

“INSERT COIN TO PLAY”: THE EVOLUTION OF COMMUNICATION DYNAMICS BETWEEN BRANDS AND VIDEO GAMES

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Abstract

As part of the dynamics of marketing and communication, the practice of celebrity endorsement has seen an increasingly prolific development over the years alongside a new form of brand communication oriented to enhance brand/product perception through endorsements of authoritative celebrities. In more recent times, the advent of the video game medium, and in particular video games, has led brands to develop new promotional and communication methods from scratch or borrow from other mediums. One that is certainly evocative among those derived from other media fields is product placement. Among the practices developed from scratch, especially in recent years, it is possible to find the use of characters or elements from video games within brand communications. This study was developed to understand this new communication mode adopted in specific contexts by brands, the effects it has on the target audience and the economic and image returns. The contributions made to the matter by this study concern that part of marketing that is focused on the target audience's perception of the brand to develop a connection, a feeling and to boost sales. Moreover, being one of the first studies developed with qualitative methodology, it allows to observe a deeper level of perception from the target audience's side. The study involved a sample of seven people from various parts of Italy, interviewed in a focus group to show how positive and relevant the impact of this form of communication is to the target audience and their impulse to purchase, in addition to the high level of brand awareness this methodology brings. Furthermore, during the focus group, it emerged that this practice could be a strong bridge between brands and gamers, by developing a solid feeling of inclusion in the target audience.

Keywords: Video games and communication; Video games endorser; Video players and brand; Video game advertising.

1. Introduction

The use of endorsers in the world of advertising is an established practice that has seen a steady increase over the years.

This contribution is developed to investigate how much brands, which are not endemic to the world of gaming, use endorsement practices that exploit video game characters or elements for promotional purposes.

The intention is to analyse whether the use of video game characters and elements in brand advertisements is effective in reaching the target audience of video gamers, what level of engagement this practice is able to generate, and whether it can develop positive sentiment and purchase intent towards the brand and its products/services.

The questions which guided this research are the following:

RQ1. *Is the use of video game characters and elements an effective advertising method for brands, which are not part of the video game world?*

RQ2. *What psychosocial effects does this type of communication have on the target audience?*

The main objectives analyzed concern:

- To investigate the possibilities and effectiveness for brands of this communication methodology.
- The involvement, the feeling developed and the perception of this methodology by the target audience.
- The observation of the psychological and social effects that this type of communication manages to develop.

The importance of this phenomenon is directly related to the growth capacity of the video game market, thanks to an ever-growing turnover, in 2016, the turnover was around \$99 billion, and in 2021 it almost reached 180 billion (NewZoo, 2016 – 2021a) and a large target audience that has grown from 235 million to 489.5 million between 2015 and 2021 (NewZoo, 2017 - 2022). This field has become a fertile ground for brands, which are acquiring new places to promote their image, values, and voice.

To fully understand the effectiveness of this practice, a focus group was conducted with a sample of seven people chosen according to the latest research on the gamers population (NewZoo, 2021b). In this way, it was possible to investigate from a qualitative perspective the phenomenon. Previous studies show that using fictional spokesperson characters and video games characters can lead to results which are equivalent to those of real celebrities if specific key dynamics are observed: consistency between brand and character, relationship with the target audience and notoriety of the spokesperson (Chuchu & Maziriri, 2020; Shelton & Chiliya, 2014). In fact, the quantitative data collected and analysed by Chuchu and Maziriri (2020) and those collected by Shelton and Chiliya (2014), highlight a positive response of the target group towards the use of this communicative

methodology, showing, regarding the samples they analysed, the development of a purchase intent thanks to this practice (Chuchu & Maziriri, 2020; Shelton & Chiliya, 2014).

This research aims to fill a gap with previous studies, in fact, the difference between this research and previous ones is its qualitative format and the reference sample that tries to reflect the target audience as closely as possible. Thanks to this choice, it was possible to observe the emotional impact told directly by the target audience and bring to light possible improvement methods to increase the effectiveness of this video game-related communication practice.

2. Literature review

The earliest examples date back to the 1980s. Some brands tried using game characters to promote their products and image to a newly emerging audience: video gamers. There are mainly two prominent phenomena related to this practice: In 1983 a company called 7-UP made a commercial using the hungry yellow ball from the video game Pac-Man “*Spot - 7UP soft drink – 1983*” as a testimonial (Tutto Spot 80, 2020); Ralston Cereal, with its 1989 “*Nintendo cereal system*” commercial (Loch SNES Monster, 2020). Today, there are many examples of non-endemic brands that have started using video game characters or elements as endorsers (Louis Vuitton, Ducati, Coca-Cola, etc.).

Data collected by various research platforms support this phenomenon. According to the “Digital 2021” report by We Are Social, in the first half of 2021, 85% of the surveyed people between the ages of 16 and 64, who had internet access, defined themselves as gamers (Starri, 2021). Due to the growth and spread of this phenomenon, it is not unusual to find numerous streamers sponsoring gaming and non-gaming-related products during live gaming sessions.

To increase the interest of brands, we find a high level of acceptance for this type of advertising. On Twitch, 76% of users believe that brand support for streamers in exchange for advertising is positive, as long as there is consistency between the brand and the content created (Twitch, 2021).

Another phenomenon that has favoured the rapid rise of video games is eSports, looking at data from the Newzoo platform, there is an increase in spectators of more than 100% from 2015 to 2021, from 235 million to 465 million (Newzoo, 2017; 2022). Today, this market is worth overall more than \$180 billion (NewZoo, 2021a).

As this reality establishes itself, another form of collaboration between video games and brands seems to be emerging, involving the use of “*Game Character Spokespersons*” instead of real celebrities as spokespersons. This is also supported by quantitative data from Shelton & Chiliya's studies (2014) on the ability of even non-endemic brands to generate purchase intent among observers by using video game characters in their communication. In fact, according to their study, the use of video game characters in brand communication “*can be effective at positively influencing consumers purchase intentions.*” (Shelton & Chiliya, 2014).

This is achieved through three fundamental elements: the attractiveness perceived by people towards the video game character used; the trustworthiness that the video game character used evokes in people; the expertise that people attribute to the video game character used, i.e., the suitability of the testimonial chosen to sponsor a particular product.

Their studies show how these three elements, when present and well-integrated, are able to influence people and persuade them to purchase.

In addition:

“This result is supported by the research which was previously done by Pornpitakpan (2003b) and Ohanian (1991); which found that the perceived attractiveness, trustworthiness and expertise of the brand endorser has a positive relationship with the purchase intentions of consumers.” (Pornpitakpan, 2003; Ohanian, 1991; mentioned in Shelton e Chiliya, 2014).

These data also find further support in the quantitative research by Chuchu and Maziriri (2020) regarding the use of imaginary spokespersons by brands:

“The study found that consumers are in favor of spokes-characters and advertisements that use spokes-characters. Moreover, the researchers concluded that only a spokes-character’s attractiveness and expertise influence attitudes toward the advertisement and a spokes-character’s trust influences attitudes toward the brand. In addition, the study found that individually, both attitude variables have a positive effect on purchase.” (Chuchu & Maziriri, 2020).

The quantitative data from this research give further evidence of the potential of using this practice by brands. These, in fact, highlight the effectiveness of using fictional characters to develop a purchase intent in the target audience, as long as, as also noted by Shelton and Chiliya (2014), there are certain elements present: people's perceived attraction to the video game character used; the expertise that people attribute to the video game character selected.

The growth of this phenomenon also indicates a change in the social perception of the video game medium, which is no longer seen as mere harmful entertainment, but as a functional element in various clinical and social contexts (Pallavicini and Pepe, 2020).

Moreover, as recently stated by the “*Gamers in the Age of Streaming*” research conducted by Samsung Ads’ (2021), “*Advertisers must adjust their strategies and look for innovative solutions to reach gamers in and out of the gaming console environment.*”, showing the need for brands to find new ways to communicate effectively with the gamer population.

3. Data and method

Research on this topic is scarce and almost entirely quantitative, leading to a general and cursory knowledge of the phenomenon without being able to generate data to explain in depth the emotional and perceptual effects on the target audience. In fact, as observed in the previous paragraph, previous research shows the ability of this communicative model to increase purchase intent due to the presence of certain characteristics without, however, considering what psychological components develop in the consumer of this type of advertising. Shelton and Chiliya (2014), in fact, speak about variables that, when added together, lead to the increase of a single factor, purchase intention, without analysing in their studies the psychological perception of individuals. Similarly, Chuchu and Maziriri

(2020) focus their studies on understanding the characteristics of “*spokes characters*” that drive people to increase their purchases from a brand. In these studies, the psychological movement that leads to the creation of a bond of value between brand and observer, the positive effects in terms of perception towards the brand and the psycho-social effects that this practice brings were never analyzed.

Today, however, it is becoming more and more crucial for brands to put the consumer at the center; this is possible by providing valuable content that enables identification and develops a strong emotional impact in line with the feeling of its target audience.

The qualitative method was chosen to investigate the phenomenon, a route which was not taken in consideration in the previous research. This made it possible to understand the target audience's reactions to this practice. Secondly, it was possible to investigate consumer sentiment towards brands that use this communication model.

To comprehend the emotional effect and effectiveness on the target audience, the development of a focus group was needed to encourage discussion and to develop a discourse on the most relevant topics. This was done to collect evidence and points of view regarding emotional involvement, perception, ability to generate a feeling towards the brand and effectiveness in creating awareness towards the target audience.

In order to promote greater homogeneity and emotional openness, a sample of seven people was built.

The discussion developed in the focus group followed an informal line with friendly and relaxed tones. In fact, as pointed out by Cortini (2005):

“Mini groups, consisting of four to seven participants, are described in the literature as having a good degree of internal homogeneity that facilitates (...) in terms of emotional openness of the participants. Despite this, the low numbers, (...) may make participants feel more pressure on themselves (...). In such circumstances, an informal style of moderation helps to ease this weight and keep participants from feeling under scrutiny.”

Another relevant point for defining the number of participants and the modalities of its execution concerns the possible problems encountered by the construction of a “*Full Group*” (Cortini, 2005). This type of group, according to Cortini, runs the risk of creating problems such as inhomogeneity, dispersion, background noise and not allowing a complete and involved interaction of all participants. In addition to the main topics of interest, possible ways to increase engagement with the target audience of this type of communication and the ability to generate social inclusion have emerged.

Due to a lack of funds and time, the focus group was unique. The sample was defined following an in-depth analysis of the gamer population, which led to interviewing a group of seven individuals between 19 and 34 years old of different nationalities, all residing in Italy in different parts of the peninsula, three were women, and four were men. Four of them obtained a high school education diploma, and the remaining three had a bachelor's degree. The sample included six regular gamers who owned between 2 and 4 gaming consoles and spent more than 10 hours per week playing video games. One of the six gamers instead, considered himself a casual gamer: he spent less than 5 hours per week playing video games, rarely followed eSports, and only owned two or fewer consoles. The research took place between November 2021 and January 2022, instead, the focus group took place on 12 December 2021 and lasted approximately 2 hours. The discussion and

starting questions were elaborated beforehand, basing their focus on the visual samples which were going to be shown to interviewees.

The aim of the questions was to comprehend the psychological and emotional dynamics developed in the target audience by the chosen visual specimens; the main ones were related to:

- The overall perception of the ads, videos and images examined.
- Emotional and psychological responses of subjects towards the specimens shown.
- Relevance, interest developed, perceived value and pertinence noted by respondents.

The following table shows the first letters of the respondents with their demographic characteristics to provide a more complete picture of the statements in the results section.

Table 1 – Reference letter of each participant and related demographic characteristics

Name	Years	Gender	Level of education
G.	19	M	High school education
I.	22	F	Bachelor's Degree
D.	24	M	Bachelor's Degree
A.	26	M	Bachelor's Degree
L.	29	F	High school education
F.	31	M	High school education
C.	34	F	High school education

During the focus group, several ads and videos were shown by non-endemic brands that use video game characters or elements to promote themselves. Among the ads shown it is possible to find the ones made by: Coca-Cola, Louis Vuitton, Ducati, UN, J-Gel and OnePlus.

4. Results

4.1 Effectiveness, involvement, and perception

During the research, there were several confirmations of the effectiveness of this format, on one side the ability to create interest in the brand and on the other, the purchase intent.

Among the first ads shown, we can notice the one used by OnePlus to promote the North Killer series of phones (OnePlus, 2021).

To get the most out of the features of their phones, which fit well with the target group of gamers, the company created some sponsorships on its social channels in September 2021, combining a discount campaign with the game *Magic the Gathering*.

Figure 1 – Ad created by OnePlus in collaboration with Magic the Gathering.



In this ad, OnePlus has chosen to use a reference to a game that is very well known worldwide. In the image, it is possible to see how the phone is placed inside the reproduction of one of the game's cards, creating a direct connection in players' minds between smartphones and *Magic the Gathering*. The connection was immediately grasped by 6 out of 7 participants, who expressed a high interest in the brand strategy. The work of OnePlus was then deepened by the respondents, who noticed some aspects of a specific game element.

F. "It is not that they made a random artefact, they put (...) things that a player can see, for example, the cost of mana, which is very particular (...) they put some attention to it, they were also a bit careful."

G. "It is very nice (...) it also pulls it off a little bit, no? Because it says legendary artefact, it is not just any artefact, legendary!"

These statements show how the brand's message immediately reached G. and F., both regular players of *Magic the Gathering*. The brand's attempt to attribute "legendary" characteristics to the product by associating it with an element that is clear in the eyes of the title's players, shows how this format, whose aim was to communicate with the gamers, received a positive response. In addition, the ability of this type of communication to attract the target audience by generating a "WOW" effect (Colletti, 2021) and creating purchase intent through the use of characters or game elements have been highlighted.

D. "I see it and I say WOW... the OnePlus thing I saw it a couple of months ago and I already have the OnePlus because otherwise, it would definitely be... if it were the right time to switch phones, it would definitely be influential."

A. “In my opinion, precisely as G. and F. said, it is extremely targeted, and people who know the game well grasp those things that I do not understand and say WOW, they are geniuses.”

The statements cited above are also supported by data collected by Chuchu & Maziriri (2020) on the effectiveness of fictional characters in promoting a brand and by those of Shelton & Chiliya (2014) on the ability to generate purchase interest through the use of video games characters to promote even non-endemic brands.

Another interesting case is the collaboration of Louis Vuitton (Louis Vuitton, 2019a) and Ducati (Ducati, 2020) with the video game League of Legends.

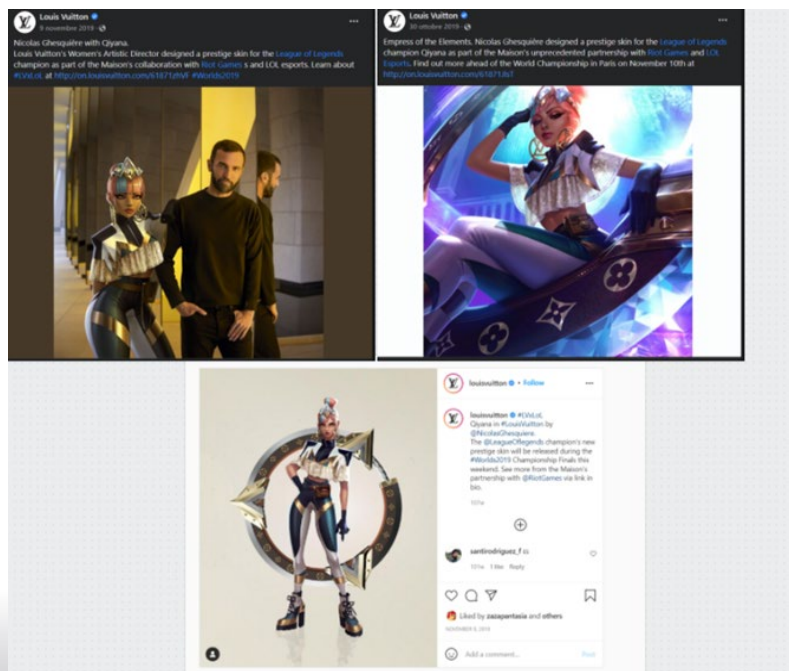
League of Legends is perhaps one of the games that have caused the most buzz in recent years; the title, which was created in 2009, now has a very high number of players (Riot Games, 2021). This is also one of the main titles within eSports tournaments and, as shown by the Nielsen report “*Esports playbook for brands 2019*”, it generates alone around 60% of the audience (The Nielsen Group, 2019).

In the eSports world, there are several ways in which brands try to make a presence: sponsoring teams and events, creating customised spots and ads to be published and broadcast during the event days.

The first collaboration to draw attention on, is the one between Louis Vuitton and LoL (*League of Legends*). The partnership between the two brands began with Louis Vuitton's participation in LoL's 2019 eSports World Finals. For that occasion, the fashion house created a custom suitcase to carry and display the world trophy.

Through this first collaboration, Louis Vuitton attempted an approach to the target audience, trying to improve its image both towards the community closely linked to the video game and towards the fans who only followed the eSports events of this title. This collaboration took place a few months before the release of the video game-inspired clothing collection created by Louis Vuitton (Louis Vuitton, 2019b; Liberatore, 2019).

Figure 2 – Collection of ads from the first collaboration between Louis Vuitton and League of Legends.



Furthermore, advertisements were created and posted on Louis Vuitton's social media to raise awareness during the months leading up to the collection's release, and several "skins"¹ were developed to be purchased inside the video game.

Looking at the creations posted on the clothing brand's social media, it's evident the attempt to bring awareness through the use of one of the game's champions (Qiyana), for whom a themed skin had previously been created. There were several interventions by interviewees in this regard:

G. "Look, in my opinion... the way I see it, it is also a little bit about the integrity of the company developer, I mean it is very easy to become a sell-out (...) among these ads the one I like the most is the one with Qiyana with her spinning disc and that because it is very much in the spirit of the game. The character is very appropriate to the product including the character, I mean you cannot put a PC² as you want, you have to put something that is actually contextualized (...) I mean you do not say "ok the most popular character ever I will put him where I want" (...) and for me the spirit of LOL is very much based on the central image"

As G. states, the most important thing for him is the consistency between brand and character used, a need that has always been present and fundamental, even when it comes to celebrities in real life. F. then brings to light what he sees as a problem in the use of this method:

F. "I like the image on the top right where they have replicated next to Nicolas Ghesquière, Qiyana who gives the clear message of collaboration (...) I see the image I say WOW cool LOL it becomes so popular that it has managed to go and affect even Louis Vuitton they have done a collab, but let's say the WOW ends there (...) there is a risk of giving in quotes more credibility to the game than to the brand that is using the game."

F. statement highlights a possible secondary point of perception. It is therefore essential to study in depth the dynamics that the collaboration between two brands of this type can generate in the consumer's mind; if on one side the reactions can be positive, on the other, there is the risk that one brand will overpower the other.

The following year, Louis Vuitton repeated the initiative by producing a new suitcase for the LoL eSports World Finals trophy (Lombardo, 2020). In addition, the same promotion method was adopted for the French fashion house's new collection of LoL-themed clothes, using ads with gaming characters on Louis Vuitton's social media.

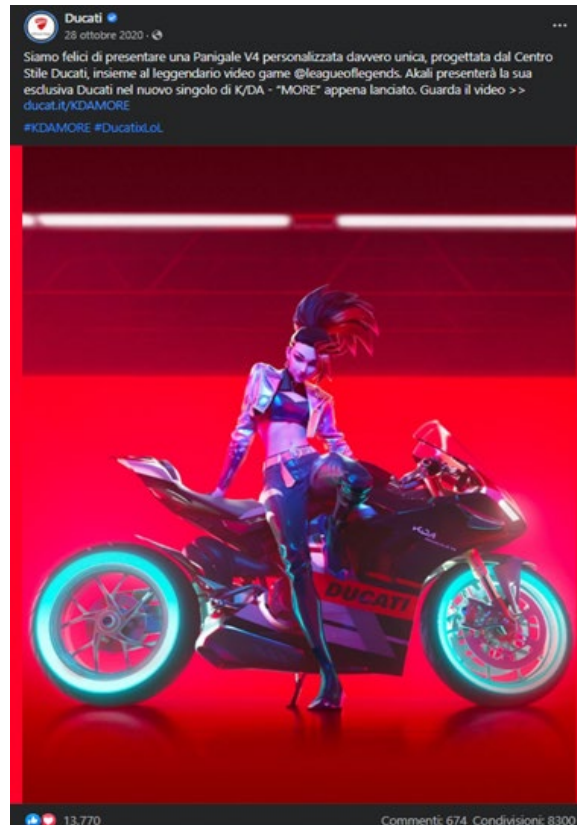
The second collaboration to mention is the 2020 partnership between Ducati and LoL (Ducati, 2020), which saw the creation of a digital model of a motorbike for a music video of the virtual group K/DA, which was composed of LOL champions.

¹ Skin = different look for characters that can be purchased in the store.

² PC = a character in a role-playing game or video game who is controlled by the person playing the game.

For the occasion, a customized bike version was made for the driver - one of the LoL champions -. In the music video promoted by LoL's official channels, the bike is shown in several shots, and from this, some frames were taken out and used by Ducati for their social media ads. This approach has provided the motor house with a powerful impact on two distinct target groups: LoL players and K/DA fans, who are not always players of the title.

Figure 3 – Ad of the collaboration between Ducati and League of Legends.



Most respondents highlighted the attractiveness and involvement of this ad:

D. *“I think the one about the motorbike is very beautiful”.*

A. *“That is the one I like best too”.*

D. *“That one is really beautiful (...) It really has potential as advertising in my opinion. Plus, even on TV, it would fulfil its function as advertisement. When I see it, I stop and say WOW!”.*

I. *“I would be interested and if I had seen the motorbike before, I would have run to my father to tell him “Dad, look what a f***ing bike Ducati has made” and then I would have said “do you know who it is? It is one of the ones in the game I play, and they did an ad with Ducati on it, do you like it?” I would have shown it to others because I am not interested in Ducati and if I had been I would have thought about it instead of going and telling someone who can buy it”.*

D. *“This makes me say OK WOW! How cool Akali’s bike is! I’m going to check it out, got it?”*

C. *“I was thinking the same thing”*

These exchanges show how the use of video game characters as endorsers can achieve high levels of attractiveness to the target audience and the ability to generate an impulse to purchase if the product is within the target audience's interests and economic possibilities.

The example spontaneously given by one respondent is also significant:

D. "OK, I will tell you something that was stuck in my mind a couple of years ago. When I went to Milan I casually stopped right in front of a shop window... there were really big windows... with an advertisement of Final Fantasy 7, one of the girls from FF7, I cannot remember who she was, if Tifa or someone else... With just... there's an advertisement with them and jewellery next to them and on them and that stuff there, it really stuck with me, it worked like a bomb, the advertisement was well done, she was beautiful with the jewellery on, ok, and she was doing the exact same job that a model could do, but from a cool game".

The example given by D. shows how, in the mind of a passionate gamer of the character or title chosen by the brand, an advertisement of this kind remains imprinted for a long period of time. This is also supported by the Nielsen Company's "*eSports playbook for brands 2019*" report, which shows that 90% of eSports viewers remember at least one non-endemic brand that created bespoke content to sponsor its products during eSports (The Nielsen Group, 2019). Furthermore, as reported by Kristen Salvatore, Twitch's Sales Director, in the Nielsen report:

"Twitch has explained in detail to brands how to authentically connect with gamers and convey their messages. Through tournaments, sponsorships, athletes, and the creation of content tailored to eSports and its audience"
(The Nielsen Group, 2019).

4.2 Psychological and social effects

Various positive effects in the social and psychological spheres emerged during the research. Indeed, we must always consider how advertising communication, in addition to its promotional purpose, clashes with the reality of observers, their perception and society itself. If we consider the perception in past years of the video game medium, there were many parents in the 1980s and early 1990s who were skeptical about their children's passion for video games:

"Like other media at the time of their emergence (think of the advent of the cinema and the famous flight from the cinema hall of the audience seeing the train arriving at the station of La Ciotat, filmed by the Lumière brothers), the video game polarized reactions" (Semprebene, Viganò, 2017).

The characterizing elements of video games have been a source of interest for young people from the beginning, while previous generations needed more time to accept them. As expressed by Semprebene and Viganò (2017), this shift has taken place progressively through the adoption of technologies increasingly linked to video game realities, which have led the more mature public toward a new conception of the video game by showing how:

“The video game could be a medium to achieve an end of personal and social utility (...) associating the medium with a (...) more virtuous end (...)it made possible to lower the level of mistrust towards the medium and, consequently, to ignite curiosity for other possible practices with a tool that was no longer perceived as hostile.” (Semprebene, Viganò, 2017).

Thanks to this change of perspective, which also emerged during the focus group, the video game becomes something that goes beyond mere entertainment to which one can associate various possibilities of both social and personal growth. It emerged how this type of communication helps the normalization of the video game and its integration on a cultural level and how this makes players feel more integrated and less stereotyped.

I. “As a player seeing these pictures and seeing them associated with a brand that goes beyond the video game context makes me feel closer and less estranged from all those people who do not actually give video games a penny and do not attribute any seriousness to them.”

I. “And seeing the Ducati with Akali on it makes me feel less.”

I. “Less estranged from reality”

A. “In my opinion the other side of the coin of what we were saying before...that it does not make you feel, I mean in the sense it makes the game seem like something of”

I. “A bit more real.”

A. “Significant for... even for others who are not necessarily players.”

Or more:

F. “Watching the premiere of arcane, to give an example, staying in the context of League of Legends, almost all the guests at the party etc., were all over 30 [...] there is a lot of interest (...) so it actually makes it feel more real, closer.”

*F. “Also because there has always been this taboo of those who play and those who do not, those who play are always mocked by those who do not play and say, “you play video games and pu*****te etc...” and then the Ducati ad comes out.”*

D. “Now there is no more of this stuff in my opinion”

F. “Maybe also thanks to this phenomenon [advertising with characters and elements of video games].”

These sentences lead us to consider how the mentality of the public, the literature world and brands, changed towards video games. Furthermore, it highlights how the strategic and well-integrated use of advertising related to the world of video games generates positive feelings towards the marginalized condition that, until recently, many video gamers used to experience. In this way, it becomes clear the potential this format can have on the image of brands, associating not only the values of the chosen character but also progressive values that aim to integrate and dilute a situation that until not long ago saw a strong stereotyping of gamers.

5. Discussion

This research answered four questions: effectiveness, involvement, perception, social and psychological effects that the use of video game characters and elements generates in the target audience.

The first question concerns the area of effectiveness, both in terms of creating interest and generating purchase intent. In this case, thanks to the responses, it was shown how the involvement of video game characters or elements in a brand's communication generates interest in the observers by attracting them to the brand and developing a declared purchase intention. These outcomes are in line with previous research findings by Shelton and Chiliya (2014) and Chuchu and Maziriri (2020), according to which this communicative practice is capable of creating clear purchase intentionality in the target audience.

The second question concerns the perception of the target group towards this format. If there were a lack of consistency for some collaborations that led to negative perception, the target audience responded positively in those cases where brand and character were found to be similar. This emphasises the importance of carefully choosing the right representative to best convey the company's values and not create a jarring collaboration in the eyes of the public. Here, too, as shown in previous studies by Shelton and Chiliya (2014) and Chuchu and Maziriri (2020), how the relationship between brand and character is perceived is crucial. Both researches have in fact noted as a fundamental characteristic for the success of this practice the expertise of the chosen character, this refers to the coherence of the character and his values with the product, the affinity of his skills with the brand/product and the experience - real or perceived by the target audience - of the character with the product.

The third question concerns the involvement and attraction that this communication can generate in the observer, as pointed out by D. and C. regarding Ducati's advertising, who claimed that this type of ad had created amazement and attraction in them and an interest in learning more about the brand's products. This is supported by previous research, in fact, as Shelton and Chiliya (2014) point out in their article:

“This popularity of celebrity endorsement is due to advertisers’ belief that a message which is delivered by a well-known personality will attract more attention, as well as improve recall for consumers.”

(Shelton e Chiliya, 2014).

The fourth issue concerns the psychological and social effects. Respondents highlighted the ability of these advertisements to make them feel more integrated in the social environment, closer to the brand and the real world, partly diluting the stereotypes that usually affect video gamers and the gaming world. This aspect is not investigated by previous research due to their exclusively quantitative approach.

5.1 Theoretical and practical implications

The main implication of this work concerns the importance for both marketers and managers to pay more attention to the potential contact points between their represented brands and the partnership opportunities with game companies.

What emerges from this research is the advantage of brands that comes from the use of video game characters and elements and the positive effects of this practice. Respondents

confirmed the ability of this format to engage and develop the “WOW” effect for a successful and coherent collaboration between PC and the brand.

A further implication of this study concerns the necessity for advertisers to thoroughly research video game characters to sponsor their brand. In this way, it becomes possible to choose what the audience perceives as most similar and connected to the brand in question, to produce an ideal result. If well-balanced, these elements can develop positive sentiment towards the brand and generate purchase intent.

Furthermore, another implication derived from this research is the following: if brand communication managers are aware that the target audience they want to talk to is involved in the gaming world, this communication methodology is a powerful tool to attract this target audience. This consideration becomes even more relevant by observing the steady growth of eSports and its viewers - from 2015 to 2021, more than 100% (Newzoo, 2017; 2022) -, in combination with the steady growth of the video gamer population - from 2020 to 2021, more than 300.00 million (Newzoo, 2020; 2021c) -, are other positive signs for the future of this practice.

This kind of communication, according to the interviewees, could reduce the distance between the real world and the society that surrounds gamers, a reality that has been perceived many times by them. The analyzed methodology seems capable of creating inclusion, bringing benefits of perception and image to the brand that uses it. This leads us to consider a further implication for marketers and brand managers; in fact, choosing to use this communication methodology when dealing with a target audience of gamers leads to a positive perception by creating an inclusive brand image in the mind of the target viewer.

6. Conclusions

The evolution of the video game and its communication from the early 50s to the present day shows us how in this field, various forms of interaction with video games are developing, interactions which were partly borrowed by other media that preceded it. At the same time, the evolution shows how these practices are changing, and how this medium is making them its own and adapting them to its user base. Also, thanks to the explosion of the video game market, the rise of eSports and in recent years the Covid-19, advertising campaigns specifically designed to engage the target audience of video gamers have seen a noteworthy increase as well as the number of brands investing in this kind of communication. The repeated collaborations over the years between brands and video game software houses for the development of this kind of communication proves the validity of this methodology, and the focus group interviewees bring further proof, this time from the audience side, of the potential of this tool.

It emerges that more attention and emphasis should be placed on this mode of communication. To support this theory, there are many examples also in today's scenario: the 2021 *Zalando Privè* commercial in which there are 3D models with explicit references to 80s and 90s arcade video games (Zalando Lounge/Privè, 2021), or the 2022 *Iliad* telephone company commercial that uses the Tetris theme music (Iliad, 2022), or last but

not least, some *Kellogg's Krave* cereal commercials that use different graphic interfaces taken from video games (Kellogg Italia, 2022).³

What's more, considering the constant growth of video gamers, communication that is aware of the public's new interests certainly benefits brands. In fact, consumers are more likely to buy from brands that they perceive to be close and that speak their language. Then, considering the statements made by the interviewees, it can be understood how even today, at times, this target group still feels excluded due to the distance between the real world and the world of video games that was created in the past and that still tends to recur today.

6.1 Limits of the research and future improvements

The main limitation of this research concerns the impossibility of extending the surveys to a larger sample due to a lack of funds and time. This inevitably led to the development of limited results in terms of generalizability to other publics. Future opportunities to investigate this phenomenon concern the development of further focus groups as well as the integration of qualitative follow-up interviews. Future research should also evaluate a comparison between gamer and non-gamer audiences; this way, it would be possible to understand whether or not the effectiveness of this methodology on the gamer audience can be found in a non-gamer one.

Other points that should be investigated further by future research include: the psychological and social effects that the phenomenon creates on gamers, and the possibility to understand how many benefits the brand image can obtain from this methodology; secondly, how well and at which level video game characters are able to convey their values to the brand that chooses to use them; finally, future studies should investigate which market sectors can benefit from the use of video game characters and elements within their communication.

This topic is wide-ranging and not well explored, however, the data analysed and collected during this and previous research shows the potential of this methodology, and for this reason, the possibilities for future research are diverse and divided into several areas: social, economic, and psychological

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