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Children's Exposure to Advertising on Games Sites in Brazil and Spain

Exposición infantil a anuncios en páginas web de juegos de Brasil y de España

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Abstract

The online space is rich in playful experiences and can provide enjoyment and learning to younger users. However, it is true that children cannot always handle the advertising noise and other adverse effects resulting from excessive or inappropriate use of technology; particularly, game pages. This article aims to confirm the advertising pressure that affects children in Brazil and Spain when playing internet games. The theoretical and methodological framework for content analysis is applied to measure advertising pressure in online games visited by a group of Brazilian and Spanish children from 9 to 11 years old. This research showed that online games are occupied by a considerable amount of publicity, that repeatedly blocks access and disrupts key moments of young players with unwanted or not interesting messages. Just as there is a concern with the commercial content of children's programming on television, similar reasons demand a prompt and sufficient attention to those webs of games that hurt the image of the advertisers, hinder gaming experiences and above all, affect those who need to become educated as citizens rather than consumers. Younger users' opinion is correct and relevant to communicators, teachers and family members.

Resumen

El espacio online es rico en experiencias lúdicas y puede proporcionar muchos placeres y aprendizajes a sus usuarios más jóvenes. Sin embargo es cierto que los niños no siempre pueden manejar el ruido publicitario y otros efectos nocivos derivados del uso excesivo o inapropiado de la tecnología, y en particular de las webs de juegos. Este artículo tiene como objetivo confirmar la presión publicitaria que afecta a niños de Brasil y España cuando se entretienen en portales de Internet con juegos. Para medir la presión publicitaria en los juegos actuales se recurre al marco teórico y metodológico del análisis de contenido sobre una muestra de webs visitadas por un grupo de niños brasileños y españoles de 9 a 11 años. Esta investigación evidencia que los juegos on-line son obstruidos por una cantidad considerable de anuncios que repetidamente bloquean el acceso e interrumpen momentos claves con mensajes no deseados o sin interés para los pequeños jugadores. De la misma forma que hay una preocupación con el contenido comercial de las programaciones infantiles en la televisión, se espera una pronta y suficiente atención a aquellas webs de juegos que lesionan la imagen de los anunciantes, entorpecen la experiencia del juego y sobre todo afectan a quienes están formándose como ciudadanos antes que consumidores. Se comprueba que las opiniones de este grupo de usuarios son acertadas y relevantes para comunicadores, profesores y familiares.



Keywords / Palabras clave

Advertising, online advertising, advertising strategies, internet, childhood, games, content analysis, digital skill.

Publicidad, publicidad online, estrategias publicitarias, internet, infancia, juegos, análisis de contenido, competencia digital.

1. Introduction and background

For years, research of effects driven by media has given consideration to the training and educational possibilities of the modernization of equipment and technological devices to separate ages or stages in audience reception. As the effectiveness of communication lies not in technology, but in the power of political and economic groups that - in spite of the changes in cultural industries - continue to control at least part of audience reception, it is necessary to maintain a critical perspective when continuing studies on the communicative impact of contemporary technologies.

Besides, critical studies are still less numerous than research on communication and audience (Martínez-Nicolás & Saperas, 2011). The importance of this research perspective has already reached institutional policies, such as the European Commission, that since 2002 has been highlighting the academic focus of technology and media to research of users' practices (Pérez-Tornero, 2010).

During the last decades, information and communication technologies have marked the production and spread of information and knowledge. The rhythm of the development of the cultural industries and the several stages in the idea of «being a child» can be distinguished: in the book world, in television or in nowadays mobile and portable communication world. This work connects with the receptionist research, but trying to expand reception to interaction as a more conscious and voluntary way that occurs differently in digital relationships experienced and expressed by their own users.

The notion of child education is as modern as the book but only in recent times and with the concept of school a certain conception of childhood with its own vital objectives has been made visible. With schooling, although somewhat hidden, there is also an adult and institutional colonization of the possible childhood involved (Ariès, 1981). The textbook - reading is aimed at teachers and only centuries later to the individual reception - expectations and values between lines are drawn according to each culture.

At the stage of media, a different childhood is conceptualized, particularly during the golden age of television. After the World Wars, five centuries after the invention of letterpress printing, an international review defines children through the Universal Declaration of their rights. But simultaneously, powerful media technologies consolidate their power: film, newspapers, radio and television stations. Starting from the mass dissemination of information through press, radio and television another idea of childhood that is more sensitive and less autonomous is being built. Unlike books, these mass media «tell it all». Contents that were never in school textbooks make television a «revealing secrets machine» for children education, as rightly noted by Meyrowitz (1995).

Now, due to reasons contrary to the criticism of the modern book, naturalism accuses technology again, particularly the audiovisual media, of the disappearance of childhood (Postman, 1982), or at least one of its utopian idealizations. Among so many interests, media research on the psychosocial effects of television on children is not simple. However, studies on violence, sexism and other abuses of power agree that this audiovisual medium has not distinguished itself for its educational role and effects with the turn of the XXI century (Pérez-Salgado, Rivera & Ortiz, 2010; Martínez, Nicolas & Salas, 2013).

Unlike books, children's television programming is produced, catalogued and evaluated as mere entertainment, but its contents sometimes compete directly with family lifestyles or the legal school



curriculum. In the most benevolent treatments, it is recognized that television for children barely reaches the category of electronic nanny while the parents rest.

If textbooks hide other forms of childhood, and television makes it fade in dreams, in the harsh terms of Postman (1982), how will childhood look with video games? The burden of blame has been cast on the time uselessly spent in front of «TV», children's favourite entertainment and dominant among Western children from the last decades of the twentieth century and now shared with electronic games so far this century. In the field of academic and industrial research, macro studies confirm every year the penetration of technologies into the practices of North American children (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2010), European children (EU Kids Online, 2010) and Brazilian children (TIC Kids Online Brasil, 2013). In addition many other micro studies have been published, more qualitative and close to navigation and children's online interactions, such as those mentioned in this article.

While critical research is minority, the ethnographic approaches to children's groups and communities within reception studies are even fewer. So, there is still pending a sociology, an anthropology, etc. of digital practices in the current reality of mobile technologies, including tablets and other devices that multiply the possibilities of video games and consoles for group playing, beyond languages and cultures, with strangers, in virtual or augmented realities, etc.

Children breeze in throughout the global computer network, with some tighter controls at home and in the classroom. From their very own words they declare that they feel freer in moments and spaces «just for them», displacing towards this audiovisual playful interaction –like unique and own practices– previous ways of reading and reception of TV content and, even more, editorial content on paper.

Muros, Aragon and Bustos (2013) agree that the youngest use video games and digital networks mainly for entertainment. On the Internet, they «talk for the sake of talking» or play« for the sake of playing». However, it must not be forgotten that, in the latest technological period of cultural industries, video games -online or offline- are still funded by direct sales and contextual advertising. With an increasing number of users and generating billions of dollars annually worldwide, video games are advertising businesses as well as entertainment media. Even during the economic crisis, in 2009, games totalled 823 million dollars in the United States (Puro Marketing, 2010). In Brazil, the combination of play and advertising, called «advergame» in 2011, reached three billion dollars (Campi, 2012). In 2012 in Spain, over 27 million euros were spent on promotional games (Infodex, 2013). The American sector (ESA 2014) states that they expect to reach 7.2 billion in 2016. It is clear that behind the scenes of gaming– and the type of child socialization involved –there is a profitable market. Away from adults behind screens, children can access possible worlds. Several Internet advertisement formats can be found in this context, which are aimed at young consumers or purchase influencers, and also entertainment formulas for domestic economies.

A general prevention of excessive advertising pressure requires a more careful approach in the case of children. The business experience of the crisis in the media is showing that advertising saturation does not make them more sustainable. Advertising has shifted from funding media to spoil the perception and value of what now are saturated channels. It is a serious matter in any case, but in addition, among children the probabilities of domestication of technologies (Silverstone and Haddon, 1996), i.e., making alternative uses of the devices to escape the programming, are, in theory, lower. Children, eager to enjoy their favourite leisure time, allow the advertising price» in those seemingly free and safe games.

Both Brazil and Spain are missing a specific regulation on child advertising in games and, as a matter of fact, the recommendations coming from agreements and self-monitoring initially designed for the television industry are not being respected. Moreover, technologies, by extending access to information with portability and mobility, exponentially multiply the possibilities of communication with more people in very varied places and formats. From this technological context that changes advertising, Méndiz (2010) details that the advertisements receive replies, they hybridize with in-



formation and they integrate under entertainment formats. Advertising campaigns of major brands during the golden age of television can be viewed as historical remnants.

Since the turn of the century, communication on corporate sites creates infotainment pages in sections that are more interesting for its audiences. And among the most innovative formats, the hybrid «advergame» becomes established, a video game with an advertising purpose that through sponsoring and contextual advertising stands over traditional formats. The exploitation of brand placement in films and on television has been extended to video games as in-game advertising, which is only placed on previously designed audiovisual spaces. But «advergames» provide the qualitative difference of offering entertainment designed by the brand for better visibility and recall (Martí & Currás, 2012). Méndiz (2010) considers advertising in virtual worlds as another type of advergame. From that format called «virtual world advertising», products and brands provide the virtual realism embedded in designed imaginary worlds that books or television of the most powerful creativity cannot reach.

To Martí (2010), the advantage of the association between advertising and games is the fact that, in the middle of an excess of traditional advertising formats, games have an entertainment value that serves as bait to lure consumers tired of a type of advertising that they do not hesitate to eliminate because of its annoyance. Works published later than González & Francés (2009) and Méndiz (2010) insist that the attraction of attention by such kind of advertising particularly facilitates communication with children. Children's ability for games should target and adapt to children the business information present in those spaces. But while children are still entering the world of consumption, advertisers in games could be practicing the most incisive strategies to build brand loyalty among children.

In order to adjust the analysis to the updating of advertising formats, the prominence of the product and the brand is stressed in «advergame», «in-game advertising» and «virtual world advertising». The analysis of advertising content on the Web is completed with the rest of advertising formats online reviewed by scholars and profesionales¹ that can be summarized in:

- Background: sets the background of the site.
- Banner: marks out a two-dimensional space with static or animated content.
- Button: rectangle that normally includes the name and the logo or symbol of the advertiser.
- Classifieds: small classic wording on classified advertising pages of print newspapers organized by category.
- Interstitial: intermediate window that opens when activating a link to another destination, it is usually displayed for a short time.
- Sponsorship: financial producer of a space that is generally related to the niche of the sponsoring brand or of interest for the target group of their services-products.
- Pop under: advertising window that opens in the background.
- Pop up: advertising window that opens up in the foreground covering the content that was being browsed.
- Skyscraper: type of vertical banner that takes up one of the sides when navigating the information on the page.
- Slotting fee: privileged positioning on the information page that has a higher price, with different sizes and format (it shows a superior economic power of the advertiser).
- Subset: it takes up a horizontal space that disappears vertically when browsing the information on a page.
- Superstitial: like a pop up, but only for a while or until a click hides the information. Unlike pop ups, it opens in the same window and not on a new page.

Given the interpretive horizon of the criticism of books, television and games, it is important to consider the evolution of reading and television reception until the current child interaction with electronic devices. Professional and industry reports have been taken into account, but for this academic research, children's subjective opinion is preferred to select game spaces in both countries. As in other cases, this field of study can be an effect of global campaigns or a conscious and fully



voluntary preference from the minors. But it is from their observation and interviews that the advertisements are taken. The idea is not studying the channels nor the advertisers with the intention of confirming some kind of effect. It consists on assessing children's judgement on the communicative and in-game effect of advertisements on their usual gaming portals. For a thermostatic education, as proposed by Postman (1984), advertising levels should be counteracted with specific actions in families and in schools, but also in game portals and businesses. In addition to fostering digital critical capacity in children, the intention is to examine how they are able to evaluate and manage their preferences and values (Martínez, Nicolás y Salas, 2013).

2. Materials and methods

In our previous study where we observed and interviewed groups of Brazilian and Spanish children between nine and eleven years old, we noted the value that children attach to these online games and what opinion they have on advertising (Saunders & Riverson, 2013). In the age range of less than 12 years old, according to Te'eni-Harari, Lehman-Wilzig and Lampert (2009), skills and abilities for critical reception of advertising messages are formed. Thus, the sample and the age choice in two countries that are away from each other but united by the Internet. On the game sites that they suggest we researched the format and pressure of the advertisements found.

The focus is directed at advertising content visible on game pages that 20 Brazilian children and 29 Spanish children can access in a classroom with computers. These children are observed and interviewed during one free hour at school. In view of their reactions, objections and suggestions (Saunders & Riverson, 2013) the opinions of 9-11-year-old children of both countries are compared to messages and advertising formats that appear on the portals where they play. Among the sites visited by children in Brazil and Spain, there are virtual worlds, social networks, portals and sites containing a single game. We have removed the pages that were visited by a single child due to representation. The Spanish sites that were analyzed are: juegosdechicas.com, juegosjuegos.com, habbo.es, akinator.com, ciudadpixel.es and clubpenguin.com. And the Brazilian game sites suggested: clickjogos.com.br, iguinho.ig.com.br, stardoll.com.br and clubpenguin.com.br. Both small groups indicate very well-known game spaces.

For content analysis, we have followed the conventional descriptions by Bardin (2004) and Piñuel (2002) with which we quantify the presence, the formats of presentation and frequency of advertisements on game portals used by groups of children. Among the data of the analysis sheet for each advertisement the following aspects are registered: origin of the distribution of advertising, whether it has been embedded by the site or it has been placed by Google as contextualized exposure during navigation.

- Position and space requirement of the advertisement on the screen according to templates.
- Type of format according to the professional advertising name mentioned in the previous section.
- Global or national character of the advertised brands.
- Levels of interaction of the advertisements: low, medium (one click, moving to another page, watching a few seconds of a video, etc.) or high, interactive and immersive.
- The general or specific and thematic nature of the ads displayed.

3. Analysis and results

In total we have analyzed 158 advertisements on Spanish game websites and 126 on Brazilian sites. Chart 1 shows more self-managed publicity on Brazilian's pages; whereas game pages used in Spain have more contextual advertising by Google.

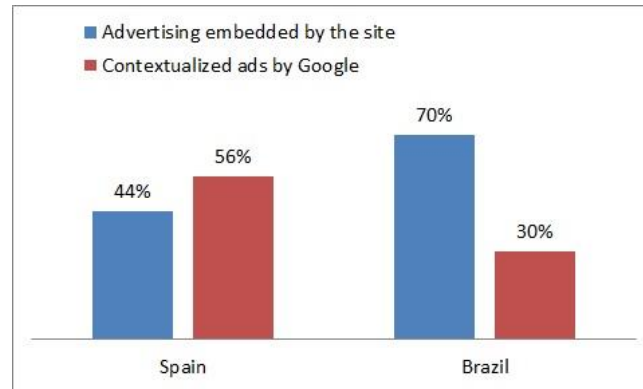


Chart 1. Distribution of advertising.

Contextual advertising suggests that Spanish children see advertisements that are more related to their personal preferences or recent searches. On the other hand, direct management and charging of Brazilian advertising suggests more independence when it comes to financing game websites.

According to the complaints expressed by children, an aggressive advertising that invades the centre of the screen prevails. Charts 2 and 3 confirm that in both countries the game is interrupted by ads.

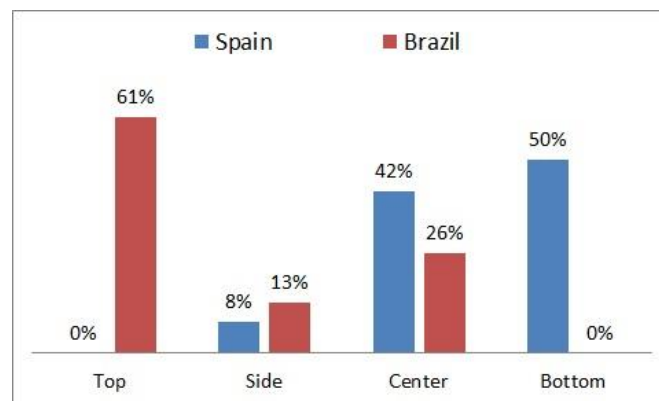


Chart 2. Position on the screen of ads by Google.

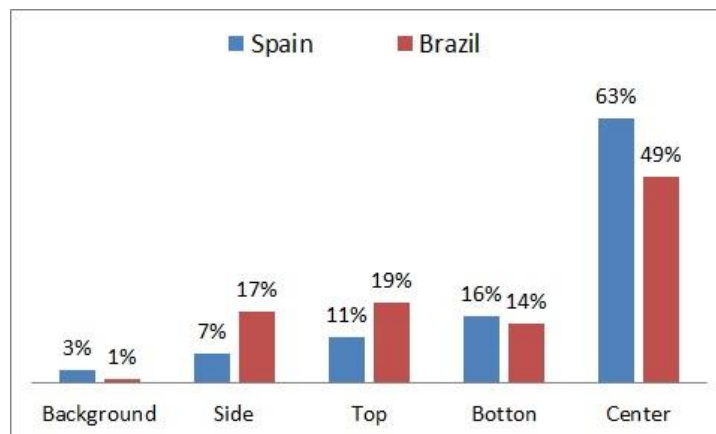


Chart 3. Position on the screen of self-managed website ads.



In Table 1, a more detailed analysis of the formats shows that contextualized advertisements by Google are less intrusive: banner (55% in Brazilian pages and 50% in Spanish sites), slotting fee (29% in Brazilian sites and 25% in Spanish sites), subset (3% for Brazilian spaces and 25% in Spanish pages) and classified advertisements that are only distributed on Brazilian portals (13%). The formats that girls and boys feel more uncomfortable with (pop-up, superstitial and interstitial) are not among the sponsored ads. A success in advertising management and beneficial to children's gaming in portals indirectly funded by Google's contextual advertising.

AD TYPE	BRAZIL	SPAIN
Banner	55%	50%
Classified	13%	0%
Slotting fee	29%	25%
Subset	3%	25%

However, as shown in Table 2, publicity managed by gaming websites does not defend a quality experience in their games. Adding pop-under, superstitial and interstitial, 24% of advertisements are considered intrusive in Spanish sites. In Brazilian sites those are 19% of the advertising displayed. According to children's opinion, it is confirmed again that half of the advertising displayed in online games interrupts gameplay and devalue the experience.

TYPE OF AD	BRAZIL	SPAIN
Advergame	1%	0%
Background	8%	1%
Banner	35%	10%
Button	9%	12%
Interstitial	4%	0%
Sponsorship	0%	4%
Pop-under	1%	3%
Pop-up	0%	0%
Slotting fee	26%	26%
Subset	1%	1%
Superstitial	15%	24%
Virtual world advertising	0%	19%

In this utilization of advertising funds, it is surprising the low use of «advergame», which includes a relative «pact of interaction» as it is played on a stage that children recognize as advertising. Figure 1 presents the «advergame» in Brazil's Click Jogos, advertising of the juice brand Ades, which enhances the gaming experience by giving away a box of juice as a prize after some challenges. The evolution of product placement facilitates a more positive perception, communication and childhood memory of brands.



Figure 1. Example of «advergame».

There is a significant difference in virtual world advertising, absent in the selected Brazilian games while, instead, it is the fifth preferred format on Spanish pages, surpassed only by superstitial and slotting fee advertisements. An example of virtual world advertising appears on the Spanish website Ciudad Pixel. As seen in Figure 2, an entire room of Ciudad Pixel has been decorated with several objects with the brand Facebook approaching the brand experience to the context where it is displayed.



Figure 2. Example of «virtual world advertising».

Both advergaming and virtual world advertising are better suited formats to the current advertising paradigm with a tendency to offer consumers a playful brand experience (Méndiz, 2010). More than information about the product or service, they are formats that allow user identification with the brand. Their absence in game spaces wastes the competences that the younger players may wish to voluntarily exercise in them.

In terms of general or specific nature of the advertisements analyzed, it is surprising the pragmatic and self-interested advertising management in these game portals, with a majority of generic advertisements, both in the Brazilian programming (74%) and the Spanish (54%) one. They are generic and not directed at children playing in them (Chart 4). The fact that very few are advertisements aimed at children playing in them (Chart 4) misses a native targeting of children practices.

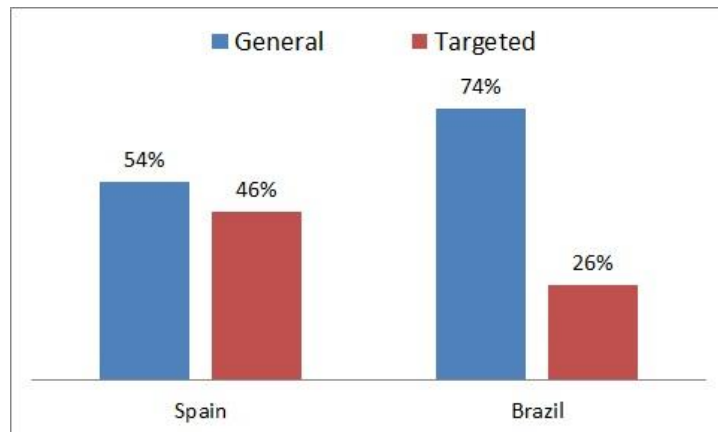


Chart 4. Generalist or targeted nature of the ads.

An example of advertising aimed at children is the type «virtual world advertising» which appears in the virtual world Habbo. Figure 4 shows that the advertisement publicizes the product Cheetos of the brand Elma Chips through vending machines and pushcarts scattered throughout the virtual world. The users of the game, through their avatar, could pick up a package of Cheetos and pretend to eat it. Buying and eating are expected actions of avatars in these games, which facilitates the advertising strategy used in the example. Because of its perspective, but also because of its shape of pet, Chester Cheetah (Figure 3) is an advertisement aimed at the users of a game. This advertising suggests and gets a more emotional, playful and direct communication with their interlocutors: children.

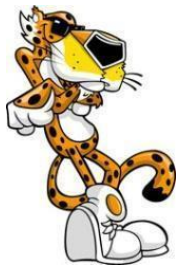


Figure 3. Cheetah pet.



Figure 4. Example of targeted advertisement.

In the playing field of gaming, interaction is still untapped by advertising. Besides, there is some correlation between the level of interaction and the appeal of an advertisement. The results in Figures 2 and 4 suggest that interaction can reach further and with more sense than the imperative and emotions given by other types of advertisements. However, Chart 5 confirms that high interactivity advertisements are not the majority on the game pages reviewed.

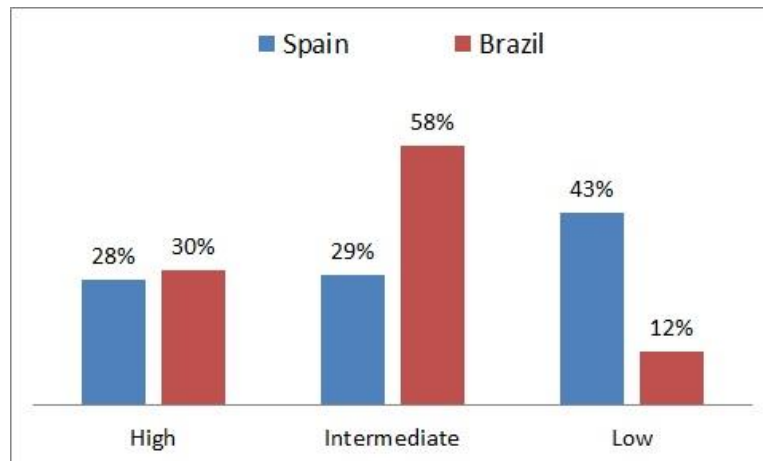


Chart 5. Level of interaction of advertisements.

It is also proved, in line with the general advertising studies cited in the introduction, that multinational advertising dominates the industry of online games. Only 4% are Spanish advertisers and 11% are Brazilian companies. Despite the dominance of international advertising in children's games in this sample, only Disney, Google and Apple coincide as global brands in both countries.

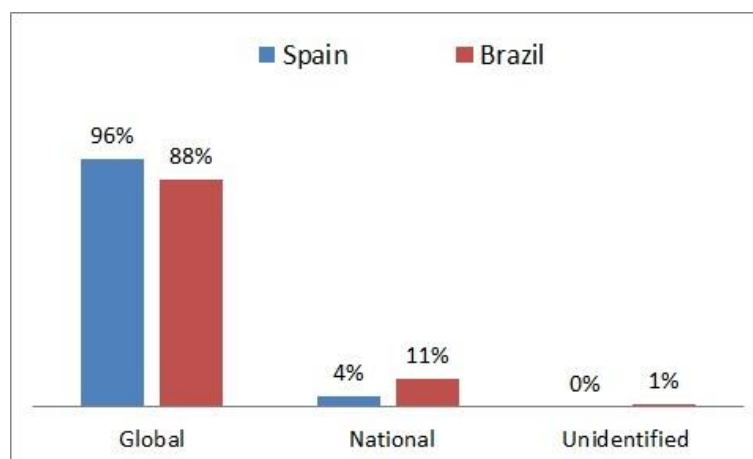


Chart 6. Global or national character of the advertised brands.

In short, Chart 6 points out that the ones who finance games chosen by girls and boys aged 9 and 11 during a gaming experience conducted in Brazil and Spain are multinational advertisers.

4. Discussion and conclusions

Gaming is the star of pre-teen children's entertainment. Beyond advertising pressure on television, children can spend more than one third of their leisure time in advertising or trying to avoid them. Few are instructive, fun and almost none is interactive. Two groups of Brazilian and Spanish girls and boys under 12 recognized gaming websites and complained about intrusion and advertising saturation (Saunders & Riverson, 2013). Having reviewed opinions and games, it is found that during that time, media children can be even more influenced no matter how much we speak of interactivity.

As their users themselves say, misdirected and inappropriately managed advertisements are an uncomfortable companion in online games for children. At least just as we are concerned about commercial content in children's television programs and series, particular attention should be gi-



ven in a professional and quick manner to advertising communication on game pages that repeatedly blocks access to the game chosen and that interrupts key moments with unwanted messages which are often out of the interest of young players.

Screens have got smaller and into our pockets, so distinguishing formats by the space and time they take represents an analogue management of digital devices. Except in the case of advergames and virtual world advertising –which could confuse younger users– there is little formal and conceptual update in the publicity use of the revised games. The views of young users of online games are of interest to publicists and managers of websites whose users are children. Interaction keeps being an unfinished business in communication, even in its form of entertaining programming. Like any other unmet user experience or demand for entertainment, ignoring opinions and suggestions of users simply because of their age results in commercial and media loss.

Beyond a presentation that is worthy or technologically appropriate for a digital context, this work has to emphasize the huge amount of advertisements and time consumed in one hour of online play. The reception of so many advertisements is very difficult and the playing time is halved because of disruptions and annoyances that in many cases do not even interest or affect them.

More elaborate and expensive games deserve further reflection, like games on virtual worlds pages due to the amount of clichés and stereotypes of consumer society² that get active around the accumulation of virtual currency. Buying items/accessories for their avatars with this money generates differentiation among users making children pre-consumers. In addition to the fact that the scenario of this type of page makes it harder for children to recognize the advertising intention of some information, kids are conditioned by the promotional aids that are being offered at different levels of those games that they clearly prefer and enjoy.

As in the case of other digital spaces for adults, it is confirmed that most of the pages from Spain and Brazil requested personal data about their child users. Giving away this data provides richer game experiences and, theoretically, it would offer a more personalized advertising. Through their privacy policy, game pages inform about whether they use user data to guide users and personalize advertising. Nevertheless, this quasi-contract comes in long texts and with the use of technical language that is difficult to understand even for an adult.

This analysis validates that the online space is rich in recreational experiences and can provide enjoyment and learning to their younger users. However, it is confirmed that they can not handle so much and so disparate advertising noise whose effects in the best of cases reduce play time and worsen their experience. Still pending more precise regulation and better ethics and corporate commitments, it is important to note that educators and parents should take a more active role in the entertainment and informal education of minors. Mediation of adults must surpass the model based on controlling the time children spend playing or the use of the content of the advertising that appears on game sites. As suggested by previous studies (García-Ruiz, Ramirez & Rodríguez-Rosell, 2014; Bujokas & Rothberg, 2014), it is essential to develop media literacy in order to establish acceptable levels of digital skills and promote the shaping of citizens with a marked critical-constructive character. Specifically, we have to anticipate the knowledge of the persuasive intention of advertisements so that children can defend themselves from the arguments of the advertisers. Even though the advertisements on game sites nowadays are still not presented in an attractive enough way to children, the trend is moving towards more interactive and attractive products whose persuasive arguments children must be able to understand and value.

Last but not least is the theoretical justification of advertising as financing and support of information and entertainment on the Internet. If advertisements are really intended to serve as the economic base of the «free» space on the Internet, they have to adjust to the times and game skills and in no way hinder or complicate the game experience. A possible quality marketing communication should not only preserve and disseminate a brand image. As communication, it should be respectful with the children that are active subjects of reception and interaction. At this stage of their educational period, perception and values are also developed. The brands that attack children's experience, no matter how visible and noticeable, may be losing reputation. Critical training is of interest to the children's environment, including advertisers and publicists. Advertising com-



munication and games that befit our times help avoid damage to players as well as loss of reputation and investment resulting from obsolete business and communication models.

Notes

¹ The definitions of the types of ads are based on the works of Brandão and Moraes (2004), Carniello, and Assis (2009), Northeast (2009) and Sebastião (2011).

² Authors like Baudrillard (1998) and Bauman (2007) argue that postmodern society is a consumer society in which the individual is seen as a consumer. In this type of society, the exercise of consumption is something that is standardized and shapes relationships between individuals.

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