The effectiveness of political advertisements in sport video games

Patrick Walsh, University of Miami
Galen Clavio, University of Miami
Susan Mullane, University of Miami
Warren Whisenant, University of Miami

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In 2007 over $9.5 billion in sales of computer and video games were recorded in the United States, which represents a 157% increase in only a 10 year period (Entertainment Software Association, 2008). Due to the growth of the video game industry, the desirable video game player demographics, and the need for corporations to engage in new and innovative ways to reach their target markets, many companies are now engaging in in-game advertising by placing their brands within video games through the use static ads, dynamic ads and product placement. It has been estimated that by the year 2011 more than $971 million will be spent on in-game advertising (Yankee Group, 2007). Sport video games represent a natural placement for in-game advertisements as they enhance the authenticity of the games, and sponsors’ logos and advertisements are very visible at most sporting events (Cianfrone, Zhang, Trail, & Lutz, 2008).

Despite the growth of the video game industry and the practice of in-game advertising little research has been conducted to examine the effectiveness of this relatively new advertising strategy. Clavio, Kraft and Pederson (2007) illustrated just how new this practice is in their examination of a popular series of one sport video game title from 1997 to 2006. The results indicated that in the first seven versions/years of the game, only one incidence of branding occurred, while in the three most recent versions/years examined 2,099 unique incidences of branding or product placement occurred within the game (Clavio et al., 2007). Nelson (2002) was the first to examine the effectiveness of brand placement within sport video games and determined that they are effective in influencing a consumer’s ability to recall brands which were placed in the game.

More recent research by Cianfrone et al. (2008) also determined that in-game advertising in sport video games was effective in creating awareness, while attitudes and purchase intentions of the brands which appeared in the game was not statistically different than attitudes and purchase intentions for brands not appearing in the game. While both of these studies examined the impact that in-game advertising had on brand awareness, Walsh, Kim and Ross (in press) compared the recall and recognition of brands which appeared in a sport video game versus brands which appeared in a televised sports contest. The results indicate that recall for brands which appeared in a televised NASCAR race were higher than those in a NASCAR themed video game, while recognition rates between the two mediums were not statistically significant (Walsh et al., in press).

Many corporations such as Coca-Cola, McDonald's, and Nike have placed their brands within sport video games. Recently, during the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign then presidential candidate Barack Obama placed "early voting" ads in a series of online sport video games such as EA Sports Need for Speed: Carbon, Madden 09, NBA Live 08, and NHL 09. As this is the first known example of in-game advertising by a political candidate, little is known as to how effective this particular type of in-game ad placement is.

Therefore the purpose of this study is to examine the effectiveness of the placement of the political advertisements in sport video games. Specifically, the awareness of the ads and their ability to enhance attitudes towards the political candidate will be measured. In addition, while previous research has indicated that video game players generally have positive feelings towards the practice of in-game advertising (Nelson, Keum, & Yaros, 2004) only corporate brands have been advertised in the past. Therefore, the game players attitudes toward in-game advertising featuring political candidates will also be examined. Participants for the study will be recruited utilizing a convenience sampling technique. Specifically, students enrolled in classes at a large southeastern university will be asked to volunteer to participate in the study. The participants will be asked to view a series of screen grabs from various sport video games which include images of actual game play in which the political and/or corporate advertisements are present within the game. Following exposure to the images, the participants will be asked to respond to a self-administered survey which measures their brand recall and recognition, and attitudes towards the advertisements.

Following data collection the results will be analyzed using SPSS 15.0 to determine if statistical differences exist in the awareness levels, attitudes towards the advertised brands, and attitudes towards the practice of in-game advertising of corporate brands and a political candidate. The results will have important implications for sport marketing professionals, future political candidates, and for future research on in-game advertising.