IMPACT OF ADVERGAMES ON BRAND RECALL AND BRAND ATTITUDE

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Abstract: Advergames are the interactive online games entrenched with brand messages, used as an effective marketing communication tool to promote company's products and brands. Previous studies have explored the impact of videogames or internet in general, on customers. This study explores the impact of advergames on customers' brand recall and their attitude towards brand placements in advergame. The study outcomes show that customers' exposure to advergames resulted in high brand recall and more favorable attitude towards brand placements in advergame. The paper also presents marketing implications and scope for future research studies.

Keywords: Advergames, Brand Placements, Online Advertising

Introduction: Today companies are investing a lot in advertising. Every company is behind catching customers' attention for its products and brands; hence every company is advertising its product to increase its awareness among customers through numerous ways of communication. Thus, companies are promoting their products and brands through one or the other medium. But the existence of more no. of companies, increased competition for product differentiation and rise in commercial time has triggered the consumers to grow ad-avoidance tactics that guard his/her psychic liberty (Rumbo, 2002). As evident from past studies (e.g., Webb and Ray, 1979; Cobb, 1985; Rotfeld, 2006) crowded advertising atmosphere results in ad-avoidance by consumers and less recall rates. Hence, the advertising clutter has compelled the marketers to develop new and interactive ways of communication (Ispir and Suher, 2009). Advergames is one such new form of marketing communication which is an amalgamation of advertising and gaming. Advergames are defined as interactive online games embedded with brand messages to promote company's products and brands (Cauberghe and Pelsmaker, 2010).These are pioneeringmeans of interactive gaming technology that express and deliver the ingrained advertising messages.

What are Advergames? *Icicle Hop*is is an advergame sponsored by Kellogg, in this advergame, the player has to keep the *Cinnamon* (the spokescharacter of the game) in the air by making it to jump high and has to earn cereals in order to win and complete the game. Therefore, in this way the customer interacts with the brand for about 5-7 minutes in an interesting way. Thus, an advergame is an online game sponsored by the company to promote its brand to the customers in a more entertaining and funny way. This new medium of communication offers numerous benefits over traditional advertising media. First benefit of the advergames is that it increases the involvement of the customer with the brands as brands are integrated with gaming environment (McCrindle, 2006). Secondly, customers are actively involved with the advergames (McCrindle, 2006) and third, advergames bring an experience of fun and realism (Refiana, Mizerski, and Murphy, 2005) unlike traditional advertising media. Hence, many national and international companies are employing advergames to communicate to their prospective customers. This increased use of advergames has motivated the researcher to understand how advergames affect behavioral outcomes, considering the limited research in this area. The few studies that have examined provide sundry results. Cauberghe and Pelsmacker (2010) and Dias and Agante (2011) showed that brand recall increased whenparticipants were exposed to Advergames. On the other hand, Mallinckrodt and Mizerski (2007) have argued that when participants were exposed to an advergame, there was no impact of knowledge of the persuasive intentions on the consumers' preferences for the embedded brand in that advergame when compared with other cereals or food categories. Hence, this study makes an attempt to find out the impact of brand placements in advergames on customers' brand

memory and brand attitude.

Research Questions: Given the snowballingacceptance of advergames as anadvertising tool, it'sindispensable to know that to what extent customers respond to the advergames and also to the brand messages embedded in advergames. Do advergames really help marketers in increasing their companies' awareness among customers by using advergames as an advertising tool? In this study following research questions are employed to study these issues:

RQ 1: What is the level of brand recall of the players after playing an advergame?

RQ 2: What is the effect ofplaying an advergame on players' attitude towards brand placement in online games? **Methodology:**

Sample and Procedure: An experiment was conducted in the computer laboratory of a post graduate university campus. The sample (N = 151) was comprised of 51 % males and 49% females. Respondents' ages were between 21-25 years, with an average age of 23 years. According to an article in mediaedge:cia (2005) 90% of adolescents are gamers who belong to the 18-35 yrs. of age group, hence this validates the use of student sample here. Students were called in a computer laboratory and were informed that the objective of the study was to know their views and evaluation about an online game. They were randomly assigned to the computers. They were told that they would be playing an online game for about 10 minutes and started to play at the experimenter's command by clicking on the "Click to start" option on the screen, which led to the game site. After 10 minutes time of game play they were asked to complete the questionnaire. Participants received small gifts as compensation for their participation.

Stimulus: "Cinnamon Jack Crowd Surfer" advergame was used in the study, available atFroot Loops website (Kellogg's company). This advergame was selected because of various reasons. It incorporated brand's logo, trademark, and its spokesperson which were central to the game. Also, this game was not gender specific and its scoring system does not need any special skills. In this game the player had to keep the cinnamon jack floating in the air and also the cereals packet by protecting them from being drowned in the sea.

Measurement: Brand recall was measured by the question"Do you remember seeing any brand name in the advergame? If yes, write down the brand name here. Attitude towards brand placements in online games was measured by asking the following questions to the respondents (adopted from Nelson, Keum and Yaros, 2004) on a five point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree, 5= strongly agree): 1. I prefer games that do not have product placements in them to those that do. 2. I don't mind if brand name products appear in games. Second question was reverse coded. Mean scores were evaluated.

Results: Participants were asked to list out the brand names which they saw, while playing the advergame. 95% (144/151) recalled the brand name correctly. This shows that advergame could be one of the very effective advertising tools in increasing awareness among customers. Also, results showed that 90% (135/151) respondents had favorable attitude towards brand placements in advergame and 10% (15/151) were negative about advertising in online games.

Conclusions: This research has two conclusions which are of great importance to the researchers as well as to the marketers. First the results advocate that advergame players have receptivity for embedded brand messages, at least for company or advertised product. The level of brand recall found in this study could be pondered high when compared with that resulted in Chaney, Lin Chaney (2004) study. This could be high because of the reason that gamers get involved in the game and can subconsciously focus well on the brand messages embedded in the games (Moore, 2006). Secondly, the results also suggest that if marketers can advertise their brands by making them more entertaining and interesting to the customers then definitely they can shift their focus to advergames as a marketing communication medium, as this medium has two big merits attached with its nature, first is fun and second is realism (Nelson, 2002). Thus, these insights can help marketers in determining the ways in which they can better position their advergames in the context of a marketing campaign. The study also provides the potential

areas where future research can be done in order to explore many other factors such as game involvement, game playing frequency, product involvement which may affect the brand recall and brand attitude of the customers. This study used only one advergame, but future research projects can explore the impact of advergames on consumers by using more number of advergames in future studies. Present study's findings can be tested in different contexts. Future studies can be conducted on kids (7-12 yrs.) unlike this study which was conducted on 21-25 age group respondents. Also, it would be worth investigating whether different types of advergames have the same effect on brand recall and brand attitude.

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