children are a goal of marketers because they influence on household purchases and they are a potential lifelong brand consumers. It can be assumed that children need protection against marketing activity geared toward them to avoid commercialization of childhood and appearance of unhealthy behaviors like poor dietary habits (Kelly B., Vandevijvere S., Freeman B., Jenkin G. 2015). There is commonly known that children have difficulty

recognizing the persuasive nature of nontraditional advertising techniques like product placement (Van Reijmersdal E. A., Rozendaal E., Buijzen M., 2012).

In order to create appropriate advertising, marketing managers need to know how children of different ages understand the presence of a brand in computer game and need to understand parents' concerns about advertisement. Present article is aimed to give an outlook on in game promotional message geared toward children and is based on literature review.

The first part will focused on the promotional message in computer game, what this message is and what forms can be distinguished. Second part refers to the children issue and promotions in game environment. This part is based on mentioned literature review. Third part take into considerations ethical and legal issues and represents various approaches and concerns regarding advertisement to children. The final part of this study offers some conclusions that could be valuable for advertisers and entrepreneurs.

2. PROMOTIONAL MESSAGE IN COMPUTER GAME

Since the beginning of commercial Internet, the spending on online advertising campaign have been continuously growing. The Internet has quickly become a strong competitor of other communication channel. Online advertisement makes users involved, enhance them to interact and increase their interest in a product or service (Dudzik-Lewicka I., Hofman-Kohlmeyer M., 2015). On the Internet, the line between entertainment and advertising become blurred (An S., Stern S., 2011). Within the last couple of years, online promotion has undergone many changes. One of the developed means of communication is contextual advertisement. It allows to reach consumers at the exact time while they watch the contents substantially related to the product or service promoted (Dudzik-Lewicka I., Hofman-Kohlmeyer M., 2015). The advertising industry always seek for innovative methods and tools to attract the consumer's attention (Kiran V., Kishore K., 2013). Web is a meaningful part of children's lives so effect of promotion based on Internet may be essential. Following the popularity of Internet, there appears a new channel of communication, namely advergimes (Mallinckrodt V., Mizerski D., 2007).

Advergame consist of the words advertisement and video game (Peters S., Leshner G., 2013). Is one of the fastest growing forms of branded entertainment. This form is characterized by trademarks, advertising messages, logos featured inside the game's environment (Redondo I., 2012). Advergimes include a broad range of possibilities, from simply using well-known game to embed the trademark in the game plot, to building more customized games that enhance the brand message and its products (Rosado R., Agante L., 2011). It is an interactive brand-centred games tailored to the needs and capabilities of particular target markets in different age or gender (Mallinckrodt V., Mizerski D., 2007). It can be assume that children are particularly susceptible on new advertising techniques like advergame (Van Reijmersdal E. A., Rozendaal E., Buijzen M., 2012). Branded game engage children for extended periods of time, much more than another means of communication (Kelly B., Vandevijvere S., Freeman B., Jenkin G., 2015).

Advergimes are widely used by food companies in order to reach to the children with advertising message. A content analysis of the company websites from 2004, indicated that on 63% of those websites placed an advergame, on 23% can be find special space for children

with pages offering food advergames (Peak H. J., Taylor Quilliam E., Kim S. J., Weatherspoon L. J., Rifon N., Lee M., 2014).

It might be encounter various types of advergaming in literature review. In terms of how promoted brand is related with a game can be distinguish: above the line (ATL), below the line (BTL) and through the line (TTL).

Above the line advergaming pertain to the game created on purpose of some enterprise. It is clearly visible in the game. This kind of game is available without payment.

Below the line include every situation when brand is embedded in the game plot.

Through the line take place when player encounter hyperlink featured in the game screen. Using this hyperlink player get possibility to enter the online shop.

Advergame can be also divides into three genres according to degree of control of possible interactions of player and trademark. There are three following genres: non-interactive advertisement in the background (e.g. billboards), interactive advertisement with limited use of the product (e. g. trademark placed on the ball or beverage) and interactive advertisement with full use of the product (e. g. the ball with the trademark can be used to fight with enemy) (Mitreğa M., 2013).

Advergaming is relatively young but many expert forecast rapid growth of this market in the upcoming years. When some traditional tools became ineffective, advergaming is new opportunity for marketers (Laskowska-Witek J., Mitreğa M., 2014).

On the top of advergames, there are static and dynamic in game advertising. Static in game advertising is a fixed placement at the moment when game is phased-in on the market. This kind of advertisement cannot be modified or upgraded after the game has been launched. In dynamic advertising, slots included in the game can be filled flexibly by different advertisers. However one condition need to be met, namely the player must have a reliable Internet connection.

There is also another kind of promotion regarding the game, namely advertising in social network games. Trademarks or products are featured in in digital games that are played via major social networks e. g. Facebook (Terlutter R., Capella M. L., 2013).

In game advertising or advergaming can be encounter in various type like computer playing CDs, online game or game dedicated to consoles like the Xbox (Rozendaal E., Slot N., Reijmersdal E. A., Buijzen M., 2013).

This kind of advertising can be also used for viral marketing. Children can spread information's about game by sending e-mail directly from the website (Mallinckrodt V., Mizerski D., 2007). Additionally, featuring advertisements in the plot of the games gives a feeling of realism to the customers (Vashisht D., 2015).

Computer game and social games give an opportunities for advertisers to interact with and engage young consumers (Rozendaal E., Slot N., Reijmersdal E. A., Buijzen M., 2013). In game advertisements and advergames involve players for longer period of time. On average, the time spent on an advergame is estimated at 7-30 minutes, which is much more than a television advertisement (Vashisht D., 2015). An instance of a Dunkin Donuts advergame shows that advergame increase the average time spent on the company website by a consumers. This new branded entertainment appeal children and adolescent as well as adults. Therefore it is not a surprise that the growing ranks of enterprise's decides to a shift away advertising budget from traditional media like movies or magazines towards product placement in game (Peters S., Leshner G., 2013).

3. THE CHILDREN AND IN GAME PROMOTIONS

Several authors investigated and tried to understand child's perceiving of in game advertising. The survey that was made brought up a lot of issue. Rosado R., Agante L. reminded two basic theories regarding to children.

The first, Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development from 1972 year, evaluated how children basic cognitive abilities mature throughout different age segments. Piaget assigned children in four stages according to their level of cognitive maturation: sensorimotor stage is from 0 to 2 years old, preoperational stage from 2 to 7 years old, concrete operational stage from 7 to 11 years old and formal operational stage from 11 to adulthood. Stage between 2 and 7 year is special because children in this age perceive reality as more than just a perception of objects, facts and events. They are able to consider several magnitudes of a particular stimulus. They can relate these dimensions in an abstract and thoughtful way. Piaget emphasize that they are still unable to develop a hypothetical thinking of "what might be" rather than just "what is".

The second, Selman's Social Perspective Taking Theory from 1980 year, focuses on children's abilities to understand different perspectives in social context evolve through every particular stage. Selman's Theory assumes that children from 3 to 8 years of age are unable to accept another person's point of view if it differs from their own. Children between 8 and 10 years of age are in the self-reflective role taking stage. Around the age of 10, children achieve the mutual role taking stage. In this stage they are able to simultaneously consider another person's point of view and their own. In this stage, children learn very important things in terms of social interaction, for example persuasion and negotiation. They are able also consider dual approaches regarding the same subject. These skills are vital to recognize advertising motives and objectives.

It has been tested that children have a developed recognition memory by the age of 3-4 but at the age of 7 they start to develop wide range abilities that allow the functioning of their recall memory. Presumably, advergaming can influence on children over that age. For this reason, this group of children is targeted by the researchers so frequent (Rosado R., Agante L., 2011).

Harris J. L., Speers S. E., Schwartz M. B., Brownell K. D. conducted a survey using comScore.com platform. The study evaluated the issue of food advergaming and children. Company websites contained advergaming attracted more young users as a percent of their total audience. Roughly 16% of visitors were between 2 and 11 years old. In comparison, company websites without advergaming reported 8% visitors from this group of age. The authors also examined 152 children from 7 to 12 years from Connecticut area. According to parents, 39% children never plays advergaming, 27% plays occasionally or more, 32% did not know whether their child plays advergaming (Harris J. L., Speers S. E., Schwartz M. B., Brownell K. D., 2012).

In terms of adults, there is presumption that advergaming do affect players' memory and evaluations of the placed product in the game. When it comes to the children, the important research was made by Mallinckrodt and Mizerski in 2007. They included Australian children from primary school age five to eight playing a Froot Loops cereal advergaming (An S., Stern S., 2011). Mallinckrodt and Mizerski focused on perception and effectiveness of advergaming in comparison to traditional advertisement. In tradition media for example television

advertisement can be observed distinction between commercial and noncommercial messages what is lacking in advergaming.

Some research support the statement that advertisement influence on the children knowledge of products. Children gather information's from various type of marketing communication and build own preferences without judge and correct interpretations this information's. When it comes to the advergaming, Mallinckrodt and Mizerski tested the influence of the game on the children's perceptions about the healthy nature of Froot Loops cereal. The results do not shows any relations between exposure and perception.

In terms of traditional media, there are evidences that repeated exposure can increase desire for the product and increase preferences for the brand and intention to consume this brand in the future. Mallinckrodt and Mizerski confirmed the hypothesis which predicted that playing the advergaming would impact on brand preference. Although the differences were only seen among the older children in the sample.

Mallinckrodt and Mizerski suggested that children can request brands and products from their parents after playing advergaming. The results shows that advergaming do not generate requests to get the brand (Mallinckrodt V., Mizerski D., 2007).

The survey also reported that the older children (ages seven to eight) were more probable to prefer Foot Loops than the other cereal choices after playing the game. Mallinckrodt and Mizerski also examined the children' awareness of the commercial nature of the advergaming. Only a quarter of children identified the source of ad as a Kellogg's Foot Loops company.

The crucial point of research about children and advertising is knowledge about advertising and persuasion issue (An S., Stern S., 2011). According to previous studies, children before the age of five cannot distinguish commercials from another television programs. They start to understand the intent of advertising at approximately eight years of age. The accurate understanding of persuasive intentions is mature until age twelve. A vast number of surveys shows that children's recognition and understanding forms of promotion like product placement in movies or in games matures later than awareness of television advertising (Rozendaal E., Slot N., Reijmersdal E. A., Buijzen M., 2013).

According to the Persuasion Knowledge Model describes by Friest and Wright, knowledge about marketers, intents and tactics is develop throughout their life span (An S., Stern S., 2011).

Rozendaal E., Slot, N., Reijmersdal, E. A., Buijzen, M. also indicates the important role of persuasion knowledge. They defined it as consumers' beliefs about advertising's motives, strategies and tactics and listed four following components of persuasion knowledge: recognition of advertising, understanding of advertising's commercial source, understanding of advertising's persuasive intent, and critical attitudes toward advertising (Rozendaal E., Slot N., Reijmersdal E. A., Buijzen M., 2013). A child who understand only the advertising intent of telling about things is more likely to accept the message without questioning the ulterior motives. Recognizing the selling intents can alter the child's response to promotional message and mitigate trust (An S., Stern S., (2011).

Rozendaal, E., Slot, N., Reijmersdal, E. A., Buijzen, M. carried out a research which investigated children's level of persuasive knowledge. The authors invited a children between nine and twelve year old and used a Habbo game. Results shows that 57% of the children recognized all four advertisements embedded in the game, 37% three and 6% recognized only two or less advertisements. In addition, 43% of the sample correctly identified the source,

70% displayed an understanding of selling intent, 73% had an understanding of persuasive intent (Rozendaal E., Slot N., Reijmersdal E. A., Buijzen M., 2013).

Mallinckrodt and Mizerski obtained the surprising results regarding persuasive knowledge. Minority of children recognized the correct source of the game as a Kellogg's company. Majority of children chose Froot Loops when they associated a game's intent in comparison with children who did not recognize one (Mallinckrodt V., Mizerski D., 2007).

Rosado R., Agante L. finds the evidence that children from 7 to 11 years old are aware that the advergames they played was made for a specific brand to achieve an underlying objective. Ability to notice embedded product in the game increase with age. The children between the ages of 10 and 11 have a greater awareness about this marketers' practices. To conclude, marketing managers should carefully adjust this kind of communication to the age segment of children. It help them achieve their commercial objective in effective way and also protect children from unclear messages. Rosado R., Agante L. also found that children in age 7 to 11 can easily identify the persuasive intentions of the game. They feel encouraged to using featured product more frequent. However, they cannot identify the intent to persuade them to buy or ask their parents to buy the product. Unfortunately, the vast majority feels that attracting computer players is the main goal of enterprises, not buying the placed product. The survey of this authors, do not confirm that advergames improve the children's' brand recall. Thereby advertising in computer game is not appropriate for company with high awareness of product category and willingness to uprate their brand's recall. In contrast, the research indicates that advergames straighten a brand's image. Rosado R., Agante L. did not found sufficient evidence to validate the positive impact of children's enjoyment of the game on their evaluation of the brand (Rosado R., Agante L., 2011).

An S. and Stern S. investigated the role of ad breaks in the game and their influence on players. They examined 112 children recruited from elementary school. The sample included children between eight and eleven years old. The research brought an unexpected results. The presence of ad breaks do not improve children's persuasion knowledge. Exposure the ad breaks do not help children identify the source of advertisement or persuasive intent however mitigate the advergame's effects on brand recall and preference (An S., Stern S., 2011).

There is a recognition of positive influence of brand prominence on children recognition. The more prominently a brand is embedded, the better is recalled. Additionally, the authors did not find negative adverse effect among children like perceiving of intrusive or irritating. The research demonstrate that involvement with an advergame may positive impact on attitude toward the game and the brand (Van Reijmersdal E. A., Rozendaal E., Buijzen M., 2012).

Redondo I. examine the effectiveness of casual advergames on adolescents' brand attitudes. Casual advergames can be describe as a special type of advergames with low demand on user involvement, low playing skills and short required time commitment. On the research purposes collected data from participants aged eleven at least. A casual game placing ads for M&M chocolate candy with two different degrees of prominence was shared on the Spanish website www.jetix.es. Additionally, the third version without brand placement was posted and used as the control condition.

The results indicates that the transfer of affect took place after brief exposure to the prominent placement and also after long exposure to the subtle placement. In another conditions the transfer of affect is impossible. There are two conclusions important for managers. If they want to build a successful product placements in the game they should

create a subtle placements for games with long lasting appearance of product or prominent placements for games with brief appearance. Effectiveness of casual advergames also depends on the gender. Female adolescents notably improved their attitudes to M&M's while for male adolescents was no observed meaningful improvement. To beef up male adolescents' brand preferences managers should focused on more appropriate entertainment vehicles than casual advergames (Redondo I., 2012).

Van Reijmersdal E. A., Jansz J., Peters O., Van Noort G. investigated the effect of an interactive brand placement on children. At first, they reported a positive effect on awareness, brand image and behavioral intention. It can be concluded that children' interaction with a brand inside a game has an impact on information processing, attitude formation and the intent to act. Mau found that static brand placement has a negative effects on attitudes toward the game. Van Reijmersdal E. A., Jansz J., Peters O., Van Noort G. did not hold this statement for interactive brand placements. They ascertained that interactive branded elements are helpful in building positive attitude toward the game. Secondly, they distinguished a different group of players with different experience with the brand. The survey indicates that children without prior experience with the brand are more influenced by the interactive brand placement. Moreover, this effect is greatest in younger children than older children (Van Reijmersdal E. A., Jansz J., Peters O., Van Noort G., 2010).

Friends and classmates play an important role in shaping children's consumer behavior. Children see that possession of some brand's products influence on their friendship. Buying these products can enable meet expectations of group and make someone more popular. The same situation may be observe in the social game environment. Players chat with each other and interact about the brands embedded in the game (Rozendaal E., Slot N., Reijmersdal E. A., Buijzen M., 2013).

4. ETHICAL AND LEGAL ISSUE

More and more often children becomes attractive targets of advertising strategy from companies. His phenomenon rise a great deal of emotion and controversy (Büttner O. B., Florack A., Serfas B. G., 2014).

The discussion about the ethics of advertising to children is related to the age at which children become able to understand commercial motives and develop coping skills. It is important to note that advertising has change during the last couple of years. Nowadays, is more integrated into the entertaining content and less often is clearly separated part of the screen. The emergence of a new types of medium constitute a move away from advertising based on information's about the product. This changes influence on children' ability to understanding an advertising intent. Nairn A. and Fine C. noted that the condition of fair advertisement is the children' ability to resist implicit persuasion (Nairn A., Fine C., 2008). In public opinion, the usage of ads which influence people without their consent defines them as 'manipulative' (Kiran V., Kishore K., 2013). Moreover, some people believe that children deserve to know about commercial message geared toward them (An S., Stern S., 2011).

The researches provided evidences of conviction that children between 3 and 7 years of age are highly vulnerable and do not develop an understanding of persuasive intent of advertisement. This opinion led to recommended restriction by American Psychological

Association on advertising geared toward children under the age of 8 (Büttner O. B., Florack A., Serfas B. G., 2014).

It is important to understand the effects of advergames on children in order to design effective and socially responsible marketing tool (Rosado R., Agante L., 2011). Abovementioned experiment with Australian children who played a Froot Loops advergames revealed that after play game children preferred Froot Loops to other cereal brands. Two investigations, first in USA carried out by Pempek and Calvert in 2009, second in the Australia carried out by Dias and Agante in 2011, found similar results. Namely, children from elementary school who played an advergames promoting healthier food more often choose the healthier food products after game play. These results shows that advergame can be used as a tool for health promotion (Peak H. J., Taylor Quilliam, E., Kim S. J., Weatherspoon L. J., Rifon N., Lee M., 2014). Harris J. L., Speers S. E., Schwartz M. B., Brownell K. D. also reached to similar conclusions. Their research explicitly shows that healthy and unhealthy food advergames increased children's consumption. In addition, increasing healthy food consumption does not reduce unhealthy food consumption. Conversely, frequent eating unhealthy food does not reduce choosing healthy products.

Public health researchers are concerned about impact of food companies advergames on children. Frequently promoted food represents low nutritional quality. Significant part of food and beverages placed in the games contain high levels of sugar, sodium and fat. Most food products featured in the game are obesity-causing. Information about nutrition or health are difficult to find in the company's or advergame' content. The American Psychological Association suspects that contact with online food promotions wield influence on long-term children health. However, advergames give also an opportunity to learn children about nutrition and expand their knowledge about healthy eating and physical activity in fun and engaging way (Harris J. L., Speers S. E., Schwartz M. B., Brownell K. D., 2012).

The European Union regulations regarding advertising to children are managed by the Audiovisual Media Services Directive of 2007 which includes existing European rules for television and transfers them to new media. Directive requires to separate advertisement from the plot of program or game. Advertisers can not using hidden and subliminal techniques. Marketers cannot take advantage of children susceptibility and vulnerability to exert influence on their purchase behavior. In 2007, leading food companies like Coca Cola, Ferrero or Danone supported initiative which pledge to resign from advertising to children under the age of 12. In the UK, the Advertising Standards Authority Committee of the Advertising Practice Cod take control on writing advertising codes and rules.

There is a great urgency to creating consumer policy regarding children. Lascu D. N., Manrai A. K., Manrai L. A., Brookman Amissah, F. represented an examples of such policies. They provided insights on online consumer regulatory related to food marketing in the three high-income countries: USA, France and Spain. France and Spain are Latin countries with some sociocultural similarities but different levels of government involvement in advertising communications. In France there are a numbers of healthy consumption guidelines whereas in Spain are not. In addition, in Europe are tight restrictions in comparison to USA.

In France, the Authority for Professional Regulation of Advertising is charge of marketing communications. Promotional message to children need to be at the children's level of understanding and cannot undermine the authority of parents and educators. Unfortunately, there are no regulations which pertain to online marketing to children.

In Spain, The Spanish Advertising Self-Regulations Association take control on advertising to children and punishment to companies who break the law. Advertising cannot be harmful through statements or images. There are also another regulations. The General Advertising Act forbid advertising which violates human dignity or the Constitution. Code for Child Publicity of the Spanish Association of Toy Manufacturers forbid misleading information about the product or use and broadcast unseparated with commercials. The Spanish Self-Regulating Cod for Food Advertising Aimed at Children is established by the Ministry of Health and Food and Drink Industry Federation to mitigate the obesity problem in children. Advertisement should be clearly understand by the children and cannot to encourage them to purchase or asking an adults to buy. Food advertisement must not promote unhealthy and sedentary lifestyle.

In the USA, Children's Online Privacy Protection Act requires parental permission for collecting data from children under 13 years old. The Children's Advertising Review Unit is a program established by the children's advertising industry in order to improve children's dietary habits. The program also highlight the limited children's ability to evaluate the information's from media and forbid creating unreasonable expectations about the products. In France placing links to lure children into a game is illegal. The scrutiny is grater and game platforms are poorer than another country. In Spain advergaming market is expanded. Children frequently use mobile phone games. Advergaming are offer by big as well as small and medium size companies. In the USA, games are available on children's websites and encourage them to interact with the brand (Lascu D. N., Manrai A. K., Manrai L. A., Brookman Amissah F., 2013).

5. CONCLUSIONS

Substantial parts of survey regarding in game advertising focused on adults' responses. Literature review demonstrated very different results regarding children. It suggest that youngest players require different approach (Van Reijmersdal E. A., Jansz J., Peters O., Van Noort G., 2010).

The findings of a vast number of surveys shows that children in different ages characterize different view on in game advertising (Rosado R., Agante L., 2011). Under the age of 7-8 children are immature to understand another person's point of view and they are still unable to thinking in hypothetical way. They do not fully understand ulterior motives of advertising.

According to survey, children have also problem with identifying the sources of advertisement as a company's name. at 7 years old children start to develop their recall memory so advergaming may be not effective under this age. Consequently, the older children more often chosen placed product after playing the game than younger. It can be assumed that the age moderate the effect of in game promotions on children. Marketers should adjust in game promotions to the age of targeted children's group.

A numbers of authors noticed that persuasion knowledge play an important role. Understanding the persuasive intent can alter the children's response and trust to advertisement.

Some research suggest that brand prominent placement is better recalled than subtle and is not perceived of intrusive or irritating. Another research show that subtle placements is

effective for games with long lasting appearance of product and prominent placements for games with brief appearance. Also interactions are meaningful. Interactive brand placement enable to build positive attitude toward the game, brand awareness and behavioral intention. Children without prior experience with the brand are more influenced.

Some authors emphasized the importance of creating consumer policy regarding children because they are highly vulnerable, the most under the age of 7. Marketers should obey some rules to create socially responsible advertisement, especially when it comes to the food products. In game advertising can be used as a tool to promote healthy lifestyle and maybe also to promote another activities like charity campaigns.

Although promotions in computer game toward children is prevalent, there is relatively little scientific evidence regarding the conditions under which advergaming is really effective. Some authors indicated that effectiveness may depend on type of game like computer playing CDs, online game or game dedicated to consoles like the Xbox. Another researchers identified a type of brand as important factor. Presumably the stage of knowing the brand can differ the effect of promotion. Only limited surveys are also available to describe how placed product in the game influence on children' behavior (e. g. buying or asking for buying).

Internet and games are significant part of children's life and probably will be attract attention of companies and scientists. Despite the progress made, still is a need of further research in this field.

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