

In-Game Advertising Strategies in Fortnite: AIDA Model as a reference

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Abstract

Advertisers are constantly looking for new marketing techniques and platforms to reach their target audiences. In-game advertising strategies within massively multiplayer role-playing games (MMORPG) started appearing. This research aims to investigate the application of in-game advertising in Fortnite, one of the most globally popular MMORPGs available today. An in-depth qualitative content analysis of the advertisements used in Fortnite is conducted in reference to the stages of the AIDA advertising model, which consists of attention, interest, desire, and action. Findings convey that Fortnite has efficiently applied AIDA as it managed to imbed the advertisements into the main setting and story-line of the game, encouraging players to take action and buy the virtual products being advertised.

Keywords: in-game advertising, cross-promotions, Fortnite, teasers, product placement, massively multiplayer role-playing game (MMORPG), AIDA Model

1. Introduction

Games have succeeded in becoming a strong advertising medium, mainly due to their interactivity features, creating positive attitudes towards the brands being advertised. However, this is usually the case if the advertisements do not distract players from the game. For example, a pop-up video that cuts off the game is frustrating for players, yet one that appears on a street banner during a car race would be more acceptable but less noticeable. While these traditional in-game advertisements are usually ignored by the players, new developments in the field are more effective, as they embed the advertisements into the user experience, instead of interrupting it. Researchers often use the terms in-game advertising and advergaming interchangeably (Nelson, 2005). “Advergaming are fully gamified advertising messages and can be defined as a type of advertising that leverages game thinking and game mechanics to drive engagement with a brand—to ultimately reach a commercial goal” (Van Berlo et al. 2021).

Many companies use in-game advertisements through the production of their own games or integrating their products into others. For example, Mars Inc. promoted M&Ms through games such as Shell Shocked, which is an elimination game consisting of 20 levels and was free to play on PlayStation. Also, cross-promotions are widely used in games, for example, the game Brawlhalla had characters introduced in 2019 from the World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) such as The Undertaker and Asuka (Watters, 2019). Throughout the years, Brawlhalla had other characters from other shows, games, and movies including Ben Ten, Adventure Time, Raymon Legends, Street Fighter, among others.

In 2017, Epic Games developed and published Fortnite, which is a massively multiplayer role-playing game (MMORPG). The Interactive Advertising Bureau (n.d.) defines the MMORPG as “any of a variety of three dimensional, highly immersive, pc or console-based video games where many players interact, competing or co-operating to achieve goals in real time.” According to the Epic Games website, “Fortnite is the free, always evolving, multiplayer game.” First of all, it is important to note how popular Fortnite is, as that reflects the extent of the effects of its in-game advertisements. As tweeted on 6 May, 2020 on the official Fortnite Twitter account, “Fortnite now has over 350 million registered players! In April, players spent over 3.2 billion hours in game.” Fortnite is available on most gaming platforms including personal computers, laptops, smart mobile phones, and gaming consoles such as Xbox, Nintendo Switch, and PlayStation; this makes it very easy for anyone who is interested in the game to start playing it with no fear of post-purchase dissonance as they did not have to pay for the game. There are several subscriptions and in-game items for those interested.

The modes included in the game are free to play, yet they have many in-game advertisements that are presented using a variety of strategies. This advertisement focus on downloadable content (DLC) such as outfits, emote, and packs. The effectiveness of these advertisements is clear, as Epic Games makes “hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue” every month (Iqbal, 2022). Most research investigating games focus on their physical, mental, and psychological effects on the players.

However, very few studies focus on in-game advertising strategies. This research provides an in-depth analysis of the in-game advertising strategies that Fortnite embeds.

2. Review of the Literature

New generations are shifting their interests from traditional entertainment methods to online gaming, as advertisers are shifting their interests to advergaming, thus it is becoming an important research area. Yang et al. (2006) examined whether college students remembered the brand names they saw in video games or not. The research included advertisements in computer games that were sports-themed and found that after playing the games students had a higher memory of the word fragments than of the recognition of the brands. Most players are immersed in the gaming experience, so they do not pay attention to traditional ads. For example, Chaney et al. (2004) examined a first-person shooting game and found the players were focused on the game, so many were distracted and could not remember the brand or the product category on the billboards.

Nelson (2005) specified different types of advergaming: 1) sponsorship/banner ads, 2) contests / gamelettes on websites, 3) background (visuals) ads and brand props, 4) background (auditory) licensed music, 5) brands are a major part of game play (equipment, tools), 6) characters are branded images (real or fictitious), and 7) game players create their own ads/brands through customization. These new forms of advergaming are non-intrusive, as they exist within the context of the game. Van Berlo et al. (2021) conducted an analysis on the effects of advergaming that are part of the game, and one of their main findings was that the players are less likely to recognize these marketing messages as advertisements, so they interact with them without feeling the pressure usually felt with traditional ads. Hera (2019) agreed that most advertising interrupts the user's experience, but advergaming incorporated into the game "are a marketing strategy that operates on pull, which means that it is the player who voluntarily approaches the advertising message" (Hera, 2019, p. 37). Papadopoulos (2020) explains that collaborations between games and brands are popular in this field of advertising, since there are benefits for both entities. "Advertisers keep seeking new ways to target a wider audience while game developers are trying to monetize their game" (Papadopoulos, 2020). Due to the role-playing aspect usually used in advergaming, the potential consumers start interacting with the brand "through fun, pleasure and control" (Ibrahim, 2011, p. 94).

In 2008, Gurău conducted an experiment and survey on a sample of 200 university freshmen in order to examine the influence of advergaming on player behavior. The results showed that there is a strong relationship between the players' exposure to the in-game ads, their purchases of the advertised brands, and telling others about them. Gurău's (2008) research found that players who got exposed to games they already knew about considered the games boring, which he referred to as 'game fatigue'. The research results showed the "importance of introducing new advergaming; once played, the game may become uninteresting, losing its capacity to induce the state of flow" (p. 113). Gurău (2008) found that advergaming are effective in enhancing the marketing effect since players choose to view them, interact with them and actively choose to adopt them; the players are also encouraged to share their experiences with their family and friends. They can also make online friends through the games. "Players can establish communication with other players with whom they can voluntarily or subconsciously spread the advertising message" (Hera, 2019, p. 40).

Treanor (2019) conducted a survey on a sample of 994 people who are regular players of video games and found that, "the majority of gamers who play *Fortnite* (85 %) spend money on downloadable content" (p. 5). The survey results showed that *Fortnite* players make more in-game purchases compared to other games and Treanor (2019) explained that the variety of skins (outfits) available on the game enables the players to express themselves, yet this requires using V-Bucks, which is the currency used in the game. Players can only get V-Bucks if they pay money for it or if they level up to 100, which only offers them 300 V-Bucks and is enough to buy a wrap for the weapons but not enough to buy many of the other features such as skins, emotes, weapons, and music lists. Mustard explained that the purpose of *Fortnite* was to "create truly mass-scale, broad-based entertainment" (Webster, 2021).

3. Theoretical Framework

The AIDA advertising model was developed by Elmo Lewis in 1898, and although the model is a classic, its components still apply to many of today's ads. AIDA is an acronym for the four steps of the model consisting of *attention/attraction*, *interest*, *desire*, and *action*. The AIDA model is still relevant in the new forms of interactive media, as the users still need to learn about the products, become interested in them, feel the desire to purchase them, and take action to buy them. The AIDA model can be applied to traditional and new media (Hassan et al., 2015).

The model has four levels, starting with a cognitive level: this is when the user's attention should be drawn; followed by the affective level: where the user should become interested in learning more about the items being advertised; next, is a higher level of affection: where the user starts feeling an urgent need or desire to purchase the item; and finally the behavioral level: where the consumer can take action and purchase the item.

In 2013, Ghirvu applied AIDA's steps to advergames as follows: the target consumer's attention can be caught using design and/or narrative elements; *interest* can be achieved through insertions or processes; *desire* through elements that are common with other media or those specific to the video game; and *action* is sought through marketing tools and consumer processes. This research examines the extent to which Fortnite applied the AIDA model through its in-game advertisements.

4. Methodology

This research offers a qualitative content analysis of the ads in Fortnite that examines the extent to which it satisfies the AIDA advertising model. An in-depth analysis is conducted on how Fortnite utilizes these advertising techniques to seamlessly embed advertisements into the gaming experiences. The content analysis is based on coding that is in accordance with the four steps of the AIDA model; thus a purposeful sample is used where the in-game advertisements that fulfill the coding criteria are analyzed. The research question under study is to what extent does Fortnite apply the AIDA model in its in-game advertising.

Fortnite was selected because it is a one-of-a-kind global innovation, which attracted players and investors. Epic Game's chief creative officer, Donald Mustard, said that the game is "an opportunity to almost create a new medium" (Webster, 2021). The case study of Fortnite is especially interesting, since everyone has equal opportunities, and since these in-game purchases do not give players any advantage in terms of performance, they only change the way they look. This means that the players are actively engaging with the advertisements although they do not need to. A purposive sample of the game content was selected since the success of Fortnite's advergaming is a new phenomenon of interest; so many unique features are involved. This research is significant as the analysis of Fortnite's in-game advertising strategies have not been studied in-depth before, although it can be used as a model for other game makers and businesses who are seeking to adopt in-game advertising strategies. Also, the extent to which it affects the audience, according to the previously-mentioned statistics, is a strong reason to conduct this research in an attempt to reveal the strategies which had such powerful effects on the consumption behavior of the players.

5. Findings and Discussions

5.1 First step of the AIDA model: Attention

Fortnite is 13+ and it has cartoonish animations and less gore compared to other battle royale games, thus it has a larger age range interested in playing; this helped it go mainstream. The in-game advertising techniques used served to first capture the player's attention. Everyone starts with a pickaxe that deals 20 damage per hit, players can buy new pickaxes from the item shop, they have special designs but they do not deal more damage, thus the only advantage from buying them is to look special. Everyone has an equal opportunity to gather weapons that cause more damage during the game, whether it is through finding weapons on the field, killing other players and taking their loot or finding bars during the game and buying weapons from nonplayer characters (NPCs), so they are not bought using real money. This shows that all purchases do not affect player performance.

However, Epic Games managed to catch the attention of Fortnite players using a variety of methods. For example, the game includes sponsorship/banner ads in the lobby, where new character skins, events, and/or packs are announced. Sometimes these ads are marketing Epic Games content, yet many times there are branded items. The unique Fortnite characters range from food-based characters such as Peely the banana, to Bash the llama, Dark Red Knight the female warrior, and Infinity the male star walker. The branded items also offer a wide variety, such as Black Widow, Xenomorph Alien, John Wick, Marshmello, and Naruto. Offering the items for a limited time also captures the players' attention, as it seems as a unique opportunity that will not be available for long. Fortnite works to catch players' attention and guide them towards the branded-collaborations. For example, Ralph from Disney's *Ralph Breaks the Internet* film appeared on a drive-in cinema screen in Fortnite as an advertisement for the film coming to theaters (2018). Finally, the players' attention is caught whether they visit the item shop or not, since they can see in-game the characters that other players have made. Consumer customization of branded material involves selecting outfits, backblings, harvesting tools, gliders, contrails emotes, and wraps.

5.2 Second step of the AIDA model: Interest

Fortnite uses a variety of in-game advertising strategies to attract the interest of players. This is done by placing a time limit on the availability of the items in the virtual store, as well as by offering a variety of items and customizations that adhere to different tastes, and they do so at affordable prices. The availability of these micro-transactions gets the players interested in the items. For example, the Starter pack targeting new players is offered with cheaper prices (600 V-Bucks), which includes a full set of items: outfit with a style, back bling, and a pickaxe (harvesting tool) as well as v-bucks (Fortnite in-game currency). These starter packs are interesting for new players, as they offer customization options at a low price of \$3.99. Also, players spend time in the lobby, sometimes to wait for their friends to join, until the number of players needed is available, or when they are between turns. During lobby time, many take the time to customize the skins, use their emotes, and many times they browse the new options available, which may get them interested in buying new ones.

Fortnite has a storyline with different chapters and updates which keep the players interested, although they are usually playing the same game over and over, but with different maps and/or characters/players. The main storyline is that there is a metaverse that includes numerous characters, realities, and storylines in the same place. So this macro-storyline enables Epic Games to include any and every character they see fit. Zero Point is the reason given for these realities intertwining. Epic Games closely monitors the feedback from players' community (fandom) and often makes changes to the game accordingly to keep them interested. Mustard explained that they follow the reactions of the players and follow their feedback and may make changes in the storyline accordingly (Webster, 2021).

Furthermore, Fortnite manages to gain the interest of the players through the cross-promotions that they have, also known as collaborations. For example, when Fortnite introduced Spiderman from the No Way Home film, Spiderman fans became interested in playing Fortnite because it included one of their favorite characters; in turn, Fortnite players became interested in watching the new film. Fortnite takes this a step further, as it has a wide variety of collaborations; for example, the Flash is included as a character, along with Thor, while both come from competing companies, DC and Marvel-Disney.

Fortnite occasionally used teasers to get users interested and generate buzz marketing, where the fandom would start asking questions and coming up with game theories, by talking about it or posting on social media. Teasers are advertisements that give little information about how to get potential consumers interested. For example, Jennifer Walters, also known as She-Hulk, appeared as a new character in Fortnite in late 2020; then Marvel announced on their official website in October 2021 that her show is to start airing in January 2022 (Marvel, 2021). Another example of a teaser is when the ice cream shop *Scoops Ahoy* from the Netflix show *Stranger Things* appeared in the mall in Fortnite. This was a teaser for the collaboration between the two, afterwards the Upside Down portals from the show started appearing in the game, and finally Fortnite introduced skins from the show. Teasers are an effective way to get users interested, as they generate curiosity.

5.3 Third step of the AIDA model: Desire

According to Ullal and Hawaldar (2018), "the advertisement does not just inform it develops desires and dreams in the target consumer's mind" (p. 285). Although their research was based on the fashion industry, it is directly related to the cosmetics included in Fortnite, as the outfits (skins) and tools used serve to fulfill the desires of the players. Growing up, most people have imaginations of who they want to be and imagine that they are basketball players, singers, superheroes, that they meet aliens, and the list goes on depending on the interests and dreams of each person. In reality, many people do not have the opportunity to realize these dreams. This is where role-playing comes in, which is a part of human psychological development. Fortnite made these dreams come virtually true through the wide range of characters offered. They also made variations of the same cosmetics, which allow each player to appear in a unique way. The virtual world of Fortnite allows players to experiment with the different characters and use different emotes. For example, a player can be an NFL or WWE player; they can be a popular singer, a Green Goblin, or even a celebrity like the Rock or Ariana Grande. Using emotes; they can do numerous moves, such as dance, exercise, or even act like a roaring dinosaur. The freedom to look as they want, act as they want and to change that according to their mood, enhances the desire to get the items.

In addition, the real-world desires to live a high-end life are enhanced by the collaborations in Fortnite. For example, the outfits that came in the item shop included Air Jordan XI Cool Grey sneakers and Ferrari outfits. Additionally, Balenciaga's collaboration went both ways, as Fortnite introduced four branded outfits and offered backpacks, themed pickaxe, and purse glider, along with a wrap and an emote.

Free sprays were also offered in the game to promote the brand. In turn, Balenciaga also started selling Fortnite-themed clothing in 2021, but it was a limited edition. So a player can wear Air Jordan sneakers, a Ferrari outfit, or buy clothing from Balenciaga and do so easily within the game at a fraction of what it would cost them to do so in real life. Thus, the desire to purchase these items increases. Fortnite also uses product placement to enhance desire; for example, all of the Whiplashes (Battle Royale Cars) became Ferrari 296. In addition, many songs are embedded in the gaming experience. Popular songs / movies included as emotes in the game included: PSY's *Gangnam Style*, Drake's *Toosie Slide*, and BTS's *I'm Diamond* (from the song *Dynamite*). Even some classics were added such as Rick Astley's 1987 *Never Gonna Give You Up* and Los Del Rio's 1993 *Macarena*.

Although the game is free to play, societal pressures encourage players to invest in their accounts. Social pressures come from both inside and outside the games. For example, the players who use the free skins available with the account are called defaults by the fandom, and it has a negative connotation among the players. Also, desire is formed because of fear of being left out. For example, sometimes players team up according to the skins they are wearing, so those who did not buy the items would be accepted into the team. Other times, players participate in challenges, where each player takes part in a fashion show runway wearing a personalized skin, and judges score their look. So players who are not investing in the game have trouble getting involved. Thus, socialization plays an important role in the desire to make in-game purchases. Fortnite offers in-game communication methods, such as voice chat. Socialization can also take place using traditional methods, such as friends speaking about the upcoming Fortnite event or the new skins they bought. Thus, "virtual environments can conjoin with life experiences from real-life brands" (Ibrahim, 2011, p. 94). New media have also allowed loyal consumers to participate in the marketing of the brand through virtual word of mouth, "through tweeting, blogging, reviewing, following, and so on" (Hassan et al., 2015, 264). There are also social media influencers and You Tubers such as Ninja, who stream their Fortnite games and market them. In turn, Fortnite included a skin from him and others such as Loserfruit.

5.4 Fourth step of the AIDA model: Action

Action is the fourth and final step of the AIDA advertising model, and it is very important as it marks the success of the advertising message. Fortnite encourages players to take this final step by simplifying the purchase process. They make purchases easy through the friendly user interface, accept a variety of payment methods, and they have the option of saving the payment information so that future transactions can be made even easier and faster.

They also encourage players to reach the action stage through offering limited-time specials, thus the players are under pressure to buy the item quickly before it is gone. Moreover, they offer affordable items, so users can buy several cheap items through micro-transactions, which add up to high profits for Epic Games. Next, they offer free items during special occasions, such as Christmas, and during challenges that require completing in order to get the reward (free items). Therefore, when free items are given out, they give the player a sense of control to choose what cosmetics and actions to use, making them more likely to take a future action of buying items or joining more challenges. Also, whether the player won the free skin or whether they bought it, they usually create their own ads/brands through customization, which is an advertising strategy used by Fortnite Players creating their own ads/brands through customization is a major advertising technique used in Fortnite. A player can select a character, such as Iron Man, change his clothing, items, and actions (emotes), so this specific version of Iron Man is customized by the player and is unique in the sense that it reflects the player's personality and interests.

Furthermore, the players who resist making in-game purchases are still exposed to viewing all of the other characters, weapons, emotes, events, etc. which are ads for the brands that collaborate with Fortnite. For example, one can have a free account, yet find themselves playing with someone who is doing the Get Schwifty emote, which may get them interested in watching Rick and Morty. Although many of the skins, emotes, weapons, etc. are available for a limited time in the virtual Fortnite store, they remain part of the game for the players who made the purchase. For example, Ariana Grande's character is no longer available to purchase anymore as it was available for a limited time, but players who bought the skin can still use it. In other words, the collaboration means that there is an ongoing advertisement for the item as long as the players are still interested in using it.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

Fortnite follows a unique strategy, since it places ads for in-game purchases, which also serve as advertisements for partners.

It succeeds in placing advertisements that are part of the gaming experience, and its ongoing storyline developments keep the players engaged. Fortnite succeeds in utilizing the AIDA model to create its advergames. It also managed to imbed the advertisements in a manner that goes unnoticed to most players, as they are embedded into the free MMORPG. Attention of the new players is caught once they see the customization and personalization options available. Both new and frequent players see the new items available for purchase. Interest is generated when players find in-game advertisements on special offers, or for a limited time, or when there are items in the shop that reflect their interests, such as a song they like. They usually enhance the interest through the cross-promotions (collaborations). Desire is reached when the players are exposed to new items that reflect their identity, wants, or needs; as well as the social desire of fitting into this virtual community. The action stage is reached once the player purchases an item; it also takes place if they start interacting externally with the in-game items, for example, starting to watch Stranger Things on Netflix because they learned about it from the ads in Fortnite.

This research is based on a qualitative content analysis of the in-game advertisements included with Fortnite with reference to the AIDA Model. However, the research has a predetermined expectation of the amount of success that Fortnite has achieved due to the information available on Fortnite's position. The question that appears is how much in-game advertising is too much? At the current state, Fortnite has reached so many collaborations and has proven to be exciting for players; but after some time this will become the norm, which may cause players to face 'game fatigue'. It may also cause the collaborating brands to feel that there is no unique space for them to display their items, or that the players are using their characters in ways that defy their identity, for example, Captain America has been a symbol of patriotism for Americans, yet a Fortnite player may make him do an emote that may defy the image that Marvel/Disney worked hard to build for this character. Additionally, historically, many media lost their edge as advertising platforms due to the overload of competing ads that appear in a short period of time. Brands are always looking for new ways to advertise their unique products, but if all other brands are applying the same advertising strategy, then there is nothing special about it. This is especially concentrated in the case of Fortnite, as the items (characters, emotes, etc.) may stop appearing in the shop, but any player that already paid for it can still use it in-game, so it seems that once a brand is in it, it would remain there.

Recommendations for future research include 1) conducting a longitudinal study of the effectiveness of advergames in relation to the in-game purchasing statistics; 2) conducting user-based research methods, such as surveys or interviews, to examine the attitudes and actions of users towards the advertisements and in-game purchases.

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