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THESIS TITLE

“The development of video game marketing: business opportunities and the gamer identity.”

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This thesis was submitted for distance acquisition of a postgraduate degree in Digital Marketing at Neapolis University.

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The Denotation

Aikaterini Bintoudi

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To my family.

Abstract

This study's endeavor was to examine on a first stage the enormous growth of video games and the upcoming benefits for businesses and marketers and on a second stage to analyze and profile the gamer identity in order to investigate truths and misconceptions about the gamer and gaming in general. With the aid of a literature review, there were pointed out some stereotypes about the gamer identity, while an important reference to the Social Cognitive Theory and the Technology Acceptance Model indicated both the social structure and the goal-oriented nature of games. Finally, with a questionnaire answered by 180 participants, it was mainly revealed and hypothesized the gender as a factor that influences the way someone interacts with video games and the marketing content as well as the contribution of congruence between the last two subjects.

Keywords: video game marketing, in-game marketing, advergames, marketing content, gamer identity

CHAPTER 1: Introduction

The erstwhile fun and niche video game industry has blossomed into one of the most profitable industries in the global market, with cutting-edge tech features to give another dimension to the gaming experience. In fact, according to research, by 2027 the industry seems to reach 482-billion-dollar profits. Those numbers as well as the ubiquitousness of the market have not slipped the attention of digital marketers who have interfered with it, taking advantage of its undoubtable allure and resonance.

The focus of this study is to present the business opportunities that can emerge from the video game world and to investigate the indicators of being a gamer. For this purpose, three key research questions have been set to operate as a guideline for the research study: 1) *How can businesses take advantage of the video games' resonance and what opportunities can they garner from this industry?*, 2) *What triggers users to engage with marketing content in video games? and 3) Could the social identity of a player influence the way he interacts with the video game and the marketing content within it?*

The second chapter of the study sought to present the literature review beginning from the multiple applications of video game marketing. This was pursued firstly by presenting the industry and the three key components that encompass it, Nintendo, Sony Corporation, and Microsoft, and further showing its course towards digitalization with the transition to digital games, the evolution of mobile gaming and the emergence of cloud gaming. Further, in an endeavor to comprehend better how advertising works in the video game world, there were explained the terms of in-game advertising, advergames and the gamification concept as well as business opportunities coming from interfering into the video game communities. Moreover, the second chapter aimed to unfold the effectiveness of this kind of marketing on player's behavior, exploring on a first basis the gamer identity and some misconceptions surrounding the term "gamer"

such as the most common description of "young, white, mostly isolated, male" (Shaw, 2012) and on a second base existing theories such as the Social Cognitive Theory, the flow concept and the Technology Acceptance Model which tried to investigate what captures gamers attention, how is this attention maintained and what is that they seek while playing. Combining what was suggested by (LaRose et al., 2004 and Yoon et al., 2013) it indicated the importance of perceived expectations that someone has before playing, whether that is the outcome of having fun, connecting with friends, or simply escaping reality.

The third chapter of this dissertation, unlocked the qualitative perspective of the research study, presenting the reasons of the selected methodology and later the survey that was conducted on students of Neapolis University as well as on subscribers of the Unboxholics, a famous Greek game streaming community. The results of 180 participants were presented, analyzed, and discussed in this final chapter of the research study. Last but not least, in the final chapter, existing limitations, further conclusions, and suggestions for future research completed the dissertation. The findings and conclusions of the study would not only contribute to future research about the video game marketing as well as the social aspect of gamer identity, but they would hopefully be very beneficial both for marketers who want to interfere into the gaming field and of course for the augmentation of the video game development.

CHAPTER 2: Literature Review

2.1 Entering into the video game world

From the first video game ever made in 1958 to the first console ever invented in 1972, the video game industry has turned into a giant in the global economy (Chodos, 2008). With profits approaching the amount of 396 billion dollars according to Statista (Clement, 2023) it is comprehensible that we are not referring to a simple entertainment

business, but to a billion-dollar enterprise, into which many “players” want to take part, yet not everyone succeeds.

The supreme primacy of this industry is fairly allocated to three giants of the video game world: Nintendo, Sony Corporation, and Microsoft (Clement, 2023). Diving deeper into their latest profits, the Japanese company, Nintendo, noted around 12.04-billion-dollar sales in 2023, when Sony’s sales reached 3,63 trillion yen and finally Microsoft 15,47 billion dollars. Those numbers represent 29% of the industry’s total profits. This comes to no surprise since the aforementioned video game companies are simultaneously hardware infrastructures, which results in even more revenues coming from their consoles’ sales. Speaking of consoles, the ultimate position is owned by Sony PlayStation, the latest version of which, PlayStation 5, has sold over 38 million units according to Statista (Statista Research Department, 2023). On the other hand, Microsoft Xbox’s sales reached 21 million the year before (Statista Research Department, 2023) and the Nintendo Switch console 17,97 million units.

Even though the consoles’ sales are undoubtedly thriving, this does not mean that there is not noteworthy competition outside the world of the three aforementioned companies. Especially with the transition to digital games, which we will explore thoroughly in the next unit, significant components of the video game industry such as the Chinese digital company named Tencent, have made their appearance. Moreover, digitalization in video games gave the step to Google and Apple to make their endeavor in this sector with remarkable profits coming from their app stores (Clement, 2023). Finally, we could not end this unit of the dissertation, without referring to Activision Blizzard and Electronic Arts. With both of them being American video game companies, the first one owns, among others, two of the most famous digital games, the Call of Duty, and the Candy Crush Saga. Till this day, the company has gained over 67 billion US dollars (Clement, 2023). The second one, mostly known from the popular e-sport game FIFA, reached in 2023 about 7,4$ billion revenues (Statista, 2023).

This brief examination of the general profits originating from video game companies was just a short representation of what the video game industry can generate to the global market. The rise of digital games within an enormous variety of gaming libraries, online streaming games and the growth of cloud gaming, gaming communities, in-game purchases, online currencies, and the integration of in-game advertisements in multiple forms skyrocketed the industry and made it the reason for so much scrutiny.

2.2 The road towards digitalization

2.2.1 The transition from video games to digital games

Video games have now entered the digital era, with anticipating profits of 102.13 billion dollars by the year 2028 (Statista market insights, 2023). The so-called digital games are *"the games, based on advanced computer and internet technology and upon a virtual platform, which let the individuals interact with each other individually or collectively and turning gamers into more active individuals"* (Kara et al., 2014). This definition perfectly explains the environment within which a digital game grows and gives us the opportunity to thoroughly discover its nature. *("The games, based on advanced computer and internet technology...")* The growth of technological investments and innovations such as Virtual Reality and Artificial Intelligence and other high-tech features led the traditional games to another dimension. On the basis of digital devices, the player has the ability to live a whole different gaming experience. The process of purchasing physical video games from physical stores has turned into huge online gaming stores where players can purchase and install a game at any time which is both timesaving and cost-effective since they do not have to worry about the in-between costs that physical stores may have. (*…and upon a virtual platform…)* Since the profits coming from this innovative form of gaming almost outweigh the ones of the traditional video games, the conventional platforms and ultimate hardware manufacturers, Sony, and Microsoft, adjusted to this evolution by

turning many of their physical video games into their digital forms, reaching outstanding profits. Especially at the first lockdown of Covid-19 era, Sony met tremendous growth at its digital appearance, with the digital sales touching 74% of its total sales, according to Statista.

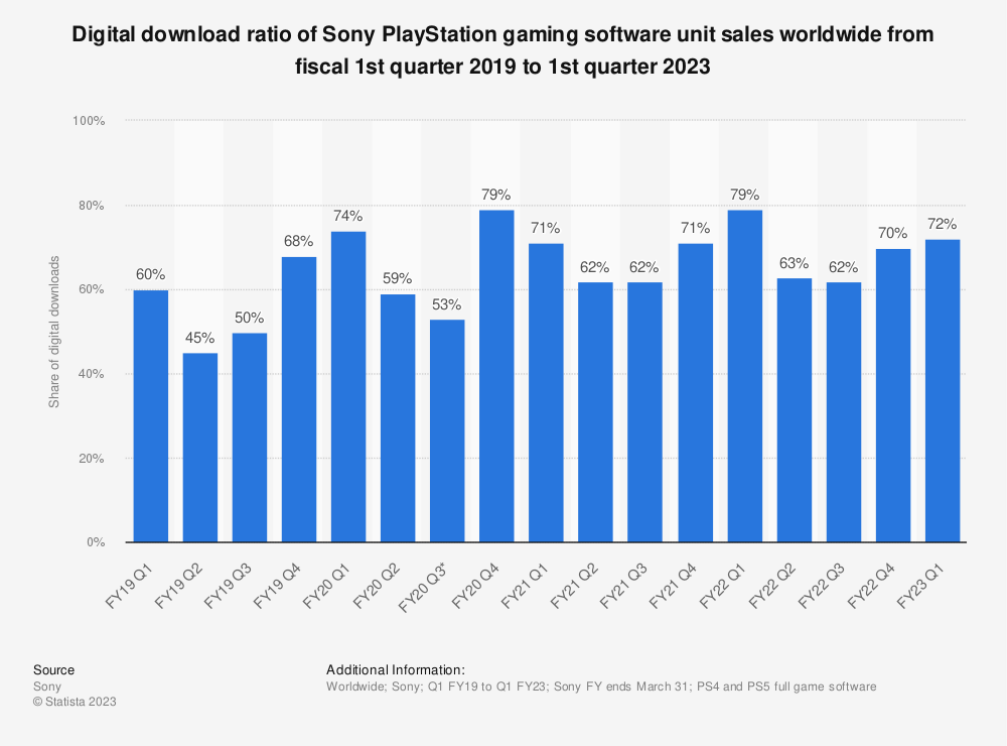


Image 1. "Digital download ratio of Sony PlayStation gaming software unit sales worldwide from fiscal 1st quarter 2019 to 1st quarter 2023" (*Statista,2023).*

2.2.2 The combat of devices and the emergence of cloud gaming

Exploring the reason why players choose to play among different consoles and devices is a significant step for companies to better comprehend the reasons behind what they play, why the play, the tendency they play and what they want to achieve by playing. Previously we had presented the three main manufacturers and their profits coming from their hardware consoles, PlayStation (Sony), Switch (Nintendo) and Xbox

(Microsoft). Till now the purchase of the latest consoles in the marketplace, is the goal of most of the gamers[1] who want to optimize their gaming experience and many of them also add another console to their collection. However, technological developments, the evolution of Virtual Reality, the proliferation of smartphones, the launch of multiple devices and the rise of digital games, doubted the monopoly of consoles and led to what (Prato et. al. 2014.) referred to as "the app economy". The so-called app economy is augmented mostly and fairly by the development of mobile gaming. According to Statista, at the time of writing we have about 6.84 billion active smartphone users, which reflects almost 85% of the global population. In fact, till 2028 this number is supposed to be expanded to 7.7 billion users whose worth is estimated to reflect 173.4 billion dollars by 2026 (Statista, 2023). Those numbers are inconceivable, and they explain almost completely the fact that 76% of the total gamers play digital games on their smartphones. There is no need for a great explanation. With a smartphone, the users have easy access to games at any time, with or without internet availability, with no costs since there is a great variety of Free-to-play games that are easy to install, and they match to their quick lifestyles. This kind of gaming is now called *"casual game"* (Prato et. al. 2014.), a term which exactly describes the ease of use of those games. Easiness to access, to comprehend and to play the game. Of course, smartphones are not the only device rising from the development of digital games and for sure are not the only device providing this kind of easy access. Tablets have become an important segment in the gaming world as well. In fact, according to researchers, the gaming activity seems to be the monopolistic usage of tablets (Richter, 2013).

Outside of the breakthrough that smartphone devices brought to the video game industry, an unbeatable device over the years that seemed to be aligned with the so-called "techies"[2], is the PC/desktop. It is an important distinctive of this category to

[1] The definition and perception of the term "gamer" will be thoroughly examined below.
[2] According to *Oxford Languages* Dictionary "techies" are persons who are expert in or enthusiastic about technology, especially computing.

have noted that many of the high-tech gamers persistently use PC devices, because that means that those users are not price-sensitive, but they do prefer quality and "demand" quick, robust, and long-lasting devices that will accompany their gaming performance. Those kinds of gamers are also more prone to make purchases such as gaming keyboards, mice, chairs etc., which will optimize their position in the gaming world. Moreover, at this level of gaming, we do not advert only to gaming as an experience that brings joy, entertainment, and pleasure, but to something deeper than that: we advert to gaming that incorporates you to a gaming community. Online gaming communities and online streaming games have changed completely the stereotypically concept of the gamer that plays alone in a room and isolates himself. Nowadays, the Massive Multiplayer Online games (from now on MMOs) give the opportunity to users around the world to play on the same server at the same time with each other. Simultaneously, this gaming experience can go streaming, meaning that players can broadcast themselves the time they are playing, with the audience watching them, commenting on their performance, and interacting with them. This kind of gaming has gained so much attention that nowadays there are gaming influencers and streamers with millions of followers and a huge loyal community surrounding them. This relationship between gaming influencers and their audience is a very interesting perspective of gaming, especially for brands and collaborations, and therefore future studies should research it with more scrutiny.

The road towards digitalization came to enlighten the gaming activity with its cutting-edge features, such as cloud gaming. Cloud gaming is (Roach et. al.) *"a type of online gaming that runs video games on remote servers and streams them directly to a user's device, or more colloquially, playing a game remotely from a cloud".* This is a breakthrough in the gaming industry. Until now we have presented and explained the multiple devices that can run physical or digital games. But cloud gaming is beyond that. The user does not have to own a hardware console or does not need to install any

game. The process is simpler. Only with a device- whatever that is- a user can play a game that belongs to another server as it is streamed. In fact, the user can even play on behalf of the owner of the server. This ease of compatibility that cloud gaming offers in combination with current estimates that its market will be expanded to 62.5% annually, really set a lot of questions regarding the future of video game industry.

2.3 *Advertising in the video game arena*

2.3.1 The emergence of in-game advertising, advergames and the gamification concept

"If you think games have already taken over the living room, wait until you see what they can do to advertising" said Bing Cordon, the Venture Partner of KPCB and Former CCO of Electronic Arts and he was absolutely right (Zichermann et al., 2010). By the time marketing firstly approached the video game industry, a whole new business area unlocked, with mutual profits and opportunities both for the advertising brands as well as for the gaming companies. The billion-dollar worth video game industry has caught the attention of marketers, who have now incorporated games or in general gamified activities into their marketing strategy with the main goal to pursue brand awareness, brand recall and finally influence consumers' purchase intentions. However, before it is explained what are the exact anticipations and benefits of marketers and with which strategies, they usually attain those goals, it is crucial to define exactly what is in-game advertising, advergames and gamification -giving appropriate examples- and thus avoid any inconsistency or misunderstanding.

2.3.2 In-game advertising

In-game advertising (from now on IGA) is *"the inclusion of products or brands within a digital game…with main aim to entertain the player"* (Tertuller, et. al. 2013). (Smith, et. al., 2014) added that IGA is *"the integration of nonfictional products and brands within the playing environment of video and computer games through simulated real-life marketing communications mechanisms"* (Hussain et al. 2023.). IGA is the closest form to traditional marketing, as it concerns mainly product placement within an existing game, in multiple forms such as posters, banners, logos etc. One of the first pioneers in this kind of advertising was the attempt of the popular food-chain Subway to incorporate its ads into the game Counterstrike. (Lewis, et. al., 2013). This endeavor had surprisingly met quick responses, pursuing 31.000 impressions in a 3-week period. Of course, this kind of "product placement" was not only referring to materials but the product, or better the brand, could be everything, from upcoming movies to personas. For instance, in 2010 the trailer of the upcoming movie Ironman was incorporated into the famous real-life simulation game "Sims 3". Henceforth, dozens of popular brands followed the example and incorporated their brand into famous games, with the hope to achieve more brand engagement from the gaming audience. For example, Nike and other brands have appeared themselves at E-sport games, such as the 2K, mainly in the form of logos or on the jerseys of the virtual players, creating a connection between the gamer and the brand. In fact, Nike has taken the in-game marketing to a next level with its "Nike connect app" to give the opportunity to players to receive in-game updates and rewards only through scanning the jerseys they have bought (Gaudiosi, 2017). Particularly, the vice president of marketing for NBA 2K, Alfie Brody, explained exactly that by leveraging in-game marketing and other technologies that are now easily accessible to marketers, they pursue as a brand, to give the highest possible value to their audience, to reward them and engage them.

2.3.3 Advergames

As (Terlutter et. al.) explains, *"advergames are created around a specific brand and often have a clear rhetoric in order to transfer specific brand information"*. In this case so, it is the brand who designs the digital game, which is not just a simple game aiming to entertain the player, but it is specifically purposed to advertise the brand and deliver some of its messages *"in an engaging manner"* (Wise et. al., 2008). However, findings by (De La Hera, 2019.) agree that the effectiveness of advergames are not that simple, since, to a great extent, they are dependent on external factors that are not controllable by the game itself. Taking advantage of the research of Christine Wright-Isak and Roland Faber, the author referred to those factors as "the campaign objectives", "the background situation", "the creative strategy", and "the media strategy". Taking a closer look at those elements, he explains that the background situation is the most difficult distinction to be hundred percent controlled, because it depends on the player's background. That means, that an advertiser can surely study his target market, learn his preferences, and analyze his behavior, but still cannot be completely aware of what will be his attitude toward the designed advergame. Does he have a solid knowledge of the brand and what it stands for? Will he understand the game? Does he have experience with such a game? Those *"personal circumstances"* cannot be completely prevented and that is why the background situation is a real challenge for marketers. Moving forward to the next factors, according to De La Hera, the campaign objectives are also a challenge when it comes to an advergame's design because as he explains, such a game which is completely designed by a brand, will have, at least theoretically, multiple objectives. The difficulty here lies in the fact that every objective may need a different kind of game construction. Therefore, it is significant that the designers are aware of their objectives and keep in mind that every step should align with them. This also applies to the creative strategy factor, which has to do with the understanding of the nature of advergames. Creating a digital game in

order to nurture your brand awareness while keeping your audience entertained may seem to be an easy task, but it cannot be accomplished without understanding the reasoning of the advergames and their interactive nature. Finally, all those factors cannot be flourished without a robust media strategy accompanying them. Taking into consideration the "where" factor, meaning where will be placed the digital game, in which kind of platform, is a deciding factor that should not be neglected by any advertising strategy. Therefore, even though this research study is going to investigate the benefits of video games for marketers, it is highly recommended that before designing any advergame, it will thoroughly analyze the nature of them and the factors influencing their effectiveness.

The famous luxury brand, Burberry, with multiple innovations across the years, illuminated the way advergames work and their possibilities and thus provide a great example. In 2019, the brand created an advergame available on Snapchat, with a deer as the main character. The point of the game was for the deer to reach the moon while wearing the brand-new Burberry puffer jacket. Among other things, the winners would get personalized gifs with those jackets, while only one winner in specific countries would get a complete real one (Showstudio, 2019). Advergames are not, however, a late-years discovery, and their effectiveness, even though not unanimously accepted, has been undergone a lot of research. In fact, a survey by David Deal in 2005, indicated that advergames can indeed lead to brand recall. The experiment was addressed into two groups of players of the puzzle game Bejeweled and the branded product was the chocolate brand, M&Ms. The first group played the advergame while the other group played the normal puzzle with website ads of the brand. After being asked to recall the brands which have been exposed while playing, the results clearly highlighted a major brand recall of the first group (De La Hera, 2019). Additionally, other researchers have suggested that in contrast to a video game that can include multiple brand placements,

an advergame is dwelled only on one brand which can evoke a robust *"thematic connection"* between the brand and the game (Wise et. al., 2008 and Winkler, 2006).

2.3.4 The gamification concept

(Deterding, 2019.) defined the word gamification as *"the use of game designed elements and mechanisms in non-game contexts"* and in fact the author suggests that the term was constructed by the digital media industry. Gamification as a concept is a very interesting aspect of this research paper in order to comprehend how enormously a video game can influence one's behavior. In particular, the fact that according to scientists there is indeed a noticeable behavior when someone plays, identifying the relationship between the human brain and the gaming activity, clearly illustrates the importance of analyzing video games (Bilos, 2022.). The understanding of this connection between the player and the game can further give more light to the second research question of this study which is what triggers players to engage with marketing content in video games. In every case, it is crucial again to keep in mind that gamification is not a simple procedure -and even more that not every activity can be gamified the same or at all-. Just like advergames and the background strategy, there are some external factors like the *"psychological characteristics"* (Bilos, 2022.) of the players that should not be neglected. However, in this case it is even more considerable to analyze the target market with scrutiny because as (Buckley et al. 2019) explains, the gamification concept includes some psychological aspects related to the relationship of the player and the game.

An interesting part of gamification is that it is not only addressed to advertising reasons, but oppositely it can be found in different aspects of our life like in the healthcare system and in education or in tourism. Regarding the healthcare system in particular, gamified activities seem to be *"a promising new approach to health*

behavior change" (Johnson, 2016) and pursue to make the health care and wellbeing more motivating and approachable. For instance, the objective of the game "Zombies, Run" is another way to motivate people to run, thinking that they are experiencing a zombie's apocalypse. Further, an interesting study by (Kleftodimos, et al., 2023) illustrated how the gamification concept could find a very useful meaning in game-based learning touristic activities. In fact, the study examined the case of location-based augmented reality games that are created in touristic destinations of Western Macedonia, Greece, with the aim to guide, entertain and teach the culture and traditions of the place to visitors through an immersive experience. These were only some examples of how a gamified framework can alter a very simple -at times boring- everyday activity. It is now better understood why it is important in gamification to have studied the reason why players are amused by games. On the IGM and advergames, where the game was the protagonist and it was either already existed or designed for specific reasons, it was more reasonable to accept that it will somehow affect the player who supposedly enjoys playing. In this case, as it was explained, completely non-gamified activities start to incorporate somehow a gaming and more playful perspective, which will make the non-gamified activity seem more "pleasant" and that exactly illustrates a positive relationship between the player and the game.

2.4 Marketing in video games: a new chapter to business opportunities

As it has been explained till now, video games have become a huge and limitless profitable industry, capturing one of the top positions in the global economy. Advertisers and popular companies have doggedly pursued a piece of this pie in an effort to maximize their profits and see what they can gain from this innovative form of marketing. This part of the dissertation will present the business opportunities coming from IGM and therefore, answer the first research question of this study.

It is unanimously accepted that behind every digital marketing strategy, besides all its individual goals, the ultimate objective is to raise brand awareness which will hopefully lead to sales' increase or in simpler words, purchases. The creation of brand awareness obviously aligns to the endeavor of companies to incorporate their content and brand within a video game, and it is undoubtedly their No1 opportunity they have from this collaboration. Yet brand awareness is kind of a general definition that in fact incorporates many other different benefits that will finally lead to that.

The first, and perhaps most important, benefit of this kind of digital marketing is that it is cost-effective. A normal digital marketing strategy requires tons of research, money- and time-investment in R&D[3] and a thorough investigation on the selected target market and their preferences, their behaviors, their needs. However, within a video game, a company can deploy its vast and diversified -in terms of both geography and preferences- audience and easily present their brand to them (Zawislak, 2023). Otherwise, it is a real challenge, quite impossible and for sure expensive to reach such a variety of target markets and captivate their attention. But even though this is still a diversified audience, they do have something in common: the game on which the ad is displayed. In its turn, this leads to other benefits, like the credibility and easier acceptance of the brand due to the game/the gaming company. As it will be also analyzed in the following chapter of the paper, one of the main characteristics of the so-called gamers, is the loyalty they have towards their favorite game (Ekren, 2023). Consequently, this loyalty may give a "free pass" to the advertised brand and make the gamer assume that it is credible and trustworthy since it is incorporated within the game. The loyalty part is quite interesting, because it can lead to another opportunity for brands, the one that leads to engagement. For digital marketers, the engagement is one of the most crucial KPIs[4](Milanese et al., 2022.), because it illustrates exactly the

[3] Research and Development
[4] Key Performance Indicators

impact of their marketing strategy, to what extent the targeted audience is involved with their brand and how that influences their purchasing intentions. The benefit of engaging the audience is highly connected to how loyal they are to the game. How exactly does that connect? Accepting the fact that even the simplest games require concentration, at least to one extent, then it can be assumed that the gaming audience stay focused while playing which consequently could mean that they may retain better information when they see it on this concentrated framework. This concentrated framework can become the opportunity for brands to promote their messages, tell their stories and make an emotional connection between both the game and the gamer. This psychological aspect of the tree-fold gamer-game-brand will be examined with scrutiny further in the chapter. For now, it is important to emphasize this enthusiastic perspective of the player, who is excited and loyal with their favorite game and thus, willing to invest time and money on that. (Ekren, 2023) Her blog explains exactly how this nature of the player can be equalized with the fact that he may be prone to purchases while playing. Taking her thought one step further, those purchases may not only be on gaming-related products, but regarding the advertised brand as well, since- theoretically- the audience has connected it with the game.

Those presented opportunities that brands can attain from their integration to the gaming screen, are interestingly proved by previous research conducted by the British internet provider company, TalkTalk. According to the company's research (Johnson, 2021.), and after it participated in the in-game advertising platform, Bidstack, on which billboards with the brand name were appeared, showed first and foremost a sales increase. In particular, there was a 12% raise of the sales in combination with an increase in the attention towards the brand. According to the report, the average time that a usual online advertisement captures one's attention, is 1.6 seconds when in this case this time was 13% higher (Zawislak, 2023). Finally, one of the most important findings highlighted that 48% of the total participants were in the position to retain the

brand, which is exactly related to what was previously explained as "the concentrated framework" of games and how within this, the recall memory of the focused gamer is growing. There is, however, a more stringent perspective which objects to the opinion that since almost every game requires to an extent attention, this concludes that the brand placement will be easier recalled because the gamer was focused. (Grigorovici, 2004) explained that the *primary focus* of the gamers belongs to the game. That means every other stimulation, in this case a brand placement, will receive a *secondary focus*, which cannot be always guaranteed, since there are some external factors, such as the difficulty of the game, which could negatively influence the player's attention. Therefore, even though brands could flourish through this innovative way of marketing, this does not mean that its success can be easily accomplished, and there is a great need to research more thoroughly those external factors that could dissuade the goals.

2.5 Profiling a gamer: perceptions and beliefs about the "gamer identity"

It is important at this point of the study to examine what it really means to be a player, or even better, a gamer. An interesting point that should be cleared from the beginning is the fact that "*not everyone who plays games, calls himself a gamer*" (Shaw, 2012).[5] (Howe et al., 2019) gave the perfect example. They explained that *"just as everyone who exercises does not call himself an athlete, not everyone who plays video games identifies as a gamer".* This is a significant starting point to acknowledge at the beginning of this chapter which will be emphasized on the gamer identity, the stereotypes and perceptions about the term itself and the gaming in general as well as on the discrepancies of different studies which have researched the same topic but ended up on some different conclusions, mainly regarding on the important indicators that identify one as a gamer.

Furthermore, as (De Grove et al., 2015) argued, there are three essential reasons to examine the gamer identity. According to the authors, the first reason agrees that digital games are a cultural phenomenon that needs to be researched and therefore, a thorough research on the gamer identity, contributes to a more general research on digital games and their attractive nature. That is why this dissertation embeds research on gamer identity as well, because someone- and especially businesses, cannot be led on efficient results regarding the impact of the marketing content in video games, without firstly understanding the impact of the games themselves on the audience and what they are really attracted to. Be aware of who is your target market and what it really wants, are two elements that cannot be neglected from a marketing perspective. Secondly, the authors investigate the gamer identity from a social perspective, and they agree on its social nature. Therefore, this kind of research *"adds on research on social identity"* and can give an explanation on the indicators of in-group identification. Finally, the authors supported the differentiation of digital games and other media regarding the *"identity building"*. In fact, they claimed that their main difference when it comes to identification is that someone cannot "hide" from being a social networker, if he uses more or less social media, but on the opposite someone can repel the identity of a gamer even if he plays more or less games. It would be remarkable, therefore, to analyze this aspect of the research topic and pursue some clarifications about the existing perceptions regarding video games and gamers.

Having identified the reasons, it is necessary to examine the gamer identity, this chapter will begin by acknowledging the social structured nature of video games. (Shaw, 2012.) illustrated on point that *"social structures do not determine our actions"*. Therefore, it should not be taken for granted that someone who plays video games is equal to a gamer, because that would be a misconception or better a stereotype. In fact, when it comes to video games, there are many existing stereotypes, which tamper our perception about video games and gamers, such as the most common one, which

describes the gamer as "a young, white, mostly isolated, male". Another stereotype, or better an oversimplistic conclusion could be that a casual gamer[6] is not a gamer when on the opposite a hardcore player is one. Analyzing this theory from the beginning, one could comprehend that their main difference roots in the dedication of the two players towards gaming, a dedication that could be translated both in terms of time -media consumption- as well as of money investment. However, this theory could be easily ruined, because as Consalvo supported in his article about hardcore casual gamers (Consalvo, 2009), a casual gamer can be very committed to his favorite game, consuming the same amount of time and money as a hardcore one. (Shaw, 2012) continued this perspective by giving the example of playing Farmville on Facebook for hours and Halo for one hour with friends. This example unlocks another common indicator which stereotypically attaches someone with the identity of a gamer: the game genre indicator. The term "game gerne" divides video games according to their rules and different concepts, and thus it is argued that its main purpose is the communication and the expression through those different experiences that every game offers (Arsenault, 2009).

A question is arising due to the aforementioned indicators: To what extent do money and time investment and the kind of a game played, set up the identity of a gamer and are they the only factors? As it will be presented below, they are not. But they do still matter, even though there is not a blatant proof on the existing, in times controversial, literature. Perhaps, this is the outcome of a stereotype. It is so deeply embedded into one's subconscious, that it is difficult to prove it hundred precent wrong. (William et al. 2008.) referred to those indicators, not as stereotypical ones, but as

[6] (Juul, 2010.) in his definition about the casual gamer, he explained that *"he has a preference for positive and pleasant fictions, has played few video games, is willing to commit small amounts of time and resources playing video games, and dislikes difficult games".* Equivalently, in his definition about the hardcore gamer, he supported that *"he prefers emotionally negative fictions, has played a large number of video games, will invest large amount of time and resources toward playing video games, and enjoys difficult games".*

prototypical (De Grove et al., 2015). They agreed on the fact that there are some prototypical distinctives about gamers, such the content -meaning some kind of games like first shooter games (Grand Theft Auto etc.) are more usual to be played by players who identified themselves as gamers. Another prototypical distinctive they referred to was indeed the media consumption -someone who plays for many hours seems to accept the gamer identity more easily- as well as the distinctiveness of the gender. At the beginning of this chapter, it was presented the most common stereotype about gamers, who describes them as *"...male"*. The authors on their research study agreed that the male participants accepted easier the gamer identity in contrast of the female ones, a result that should be neither a proof nor completely irrelevant. The truth is that players do have a misconception regarding the gamer identity, and as said before, many play, little value themselves as gamers. Among a lot of studies regarding gender representation in video games, a very interesting one researched how the underrepresentation of women could be connected with the way they *"are portrayed"* in the video games. Particularly, the authors found that when women are the protagonists in the game, like Lara Croft, they are interpreted as strong and powerful, while oppositely when they have secondary roles, they are weak and quite insignificant (Rajkowska, 2014). Even more alarming, however, is that females in protagonist roles can lead to upheavals, like it happened in *Battlefield 5*, in the trailer of which a lot of women were included, oppositely to many arguments supporting that women did not fight in the World War Two (Buckley, 2018). This raises serious concerns about the distinction of genders in video games.

Moreover, in another study of her, (Shaw, 2010.) agreed that video games are played *"by all ages, sexualities, races, religions and nationalities"*. And yet, after a very interesting research she conducted by interviewing marginalized groups such as women, gays, trans who play games, the results showed that from the indicators of

gender, race and sexuality, gender was indeed a significant factor for women to not identify themselves as gamers. Borrowing two of the interviewers' statements:

"gamers are 'usually guys. I know one girl gamer […] I don't really consider her as a gamer. I don't know maybe my perception of gamer is too extreme. But she considers herself as a gamer" (Shaw, 2010).

"when I'm playing a guy. I get fully absorbed because I really have to win. Because he just expects me to lose anyway, because I'm a girl" (Shaw, 2010).

Those perspectives can become a useful food for thought. Firstly, from both statements one can realize the existing misconception of gaming to have only "room for boys". Interesting is that this perception comes out from women at this point and not from men, as one could guess. This leads to the second thought, that maybe some women play the exact amount of time, types of game and they do invest money, but because they do not have a "clear mandate" on gaming, they do not consider themselves as gamers. This could consequently doubt the indicators of frequency and money investment and give a more serious matter to the gender one, which in turn is a social structured factor.

This concludes to what was acknowledged from the beginning of this chapter, the social aspect of the gaming and consequently the gamer identity. Even though the preconception of a gamer characterized him as an isolated human, the social element of gaming, especially nowadays with the rise of MMOs, could seriously doubt this obsolete perspective. In fact, it is widely proven that video games can consolidate players with *"unique communication"* inside or outside of the game (Howe et al., 2019). Nowadays, players can communicate while playing with users worldwide, sharing their news, experiences, and enthusiasm about gaming. This gaming occupation overcomes the gaming activity itself because it takes part also in forums or even in real-life discussions. Even without this kind of communication, it would be wrong and a very generalized conclusion to stigmatize certain types of consumption. (Shaw, 2010.)

gave a very interesting example to think of: in a case of having two players, player A and player B, the first plays alone in a room MMOs while the second plays in a room sitting next to another player but playing on different devices – and maybe also different games-. The question is, who is supposed to be "the isolated gamer"? The one playing alone but on an online community with perhaps hundreds of users communicating and playing simultaneously? Or two players in the same room who thus play individually and maybe hardly speak to each other? The second example could also be the example of an Internet Café. Since there is not a clear answer, it is reasonable not to prejudice the type of consumption.

Despite the many dissonances of the existing research studies regarding what matters or not to the acceptance of the gamer identity, there seems to be a consolidation about the friendship network as a factor. The main idea, that (De Grove et al. 2015) referred to as *"the accessibility factor"* is, that if someone categorizes his friends as gamers, there is a great possibility that, if he plays, he will also categorize himself as one. This *"implies a social environment that is open to a gamer identity"*. Moreover, this connects to a great extent to what (Howe et al. 2019) explained in their research as the social identity theory. According to this, *"social identity is part of an individual's self-concept which derives from one's knowledge of membership of a social group together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership"*. In other words, and in combination to what it was previously mentioned as accessibility factor, in a group of friends, usually the members want to feel accepted by the other co-members. Therefore, there is a very positive association of accepting the gamer identity on the self, when there is a positive perception about gamers in the group or generally close environment (De Grove et al., 2015.). In this kind of environment, gaming is not a *"guilty pleasure"* (Shaw, 2012.).

2.6 Theoretical framework: what really motivates the gamer?

Examining the gamers' profile was the first step to comprehend their nature and different perspectives. On a second base it is crucial to seek out the motives behind gaming. This endeavor is going to be supported by plenty of existing literature and research on gaming motivation and acceptance. In particular, three specific theories, the Social Cognitive Theory, the Flow Experience, and the Technology Acceptance Model have been selected to contribute to a better understanding of the motives surrounding video gaming.

First of all, it is important is to accept what (Bartley, 2004) suggested by saying that *"people must expect to get something out of their experience"*. (Blumler et al., 1973) had previously argued that *"media use and video games are goal oriented"*. That is exactly what this part of the dissertation wants to investigate: what is that players want to pursue by playing. Going back to Bartley's research on people's motivations when playing MUDS[7], he referred to four things that players usually enjoy while playing, also known as Bartley's four types. The "four types of gamers" for Bartley are the Achievers, the Explorers, the Socializers, and the Killers. Particularly, he explained that the Achievers are players who enjoy competition, who want to congregate points, set goals and leap over different levels within a game. They have a purpose, and they want to achieve it. On the other hand, the Explorers are players interested in understanding the game per se and explore its different -and perhaps secret- elements. Their goal is to explore. Moving forward to Socializers, significant for them are the other people, the co-players. Their goal is to socialize, to communicate with others and share their experiences. Finally, the Killers, according to Bartley, pursue to impose on

[7] A MUD is short for a multiplayer dungeon. In this dissertation the term is included in the word MMOs (Massive Multiplayer Online games). Both terms are referring to a virtual world where players can play and communicate simultaneously.

others within the game, either that means that they gain a superior position by winning, or -mainly in first-shooter games- that they leverage virtual weapons to gain the authority. At this point, it would be useful to mention a very interesting research by (Ryan et al., 2009) regarding the motivating role of violence in video games. In particular, despite many prejudices and a ubiquitous perception that violent games may lead to equivalent anti-social, violent behaviors in real-life (Anderson et. al., 2010.), the findings of the study illustrated that the violence as an element in video games plays an insignificant role as a motivational factor. Oppositely, what is really provided by those games, according to the authors, is the capability of the players to do whatever they are pleased with, a feeling of freedom and complete autonomy. Especially games like Grand Theft Auto, World of Warcraft, Call of Duty, Halo etc., what they really provide behind the obvious -for someone- violence, are opportunities for autonomy, organizing strategic plans and overcoming challenges. Besides, other studies (Metzger et al., 2016) sidelined the violent character of some games by shedding light into other positive features like the historical orientation and academic attributes of some games -within which violence is occurring- such as Assassin's Creed, Son of Rome etc. Particularly, the study pursued to indicate how those historically themed games can positively influence players to engage more with history. Those contradictions in the literature review, show exactly the misunderstandings and opposite perspectives surrounding video games and could be a clue to their false interpretation as a "guilty pleasure", as it has been already explained.

Even though this is indeed an oversimplistic categorization of players, it offers a first impression of what usually pleases them. (Van Rooij et al., 2017) referred to what is called *Active Choice Theory*, which presents the user as *"an active agent that makes conscious decisions about gaming behavior, shaped by their social structure and individual characteristics".* They affirmed this four-type theory, by mentioning mainly three categories, which they called as gratifications, the achievement, the immersion,

and the social. The achievement includes the need for competition, the immersion the previously said exploration and need for escapism, and lastly the social motivation meaning the need for interaction.

2.6.1 Social Cognitive Theory & Flow Concept

In addition to this theory, with some variations, exists the *Social Cognitive Theory* in which, according to (Van Rooij et al., 2017), *"people are also thought to be active agents, but the expected outcomes of behavior are considered to play a central role".* (LaRose et al., 2007) had previously expressed that this theory explains *"the self-regulatory mechanism through which individuals observe their own behavior, judge it (…) and adjust their own behavior to the environment by applying self-reactive incentives."* This theory is mainly used to interpret the uncontrolled -or as said by many authors- unregulated media consumption. What it supports, in simple terms, is that people do have a subconscious nature to control their feelings, and when those feelings are negative, such as for instance stress, sadness, anger, or loneliness, they may trigger an uncontrolled consumption. This is exactly what a self-reactive incentive concerns. A deliberate example that aligns perfectly with this case study, by LaRose et al. 2007, adds that people who face such negative feelings may try to control them by playing. However, this *self-regulatory mechanism* or better this endeavor to soothe their feelings through an activity, in this case video games, may lead to the development of habits that are no longer controllable, and have become *automatic* (Triandis, 1980). Many would describe this behavior as an addiction, but as (Peele et. al., 1992) correctly underpinned, the term addiction has usually a more alarming tone that needs intervention, which is not always the case. Therefore, since not every case is the same, it is better to describe an unregulated consumption, video game consumption, as problematic rather than addictive. Moreover, it still influences people's capability to observe and alter their behavior (self-observation), exactly because this behavior has now turned out to be automatic. Particularly, the authors (LaRose et al. 2007) noted that

during this automatic stage any kind of stimulus may wake up this behavior – even the sight of a gaming console or hearing a discussion about video games-.

A very interesting aspect that can be additional to the Social Cognitive Theory, is the so-called *flow experience* which in simple words is mainly used to express the exciting feelings that one receives through a total immersive activity. For instance, when someone plays video games and he is focused to an extent that his physical surroundings don't even exist, the literature explains that he is experiencing the flow stage (LaRose et al., 2007). Other authors, (Hussain et al., 2023) later described this experience with the term *transportation*. The meaning was though the same. *"The transportation experience goes beyond simple immersion in the unreal world, which takes individuals to a level where they feel themselves being part of that narrative"* (Vashisht et al., 2017).

2.6.2 Marketing placement and ethical considerations

This high level of immersion and the previously explained unregulated consumption was very crucial to be analyzed and they raise interesting questions and thoughts regarding the role of in-game advertising. First of all, some ethical concerns are arising regarding how upstanding it is to impose the player, who is already experiencing a situation of uncontrollable emotions, on a marketing concept. Is this the case of marketing and branding? To take advantage of a player's incapability to make deliberate decisions? And even if the marketing ethics are being respected, how exactly could a brand customize or better disaggregate its marketing content within a game to those who can receive it consciously? (Terlutter et al., 2013) in their research study regarding the gamification of advertising, provided some interesting theoretical models regarding the advertising perception in digital games that could perhaps answer- or add thoughts- at the previous concern. Firstly, they referred to the "*Persuasion Knowledge Model" (PKM)* by saying that over time of playing, users usually mature and they become aware of the marketing and persuasive content that they are being imposed on.

Therefore, one could presume, that even if they experience the stage where they are unable to observe their media consumption, they still can notice the marketing tactics. On the other hand, the authors referred to the "*Limited Capacity Model of motivated mediated message processing"* (Terlutter et al., 2013) which supports that blending the marketing advertisement within a fun and interactive game, can sure have positive outcomes, such as brand recall and recognition, but in the case of children, who are not that mature, they cannot easily comprehend the intention of the ad they are watching, and this still raises ethical concerns. It is very crucial, therefore, the marketing content to be addressed to a target market that possesses the ability to *"cognitively process"* the branding messages (Terlutter et al., 2013). Furthermore, another thought that occurred due to the reference to the flow stage, and has been multiply highlighted in the existing literature, is the level of congruence of the marketing content and the game. In particular, it has been argued that *"the degree of similarity or relevance between the game theme and the embedded brand/product",* or else the congruence level, is a very significant factor to increase brand recall and finally purchase intention (Hussain et al., 2023). Researchers have indeed affirmed that there is a positive interaction between congruence and brand recall and consequently argued that when the marketing content is not intrusive and there is not a discrepancy with the game theme, users' gaming experience and flow experience are not interrupted, and this leads to a positive view of the marketing product/brand (Marti-Parreno et al., 2017, Vashisht et al., 2020). However, even if the level of congruence between the placed product and the game is balanced, there are still obstacles that could dissuade the gaming experience. In particular, (Terlutter et al., 2013.) underline that a combination of skills, interactivity and challenges are usually the ingredients that create a memorable gaming experience and skyrocket the player to the flow stage. Significant is, though, that those challenges are not that infeasible in a way that they could cause frustration to the player, and equivalently not that insignificant that they could cause boredom. Both thoughts highlight that marketing placement within a game is not an easy task, since there is a

thin stroke in catching a player's attention between not destroying his gaming experience and simultaneously respecting a moral code.

2.6.3 Technology Acceptance Model

Another interesting and noteworthy theory that could shed some light to the reasons why users are motivated to engage with video games, is the *Technology Acceptance Model (TAM).* TAM was created with the aim to identify and analyze why individuals accept information technology. Particularly, a research by Yoon et al., (2013) exploited this model in the field of video games, in order to define the reasons why players are gratified by games. As they explained, there are some crucial determinants that influence this motivation, such as *"the perceived usefulness, the perceived ease of use and the perceived enjoyment" (Yoon et al, 2013).* The "*perceived usefulness"* is referred to as *"achieving valued outcomes"* by playing, which can be connected to what was previously highlighted when mentioned that users always seek something by playing, either that is the enjoyment out of exploring the game, winning, and selecting points, interacting with others, or escaping the real world. Whatever the anticipated outcome of gaming is, the authors stressed that the perceived usefulness would influence the relationship of the players with the game. Additionally, they added that equally crucial is the "*perceived ease of use*" of the game, which was also previously mentioned when referring to the flow stage. As (Davis, 1989) mentioned about the perceived ease of use, it is *"the degree to which a person believes that using a particular system would be free of effort".* In the case of gaming, however, this perception has two perspectives. One could support that people indeed desire -or anticipate the outcome of – relaxation when they decide to play, and they perceive this activity as the loophole from their stressed lifestyle. Therefore, a very difficult structure, complicated, with many rules and elusive game would probably cause frustration and unpleasant feelings to them. On the other hand, one could also support that this aspect concerns casual players, and that in the case of hardcore ones, the "*perceived ease of*

use" would not be a motivational factor, since their anticipated outcomes would be to overcome challenges (Yoon et al., 2013). Both determinants can also seriously affect the role of marketing in the gaming context. If there is not a perceived usefulness and the perceived ease of use is not balanced, then players consequently would not be able recall the branding message, and even more they probably won't even notice it. That is exactly the reason why brands should be completely aware who is their target market, what they want to achieve and correspondingly in which kind of game they are going to transplant their branding message. Finally, the "*perceived enjoyment"*, which is correlated to a great extent with the other two determinants, is another factor that would positively affect one's desire to play a video game and can exactly explain the hedonic nature of games.

CHAPTER 3: Methodology

3.1 Focus of the research study

The current research study aims to investigate the opportunities that video games could offer to the business world as well as to profile the gamer identity.

3.2 Key research questions

For the aforementioned purposes, three key research questions were created:

1) *How can businesses take advantage of the video games' resonance and what opportunities can they garner from this industry?*

2) *What triggers users to engage with marketing content in video games?*

3) Could the social identity of a player influence the way he interacts with the video game and the marketing content within it?

3.3 Importance of the research

The current research study will provide digital marketers as well as game designers/developers with significant insights mainly regarding their benefits from the integration of video games into their marketing strategy as well as regarding the gaming audience and how its different preferences, behaviors, and characteristics, can influence its interactions with games and the marketing content.

3.4 Methodology and Participants

For a more thorough investigation of the topic, primary qualitative data was selected to add more value - or doubt- to the aforementioned literature and theories. Particularly, a structured questionnaire with sixteen deliberate questions was created to be answered by people who play any kind of game, at any frequency and device. Five of the questions were multiple choice -with the four of them to have the choice of "other"[8]- while the rest of them were yes-no questions. The questionnaire was sent to current students of Neapolis University while it was also uploaded to the forum of Unboxolics[9] as well as in the Instagram and Facebook pages of the researcher. The platforms were selected in order to have a wider range of answers and users. The respondents were reassured that the survey follows all privacy protocols and that their answers will remain anonymous. The questionnaire was open to answers for one week and the final respondents were 180. All of their answers were categorized in a spreadsheet in an endeavor to be analyzed and compared more effectively. Table 1 below demonstrates the demographic characteristics of the participants, the gender, and the age.

[8] Meaning that the participant had the option to answer in his/her own words.
[9] Unboxholics are one of the most popular game streaming community/influencers in Greece. They have a YouTube channel with a wide audience (1,2 million subscribers at the time writing) as well as a website, where they not only speak about games, but also about tech gadgets.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of participants. (n=180)

	Total	**Age 13-20**	**Age 21-28**	**Age 29-35**	**Age 36-49**	**Age 50+**
Male	50,6% (91)	7	37	26	14	**7**
Female	49,4% (89)	5	40	24	16	4

What came as a surprise and consequently gave more value to the survey was the almost equal participance of women and men in the questionnaire. This not only brings down the stereotypically idea of gaming being just for boys, but also it gives the chance to control and analyze whether some of the aforementioned perspectives for women and games can be identified. From Table 1 is illustrated as well, that the average participant was between 21-35, which also confirms the opinion of the average gamer to be 35 years old. The questionnaire had an interesting participation in ages older than 36, mainly around 40-45 years old. Therefore, with the participation of both genders and a wide range of aging groups, there have been congregated precious responses that could give more light to the research study.

3.5 Results and Data Analysis

Table 2. Questionnaire and results ("*" means that the participant gave his/her own answer)

Q1. Why do you play games?

Fun (69,4%)

Competition (3.3%)

Kill time (5.6%)

Socialize (1.7%)

Escape reality (9.4%)

Repel stress (10.6%)

Q2. Which kind of games are your favorite?

Action and Adventure (47.2%)

First person shooter (17.2%)

Role-playing games (RPG) (27.8%)

Simulation (17.2%)

Racing (15%

Sport (25.6%)

Puzzle (27.2%)

***Moba/strategy (1.1%)**

***Strategy (6.1%)**

***Fighting (1.1%)**

Q3. How often do you play any kind of game?

Several times a week (25%)

Several times a month (28.3%)

Almost every day (17.2%)

Hardly never (26.1%)

***This fluctuates**

***Not so often anymore**

***Every now and then**

***almost every day before the studies**

Q4. Do you prefer playing alone or with friends?

Alone (55%)

With Friends (45%)

Q5. On which platform do you mostly play?

Smartphone (37.8%)

Tablet (2.2%)

PC (32.8%)

PS (23.9%)

Xbox (2.2%)

Nintendo (0.6%)

Q6. Would you consider yourself as a gamer?

Yes (25.6%)

No (74.4.%)

Q7. Does the term "gamer" have a negative tone for you?

Yes (31.1%)

No (68.9%)

Q8. If you see a marketing content within a game, will you recall it afterwards?

Yes (41.7%)

No (58.3%)

Q9. If the marketing content matches with the kind of the game, would you like it?

Yes (59.4%)

No (40.6%)

Q10. If the marketing content doesn't match with the kind of the game, would you like it or would you find it interruptive?

Yes, I would like it (19.4%)

No, I would find it interruptive (80.6%)

Q11. Do you think that you connect somehow emotionally with brands that often sponsor your favorite game?

Yes (33.3%)

No (66.7%)

Q12. Would you feel triggered buying from those brands in the future because you saw them while playing?

Yes (27.2%)

No (72.8%)

Q13. If yes, do you think that happens because you have feelings of excitement while playing?

Yes (62.7%)

No (37.3%)

Q14. Would you still pay attention to an advertisement if the game was difficult, and you felt frustrated?

Yes (28.3%)

No (71.7%)

Q15. Would you feel triggered to buy a product -game-related or not-, because a game streamer you watch, showed it?

Yes (28.9%)

No (71.1%)

Q16. Have you ever invested money to enhance your gaming experience?

Yes (32.2%)

No (67.8%)

Table 2 demonstrates the questions that 180 participants were asked to answer as well as their responses converted in percentage. After they had acknowledged their gender and age, as illustrated above in Table 1, they were about to answer the first question (Q1) regarding the reason they play games. Significant is to highlight at this point, that the questionnaire was addressed from the early beginning only to people who play more or less any kind of electronic game, a disclaimer that was clarified from the description on the platforms it was uploaded. Therefore, the first question takes it for granted that the respondents play games and seeks out the reason behind playing. The most popular answer, with 69,4%, meaning 125 responses, was the fun reason behind playing, followed by two less popular responses, but still on the second and third position, the reason of "repelling stress" and "escaping reality". Killing time and competition were below on the categorization. What came as a real surprise, though, was the reason of socialization, which unexpectedly was the least favorite answer. In fact, from the total 180 participants, only three (1.7%) believed that playing video games for them is a way to socialize and interact with people. Of course, that does not erode the social aspect of video games, as it has been thoroughly analyzed in chapter 2

of the research study, but perhaps the reason for having fun and entertainment in general is more blatant for the participants and comes first to their mind, while the other reasons are more specific. Moving to the next question (Q2), the participants were asked which kind of games are their favorite and the number one answer was the action and adventure games with 47.2% (85 out of 180). Further, almost half of them answered Role Playing Games (RPG) with 27.8% and Puzzles with 27.2%. Final on the scale were the First Shooter games (17.8%), the Sport games (25.6%), the Simulation games (17.2%), and finally the Racing games (15%). Seven of the participants answered with the option of "other" strategy games as their favorite and two of them fighting games. Interesting is to observe at this point what kind of answers were most preferred by females. As it is illustrated in Table 3, most of the female participants had a preference in action and adventure games and secondly in puzzles. The rest of the given games were preferred by almost the same percentage of females. However, it is crucial to point out the least preference in First person shooter games, with only two responses coming from women, which confirms the opinion in Section 2 that this kind of games are mostly addressed to -or at least preferred by- men.

Table 3. Female responses in Question 2 (n=180 total participants and n^1=89 total females)

Q2	Which kind of games are your favorite?	Female answers
Action and adventure	47,2% (85 total)	31
First person shooter	17,8% (32 total)	2
RPG	27,8% (50 total)	10
Simulation	17,2% (31 total)	7
Racing	15% (27 total)	7
Sport	25,6% (46 total)	7
puzzle	27,8% (50 total)	21

Moving forward to question three (Q3), the participants were asked about the frequency they play any kind of game. The two most favored answers were several times a month with 51 responses (28.3%) and hardly never with 47 (26,1%). Additionally on the scale were several times a week with 45 responses (25%) and almost every day with 31 out of 180 (17.2). Some individual answers were "this fluctuates", "not so often anymore", "every now and then" and "almost every day before the exams". Therefore, it is comprehensible that the audience was mixed between regular players, whether they are casual or hardcore, and rare ones. This was actually the objective of the questionnaire as it was about to be addressed to every kind of user and observe their different answers, especially in the upcoming questions related to marketing in video games. The fourth question (Q4) asked the respondents if they prefer playing alone or with friends, a very important and perhaps "tricky" question, since a lot has been spoken about the lonely nature of video games. Nonetheless, there was not a tangible difference in the results, as playing alone garnered 99 answers (55%) and with friends 81 (45%). In fact, on a closer analysis in this question, as it is shown in Table 4 there was not a great difference either in male or female answers. Out of 89 female participants, 49 stated that they prefer playing alone and equivalently out of 91 male participants, 50 stated the same. Therefore, it is not reliable to assume either that those who play video games are prone to solitude or that video games augment the social nature of humans. It is more decisive to accept the important role of individual preferences on such matters and how each of the users chooses to perform while playing.

Table 4. Male and female responses in question 4. (n= 180)

Q4	Do you prefer playing alone or wiht friends?	Female	Male
Alone	55% (99)	49	50
With friends	45% (81)	40	41

Furthermore, which kind of platform is their most preferable was asked in question five (Q5). The top answer with 68 responses (37.8%) was the smartphone followed by PC/desktop with 59 responses (32.8%) and PlayStation with 43 (23.9%). Tablet, Xbox, and Nintendo were at the end of the scale. Smartphones receiving the first position in the preferences, came as no great surprise, since the rise of mobile phones and in this case, mobile gaming has been enormous in recent years. Moreover, one of the most crucial questions, that will be much analyzed and combined with other questions later, is the sixth question (Q6) which asks the participants if they consider themselves as gamers. This question may also give answers to the third key research question of whether the social identity of a player could influence the way he interacts with the video game and the marketing content within it. There is an undoubted difference between the yes and no answer. Particularly, 134 out of 180 participants (74.4%) stated that they do not consider themselves as gamers, with the majority of them (81), as shown in Table 5, being women. Those who do support that they are gamers, were only 46 participants (25.6%) with most of them – 39 actually- being male.

Table 5. Male and female responses in question 6. (n=180)

Q6	**Would you consider yourself as a gamer?**		**"YES" answers**	**"NO" answers**	
Yes	25,6% (46)	Male	39	53	
No	74,4% (134)	Female	7	81	

Before proceeding to the next question, crucial is to return to question four (Q3) and observe the frequency that the "gamers" of this group of participants stated that they play. According to Table 6, out of the total 46 gamers, 18 of them play almost every single day and 17 of them several times a week. This means that more than half of them who consider themselves as gamers play at a very high frequency. Of course, this does not completely correlate the frequency with the identity of a gamer, because the questionnaire has not asked the participants the hours of their playing. Therefore, it

would be wrong to assume that someone who plays every day for half an hour differs from a person who plays two times in a month for four hours straight. Again, oversimplistic conclusions do not contribute to a better analysis of the topic but oppositely add more to stereotypes' maintenance and stigmatization. What is very triggering to comment though, is that of the 17 participants who claimed to play almost every day and consider themselves gamers, only one of them is female. In fact, 8 women claimed that they play almost every day -and many several times a week-, but they do not see themselves as gamers, even if they consume the same amount of time as someone who is a gamer. Of course, as it is presented below, 26 male participants stated as well that they play at a high frequency but do not think that they are gamers. However, even proportionally the results clearly show that women accept the term more reluctantly. This aligns to what was proposed in the literature in chapter 2 that women do not think of them as gamers, maybe because they see gaming as a "male era". Additionally, this confirms that frequency as a factor has more than little significance regarding the gamer identity and gives strong precedence to the gender factor.

Table 6. Correlation of Question 3 and Question 6. How much do gamers and non-gamers play?

Gender	Gamers that play almost everyday	Gamers that play several times a week	Non gamers that play almost every day	Non gamers that play several times a week	Non gamers that play several times a month
Male	16	15	7	19	11
Female	1	1	8	14	25

This hesitating tendency of women regarding the term "gamer" is confirmed by the next question (Q7), which asked the participants if the term has a negative tone for them. Even though, on a first sight, the results showed the majority to have answered

negatively with 124 responses (68.9%) and positively with 56 (31.1%), on a closer emphasis it was proved that most of the positive answers were rooted from women. In fact, from the 56 positive responses, more than half of them - 38- as shown in Table 7, came from women. This could be also added to the reasons why women accept more difficult terms, because exactly all along they do not interpret it positively.

Table 7. Correlation of Question 6 and Question 7. Who thinks that the term "gamer" has a negative tone?

Does the term "gamer" has a negative tone for you?	**Answered yes and not considered themselves as gamers.**	
Yes – 31.1% (56)	Male	13
No- 68.9% (124)	Female	38

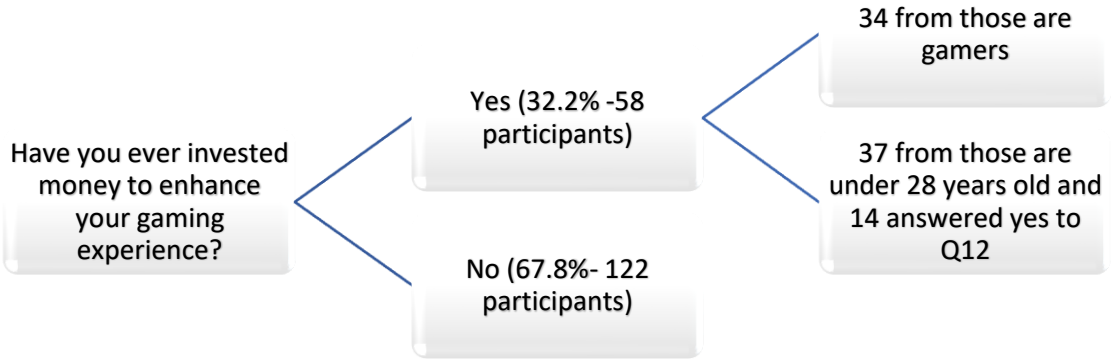
The first seven questions were more identifying in order to understand what kind of player every time answered the questionnaire and how exactly does he/she value gaming as an activity. Henceforth, the questions will be specifically constructed around the marketing in video games. Therefore, the eighth question (Q8) asked whether the users recall a marketing content when they see it within a game. 105 participants (58.3%) gave a negative response while the rest of them (75- 41.7%) gave a positive one. This, however, does not conclude that they necessarily do not like advertisements within the games they play, because as shown also by the next question (Q9) 107 participants – almost the same with those who answered negatively in the previous one- would like an ad which would match with the content and the tone of the game. Therefore, this could be a hint to companies to rethink their in-game marketing approach, to evaluate their strategy and observe whether it is obsolete and needs alterations, because even if the user likes what he sees and finds it coherent, this will not necessarily catch his attention to an extent to ensure the recall. In every case, thus,

the level of congruence, as explained in Section 3, is very crucial to approach the player. In fact, this was confirmed mostly by question ten (Q10), in which way more than half of the participants – 145 out of 180- stated that if the marketing content does not match with the game, they would find it interruptive.

In addition to, in the following question (Q11) the participants had to answer if they think that they connect somehow emotionally with brands that often sponsor their favorite game. More than half responded negatively, with 60 users (33.3%) to think that they do have an emotional connection with some brands. Significant is to point out that only 16 of them have claimed to be gamers. Question twelve (Q12) dived deeper into the marketing perspective of video games, and in continuation to the previous question, it asked the applicants whether they would feel triggered buying from those brands because they saw them while playing. The distance between the positive and negative answers here skyrocketed, with only 49 participants (27.2%) responding with yes and the rest 131 (72.8%) with no. From those who answered yes, only 11 are gamers, which actually indicates that marketing should not only aim on "hardcore" players and that everyone can be influenced if the marketing is persuasive enough. Further, the next question (Q13) was only addressed to those who answered yes on Q14. In particular, they were asked if they think that happens because they have feelings of excitement while playing, and the crushing majority with 62.7% answered positively. More importantly, though, is to observe the following question, which stated whether they would still pay attention to an advertisement if the game was difficult and they felt frustrated. 129 participants (71.7%) don't think that they would still be able to focus on the advertisement if the game provoked for some reason negative feelings. That is of course not surprising at all, since 96 out of those 129, in Q1 stated that the reason why they are playing is to have fun. Therefore, two things are crucial to be acknowledged. Firstly, even if researchers look for reasons and motivations behind playing video games, the most obvious -but yet so simple and accurate- reason would be the

entertainment. This leads to the second acknowledgement, that even if there has been constructed a very deliberate in-game marketing, the game itself, would always be an important aspect to influence the main objective – the brand recall-. That is why marketers should not forget that the in-game marketing comes supplementary to the gaming experience for the player. In other words, what matters in the first place for them is the game. Moving forward, the pre-last question (Q15) was an endeavor to bring the game streamers on the table, and asked the participants if they would feel triggered to buy a product, game-related or not- because a game streamer/influencer they watch, showed it. The vast majority answered negatively, but from those who did answered positively, particularly the 28.9% meaning 51 participants, only 16 of them consider themselves gamers. This indicates once more that the in-game marketing should not only be addressed to gamers with the reasoning that they are the ones they play a lot so consequently they are the ones that are going to be somehow influenced. The final question of this survey (Q16) sought out how many of the participants have ever invested money to enhance their gaming experience. Out of 181, 122 (67.8%) answered that they haven't and 58 (32.2%) that they have invested money. From those who responded positively, 34 are gamers. Interesting is also, that analyzing this question it seems that 37 of those who responded positively are aged under 28 years old and 14 of those have answered positively as well to Q12 -if they would feel triggered buying from brands they saw while playing-. The data is also presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Analysis of question 16.



CHAPTER 4: Conclusions

4.1 Discussion

This paper tried to give some light on three key research questions related firstly to how can businesses take advantage of the video games' resonance, which was answered in the first section of the dissertation, basically by suggesting that building a connection with the audience through this loyal framework that surrounds video games, could lead to high engagement and consequently to brand awareness. Further, with the aid of the existing literature and the aforementioned questionnaire, there were congregated some thoughts regarding the following key research questions about what triggers users to engage with marketing content within a video game and secondly if the social identity of a player could influence the way he interacts with the video game and the marketing content within it. In fact, the results of the study provided the future researchers with both some theoretical implications and some controversial -from the theory- insights which thus, may give more food for thought.

On a first and important stage, the study confirmed that gaming is not addressed anymore to a small group mainly of males. Users of both genders and literally of all the aging groups find somehow pleasure in video games. This consequently decomposes perceptions that only male teenagers play video games. From the first questions there was also highlighted that fun, repealing stress and escapism are the main purposes that users seek to pursue by playing. Even though the social factor was surprisingly in the last position, as explained before, this does not undermine the social element of video gaming, which was the main topic on theories addressed above. It should be kept in mind that the participants had the opportunity to choose only one of the multiple choices. Therefore, maybe in such a direct question -why do you play video games- the first automatic answer could fairly be the fun one, because either someone plays to escape from his/her life, or be in contact with friends, or coordinate and structure new strategies, whatever the actual reason is, they are all wrapped with the entertaining element. After all, one is having fun when playing video games. This was further proved in Q4, which asked if the participants have a preference in playing alone or with friends and the percentages were almost equal with a with a small lead in playing alone. Another insight that was gained from the survey was a preference in action and adventure games for both genders, with an interesting fact that indeed the so-called gamers have a *"prototypical"* tendency to play first-shooter games as explained by (De Grove et al., 2015). Moreover, the survey also revealed the resonance of smartphones when participants were asked on which platform they prefer to play. In the same question it was also proved that most of the gamers mainly play on PlayStation or desktop devices, which in its turn could indicate that they own those devices and that they are not price-sensitive when buying gadgets to update their gaming experience.

Question six of the questionnaire was a key question to understanding a little bit more about the nature of gamers and realizing whether some perceptions around them are true or not. Interestingly, it was revealed that only a small minority of those who

consider themselves as gamers are female and even more interestingly a big percentage of those who interpret the term "gamer" with a negative meaning, are again female. The gender categorization surrounding the video game world could give useful answers to the third research question, by accepting that indeed the social identity -the gender one- of a player influences the way he/she interacts with video games and even more with the marketing content. This was proved mainly by the last questions which were completely marketing oriented and showed that most of the users -gamers or not- that have invented money to enhance their gaming experience or that would feel triggered either from a brand or a gaming influencer to buy a product that they were exposed to, are male. This is contrary, however, to the time of playing that those female users have stated they usually play. Many of them play on the same frequency with "gamers" and still do not accept themselves as ones, neither would proceed to purchases in the future. This contradiction and the social factor surrounding video games deserves further examination and should be definitely the main topic of future research. It is also an alarming point for both marketers and game designers, because it indicates the need to make female users feel more incorporated in this industry. The feeling of inclusion could only be beneficial as it would rebut old-fashioned prejudices that "video games are for boys" and may give the free to female users to augment their gaming experience without having guilty feelings that "this is not for them".

Finally, the survey provided important evidence and proved what many authors suggested (Hussain et al., 2023, Marti-Parreno et al., 2017, Vashisht et al., 2020) regarding the importance of the congruence between the marketing content and the video game. A great percentage of the participants revealed that they would like a content that matches with the game and in a contrary situation with an interruptive content they would feel irritated. This, in combination with the leading role that "fun" has towards players, could be an answer to the second key research question. A user cannot feel triggered to engage with a marketing content when he/she feels that this is

intrusive and has absolutely nothing to do with the game. This underpins as well, that the core is the game itself and that every marketing content and strategy are surrounding this core and should align with it. From a marketing perspective this highlights the importance of analyzing at a first stage the game and what its audience seeks from playing it. In this way, the marketing content is purposeful to the taste of this audience and thus, the possibilities to become interruptive are being declined while the possibilities of being recalled in the future are being augmented.

4.2 Limitations

Of course, as with almost every research study, this one has some limitations and cannot be hundred percent accurate. Firstly, a questionnaire as a research tool has some limitations itself since the questions and answers were specific. This particular questionnaire was structured with mainly yes-no answers which can always lead to some misunderstandings, since sometimes the answer can also be a "maybe"[10]. Especially in comparison to an interview, in which the participant has room to express himself in his own words and the interviewer can see his expressions and feelings, the questionnaire is more impersonal, and the participant chooses the answers he is in front of, whether they represent him completely or not. Another limitation of this specific survey was the neglect of asking the time and the place they are playing. This could have led to misinterpretations mainly regarding the questions three and five. Particularly, someone who has answered that he plays almost every day, could have meant that he plays almost every day on the way back home from work for 20 minutes. Accordingly, someone who has answered that he plays several times a month, could have meant on his desktop for six hours straight. Not knowing where, under what circumstance, and for how much may consequently lead to false conclusions regarding

[10] Especially in questions 12 and 15, which asked if the participants would feel triggered in the future to do something, the answer "maybe" has a strong importance, since one cannot predict completely how he/she will feel in the future.

who is a gamer, but again this indicates that the frequency of time as an indicator is problematic. Additionally, a very serious limitation of the study concerns the fact that even though key research questions were created as a guideline of the dissertation, further metrics to measure the upcoming results were not included, which automatically creates a gap in the trustworthiness of the results. Particularly in the third research question, which aimed to identify whether the social identity can influence the attitude toward the marketing content, metrics, and variables regarding the social identity itself would have led to more accurate and reliable conclusions. Therefore, every upcoming conclusion for this matter, can only function as a hypothesis and not as a serious academic result, which has been measured and analyzed. Last but not least, another important limitation is the fact that this survey and its results only concern a tiny minority of those who play video games. The video game world as explained is huge and a simple survey with only 180 participants from a specific place of the world cannot become the indication in order to proceed to generalized results. What was discussed above was only interpreted regarding the results of this specific questionnaire and the selected literature. It is comprehensible that the same questionnaire somewhere in the United States or in Asia would be different. Moreover, the topic itself has an enormous room for further research studies and it should be again disclaimed, that it was discussed only with the aim to analyze the three aforementioned key research questions.

4.3 Conclusion

In summary, the current research study sought to investigate the development and ubiquitous nature of video game marketing, in particular by exploring the business opportunities rooting from this industry as well as by investigating the target market of gamers. By doing so, three key research questions accompanied this endeavor: 1) *How can businesses take advantage of the video games' resonance and what opportunities can they garner from this industry?*, 2) *What triggers users to engage with marketing*

content in video games?, and 3) Could the social identity of a player influence the way he interacts with the video game and the marketing content within it?. The aforementioned selected literature in combination with a qualitative research conducted by a questionnaire, led to some potential conclusions and assumptions to those questions.

The research was segregated into four chapters. The first one was the introduction and the second one articulated and clarified the resonance of video games, by highlighting that at the moment writing the industry's worth is almost 396 billion dollars, constituted by three main components, Sony Corporation, Nintendo, and Microsoft, each of them with millions of profits breaking their records every year. With the passage of time, and with the groundswell of success surrounding the industry, other components such as the Chinese company Tencent, Activision Blizzard and Electronic Arts pursued a piece of this pie, while cutting edge technological features such as AI and VR, as well as the transformation into digital games and the emergence of cloud gaming, made the industry even more alluring. This billion worth business caught the eye of digital marketers and businesses who wanted to differentiate themselves by integrating video games into their marketing strategy.

This integration is usually accomplished by the so-called in-game marketing, which in simple terms is a brand placement within a video game, by the creation of advergames, which are games completely designed for marketing purposes and finally by the gamification concept, which embeds a kind of gamified activity in a non-gamified framework, like the healthcare system. Even though the three of them demand a different strategy and have different objectives, all of them's main goal is to transplant some of their brand messages into a content *"that consumers seek out for entertainment purposes"* (Wise et. al., 2008). By doing so, businesses pursue to raise brand awareness in an engaging and attractive manner that will finally maximize their profits. Besides, video game marketing could endow them with a large and various target market, easier

credibility, engagement, and a very loyal audience that is willing to upgrade their gaming experience. To sum it up, this integration of video games, via in-game marketing, advergames and gamification concepts into marketing purposes as well as benefits coming from this alliance, such as high engagement, easier access to a vast audience, brand recall and credibility, answer the first key research question.

However, this is not an easy task, since in order to catch the audience's attention, a marketing strategy should firstly analyze the audience and comprehend its outstanding features and desires. Therefore, the chapter 2 further pursued to profile the "gamer" and present on the one hand some existing misconceptions and stereotypes surrounding the term and on the other hand some indicators that could be equivalent to the gamer identity, such as the frequency of playing time, the game genre, the money investment, and the gender. By doing so, assumptions for the third research question were selected. Through the literature review and with the aid of a questionnaire answered by 180 participants and thoroughly analyzed in Chapter 3, there were many discrepancies regarding the significance of those indicators, but there seemed to be a consensus regarding the gender preconceptions in the video game world. In fact, it was proved that many women play the exact amount of time and maybe the same games as men, but they do not consider themselves as gamers because they have equalized the term with male players, which can be totally misleading for both game designers and marketers. A hypothesis that could give light to the third research question, is that the type of consumption as well as the features of the consumer should not be stigmatized, because it is proven that video games have room for all genders, sexualities, ages, gamers, and non-gamers. By incorporating equally all of them, every different social identity, they, as individuals, will not interpret video gaming or investing money on that as a "*guilty pleasure"* which is not addressed to them.

Furthermore, with a reference to the Social Cognitive Theory, the Flow experience, and the Technology Acceptance Model, it was pursued to investigate the motives

surrounding video games and the marketing content within them, according to the second research question. All the theories accepted the goal-oriented and social structured nature of video games, others by highlighting four types of players – the Achievers, the Socializers, the Explorers, and the Killers- (Bartley's Four Types) and others by pointing out other gratifications such as the immersion and the need for escapism. Whatever is the expected outcome for the player, it is of a great importance because it reflects the attitude that he will have toward the ad and consequently the brand. This connection between the brand and the game, as shown by the literature and the survey, outstandingly depends on the level of congruence between the two, advertisement and game. If the player finds it somehow intrusive and destroys him the *flow experience*, then the attitude toward the marketing content will be, at very least, neutral, and the brand recall will not be accomplished.

In every case, those results are limited by many external factors, such as the player's gaming background as well as the difficulty of the game and the players' ability to understand its rules, which are of major importance and should be highly recommended for future research. Last but not least, to expand the research on this topic, surveys on the importance of MMOs, gaming communities and on famous game streamers would be of much interest both regarding their impact on gamers' behavior as well as from a marketing perspective. Game influencing is a significant yet overlooked topic, which worths a thorough future investigation.

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**of importance*

*** of major importance*

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APPENDIX A: Questionnaire

Questionnaire about marketing in video games

Hello everyone,

My name is Katerina and I'm currently doing my master's in digital marketing. This questionnaire is part of my dissertation, which concerns a research focused on marketing in video games. The survey follows all privacy protocols, and your answers will remain anonymous. Please respond based only on your personal interests. Your participation will be valuable for me.

Thank you in advance!

* Indicates required question

Gender*

Male
Female
Non-binary

Age*

13-20
21-28
29-35
Other:

1. Why do you play games? *

For fun
For competition
To kill some time
To socialize
To escape reality
To repel stress

2. Which kind of games are your favorite? *

Action and adventure games
First person shooter games
role-playing games (RPG)
Simulation games

Racing games
Sport games
puzzle
Other:

3. How often do you play any kind of game? *

Several times a week
Several times a month
Almost everyday
Hardly never
Other:

4. Do you prefer playing alone or with friends? *

Alone
With friends

5. On which platform do you mostly play? *

Smartphone
Tablet
PC/desktop
PlayStation
Xbox
Nintendo
Other:

6. Would you consider yourself as a gamer? *

Yes
No

7. Does the term "gamer" has a negative tone for you? *

Yes
No

8. If you see a marketing content within a game, will you recall it afterwards? *

Yes
No

9. If the marketing content matches with the kind of the game (for example, a Jordan advertisement placed in 2K), would you like it? *

Yes
No

10. If the marketing content doesn't match with the kind of the game (for example, a Coca-Cola advertisement placed in Assassin's Creed), would you like it or would you find it interruptive? *

Yes, I would like it
No, I would find it interruptive

11. Do you think that you connect somehow emotionally with brands that often sponsor your favorite game? *

Yes
No

12. Would you feel triggered buying from those brands in the future because you saw them while playing? **(If the answer is no, proceed to question 14)** *

Yes
No

13. If yes, do you think that happens because you have feelings of excitement while playing?

Yes
No

14. Would you still pay attention to an advertisement if the game was difficult, and you felt frustrated? *

Yes
No

15. Would you feel triggered to buy a product, game-related or not, because a game streamer you watch, showed it? *

Yes
No

16. Have you ever invested money in products (such as a gaming chair or purchasing virtual goods like weapons) to enhance your gaming experience? *

Yes No

APPENDIX B: Consent of the research study by the Institutional Review Board of NUP

Κυρία Μπιντούδη,

Σας ενημερώνω ότι το ερευνητικό πρωτόκολλο με τίτλο «"The development of video game marketing: Business opportunities and the gamer identity», έχει εγκριθεί από την Επιτροπή Δεοντολογίας-Βιοηθικής του Πανεπιστημίου Νεάπολις Πάφος.

Με εκτίμηση,



Δρ Μάριος Αργυρίδης
Αναπληρωτής Καθηγητής
Ψυχολογίας Πρόεδρος
Επιτροπής