

ADVANTAGES OF DIGITAL MARKETING IN THE WORLD OF DIGITAL GAMES

BALTEZAREVIĆ Radoslav¹, BALTEZAREVIĆ Borivoje², BALTEZAREVIĆ Ivana³

¹*Institute of International Politics and Economics, Belgrade (SERBIA), ORCID: 0000-0001-7162-3510*

²*Institute for Serbian Culture, Leposavić (SERBIA), ORCID: 0000-0002-6798-6981*

³*Faculty of Law, Belgrade, Megatrend university (SERBIA), ORCID: 0000-0003-4605-1420*

E-mails: radoslav@diplomacy.bg.ac.rs, baltezb@yahoo.co.uk, ivana.baltezarevic@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The digital gaming industry, apart from being extremely powerful, also gathers a multi-million audience of gamers. With gamers playing digital games with the help of gaming consoles, computers and smartphones, and spending most of their time in the virtual space, it is certainly best to communicate in their digital environment. In order for companies to reach this target market, to achieve an emotional connection with consumers, and advertise their products, it is advised to use digital marketing strategies, such as social media marketing, content marketing, video marketing, search engine optimization (SEO), and influencer marketing. In this way, they can inspire adequate and positive electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), as well. In this paper, the authors, by analyzing the attitudes of 159 respondents, tried to bring this current topic closer to experts in the field of digital games, in order to point out to them all the benefits that digital marketing in this industry can achieve. The aim of this study is to indicate that if digital marketing strategies are adapted to the target market (namely gamers), there is a high probability that companies will influence consumer purchasing decisions, create a large base of loyal consumers, achieve a competitive advantage in the market and generate profits that traditional marketing methods, in this case, would not be able to contribute.

Keywords: Digital games industry, Digital games, Gamers, Digital marketing.

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INTRODUCTION

The digital games industry, as one of the strongest in the world, has been developing rapidly in recent years. It gathers a huge audience, and for this reason it has become very interesting for many companies to communicate with consumers and advertise their brands. Given that digital games are played in a digital environment, where gamers discuss about them with each other, read online reviews or follow gaming influencers, primarily on streaming platforms, using digital marketing methods to reach this target market is the most logical choice.

In the digital environment, with the help of visual communication, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) and an adequate selection of credible influencers on social media, companies are able to directly and indirectly communicate with the target market and influence consumers attitudes towards brands and their purchasing decisions [1]. In digital marketing, it is crucial to have creative collaborators, who mutually motivate each other to improve their skills. In order for marketing goals to be successful, one must demonstrate proactivity and have enough self-confidence to make bold moves, but also the freedom to experiment, because that's the only way to achieve great results [2]. Creativity and proactivity are perhaps best reflected in the creation of social media content that companies place on social media, which are often enriched with videos and images to make their impact even stronger. Often, the content is created in such a way that it evokes consumer emotion, which creates an emotional connection with consumers that can result in greater loyalty.

Within the digital gaming industry, in many cases, companies hire the most successful gamers (gaming influencers) to discuss, endorse or recommend their brands to often a very large number of their followers. This influencer-consumer communication most often happens during gamer streaming sessions, while influencers (gaming professionals) play the game and communicate directly with consumers, showing them their skills and explaining potential tricks within the digital game [3]. Regarding the use of gaming influencers in digital marketing campaigns, it should be noted that mostly games are promoted with the help of influencer marketing before launch, with the aim of getting as many people as possible to subscribe to it in advance [4]. Studies have proven that consumer buying behavior is more influenced by communication with other consumers than traditional marketing methods [5]. Nowadays, before making a purchase decision, consumers will first consult on the Internet, read reviews by credible experts, and posts on specialized forums, listen to electronic word of mouth (eWOM), but also visit the websites of companies, whose brands interest them. In order for a gaming company's website to be better positioned (on browser page) than the competition, during a consumer search in a search engine on the Internet, it is necessary to perform search engine optimization (SEO), which is also considered one of the most important digital marketing strategies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The digital games industry encompasses a number of elements, such as hardware and software, consumer platforms, content development and production (including publishers), developer networks, creative teams, middleware and software tools production, distribution (whether physical or online), servers and networks technologies and of course marketing [6]. The digital games industry has experienced an unprecedented boom in recent years, and the growth of the industry is expected to continue rapidly and reach a sum of over 200 billion US dollars in 2023. It is also estimated that it will reach an average growth rate of almost 8.5% compared to the previous year. The revenue from the global gaming industry is 9 times higher than the music industry and almost five times higher than the cinema industry [7].

Digital games is a term that refers to a wide range of events. This interactive digital entertainment is done with game consoles, computers, or mobile devices. Today, on the world market, there are a large number of different types of digital games of different types, however, due to the lack of specific names for each of them, the term is generalized as digital games [8]. Digital games have experienced great success, primarily due to their interactive nature [9], however, playing digital games extends to other activities of users who, in addition to playing games, can use streaming platforms to watch entertaining content, to learn, but also to communicate with other users. Specialized streaming platforms such as Twitch, Mixer and YouTube Gaming together generate hundreds of millions of hours of live viewing [10]. Digital games, which can be understood as a kind of cultural product, require a special approach from a marketing perspective, if a positive market response is desired [11].

Digital marketing as a concept highlights a set of processes that include all available digital channels for the promotion of products or services, or for building a digital brand [12]. A study, which was carried out a few years ago, on the impact of digital marketing strategies on consumers, with the aim of facilitating the interaction between the company and consumers, but also between the consumers themselves, which can cause the strengthening of emotional and psychological ties between them, showed, among other things, that implementing digital tools can increase annual sales revenue by nearly 4%. This data proves that digital marketing has contributed to positive and additional value for the organization [13]. Regarding the application of marketing in the digital game industry, generally the digital marketing process starts at a very early stage, that is, when developers create ideas and present them to publishers [14].

Marketers are making extensive use of social media opportunities, which have become the language of our public culture [15], in the digital gaming industry. Social media, in addition to the immeasurable increase in the amount of internet content, have also had a great impact on interpersonal communication. Due to the great daily influence that social media has on people, companies should never avoid it, as it can help them reach larger markets. A company should be able to integrate social media marketing not only as a way to improve advertising and communication, but also to inseparably combine it with its core goals and strategies [16]. Social media enables brands to inform, recall and persuade their consumers [17], using a consumer-centric approach [18]. Moreover, social media has the ability to truly consistently engage consumers in direct, deep, and long-term relationships, and thus to drive virality [19]. The viral effect, if the content is positive, can have great benefits for companies and brands. It represents information that spreads exponentially through cyberspace. However, in case of a negative eWOM communication, which has been affected by a wave of virality, the consequences can be unfathomable, and once this effect starts, it is almost impossible to control it.

Adapting to social media platforms means less product-oriented communication, i.e. adopting a more spontaneous and informal strategy and creating content that inspires consumers [20]. By creating emotions, companies can increase brand loyalty [21]. Companies are not recommended to burden consumers only with boring and redundant information about the company's operations and their brands, it is much better to occasionally engage in current social topics.

However, if companies want to achieve better business results, the same content cannot be targeted at all consumer groups. That is why it is important to create an imagined portrait of the company's client, and after that the content should be adapted to his or her expectations, interests, needs and desires [22]. Marketing experts dealing with content marketing pointed out that appropriate content should be prepared as simple, recognizable and connected to the brand, but also visually well structured. As today's environment is overcrowded with a sea of all kinds of advertising messages, many consumers have developed an immunity to them, which means that content marketing experts are facing a big challenge, because they have to put all their efforts and create content that is narrative and more personalized (to affect personal feelings). A properly addressed content marketing strategy is a tool that can change a lot and bring significant benefits to the company [23].

Online video, as a part of content marketing strategy, can be seen as a temporal network of images, sounds, subjects and objects. Social media sites such as Instagram, Facebook and Snapchat have also embraced videos as the most powerful means of visual communication [24]. Video has the power to enrich the consumer journey, and is more effective than other content in reaching consumers. Studies have found that 4 times more consumers would rather watch a video about a product than read about it [25]. According to the Ericsson Mobility Report, video will account for over 70% of all mobile data in the coming years. Also, the report shows that video has the highest growth rate of all other categories of online content, leaving behind audio material and social networks [26]. Video advertising provides technical support to consumers, experts have found that this kind of product support is of great importance to consumers in order to get maximum value from the product, while the advantage of companies is to positively influence consumer satisfaction and increase sales revenue [27]. The recommendation for small and medium-sized businesses is to adopt the video marketing trend and add these strategies to their marketing plans, since the future of content marketing is in online video [28]. However, online video is still not a perfect marketing tool, it still has a lot of room for improvement and will continue to evolve in the years to come [29]. The digital game industry today intensively uses video in order to inform and communicate with consumers, but also to promote its digital games, game consoles, game competitions, etc. How video marketing will be further improved and what other purposes it will have, will be known in the near future, when mixed reality (which is still in the experimental phase of development) enters the scene, i.e. the merging of the real world environment and the computer generated environment.

Compared to traditional advertising, electronic word of mouth (eWOM) has greater effects on consumer decision making. Consumers have always valued other consumers' evaluations more than advertisers, and this is considered one of the keys to influencer marketing [30]. There are different definitions of influencer marketing, one of them considers it a type of marketing that focuses on using key leaders to convey a brand's message to a larger market [31]. The difference between celebrities and influencers is primarily that influencers are more accessible to consumers, and it is much easier to connect with them, primarily because they share more details from their personal lives. In this way, a deeper and more personal relationship is built between the influencer and the follower, which makes it more likely that the follower will trust the opinions of the influencer [32]. Consumers can choose which social media influencers to follow, who to trust, and who to allow to influence them [33]. However, companies must choose an influencer who is aligned with the needs and desires of the target market, in order to achieve adequate communication, the communication that creates an emotional connection, and the result of such connections creates a sincere relationship, building trust and ultimately long-term loyalty [34]. Even before the development of digital technologies, influencers played a major role in society influencing other members of the community in decision-making. However, the development of technology has taken it to a higher level, so that electronic word of mouth (eWOM), as a digital form of traditional word of mouth, has become a very successful tool for influencing consumer attitudes [35]. Studies show that credibility is one of the most important keys when people adopt eWOM [36]. Influencer reviews, improve sales, as well. For example, a blogger trusted by followers, who acts as an opinion leader in promoting products or services, can be considered a very successful eWOM strategy [33].

Gaming influencers generally start their careers on the YouTube platform, which is still considered one of the most popular platforms. In addition to YouTube, another very popular platform for streaming digital games is Twitch, a platform that allows its members to connect their computer, smartphone or console and directly stream their videos while playing the game. It is estimated that more than 3 million gamers regularly follow gamer streams on this platform. Gamers (amateurs) follow top gamers to listen to advice, improve their gaming skills, and discover new games or gaming devices, based on the recommendations of these professionals. It is an interesting fact that lately there have been big changes in the demographics of gamers, but also in the demographics of gamer influencers. SSSniperWolf and iHasCupquake, are female high powered gaming influencers with billions of views and millions of followers. These changes are very important for companies when choosing digital game influencers, as partnering with the right influencers can positively affect consumer perception of digital games [3]. Twitch has almost 10 million daily active users, while on the YouTube platform, content related to digital games makes up 80% of the most popular topics [37]. The phenomenon of digital games live streaming prioritizes the social component. These types of platforms are where a community of gamers meet, and each individual gamer has a sense of belonging. This leads to the creation of very small intimate groups, but also huge ones, which are formed usually for the purpose of streaming large gaming tournaments and events [38].

Most of the digital games on the world market are developed by the companies that also publish them, and as the development of the game comes to an end, the publishers are more actively considering the scope of the marketing campaign to support the digital game [39]. As part of an early digital marketing campaign, before the game is released, very often selected YouTube influencers are given early access codes to the games or a copy of the finished game to create a preview video. Depending on the size and characteristics of the influencer's audience, the developer will make a decision whether to contact him/her or not [40].

Instead of face-to-face conversations, i.e. word of mouth, consumers now increasingly use recommendations from anonymous sources in the digital environment. They can read reviews and comments from other unknown consumers about products and their experiences with those products, and make their own purchasing decisions based on that information [41]. In search of satisfying their needs and desires, gamers will also visit the website of the company that released the digital game. In order for the website to be well positioned on the web search engine (at the top of the page), so that consumers can easily find it in the results, it is necessary to include a digital marketing strategy known as search engine optimization (SEO).

The SEO strategy aims to have the brand name listed on the first page when the keyword is entered into the search engine. Usually, customers won't scroll to the bottom of the first page or won't visit too many pages due to time constraints [42]. If pages are better exposed in search results, companies are more likely to draw consumers' attention to themselves and their brands. Internet users, every year, perform billions of searches in order to obtain information about the desired products and services, if the position in the search results is better than the competition, it can significantly influence the company to achieve a competitive advantage and expect higher profits [43].

METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS

In order to conduct empirical research with the aim of finding out about the attitudes of the respondents in relation to the matter we are investigating in this study, we defined four hypotheses that have a basis in the theory that we analyzed:

H1 If a gaming influencer endorses a digital game on social networks or streaming platforms, it is more likely to influence consumers' decision to initiate positive eWOM communication about a digital game in a digital environment.

H2 If the digital marketing activities are started before the official release date of the digital game, the greater the chance that the digital game will experience success in the market.

H3 If, as part of a digital marketing campaign, video content representing a digital game is published on social media platforms, it is more likely to have a positive effect on digital game sales.

H4 If digital game websites are better exposed in search results (SEO), gaming companies are more likely to draw consumers' attention to themselves and their digital games.

We started the research by preparing a special questionnaire that we sent electronically to the e-mail addresses we have in the respondents' database. The questionnaires were forwarded to a total of 190 electronic addresses, while a total of 159 correctly filled questionnaires were taken into account for further processing. We processed the data using SPSS software. Data on the demographic structure of respondents show that 81 (50.9%) male respondents and 78 (49.1%) female respondents participated in the survey. Data on the age structure of the respondents show that the majority of respondents are from the age group of 26 to 35 years, a total of 85 (53.5%), and that the majority of respondents 77 (48.4%) are with a higher/university education. From a total of 18 statements included in the questionnaire, for testing the hypotheses, we selected eight statements from which we created a reduced scale whose internal agreement was checked using Cronbach's α .

To check the validity of the hypotheses, we tested the internal consistency of the scale using Cronbach's α .

Table 1. Reliability Statistics

Reliability Statistics		
Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.871	.872	8

Table 1 shows that the value of Cronbach's Alpha .871 is satisfactory, but we additionally checked the mean values of the variables used to test the hypotheses, because the list was composed of less than 10 variables.

Table 2. Mean values of the variables

Item Statistics			
	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
P1	3.18	1.072	159
P2	3.31	1.119	159
P3	2.55	1.071	159
P4	3.07	1.068	159
P5	3.06	1.168	159
P6	3.14	1.022	159
P7	3.16	1.073	159
P8	2.97	1.064	159

From Table 2, we see that all mean values range from 2.55 to 3.31, which is an absolutely acceptable value.

By testing the set hypotheses, we obtained the following results:

The first hypothesis H1:

Results $\chi^2(16,1) = 330.575^a$, $p < 0.01$ shows that a statistically significant correlation was established between the respondents' attitudes. Pearsons $R = .596$ shows that there is a positive high correlation and H1 is confirmed.

The second hypothesis H2:

Results $\chi^2(16,1) = 193.484^a$, $p < 0.01$ shows that a statistically significant correlation was established between the examined attitudes of the respondents. Pearsons $R = .525$ shows that there is a positive high correlation and H2 is confirmed.

The third hypothesis H3:

Results $\chi^2(16,1) = 181.601^a$, $p < 0.01$ shows that a statistically significant correlation was established between the examined attitudes of the respondents. Pearsons $R = .274$ shows that there is a positive weak correlation and H3 is confirmed.

The fourth hypothesis H4:

Results $\chi^2(16,1) = 149.891^a$, $p < 0.01$ shows that a statistically significant correlation was established between the examined attitudes of the respondents. Pearsons $R = .343$ shows that there is a positive moderate correlation and H4 is confirmed.

CONCLUSION

The research conducted in this paper confirmed all four hypotheses, and the following conclusions were reached: A gaming Influencer who endorses a digital game on social networks or streaming platforms can influence consumers' decision to initiate positive eWOM communication about a digital game in a digital environment; If the digital marketing activities start before the official release date of the video game, the chances are higher that the video game will experience success in the market; If video content representing a video game is published on social media platforms, as part of a digital marketing campaign, it is more likely to have a positive impact on video game sales; and finally, If video game websites are better exposed in search results (SEO), gaming companies are more likely to draw consumers' attention to themselves and their video games. Based on the results obtained in this research, it can be concluded that digital marketing activities, if they are precisely designed and creative, can certainly be a lever that will push video game publishers and their products and services towards their business goals. These activities can differentiate the company from the competition in the market and give them a competitive advantage. They have the power to attract the attention of consumers, encourage their engagement, and inspire them to recommend the digital game to others in real and digital environments.

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