Marketers at Play:
An Advertising Congruity Framework

Andrei PĂDURARU

National University of Political Studies and Public Administration,
College of Communication and Public Relations
30A Expoziției Blvd., Sector 1, 012104 Bucharest, Romania
andrei.paduraru@comunicare.ro

Abstract

Advertising is annoying and intrusive. This motivates consumers to use ad blockers to avoid unwanted commercial messages. In this context, video games stand out as a new advertising medium, unspoiled by ad fatigue. This idea builds on the unique power of video games to offer an immersive experience that can keep the attention span of consumers through interaction, making it a valuable space for communication. Moreover, the video game industry is in continuous expansion. It amounts to over 3 billion gamers, and unlike traditional media, it offers an immersive, interactive experience, attracting marketers who decide how to spend their advertising budgets. However, this new medium comes with not only benefits but also risks. To properly communicate with gamers without affecting the gaming experience or being perceived as intrusive, advertising must be optimised for video games' specificities and gaming behaviour. This paper introduces the Advergaming Congruity Framework, developed through a systematic literature review of academic papers and commercial reports. The framework provides guidelines for creating congruent advertising that aligns with game narratives and themes, facilitating positive affect transfer from video games to brands. The findings emphasise that advertising congruence with video games enhances brand perception and minimises psychological reactance among gamers, ultimately contributing with valuable insights to the fields of marketing, advertising, and game design. By providing a structured approach to ad integration, this research deepens the understanding of effective communication strategies within the advergaming landscape. The framework aims to enhance the way brands engage with gamers, ensuring that advertising complements the gameplay experience, thereby enriching the overall enjoyment of the game.

Keywords
advergaming; affective transfer; congruity; gamer; psychological reactance; video games.

Introduction

The objective of this conceptual paper is to contribute to the existing research by providing a critical foundation for understanding and optimising advertising strategies targeted at video game players.

Today's consumers spend most of their time online and are growing desensitised to advertising. Repeated exposure to the same ads leads to "ad fatigue," a phenomenon characterized by decreased engagement and lower click-through rates (CTRs) as users encounter the same ads repeatedly (Silberstein et al., 2023). Moreover, individuals often

feel irritated (Goldstein et al., 2014; Jenkins et al., 2016) and develop negative perceptions of brands that clutter the digital environment with ads, preventing them from reading an article, watching a video, or browsing a website. According to a survey by HubSpot (2020), 64% of participants reported that advertisements are annoying and intrusive, and 54% stated that ads disrupt their experience. Immediate ad retargeting just after abandoning their online shopping cart can frustrate consumers, leading them to perceive it as overly aggressive, which negatively impacts their attitudes and reduces purchase intentions (Li et al., 2021; Moorman et al., 2022).

Not only are sales affected by ad saturation, but consumer behaviour is as well. When ads interrupt their activities, consumers seek ways to minimise their exposure and quickly return to their original activities (Woltman et al., 2003; Goldstein et al., 2014; Wilbur, 2015). This ad saturation drives users to adopt ad-blocking software to access content without interruptions (Rios-Pino et al., 2021). In 2019, 25.8% of internet users used ad blockers, preventing targeted ads from reaching them (de Haan, 2024). Additionally, consumers increasingly pay for ad-free premium streaming services. In 2023, Netflix had around 260 million global subscribers, and Spotify's premium subscribers rose to 226 million, up from 195 million in 2022 (Statista, 2024).

In this new context where advertising is increasingly ineffective and consumers actively avoid ads, marketing professionals are compelled to seek new communication channels to persuade consumers. Among these, the video game industry stands out as a new and effective medium for reaching audiences, bolstered by advancements in technology, increased internet speed, and the proliferation of broadband connections and mobile devices (Rykała, 2020; Newzoo, 2021).

This article investigates the practice of advergaming and proposes a framework for the effective integration of advertisements within video games, aimed at minimising perceived intrusiveness among gamers. Beyond this, the research identifies best practices for marketers and advertising professionals to create less intrusive ads. The framework serves as a valuable resource for both academics and industry practitioners, enhancing the seamless integration of advertising within the gaming environment.

Literature review

In this study, an Advergaming Congruity Framework (see Figure 1) is developed and proposed, based on an extensive literature review, to guide researchers, advertising professionals, marketers, and video game producers in optimising advertising. Each variable of the proposed conceptual framework is based and supported within the literature review below for future empirical research lines and practical marketer application.
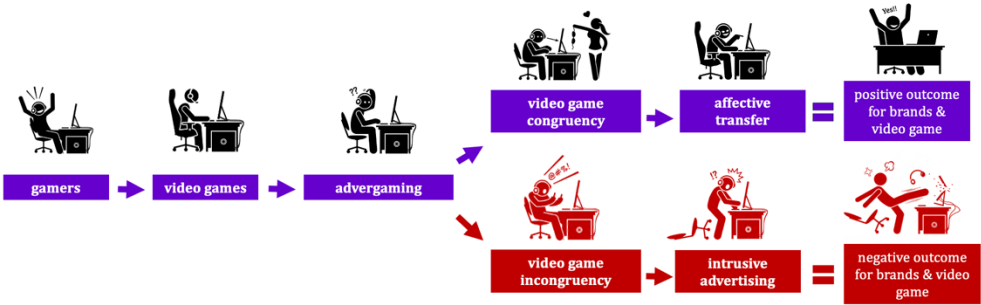
Figure 1 - Advergaming Congruity Framework
Source based on schema congruity theory (Meyers-Levy et al., 1994), theory of
affective transfer (Fiske, 2014) and psychological reactance theory (Miron & Brehm,
2006; Steindl et al., 2015).

Even though the video game industry is growing, insufficient attention has been
dedicated in the Romanian market to the relationship between video games and
advertising. In Romania, approximately 7.8 million people aged 15 to 64 play video
games at least once a month on platforms such as mobile devices, tablets, laptops/PCs,
consoles, online browsers, and social media. Among them, 2 million play weekly, with
one in four residing in urban areas. Notably, half of the gamers are over 35 years old,
40% are women, 37% have above-average income, and 50% have children (Romanian
Game Developers Association, 2022). This data highlights a market with substantial
potential for communication strategies. To effectively engage this vast and growing
audience, brands now have opportunities to create custom integrations within games
and utilise metrics to assess campaign engagement and effectiveness. As a result,
forward-thinking brands have invested in gaming campaigns, achieving success in
meeting objectives across the marketing funnel, with many anticipating an increase in
their gaming-related expenditures (Interactive Advertising Bureau, 2023).

The limited-capacity model of attention suggests that it may be challenging for gamers
to focus equally on the game and in-game advertising (Kim & Ko, 2019). Gamers often
exhibit varying levels of selective focus, ranging from intense concentration to lower
engagement. Due to potential cognitive overload from multiple stimuli, cognitive
resources must be diverted from the primary task to support the attention needed to
process secondary tasks (Lupinek et al., 2021). If an advertisement is overly aggressive,
it can disrupt the gaming experience, leading gamers to perceive it as intrusive and
invasive (De Pelsmacker et al., 2019). To effectively develop advertising campaigns
targeting gamers, it is essential to consider several key factors that ensure the
advertisement aligns with the gaming environment.

Gamers & video games

Gone is the nerd reputation of video games. At the time of this writing, the number of
video gamers is estimated to 3.07 billion worldwide (Newzoo, 2022). According to The
Entertainment Software Association (2024), the gaming audience has expanded
significantly due to the rise of technological developments and the emergence of online
and social platforms where gamers can connect, play, and create. The COVID-19
pandemic accelerated this growth, increasing the global gamer population.

The term "gamer" refers to a highly diverse group that includes individuals of all genders, ages, ethnicities, and socio-economic backgrounds. For instance, women now make up the majority of mobile-only gamers, while men dominate console and PC gaming (Statista, 2021). One of the fastest-growing gaming demographics is adults aged 55 to 64 (GWI, 2022). The average gamer is in their early 30s, and the rise of casual mobile games has attracted people who may not traditionally identify as gamers (The Entertainment Software Association, 2024). Given the substantial number of gamers, marketers are exploring efficient ways to engage this audience through video games.

One of the key advantages video games hold over traditional media is their capacity to foster high levels of interactivity, engaging players in active participation rather than passive consumption (Poels et al., 2019). Unlike traditional media, video games serve as an appealing medium for brands to achieve their communication objectives by embedding ads into the entertainment experience (Kretchmer, 2004; Tran & Strutton, 2013; De La Hera, 2019). Thus, when done properly, the seamless integration of advertising into the gaming environment creates an engaging, non-intrusive experience for consumers, making it a particularly effective advertising channel (Yoon, 2019). However, for this type of advertising to be effective, it must be carefully managed, because poorly executed ads may irritate consumers, potentially reducing their effectiveness (De Pelsmacker et al., 2019; Tran & Strutton, 2013). Therefore, brands must carefully manage the integration of advertising to ensure positive consumer engagement while minimising negative reactions.

A study on video games advertising found that only brands associated with positive gaming experiences received favourable evaluations. In contrast, brands linked to negative experiences were rated worse than non-displayed brands. This indicates that mere brand placement in inadequate space and time is insufficient for success. Marketers must prioritize the strategic placement and timing of advertisements to ensure they appear in positive contexts, thus fostering favourable brand associations. Furthermore, the execution of this association should be both memorable and minimally intrusive (Ingendahl et al., 2023).

Advergaming

According to the Interactive Advertising Bureau (2023), advergaming refers to the practice of integration of advertisements within video games. This can range from pop-ups and interstitials served during gameplay breaks to rewarded ads players can watch for in-game rewards, to intrinsic native ads that blend realistically into the game environment, to custom integrations like product placements, virtual items, and even branded worlds. The full spectrum of advertising in the physical world can exist within these digital gaming worlds, and can enable a seamless advertising experience for players, while providing revenue for game developers (De la Hera, 2019; Interactive Advertising Bureau, 2023; De-la-Vara-López & De-Marchis, 2024). The practice of advergaming envelops three main methods: *advergames*, *around-game advertising*, and *in-game advertising*.

Advergames are video games "specifically designed for a brand with the aim of conveying an advertising message" (De la Hera, 2019, p. 31). These types of games are usually free, easy to play, have a short duration and offer quick rewards (Redondo,

2012). Using this kind of video game, companies can send messages and promote engagement to a specific target audience (Tuten & Solomon, 2013).

Around-game advertising refers to promotional strategies that orbit around the video game experience, akin to traditional TV commercials that disrupt viewing to persuade consumers. Predominantly used in mobile gaming, it encompasses four main types: banners, interstitials, sponsorships, and cross-promotions (Smith et al., 2014). Banners are graphical ads embedded within digital media such as websites or apps (Lupinek et al., 2021). Interstitials interrupt gameplay to present advertisements, often appearing at the game's onset, between levels, or at its end. They may also offer incentives; for instance, in Candy Crush Saga, players can watch an ad to receive an extra life when they run out of lives. Sponsorships involve agreements where brands pay to feature their logos in gaming contexts, such as Honda's partnership with Riot Games for branding in a League of Legends tournament. Finally, cross-promotions are collaborative efforts between brands and games to promote products beneficial to both parties. A notable example is the 2021 collaboration between Fortnite and luxury brand Balenciaga, which offered exclusive in-game outfits while launching a complementary physical clothing line (Cole, 2021).

In-game advertising, by definition, is "the placement of brands in games" (Yang et al., 2006). As an example of in-game advertising can be found in Metal Gear Solid: Peace Walker (Kojima Productions, 2010), where players can collect and consume branded products such as Doritos, Pepsi, and Mountain Dew to restore health or psychological stamina.

Congruency in the context of advergaming

Congruence in advergaming refers to the perceived fit between advertising execution and the gaming environment (De Pelsmacker et al., 2019; Lupinek et al., 2021). Advertisements that are congruent with video games tend to have positive effects on players' attitudes and behaviours toward both the ads and the brands, while incongruent ads can lead to negative effects (Chang et al., 2010; Lewis & Porter, 2010). For instance, modern billboard ads seamlessly integrate into the highways of car racing games but appear incongruent in medieval-themed games (Pelsmacker et al., 2019). Schema congruity theory (Meyers-Levy et al., 1994) posits that individuals seek harmony among their thoughts, emotions, and behaviours, favouring information that aligns with their pre-existing mental schemas. This alignment enhances the interpretation and evaluation of information, allowing individuals to more easily assimilate congruent stimuli, such as video game ads, into their cognitive frameworks. Thus, congruent advergaming has positive effects on players' attitude and behaviour toward the ads and featured brands, while incongruent advergaming results in adverse effects (Chang et al., 2010; Lewis & Porter, 2010).

The perceived congruity of advergaming can come from the game itself, the advertisement, or the gamer, and may take different forms. When it relates to the structure of the game, appearing in the form of gameplay, simulation, or the game's narrative (Verberckmoes et al., 2016) it is a *narrative coungruity*. An example of narrative congruity in gaming advertising is found in Final Fantasy XV (Final Fantasy XV Guys Chill Out with Nissin Cup Noodles, 2016), which features Cup Noodles by Nissin. Here, the gamer must embark on a mission to gather ingredients to enhance the noodles' flavour.

Additionally, there can be *thematic congruity* - when there is harmony between the game's content and the ad (Lee and Faber, 2007). For example, promoting a sport car brand in a racing car game, represents a prime example of thematic congruity. Branded cars were among the first real-world products to appear in video games and now feature in almost every racing game (Vedrashko, 2006).

There can also be *interactive congruity*. In the context of video games, interactivity is about having the ability to modify the in-game experience. When gamers play a car racing game, they may choose a car with specific attributes, such as higher top speed, but slower acceleration – choices that may change their gaming experience (Herrewijn & Poels, 2014; Lupinek et al., 2021). In this case, interactive congruity could be achieved if the player could interact with a branded racing car, like customising its colours or performance (Pelsmacker et al., 2019). Previous research revealed that interactive congruity within advergaming practice has positive outcomes both for the advertised brands and game developers (Wu & Liu, 2007; Wu et al., 2008; Pelsmacker et al., 2019).

Krcmar et al. (2011) found that the realism of video games is closely linked to players' ability to retain attention. Therefore, *realistic congruity* can be integrated within advertisements using advanced graphics and heightened realism. This may capture players' attention more effectively, leading to increased identification with the game and a stronger sense of immersion. For instance, a gamer playing a VR basketball game in a highly realistic environment should experience in-game ads that reflect the actual game setting, including current jersey sponsors and in-arena sponsor signage (Lupinek et al., 2021).

Finally, advergaming practice requires a high degree of *immersive congruence*, in which advertisements seamlessly align with the gaming environment to enhance the player's experience without breaking immersion. This concept builds on the idea that players are deeply involved in the virtual world, often losing track of time and their surroundings, as described by Faiola et al. (2013). To maintain this sense of immersion, it is critical that advertisements fit logically and contextually within the game. Cummings and Bailenson (2015) emphasise that virtual environments need spatial consistency for players to perceive them as plausible. As such, ads that are congruent with the game's theme, environment, and narrative—such as sports-related brands in sports-related video games —are likely to be perceived as part of the game rather than an external intrusion. This immersive congruence not only enhances the player's sense of presence but also increases brand awareness, as suggested by Bae et al. (2020). This suggests that gamers may recognise a brand from a video game in real life, potentially influencing their purchasing decisions in a positive way.

The affective transfer

The deep engagement and significant time investment gamers dedicate to video games also create an opportunity for affect transfer: the positive feelings players have towards the game can spill over to the brands advertised within the game (Poels et al., 2015). This transfer is rooted in the theory of affective transfer, initially proposed by Fiske (2014) in the social sciences and later adopted by marketing researchers to explain various persuasion-related activities in advertising. The theory operates through a schema-driven affective transfer process, which posits that emotions are transferred

from one attitudinal object to another when an existing schema aligns with a new object (Ghosh & Dwivedi, 2022). In simpler terms, if gamers have a positive experience with a video game and engage favourably with a brand during gameplay, their positive feelings towards the game may extend to the brand itself.

Incongruity & intrusiveness

Marketing professionals must recognize the available advertising space in video games while also considering factors such as timing, visual presentation, and ad flow to avoid consumer perceptions of intrusiveness. By doing so, they can minimise negative reactions to in-game advertising (Riedel et al., 2018). In a basketball game, it would be realistic for the players to experience fatigue between whistles and require hydration. This creates an opportunity for advertisers to feature brands like Gatorade, where participants can boost their players' stamina during timeouts by choosing Gatorade over water. However, this type of brand activation can be perceived as intrusive if not seamlessly integrated, especially if enhanced stamina is only available after watching a 10-second commercial (Lupinek et al., 2021). Poels et al. (2013) found a positive relationship between players' attitudes toward the intrusiveness of in-game advertising and the authenticity of the in-game advertising context. This highlights the link between intrusiveness and incongruity—what feels out of place can be perceived as intrusive.

Intrusiveness, in the context of advergaming, is about the degree to which advertisements embedded in the video game universe do not conform with the medium and impact the player's gaming experience. A FIFA player may expect to see advertisements embedded around the football field, just like it happens in the real world, or may expect to see branded sport uniforms, again, just like it happens in the real world (Lupinek et al., 2021). However, the player does not expect to be extra advertisements in other places, such as on the goal posts. If this happens, gamers may frame the advertising as intrusive, since it negatively affects their gaming experience. When advertisers place their commercials in inappropriate gaming contexts may result in aversion toward the advertised brand and a reduction in consumers' intention to purchase the product (Poels et al., 2013).

To understand the consequences of integrated advertising in video games on users, as well as its perceived intrusiveness, the psychological reactance theory can be applied. Psychological reactance represents a negative motivational state, referring to an individual's aversion to obstacles or threats from external sources that limit their freedom of action (Miron & Brehm, 2006; Steindl et al., 2015). Thus, if a gamer perceives integrated advertising as an obstacle to their freedom to play, they are more likely to classify the advertising as intrusive and reject its message (Malhotra et al., 2021).

Discussion and conclusion

As the popularity of video games continues to soar, it is foreseeable that marketers and advertisers will increasingly leverage the practice of advergaming. Recognising this trend, the Advergaming Congruity Framework (see Figure 1) has been developed to optimise communication efforts while preserving the gaming experience without alienating gamers.

This framework is rooted in a systematic review of both academic literature and commercial reports, aiming to serve as a practical guide for developing and implementing advertising within video games. One of the key findings is the critical importance of congruence between the advertising and the gaming environment. When ads align with the game's narrative and aesthetics, they enable affective transfer, whereby the positive emotions associated with the game are transferred to the advertised brands (Poels et al., 2015). This symbiotic relationship not only enhances brand perception but also strengthens player engagement, thus benefiting both advertisers and gamers.

Conversely, incongruent advertising—where the ad disrupts the immersive gaming experience—can lead to negative consequences. Such ads are perceived as intrusive, diminishing overall game enjoyment and potentially leading gamers to reject both the advertised brand and the game itself. This dissonance can lead to psychological reactance (Miron & Brehm, 2006), a phenomenon where players feel their autonomy is being threatened, resulting in active resistance toward the brand and/or video game. In extreme cases, this may result in product boycotts or a complete disengagement from the video game (Malhotra et al., 2021).

By strategically aligning advertising content with the thematic and narrative elements of video games in a congruent manner, advertisers can avoid these pitfalls and maximise the positive impact of their campaigns. The framework proposed in this paper provides a comprehensive tool that incorporates a wide range of scenarios and contexts within the gaming ecosystem. In conclusion, this research underscores the need for careful integration of ads within video games, ensuring that communication efforts are not only persuasive but also seamlessly embedded into the gaming environment. Thus, by adhering to the principles of the Advergaming Congruity Framework, marketers can optimise their strategies to achieve long-term brand loyalty and a positive consumer experience.

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