From apathy to ambivalence: How is persuasion knowledge reflected in consumers’ comments about in-game advertising?

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In today’s fragmented media environment, advertising in videogames (i.e. in-game advertising) is an increasingly appealing marketing communication tool to reach a targeted and captive audience, especially the elusive and hard-to-reach 18–34-year-old demographic. This article develops a conceptual framework that adapts the persuasion knowledge model to consumers’ views of in-game advertising. The propositions are tested in a content analysis of consumer comments about brands in videogames collected on 21 online forums. The results show that the interplay between knowledge types is reflected in gamers’ comments about in-game advertising. The absence of persuasion knowledge is reflected in more positive comments about the practice, but consumers who express both topic and agent knowledge also express more positive views of it. A key finding is that, when all three knowledge types are activated, consumers express ambivalent thoughts about the practice, and ambivalence is actually more common than univalent or apathetic views. The findings collectively suggest a nuanced approach to the relationship between persuasion knowledge and consumers’ opinions of new advertising formats.

Keywords: in-game advertising; persuasion knowledge; ambivalence; content analysis

Introduction

The videogame business, worth more than $18 billion a year, continues to outpace the Hollywood Box Office with its hardware and software sales (IGA Worldwide 2008). It attracts an audience of millions, from the hard-to-reach market of 18–34-year-old males to professional women both young and old who are increasingly embracing digital media (Adweek Media 2008). According to Nielsen Entertainment, young men spend around 12.5 h a week playing videogames, compared with 9.8 h a week watching television (Kim 2006). These characteristics have attracted the attention of advertisers who see the videogame platform as an appealing new format for placing their brands (Yang et al. 2006). ‘In-game advertising’ is hereby defined as the placement of brands and/or products in games, which reside behind the games’ rules. Although in early computer games such as ‘Fifa International Soccer’, billboards were included for free, solely to increase realism in the game (Nelson, Keum and Yaros 2004), most in-game placements today are both intentional and paid for by the owner of the intellectual property. With the assistance of high-speed Internet, the industry is now evolving to accommodate a wide array of campaigns from static billboards to dynamic ads that can be targeted by geographic location, time, launch plans and demographics.
This research adapts Friestad and Wright’s (1994) persuasion knowledge model (PKM) to this new format of advertising to assess how consumers’ topic, agent and persuasion knowledge about the practice of in-game advertising are reflected in their opinions of in-game advertising. Few studies have focused on how consumers view the practice of in-game advertising, having focused mainly on attitudes towards placed products (Glass 2007; Sharma, Mizerski and Lee 2007; Cauberghe and de Pelsmacker 2010) and memory for placed brands (Nelson 2002; Yang et al. 2006). Only one published study (Nelson et al. 2004) has addressed consumers’ responses to in-game advertising but it is limited by its focus on computer-savvy members of a single online forum and did not test whether consumers’ knowledge of the games and publishers affects their views of the practice.

The objectives of this article are therefore to develop a conceptual framework for how persuasion knowledge is revealed in consumers’ comments about in-game advertising. Namely, this research provides an analysis of the content of gamers’ comments in online gaming forums with respect to whether they denote persuasion, agent and/or topic knowledge. The analysis then identifies linkages between the types of knowledge revealed in these comments and the valence of the expressed views about product placement, allowing a distinction between the neutral attitudes towards product placement found in earlier studies and more ambivalent attitudes.

Literature review

Product placement research

The growing body of research on product placement offers a solid foundation for research on in-game advertising. Academic research can be broadly categorised into the effects of product placement on consumers’ attitudes towards placed products (Nebenzahl and Secunda 1993; Gupta and Gould 1997; Delorme and Reid 1999; Cauberghe and de Pelsmacker 2010) and memory for placed brands (Gupta and Lord 1998; Nelson 2002; Russell 2002; Ferle and Edwards 2006; Yang and Roskos-Ewoldsen 2007), consumers’ attitudes towards the practice itself (Nebenzahl and Secunda 1993; Gupta and Gould 1997; Delorme and Reid 1999) and practitioners’ views of product placement (Karrh, McKee and Pardun 2003; Russell and Belch 2005). We focus this article on consumers’ attitudes towards the practice (Sung, de Gregorio and Jung 2009).

Research is mixed regarding consumers’ attitudes towards the practice of placing products in the content of entertainment. One of the earlier studies found that product placement was rated favourably by 70% of film viewers, a percentage significantly higher than the traditional advertisements at the beginning of films (Nebenzahl and Secunda 1993). However, attitudes towards the practice seem more mixed now, especially in the context of videogames. Recent research has found that, in comparison to other advertising vehicles, consumer responses to product placement as a practice are generally positive, reasoning that product placements are contextual and add realism to games (Lewis and Porter 2010). Other research has found that consumers who are negative towards advertising in general also tend to be more negative towards advertising in videogames (Winkler and Buckner 2006). In addition, there are boundary conditions: staying in context and enhancing realism increase the acceptability of product placements (Nebenzahl and Secunda 1993; Gupta and Gould 1997), but ethically sensitive product categories such as alcohol and tobacco hinder it (Gupta and Gould 1997). Delorme and Reid’s (1999) qualitative study with non-student participants found that they were fairly
positive towards product placement in general and that they were aware of persuasion attempts and actively analysed them.

With a few exceptions (e.g. Delorme and Reid 1999; Neijens and Smit 2003; Sung et al. 2009), product placement studies to date have used student participants who are not representative of the larger population (Soley and Reid 1983; Peterson 2001). A 2009 study conducted with 3340 non-student participants found that respondents were more neutral towards product placement than students in previous studies (Sung et al. 2009). However, it also found these respondents to be positively disposed towards product placement and the realism it brings, not perceiving it as unethical or misleading. More recently still, De Gregorio and Sung (2010) suggested that discussion between peers about placed brands and the practice of product placement that occurs from exposure through movies may result in more positive or at least indifferent attitudes towards the practice. Of course, it is possible that these neutral or indifferent views in fact reflect more complex opinions, such as ambivalence, which is the focus of this research.

Similar to film and television, research on product placement in videogames suggests that people tend to be accepting and are even positive towards this practice. A study published by Nielsen Games found that 82% of respondents had no problems with in-game ads, which is significantly more positive than traditional media (Adweek Media 2008). This is also supported in trade literature (e.g. Reid 2010), which not only finds that in-game advertising usually leads to significant positive changes in attitude towards the advertised brands, but also suggests the same outcome for the practice itself. In the academic arena, Nelson (2002) reported that in-game advertising generally did not disrupt the gamers’ experience. In-game advertising can be viewed as enhancing realism, hence adding value to the game (Nelson et al. 2004). In particular, Lewis and Porter (2010) found that both fictitious and congruent brand placements lead to higher levels of acceptance of in-game advertising, supporting the premise that contextualised advertising leads to greater acceptance of the practice. However, acceptance is not unconditional; a 2008 study by Nielsen Entertainment, commissioned by Massive Incorporated, showed that gamers accept in-game ads as long as the advertising messages do not interfere with game play or slow down the game. This is echoed in a qualitative study, based on in-depth interviews, that showed that respondents wanted escapism (i.e. immersion in game) rather than realism in their computer games (Berg and Schager 2006). Contrary to Grigorovici and Constantin’s (2004, p. 2) opinion that ‘product placements are less obtrusive and therefore media users are less likely to develop the so-called persuasion knowledge’, Berg and Schager (2006) found that their participants had high levels of persuasion knowledge and were able to spot placements and elaborate on the motives and strategies driving them. These studies suggest a more complex relationship between consumers’ knowledge and understanding of advertisers’ strategies and their views about in-game advertising.

**Persuasion attempts and the PKM**

Consumers’ views about advertising messages placed in videogames are likely to depend upon the extent to which they have developed personal knowledge about the strategies or tactics used in persuasion attempts. Friestad and Wright (1994) developed the PKM to explain how consumers’ knowledge about the actors, themes and outcomes of the persuasion process affects the way they respond to these attempts. A central premise of this model is that, as stated by Campbell and Kirmani (2008, p. 549), ‘the extent that an individual consumer imputes an ulterior persuasion motive to the product placement is likely to affect the consumer’s response’. Based on this assumption, if the marketers’
strategies and tactics are deemed misleading, persuasive or manipulative, the consumer may display more negative views of product placements. On the other hand, if these strategies and tactics are deemed informative, entertaining or adding to realism, the consumer may express more positive views about product placement.

The PKM proposes that consumers carry three types of knowledge to the persuasion interaction and that these types interact to influence their response to the persuasion attempt. Agent knowledge is all non-persuasion-related knowledge of an agent; it incorporates beliefs about the characteristics and competencies of the agent (Hibbert et al. 2007). Topic knowledge is all non-persuasion-related knowledge about the topic or content of the persuasion attempt. This includes information about the products advertised and context in which they appear. Campbell and Kirmani (2008) note that product or issue expertise is part of topic knowledge, as experts tend to have better topic knowledge than novices. The third type, called simply persuasion knowledge, is the consumer’s personal knowledge about the strategies and tactics used in persuasion attempts. This includes ideas about what the agent is attempting to achieve, as well as ideas about persuasion strategies, what the agent tries to achieve (Campbell and Kirmani 2000).

Academic research drawing on the PKM spans a range of contexts, including retail, sales, advertising messages and, more recently, product placement (Ahluwalia and Burnkrant 2004; Campbell and Kirmani 2004; Mallinckrodt and Mizerski 2007; Cowley and Barron 2008). A general finding is that activating persuasion knowledge and subsequently increasing a consumer’s awareness of an agent trying to influence them have a negative impact on consumers’ perceptions of the marketing agents (Brown and Krishna 2004; Morales 2005; Main, Dahl and Darke 2007). In contrast, when consumers are not aware that someone is trying to persuade them, they react more favourably than when their persuasion knowledge is activated. For instance, Campbell and Kirmani (2000) showed that when an ulterior persuasion motive is less accessible, targets who are cognitively busy are less likely to use persuasion knowledge and, in turn, evaluate the agent as more sincere than the ‘unbusy’ observers. Overall, these findings suggest that the type of knowledge that is activated during a given experience affects consumers’ views of the experience itself.

Research has also looked at more covert marketing strategies such as product placement (Cowley and Barron 2008; Wei, Fischer and Main 2008). Wei et al. (2008) found that the activation of persuasion knowledge had a negative effect on the evaluations of brands placed in radio shows but that these negative effects diminished with increased levels of perceived strategy/tactic appropriateness and brand familiarity. Interestingly, the effects of activating persuasion knowledge extended beyond the brand itself to the hosts, show and station, suggesting that there can be negative carryover effects of activated persuasion knowledge onto the entities affiliated with brands engaging in covert marketing (Wei et al. 2008). In their study of placements in television programmes, Cowley and Barron (2008) found that an otherwise positive shift in attitudes towards a placed brand did not occur when a ‘persuasive-intent prime’ preceded exposure to the placement. Indeed, Russell (2002) argued that persuasion knowledge can impede the persuasive impact of subtle placements that otherwise operate via mere exposure. People who have developed a high degree of persuasion knowledge during their media socialisation are less likely to be influenced by product placements via the mere exposure effect (Nyilasy and Reid 2007).

However, these studies focus on consumers’ responses to specific product placements, not their overall views of the practice. To date, the focus has remained on the persuasion knowledge component of the PKM, not distinguishing between how the other types of knowledge (namely, agent and topic) might interact to affect consumers’ opinions...
of covert persuasion attempts. These distinctions are hereby applied in the context of consumers’ comments about the practice of in-game advertising.

**Model of consumers’ views of in-game advertising**

The extant research on product placement suggests that consumers’ views of the practice of in-game advertising are complex. Social psychologists have long recognised that people often hold inconsistent beliefs or feelings about an object or issue, some positive and some negative (Breckler 1994). The evaluative inconsistency towards an issue or topic is referred to as ambivalence (Katz 1981). In attitudinal research, the recognition that being ambivalent about an attitude object or issue is different from being apathetic or neutral about it led to the recommendation that positive and negative opinions be captured separately. Indeed, across many studies, positive and negative evaluations were found to cluster separately and form two factors with a small negative correlation (Thompson, Zanna and Griffin 1995).

Recognising the independence of positive and negative views, this research proposes four possible consumer views of the practice of in-game advertising: apathetic, positive, negative and ambivalent. Apathy is defined as a decrease in or lack of motivation, interest or emotions, which cannot be ascribed to any impairment of consciousness or any emotional or cognitive disorder (Marin 1991). Apathy is reflected by indifference, expression of not caring about or not minding the practice. Expressing only supportive (opposing) views about the practice and its effects on the gaming experience would reflect an overall positive (negative) response. Ambivalence occurs when consumers simultaneously express both positive and negative views of the practice (Maio et al. 2004).

Previous product placement research suggests that consumers’ views of in-game advertising are affected by the interplay between the three types of knowledge discussed within the PKM. Therefore, this research proposes that consumers’ persuasion knowledge interacts with their (non-persuasion) agent knowledge and topic knowledge to influence their expressed views of the practice of in-game advertising. This is summarised in Figure 1. Because valenced thoughts have been shown to be good predictors of overall attitudes towards a given subject (Brin˜ol, Petty and Tormala 2004), the model focuses on consumers’ explicit comments about the practice of in-game advertising and identifies linkages between the nature and type of knowledge (persuasion, agent and topic) that is revealed in these comments and the valence of the expressed views.

As advertising in games is usually less obtrusive than traditional forms of advertising, people have not necessarily developed persuasion knowledge and reactance to these commercial messages (Edwards, Li and Lee 2002). If a persuasion attempt is acknowledged in this context, targets may express negative views of the practice (Friestad and Wright 1995). Consumers who may not expect promotional motives within entertainment content would express more negative views if they spot a persuasive intent and their persuasion knowledge is activated (Campbell and Kirmani 2004; Main et al. 2007).

P1A: Consumers with activated persuasion knowledge are more likely to express negative views of the practice of in-game advertising.

In-game advertising is a relatively new marketing tool; it is an unobtrusive and covert way to promote products. Due to its nature, many consumers may be unaware of its persuasive intent; therefore, they are less likely to develop persuasion knowledge. Therefore, consumers with no persuasion knowledge are not only less likely to express negative thoughts about the practice of in-game advertising but also express more
univalently positive thoughts about it. If consumers are unaware that brands placed in games are there to persuade them, they are likely to express more positive views about the practice.

**P1B:** Consumers with no persuasion knowledge are more likely to express univalently positive views of the practice of in-game advertising.

Topic and agent knowledge refer to non-persuasion-related knowledge. This is knowledge about in-game advertising, gaming in general, advertisers and game publishers. Previous research has shown that negative effects diminish with increased perceived strategy/tactic appropriateness and brand familiarity (Wei et al. 2008). Because topic and agent types of knowledge reflect a certain level of familiarity, expertise and savvy about gaming brands and the economics behind making a multi-million dollar game should lead consumers to express more positive views about game-related practices such as in-game advertising. As knowledge concerning gaming and publishers is non-persuasion related, it is proposed that the expression of topic and agent knowledge will be reflected in positive views about the practice of in-game advertising.

**P2:** Consumers with topic and agent knowledge are more likely to express positive views of the practice of in-game advertising.

Targets with activated persuasion knowledge are aware of the persuasive intent of advertisements in games. However, if they also possess agent and topic knowledge, which, as discussed above, tend to be reflected in positive views, the presence of persuasion knowledge will result in the coexistence of positive and negative beliefs about the practice, in other words, consumers will be ambivalent towards the practice (Maio et al. 2004).

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Figure 1. A general model of consumers’ views of in-game advertising.

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Consumers may have positive feelings due to their agent and topic knowledge and, at the same time, negative feelings due to their knowledge of the persuasive intent of advertising.

P3: Consumers with topic, agent and persuasion knowledge are more likely to express ambivalent views about the practice of in-game advertising.

Consumers who lack topic, agent and persuasion knowledge have limited means to express firm, valenced, views about the practice of in-game advertising. Apathy is defined as a decrease in or lack of motivation, interest or emotions towards an object (Marin 1991). Consumers with no topic, agent and persuasion knowledge will have a lack of interest or motivation to form views about the practice; they will be uninterested and subsequently apathetic towards the practice of in-game advertising.

P4: Consumers with no topic, agent and persuasion knowledge are more likely to be apathetic towards the practice of in-game advertising.

Study
To provide an initial empirical test of the propositions, we conducted an analysis of computer-mediated communications of members of online gaming communities (Kozinets 2002). Specifically, we collected and analysed consumers’ comments about their videogame experiences on online forums that actively discuss advertising in games. The sample consists of individual gamers’ comments publicly posted on 21 online gaming forums (see Table 1). This method provides an unobtrusive way to collect and analyse consumers’ comments in naturally occurring computer-mediated communication about advertising in videogames. Of course, we acknowledge that, while this context is ideal for witnessing consumers’ views of in-game advertising in an unprompted, naturalistic fashion, it may also inherently contain a selection bias, as it is potentially skewed towards highly involved videogame consumers. A related limitation of the methodology is that comments on forums inevitably reflect consumers’ explicit and salient views about advertising. Still, the unobtrusive, observational method (Kozinets 2002) allowed an unbiased assessment of these consumers’ views of in-game advertising, and the variance in the nature of the posts reveals that there was in fact a range of gamers represented in the sample.

Method
Paisley (1969, p. 133) defines content analysis as a phase of information processing in which communications content is transformed, through objective and systematic application of categorisation rules, into data that can be summarised and compared. The

| gamespot.com | quakelive.com | hwired.com |
| forums.xna.com | forums.worldofwarcraft.com | ign.com |
| community.codemasters.com | compsgames.about.com | blogs.smh.com.au |
| mmorpg.com | forums.themysimsresource.com | braid-game.com |
| forum.lowyat.net | community.au.playstation.com | vg247.com |
| bboy.org | answers.yahoo.com | forums.whirlpool.net.au |
| palgn.com.au | forums.atomicmpc.com.au | guardian.co.uk/technology/gamesblog |
content analysis method provides a ‘scientific, objective, systematic, quantitative and
generalisable description of communications content’ (Kassarjian 1977, p. 10). The
selection of gaming forums was based on several factors including the number of
messages posted and their relevance to the topic of in-game advertising. Forums had to
have a minimum of five posts and the posts had to actively discuss the topic of in-game
advertising. From here the researcher uses a ‘big-net’ approach, which involves observing
and analysing all posts. The researcher focuses on the posts that help promote an
understanding of consumers’ opinions of in-game advertising. When the same individual
made multiple posts, the researchers took the ongoing conversation in its entirety as a
single unit of text for coding. In all, the posts of 406 individual forum members were
analysed. Given that the discussions focused on detailed aspects of gaming, we can be
reasonably sure that most of the participants have played or play games. Moreover, due to
the type of forums and the demographic segment gamers largely represent, it is a
valid assumption that the participants are videogame-savvy individuals mostly between 18
and 34 years of age. The publicly available postings were downloaded, saved and
analysed.

**Coding**

A detailed coding form was developed and the two coders underwent several training
sessions. Practice coding was first conducted on a subset of the comments from 120
members. Each coder coded these separately and then met to discuss any discrepancies,
provided clarification and updated the coding scheme as needed. Training continued until
an adequate level of inter-rater reliability was achieved (Inter-Class Correlation
Coefficients > 0.85; Kassarjian 1977). This ensured that all postings in the master file
were properly coded. Each knowledge type and valence was clearly defined and examples
are provided for the coder to follow (see Table 2). The entire posting (or set of postings in
the case of multiple postings) of each individual member of the forums was analysed and
coded dichotomously (1: Yes; 0: No) for whether it displayed each of the knowledge types
and for the valence of the comments contained therein. To avoid bias in coding,
knowledge types and valence were coded independent of each other.

**Results**

Of the 406 individual postings collected, 27.6% did not include any comment about in-
game advertising and were excluded from the analysis, resulting in 294 usable
observations. Overall, all four categories of attitudes towards in-game advertising are
represented: 29.3% of postings reflect univalently positive thoughts, 23.4% univalently
negative thoughts, 13.3% apathetic and 34% ambivalent. 59.2% of postings reflect topic
knowledge, 62.9% have persuasion knowledge and 46.3% have agent knowledge.

The relationships between the valence of opinions of in-game advertising and
knowledge types were examined using $\chi^2$ analysis. P1A is supported: of those individuals
whose comments reflect persuasion knowledge ($N = 185$), 67% express negative views
($\chi^2(1) = 18.60, p < 0.01$). P1B is also supported as those who do not explicitly rely on
persuasion knowledge represent the largest segment (55.8%) of the univalently positive
consumers ($\chi^2(1) = 18.29, p < 0.01$). Thus, the activation or lack of activation of
persuasion knowledge is key, respectively, to the expression of negative and positive
comments about the practice of in-game advertising.
P2 posits that consumers with both topic and agent knowledge are more likely to express positive views about the practice of in-game advertising. Indeed, 68% of observations with agent and topic knowledge reflect an overall positive view of in-game advertising ($\chi^2(1) = 5.64, p < 0.05$). P3 posits that consumers with all three types of knowledge (topic, agent and persuasion) are more likely to be ambivalent towards in-game advertising and indeed, of the observations with all three knowledge types ($N = 120$), 64% of them reflect ambivalence towards in-game advertising ($\chi^2(1) = 27.07, p < 0.01$). P4, which posits that consumers with no topic, agent and persuasion knowledge are likely apathetic towards the practice of in-game advertising, is not supported ($\chi^2(1) = 3.23, p > 0.05$). However, only 12.2% of the total number of observations did not reflect any knowledge type, making it difficult to test this proposition on such a small sample.

### Table 2. Coding categories and examples.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Knowledge Type</th>
<th>Illustrative Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agent knowledge</td>
<td>I want the best game possible, and if it takes a couple pixels of advertising inside the game world, it’s a great trade-off to get funding for my videogame company of choice. Yahoo forum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic knowledge</td>
<td>I don’t think people would have a problem with a few in game ads if it lowered the price of the games significantly. Putting in a few items here or there (like nikes, coke cans, etc.) isn’t too much of a bother but more than a few items is lame. Especially since billboards usually have mock ads that are often the only clever outlet programmers get to put into some cheesy games. Wired forum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persuasion knowledge</td>
<td>The intent of these ads is not to make you look at them and say ‘Oh, I want a soda.’ The intent is for you to glance over them, and next time you’re at the supermarket, you look at the shelf, and subliminally see their brand of soda out of the bunch. The idea is just to get a second look at their product, not sell it on the spot. I could see either way into the argument, in some cases real world ads in-game make sense. However, if they’re going to be getting the benefits of ads, they better give the gamers some kickback in, I dunno, not launching the game at a $60 price point? Wired forum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Ads are fine. Battlefield 2142 incorporated billboard advertisements into the game. The billboards were tailored to fit the visual style of the game. There were one or two billboards that struck me as a bit out of place, but I do think overall the system worked. Placing advertisements in locations that advertisements would exist in the real world does not at all bother me, it’s like product placement in movies. IGN forum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>I am totally against ads in games; I think it ruins the enjoyment of the game. There are many advertising avenues for advertisers. TV, billboards, etc. Why games? Besides I thought advertisers are moving online now to sites like paymydebts.com.au and others where they can advertise? SMH forum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambivalence</td>
<td>I agree with the ads in this case, Nike, Adidas, Gatorade, etc. – the ads fit right in there with sporting games. I don’t agree with the idea of running around of the world of Oblivion beating the shit out of a goblin, just in front of a big billboard telling me how awesome Pepsi Max is… Atomic forum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apathy</td>
<td>I don’t really bother about those ads in-game; some of them are just fake ads that the developer just add it in to make it look more realistic and lively. Lowyat forum</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Discussion and research implications

This research is the first to relate different types of knowledge about the persuasion attempt to consumers’ comments about the practice of in-game advertising. The results suggest that the interplay between knowledge types is an important factor in understanding the overall attitudinal response to in-game advertising. Consumers with no persuasion knowledge are more likely to express positive views of the practice, but so too are consumers with both topic and agent knowledge. And a key finding is that, when all three knowledge types are activated, consumers’ views reflect ambivalence towards the practice, and ambivalence is actually more common than univalence or apathy about the practice.

The study makes clear that consumers are savvy about new advertising formats, such as in-game advertising, with most consumers in the sample articulating some forms of knowledge related to the persuasion attempt. This suggests that advertising messages embedded in new media are not as covert as previous research has implied (e.g. Campbell and Kirmani 2004; Grigorovici and Constantin 2004; Main et al. 2007) and that many consumers also recognise their benefits in terms of its ability to subsidise and enhance entertainment content, as long as a certain level of appropriateness is maintained (Wei et al. 2008).

More generally, the pattern of results reveals the need for a nuanced approach to the relationship between persuasion knowledge and consumers’ views of new advertising formats, such as in-game advertising. Indeed, although consumers who recognise the persuasive intent of advertising in videogames express more negative views of the practice, those with both agent and topic knowledge express more positive views. Given that all three types of knowledge often coexist, the most prevalent response to the practice of in-game advertising is one of ambivalence.

This pattern aligns with O’Donohoe’s (2002) discussion of postmodernism and advertising literacy where she argues that, to make sense of advertising, consumers draw on their understanding of conventions from other cultural texts, and that their advertising literacy skills enable them to feel both immune and vulnerable to the persuasive and ideological powers of advertisers. The ambivalence that results from these ‘postmodern paradoxes’ (O’Donohoe 2002, p. 103) is especially noticeable in consumers’ attitudes towards advertising in new formats. Further research is called for regarding the relationship between ambivalent attitudes towards advertising practice and the impact of those messages on audiences (Cauverhe and de Pelsmacker 2010) to assess whether, as previous research suggests (Armitage and Conner 2000; Sengupta and Johar 2002; Zemborain and Johar 2006), ambivalence in fact increases consumers’ vulnerability to advertising messages.

Of course, the findings are limited by the nature of the data collection. The anonymous and unobtrusive nature of the online medium meant that there is a risk of people altering their social representations, which can subsequently alter their true opinions (Kozinets 2002; Hong and Lee 2005). As previously mentioned, it is also possible that the sample of participants was skewed towards highly involved videogame consumers and perhaps this is why apathetic consumers were the least prevalent segment. Another limitation is that, although the comments posted spanned a wide time period, the data were collected at a single point in time and could not capture the developmental process of persuasion knowledge, consumers’ progression of awareness of persuasive strategies in videogames over time (Nelson et al. 2004).
The fact that the data collection captured historical comments at a single point in time does not allow the evaluation of factors and experiences that may affect viewers’ opinions over time. This leaves open some opportunities for future, longitudinal research in this domain where factors that prompt or instead suppress the activation of agent, topic and persuasion knowledge could be studied. Following on previous research, further research could also investigate whether the effects of activating persuasion knowledge extend to the embedded brands and to secondary sources such as the characters in the game and the game itself.

In this fast-evolving industry, it is important to continue monitoring consumers’ evolving knowledge about the forces shaping the videogame industry and the impact this knowledge has on the nature and valence of their opinions of advertising practices therein. This qualitative, unobtrusive inquiry has revealed the prevalence of ambivalence and thus signals the need to move beyond quantitative measures of attitudes that do not differentiate between apathy and ambivalence, and to more accurately capture the complexity of consumers’ responses to in-game advertising. We hope that, by means of this exploratory foray into consumers’ comments about in-game advertising, we have identified some previously undocumented dynamics affecting consumers’ views of new advertising formats.

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