

A summary of the doctoral thesis written under scientific guidance of

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**METHODS OF BRAND PLACEMENT BY ORGANIZATIONS IN
VIRTUAL WORLDS AND BRAND RECEPTION BY PLAYERS**

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Contemporary organizations develop a variety of methods to build a strong brand as a part of its business strategy. Loyal customers may be willing to pay more for the product with brand's logotype because they perceive some unique value and greater trust. The brand's logo makes it possible to stand out the company's offer from competitors. When buying products such as cars, shoes or cosmetics, consumers are often guided by the brands with which they associate specific attributes.

Over the past three decades, there has been a trend for organizations to shift their marketing spending from traditional forms of advertising towards product placement. Organizations are convinced that product placement, or often interchangeably referred to as brand placement, will reach and influence the audience response of commercial messages. An example is the Pottery Barn brand, which gained popularity after appearing in the TV series "Friends". Similarly, Coca-Cola can boast of a long cooperation with the American edition of the "Idol" program. For thirteen years, a red Coca-Cola cup stood on the jury's table, in front of the camera. Brand placement is a popular tool among many brands belonging to different product category.

With development of new technologies and Internet after 2000, product placement, which already has a rich history with cinema and television broadcasting, has gained popularity in other media. The significant size of the gaming market and the growing number of players in each age group have made games an attractive medium from the perspective of marketing communication. Virtual reality allows create experiences with a high degree of immersion, i.e. a deep sense of player's involvement. Computer games have several unique features that lack in traditional media such as television and newspapers. Because of long-shelf life of computer game, the brand is displayed repeatedly for many years. The advantage of brand placement in games is also the dynamic placement option. Dynamic placement allows you to modify the

display of a brand after the game is released. There are also risks that the placement project can be perceived as obtrusive and lead to worse brand attitude. Organizations are therefore faced with the problem of the optimal design of campaigns in computer games that will allow them to achieve the assumed goals. The available literature indicates many examples of brands that decided to conduct a campaign in games, properly designed and consistent with the brand's strategy. At the same time, the necessity to conduct research taking into account different methods, or strategies, of brand placement in computer games and the impact of these strategies on brand response has been repeatedly indicated. Therefore, the following scientific goals of this work were established:

1. Systematization of the methods of brand placement in computer games proposed in the literature
2. Exploration of brand placement methods in computer games
3. Determining the impact of particular brand placement methods on consumer learning and expected buying behavior
4. Determining the impact of selected player characteristics on the reception of brand placement in computer games.

One utilitarian goal was also assumed, which accepts specifying the recommendations for marketing managers in the field of brand placement in computer games. The following main hypothesis was formulated: *the method of brand placement in a computer game influences the cognitive result and the behavioral outcome towards the placed brand*. Due to the large number of identified methods of brand placement, the analysis included the types of placement that constituted the research gap. An important role play for methods of brand placement which based on players' willingness to introduce brand into game environment (*player dependent placement*). Player dependent placement takes place when consumer chooses which brand appeared in the game. Second meaningful type of method for brand placement is *customer investment based placement*. Customer investment based placement pertains to the player's investment aimed at the appearance of the brand inside the game, especially money, time and effort. The second main hypothesis was proposed: *more positive results in terms of brand reception can be obtained by an organization through methods involving the gaming community than placements suggesting game producer control of placement*.

The research subject required the use of primary and secondary sources of information. The study was carried out by the following steps. In the first stage, a literature review was made in order to systematize the methods of brand placement in computer games. The analysis included publications that appeared from the beginning of 2000 to the end of 2016 and were

indexed in the Ebsco and Proquest databases. The obtained set of scientific publications was selected using the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Conducted procedure allowed to illustrate the growing interest of academic in the issues of marketing in computer games. The increase of knowledge in this area is gradual and fragmentary. The conducted research is characterized by the multiplicity of issues that are still worth exploring, the partial incomparability of the obtained research results and the lack of unambiguous answers to detailed questions.

In the second stage, 20 in-depth interviews with adult computer game users who had contact with the game for at least six months before participating in the study were carried. The interviews took place according to a previously prepared scenario, in the period from August 21ST to December 5TH, 2018. Three computer games were chosen for the study: Second Life, Euro Truck Simulator 2 and The Sims. The primary goal of interview was to identify the current methods of placing brands in computer games. Second, the purpose of the interviews was also to characterize these methods and to try to divide them into typologies.

In the third stage, the author carried out a survey among computer game users. The purpose of the study was to assess the impact of the brand placement methods on brand reception by players. Data was collected with use an electronic questionnaire in June 2020, during two weeks period. The study included players who were able to indicate at least one brand that they remember from the game and played the indicated game within the last six months. Because of the significant influence of parents on children and youth amount of financial resources and purchase decisions, it was decided to set the age of 15 (the time of starting secondary school education) as a threshold to participate in the study. Finally, 550 correctly completed questionnaires were collected using the online survey technique.

Subsequently, structural equation modeling using partial least squares estimation was applied (PLS-SEM). The calculations were made in the SMART-PLS program. Exogenous variables describe the methods of brand placement in computer games, identified during in-depth interviews. The outcome of brand placement methods in computer games is consumer learning and behavioral outcome.

Based on the analysis, it can be concluded that the type of brand placement in the virtual world of a computer game is important from the point of view of the brand reception. Particular placement methods resulted in different impacts, positive or negative, on consumer learning and expected purchasing behavior. Therefore, the first main hypothesis was supported (*the method of brand placement in a computer game influences the cognitive result and the behavioral outcome towards the placed brand*).

Perceived source of brand appearance in the game by the user (player, other player, game developer) also exerted influence. The results show a positive impact of brand placement emerging on the initiative of the player as well as on the initiative of another player on consumer learning and expected purchasing behavior. Therefore, the second main hypothesis was also supported (*more positive results in terms of brand reception can be obtained by an organization through methods involving the gaming community than placements suggesting game producer control of placement*). It was confirmed that the current player is not only a consumer but also participates in the process of value co-creation. Player participates in product development, increases the quality of experience related to product use and improves its innovation. It makes the product (computer game) personalized and meets player's needs better.

The dissertation consists of an introduction, four chapters and a summary. The first two chapters cover the theoretical part of the dissertation, the next two chapters constitutes the research part. The dissertation is ended with a final conclusions and recommendation for further research.

The first chapter presents brand placement in virtual worlds of computer games as a form of marketing communication. Attention was paid to the importance of the brand in managing the organization, brand placement and computer games as a form of marketing communication. The last part of the chapter characterizes the reception of marketing messages featured in virtual worlds of computer games.

The second chapter is devoted to the methods of brand placement in computer games. It presented the procedure and the results of a systematic literature review. A research gap was identified, which is the impact of brand placement methods in computer games on brand reception by players. At the end of the chapter, the methods of brand placement in computer games, which were discussed in the analyzed scientific publications, were summarized.

The third chapter contains the results of the conducted qualitative research. First, the author presented project of direct research. Then the sample and the results of in-depth interviews were characterized.

The fourth chapter is devoted to brand placement in computer games from the perspective of quantitative research. This chapter begins with a quantitative research project. Then, the process of constructing a research model is showed. The measurement and structural model was assessed. Finally, the research's hypotheses were tested.

The dissertation ends with a summary and conclusions for further research. There are also made recommendations for marketing managers on brand placement in computer games. In this part, the degree of achievement of the objectives of this dissertation was also verified.