

# EFFECT OF ADVERGAMES ON CHILDREN: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

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**Abstract** *The modern business landscape is marked by the digital culture. For companies trying to place their products on this digital plane, electronic games have become an extremely important platform. One of the innovative techniques of electronic marketing is commonly known as 'advergaming'. Advergaming is a mixture of advertisement and entertainment that takes the form of video games. It is primarily used by companies to target children and adolescents. Effective thematic presentations are added in the game content to disseminate information about the brand/product within the virtual gaming world. However, the ethical angle of marketing to children through advergaming has become debatable, as it has blurred the differences between commercial and entertainment content. Therefore, the present study seeks to examine the ethical concerns involved in advergaming. The study investigates the marketing practices of some of the gaming websites currently popular with young Indian consumers. The main aim of the study is to undertake a situation analysis and document the knowledge gaps in issues related to unethical or misleading content of advergaming. The study also attempts to provide an overview of the codes currently in place to regulate online advertising in India.*

**Keywords** *Digital Advertising and Marketing, Advergaming, Ethics, Children, Media Literacy*

## INTRODUCTION

The modern business landscape is marked by the digital culture. The introduction of tele-communications and computer technology into business processes has given birth to a new business organizational system called 'e-commerce'. E-commerce provides a virtual platform where sellers and buyers can come in contact for sale and purchase of goods and services. In this era of globalization, e-commerce has emerged as the boundary-less trade medium and offers a wide range of commercial transactions such as online shopping websites for retail sales (B2C); online marketplaces for business-to-business (B2B) or consumer-to-consumer (C2C) sales; business-to-business electronic data interchange (EDI); and a new marketing environment called 'digital marketing'. Digital marketing practices encompasses various online advertisement methods such as displayed banners, pop-up ads, floating ads, as well as online games that incorporate marketing content and are commonly known as 'advergaming'. Advergaming is a new form of digital marketing technique that incorporates advertisement and entertainment to disseminate information about the brand/product within the virtual gaming world.

## ADVERGAMES

The word 'advergaming' was first coined in 2000 by Anthony Giallourakis, who also created [www.advergaming.com](http://www.advergaming.com) services. It has now become a central part of many digital advertising and marketing initiatives. In fact, marketers have been using the concept of in-game advertising since the 1980s, when KoolAid and Pepsi developed Atari 2600 games

for promotion of their products. Basically, advergaming is a digital marketing technique that implants marketing content into the games, so that the game can act as a marketing tool for corporate websites, typically featuring brands and product placement. It could be perceived as a game established on the attributes of the brand (Kanth, 2010).

Further, the evolution of advergaming has been best described by Juul (2010). The author elucidated a three-step revolutionary process by which digital games have become part of people's daily routines. In the first step, the author entitled digital games as casual games, as these games could be played anytime and anywhere through wireless devices. Secondly, casual games do not require players to spend hours to get anywhere in a game; for example, a player who is chatting with a friend on any social website can leave the conversation for a moment to enter any level of the game. Finally, casual games also "fit the social contexts in which people interact with each other at a digital platform". Therefore, a digital game that brings together these three characteristics is appealing not only to players, but also to marketers who find in them an attractive medium to convey advertising messages without disturbing consumers.

Also, in terms of user connectivity, advergaming generate a high rate of interaction. An advergaming is built around a message that a particular brand wants to convey to the audience. The game usually exhibits the use of a product and also correlates the product with an activity or a lifestyle (Gurau, 2008). Effective thematic demonstrations are added in the game content, and players (usually children or young adults) take the role of a 'character' in completing certain levels of the game. The brand is usually the hero of the game and the consumer plays it to have fun. In order to increase

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the interest of players, some advergaming promise gifts, prizes, or promotional incentives to the best scorer(s). By the end of the activity, the brand acquires better proximity with the player, thereby gaining a mind share.

## ONLINE GAMING TRENDS IN INDIA

In India, while the origin of online gaming eventuated with the advent of the Internet, it was in the year 2007 that the industry started to grow. The trend was started early by companies like Zapak and Contests2Win, and has been easily adopted by the younger generation. The growing popularity of advergaming caught the attention of venture capitalists, and project partnership was extended to start operations in this new area. For example, in 2007, Kreed Games received approximately USD 10 million financing from IDG Venture India and Soft Bank China. In 2011, another Games2win start-up received USD 5 million financial backing from Clearstone Venture Partners and the Silicon Valley Bank Financial Group.

Although this is a relatively new phenomenon, the popularity of advergaming has increased rapidly, especially among youngsters. Advergaming offered a way to get to those 'hard-to-reach' younger markets by entering their worlds through the games they play. According to a recent report published by Internet & Mobile Association of India (IAMAI) and IMRB International (2010), online 'gamers' constitute 41.2% of the total active Internet users in India. The report highlighted that the number of online gamers in India has increased from 2.8 million in 2007 to 7.2 million in 2008. The study also indicated that there has been a significant shift in demographics of gamers. The proportion of online gaming by college-going students accounts for almost 50% of the gaming users, along with school-going children. This shift of young consumers' orientation toward the Internet and online gaming activities has stimulated advertising agencies toward advergaming. As the young consumers are connected onto gaming websites a lot and are also the most targeted group among retailers, advergaming seems to be the perfect option for marketers to capture their attention in a way that is recognized by them.

Although the advergaming technique is exceptionally selective and increasingly effective, there is a growing concern over their role in persuading an incredibly sensitive audience in the age group of 11-25 years. Advergaming are often targeted at children, who at their tender age cannot differentiate between advertising and other content. In fact, children are unable to understand the concept or persuasion at the developmental stages in their lives. Advertisers may use advergaming to encourage children to consume junk food, persuade them to revisit the websites, and attract them with animated spoken characters or avatars. Dorfman et al. (2009) found that advergaming are extensively used for marketing

fast food, snack food, and processed food products that are usually high in salt, sugar, and fat content. Lee, Choi et al. (2009) have also reported that there are several food brands that use popular advergaming to market their products. This implies that children who play advergaming can be easily exposed to the alluring market of unhealthy foods.

Further, Nairn and Dew (2007) have observed that a broad range of products and services that have been advertised on gaming sites such as financial services, cars and many of the clothing, jewelry and cosmetics products, dating services, cosmetic surgery, and so on, are not only irrelevant, but also inappropriate for children. The authors advocated that as the reasoning abilities of children are limited, the narrative persuasion of advergaming and its intent would impact them to a greater level. Therefore, the present study seeks to examine the ethical concerns involved in advergaming. The study investigates the marketing practices of some of the gaming websites currently popular with young Indian consumers. The main aim of the study is to undertake a situation analysis and document the knowledge gaps in issues related to unethical or misleading content of advergaming. The study also attempts to provide an overview of the codes currently in place to regulate online advertising in India. The following objectives have been formulated for the study.

## OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To understand the concept of advertising through advergaming.
- To analyze the impact of advergaming on young children.
- To examine the ethical concerns involved in advergaming pertaining to children and adolescents.
- To propose moral considerations for designing and promoting advergaming for children and adolescents.
- To provide an overview of the regulatory framework of online advertisement in India.

## ADVERTISEMENT THROUGH 'ADVERGAMES'

Video game advertising has evolved over the years. Conventional advergaming is about designing a whole game around promoting a brand or product, while in-game advertising involves placing real-world marketing on pre-existing computer consoles and games, usually in the form of billboards, posters, and sponsorship signs in sports and racing games (Schwarz, 2005). Other forms of advergaming also include 'event sponsorship', which consists in offering consumers tickets for real events via the game, as well as 'adverworld', which are interactive worlds designed to inform consumers of their products. Many web portals have

sought to design their online PC gaming activities into four models: on-site advertising, revenues generation by offline activities in cyber cafes and subscription models, where users purchase the product or make periodic payments to access the games.

In fact, many brands use in-game advertisement to open up toward their consumers. The different companies that have preferred this form of advertising include food products, apparels, electronics and home appliances, as well as banks, recruitment companies, and politicians. In many cases, games are also used because of the considerable increase in user time spent on the product page. Advertising through an advergame is not limited by time. Ipe (2008) found that the average time spent by a player in an advergame is seven to 30 minutes. This time spent is much longer than watching a traditional form of advertisement, which takes about thirty seconds. This extended period helps in creating a higher brand recall, product preference and/or product request (Smith & Just, 2009). In comparison to other forms of advertising, games stimulate interaction with customers. Players are engrossed in performing specific tasks for which points are awarded to them. The high level of focus and attention during the game make the player memorize the advertisement that appears in the game. Although advergames involve a high level of user engagement, it does not interrupt the game play; it is an element that gives it realism and allows for prolonged contact with the brand. It can be included in different places such as Game loader, Game Menu, Scoreboard, and so on. The use of in-game ranking requires a player to register. This makes it an effective tool for collecting demographic profiles of users.

The success of an advergame can be easily measured because the prospect's data and the contact information are obtained from the registration; brands can easily record digital information such as the total hours of game play and the number of times a game was suggested to someone. It can therefore be assumed that advergames are a great marketing opportunity for companies that want to spread branded content exuberantly across a wide range of audiences.

According to Chen and Ringel (2001), brand messages can be transformed into advergames by associative, illustrative, and demonstrative methods. Associative advergames "support brand awareness by the lifestyle association". Such games intermittently put a product or logo in a game as a background or hidden advertisement. For example, in India, gaming portal Zapak.com introduced 'Change the Game', a reality-based advertisement for Pepsi. Associative advergaming allows the company to promote its product to the people by broadcasting it in the background of the game. It appears that many consumers appreciate this type of advergame because they are able to play an online game without being bombarded with advertising throughout the play.

The second type of advergames is illustrative. An illustrative advergame prominently highlights the product in the game. It adds extra appeal to a younger, more vulnerable audience. The third type of advergame is 'demonstrative advergame'. This type of advergame reinforce messages efficiently by presenting the product in its natural context and inviting the consumers to connect with it. Demo games are very useful for allowing a consumer to try a product on the Internet before buying it. This type of advergame will be one of the last steps leading to the purchase of a product by a customer.

## IMPACT OF ADVERGAMES ON YOUNG CHILDREN

Young children are prime targets for marketers nowadays. They represent an important demographic as they influence the purchasing decisions of their parents and are the adult consumers of the future. As a result, there is now a whole segment of the marketing industry devoted to figuring out how to sell things to children. Consequently, with the advent of digital marketing, advertisers are adopting advergames as a new advertising venue.

In fact, children were first identified as a target market in the 1960s, and the concept has continued to increase in its popularity. According to YTV Kids and Tweens Report (2008), children shape the buying pattern of their families. From breakfast choices to vacation choices, computer or software purchases, and clothing purchases to family entertainment choices, they exert tremendous power over the family buying process. Thus, to influence children is to influence the entire family's purchase decisions.

Till date there is an ample amount of research that signifies how specific features of advergames influence desired advertising outcomes. Most of the studies involve content analysis (Moore, 2006) of advergames, examine the effects of advergames on children (Mallinckrodt & Mizerski, 2007), or consider social policy implication (Villafranco & Zeltzer, 2006). Therefore, to identify the persuasive impact of advergames on young children's mind, a review of literature has been conducted so as to figure out several advertisement dimensions involved in the digital games.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The advergames '2002 America's Army' and '2007 J2O' are two of the best-known examples of advergames used for achieving marketing goals (Edery & Mollick, 2009; Marolf, 2007). In fact, 'America's Army' advergame was explicitly used as a recruitment tool aimed at young teenagers. In 1999, the soldier recruitment numbers was at its lowest in the United States of America. In response to this, the US Congress decided to take some aggressive and innovative steps. The US Defence Department augmented recruitment

budgets to USD 2.2 billion a year. Out of this initiative, an 'America's Army' advergaming was designed to help the military reach America's youth (Marolf, 2007). The game has two parts: 'Soldiers: Empower Yourself', a role-play segment that infuses 'army values', and the most violent, but popular part, the 'Operations: Defending Freedom'. As a result of this, it was found that in April 2006, almost seven million users were registered on [www.americasarmy.com](http://www.americasarmy.com) as players. Because of this influencing appeal, the game won the Advergaming of the Year Award (2005) at Digital Entertainment and Media Awards of Excellence (Marolf, 2007). Therefore, it could be concluded that the emergence of the America's Army project as a simulation of war is justifiable. This fact is also supported by (Nichols, 2010) who refers to video games, as an attempt to move beyond entertainment into the realm of training and education, as 'serious games'.

Furthermore, in an attempt to provide a theoretical framework on the impact of advergaming on players' attitudes and behavior, Gurau (2008) studied the process of 'player-advergaming' interaction by combining the concept of the state of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991) with the AIDA model. The author identified the potential mechanisms of attitudinal and behavioral change. The research showed a clear statistical relation between the capacity of the advergaming to induce the state of flow, and a change in the buying behavior of players.

Mallinckrodt and Mizerski (2007) also studied the behavior of children playing the advergaming 'Fruit Loop Toss'. The researchers found that there is an increase in brand preference by those children. However, the results of the post-survey revealed that advergaming's claim that Fruit Loops are better than normal fruit was ineffective. The authors concluded that most advergaming could increase brand awareness, but the games that actually extend tele-presence could increase brand loyalty. In a recent study by Peters (2008) on content analysis of advergaming, it has been found that when brands are centrally placed in advergaming in line with the game content, it results in an improvement in the players' memory, and their attitude toward the brand tends to be more positive as well. This fact is also supported by Waiguny et al. (2012), who advocated that when children feel that they are being challenged by the game – 'in the flow' – they present better attitudes concerning the advertised brand.

In addition, Terlutter and Capella (2013) showed that advergaming had the highest level of integrated advertising. The positive effect associated with the entertaining aspect of the game is ultimately transferred for promotion of the brand beyond conscious control of young children, thereby influencing their food choices without considering the unhealthy content of the food. Hernandez and Chapa (2010) concluded that the food industry is among the top three leading industries for advergaming's promotion strategy. In support of this, Buijzen et al. (2010) also advocated that

children's cognitive resources are allocated largely to the game they are playing, and food cues thus become elaborated on an automatic level, directly leading to physiological and psychological reactions.

Further, in 2009, Lee et al. (2009) conducted content analysis of advergaming for 142 food products in the USA. The researchers found that 83% of the food advertised to children through advergaming is of poor nutritional quality. Dias and Agante (2011) also conducted a content analysis study in Portugal with 234 children ranging from seven to nine years. The results of the study revealed that children who played an advergaming promoting fruits and vegetables were much more likely to choose fruits and vegetables and express a preference for them, than children playing an advergaming displaying cookies and treats.

From the review of various studies, it could be concluded that advergaming can persuade young children at a subconscious and emotional level, and could change children's behavior without their conscious awareness. Strong brands such as Coca-Cola, Burger King, and other major cereal companies are known for their efforts to provide games on their websites in order to attract a younger audience. In fact, Burger King advergaming, indicate an increase of 40% in Burger King's profits (Cauberghe & Pelsmacker, 2010). The point of concern here is that these advergaming are promoting less healthy food options and are intending to change the consumption pattern of young children. In addition to their persuasive impact, many researchers and regulators have advocated that advergaming are also responsible for exploiting a child's relationship with parents and peers. Since children may view as many as 40,000 commercials a year (Austin & Reed, 2009), it is not possible for parents to satisfy every demand for the advertised products. As a consequence, parental refusal to a child's purchase demand can lead to family conflicts and cause tension in family relationships. Davidson (2003) quoted that children's exposure to offensive products, such as gambling, alcohol or pornography are very inappropriate. All these issues raise an ethical concern, both from a marketing standpoint as well as the consumers' health point of view, as the target market for advergaming are mostly young children.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research methodology for this study involves a combination of quantitative (validation) and qualitative (inquiry) research methods. The target population for this research is the parents of children who play advergaming. A survey was conducted among parents whose children were exposed to advergaming, from three different schools in the Jammu region, in the state of Jammu and Kashmir, India. Data was collected through the random sampling technique by employing a structured questionnaire. The sample consisted

of 200 respondents. The questionnaire contained a total of 15 statements, out of which six were descriptive in nature, providing the demographic profile of respondents and nine were designed by employing the five-point Likert scale to map the general perspective of parents regarding the impact of advergaming on their children. The respondents were also asked to provide a written rationale for their choices. This written information helped the researcher to better interpret the numerical levels of the Likert scale.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

The result of the survey indicates that out of a total of 200 children, 150 teens (75%) played video games. 20% of the gamers were girls (30); female gamers were found to be playing an average of three hours per week. Male gamers (120) played an average of five hours per week.

With respect to game content, about 58% play violent games, 12% prefer to play sports games, 24% have a preference for racing or driving games, 3% play puzzle games, and three per cent prefer to play rhythm games. The survey also revealed that over 90% of the children between the ages of 8 and 14

go online to play games. The social networking games are probably a big part of their gaming habits. Above 90% of parents say that most of the video games are connected to the Internet, which allows children and adolescents to play online with unknown adults.

The responses to the Likert scale statements have been presented in Table 1. As indicated in Table 1, about 83% of respondents felt that the adverts on video games have an impact on children. Most of the parents felt that advergaming of famous characters or celebrities, food and beverage brands (Hanuman, Chota Bheem or Barbie dolls, Angry Birds, KFC, and so on) influence children's shopping and eating preferences. These responses confirm the research findings of Acuffand and Reiher, 1997, and Guber and Berry, 1993, who revealed that advergaming could persuade children to buy the products; and advergaming could also help with the development of critical evaluation and consumption skills.

With regard to the second indicator, that is, whether advergaming are recognizable as being targeted at children and adolescents, about 78% of the respondents found advergaming to be targeted at children. In fact, these games are available on online gaming sites for children and teens.

**Table 1: Responses of the Parents (Likert Scale Levels)**

Sr. No.	Indicator	Response as Per the Five-Level Likert Scale				
		Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	Adverts on video games have an impact on children.	68	57	11	4	10
2	Advergaming are clearly recognizable as being targeted at children and adolescents.	45	72	15	6	12
3	Advergaming show situations which are unsafe for children.	56	74	13	4	3
4	Advergaming show situations which could result in physical, mental, or moral harm.	73	46	15	7	9
5	Advergaming are often misleading.	84	37	7	12	10
6	Advergaming contain violent or inappropriate material.	52	67	11	13	7
7	Advergaming promote unhealthy eating habits.	85	49	3	11	2
8	Children demand food products that are advertised with game content.	83	50	5	5	7
9	Children insist on buying products/brands advertised in digital games.	91	52	nil	6	1

With regard to the third indicator, about 86% of respondents believed that advergaming do contain unsafe content for kids. 79% felt that advergaming contain situations which could result in physical, mental, or moral harm. It has been found that some of the games present or allow many dangerous situations, such as jumping from tall buildings, fighting with great aggression, impetuous driving, and being exposed to alcohol or tobacco.

80% of the respondents felt that advergaming are often misleading, and often contain violent or inappropriate

material as well. The respondents found that many action-oriented games, such as Mini Militia Doodle Army: 2, contain scenes of violence and bloodshed. The games also contain inappropriate words like 'committed suicide'.

Further, with regard to unhealthy food habits promoted by the advergaming, about 89% of the respondents agreed that advergaming promote unhealthy eating habits in young children; 95% felt that the children demand food products that are advertised in the games. In fact, observing the market for children's products nowadays, there are at least

20 stores across the country that sell Chota Bheem clothing, school kits, stationery, apparel, and accessories. Twelve of those stores are franchises, and the rest are company-owned and operated. Even beverage brands like Pepsi use 'Bheem' to sell Notty, its energy drink for children. Usha Fans uses 'Bheem' to launch a new range of ceiling fans. Bheem *ladoos*, which are a source of strength for Bheem, have become a favorite sweet of Indian children.

In fact, various research studies (Panic et al., 2013) have already shown that advergaming can generate more positive brand attitudes and purchase demands among children than other conventional formats. However, new advertising formats may also increase the inadvertent effects on children, such as health issues and shaping their personality to more materialistic values. This is because children do not fully understand the motive behind these formats when they watch them, which leads to their approval and fondness of such advertisements. From the results of the survey, it is recognized that digital media has both positive and negative effects on young consumers. The negative effects are potentially damaging, leading to serious complications like obesity, sexual initiation, aggression, and social isolation. However, if the game content is designed to inculcate good habits and moral values in children, along with the promotion of the product, then advergaming could become one of the most significant tools for marketers. The fundamental goal is to reach the youth with positive messaging. Therefore, it is required to develop a regulatory framework for the content of advergaming or digital advertisement targeted at children, which may lead to the institutionalization of media regulation and adoption of certain forms of media censorship. With this objective, the present study further attempts to analyze the current context and document the knowledge gaps in issues resulting from digital advertisement in India, and recommend a clear way forward on how to address the issues within the framework of Indian law.

## REGULATING ADVERGAMES

Advertisements targeting children are often the subject of debate, especially the former's alleged influence on children. The ethical concern that children are particularly prone to being exploited and victimized by marketers is widely accepted internationally. The review of marketing regulations in 2004 showed that a majority of countries had ethical rules that advertising should not "exploit the credulity of children" or "harm them". This widespread recognition that young people need special protection has been reflected in international texts ranging from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child to the House of Commons Code of Practice on Advertising. The laws concerning such advertisements have largely evolved in recent years. In most countries, advertising targeting children is framed by a mix of legislation and advertising

self-regulation.

In India, the advertising market as a whole is regulated and controlled by a non-statutory body – the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI). The ASCI Code aims to protect the legitimate interests of consumers by regulating false, misleading, and inadmissible advertising on television, radio, and the Internet by advertisers, media, and advertising agencies. Members of ASCI are allowed to mold the course of self-regulation and participate in the production of healthy, effective advertising. Further, depending on the nature of the grievances, the power to regulate advertisements has been exercised by a vast variety of authorities, including the courts, Central and State Governments, tribunals, or the police. In addition to these authorities, online advertisement and website content, including social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter, must comply with a range of marketing, consumer, privacy, and contract laws. Online advertisers should comply with ASCI, the Indian Penal Code, the Information Technology Act, 2000, and other applicable laws. For this purpose, the Information Technology Act was amended in 2011.

However, in the context of advergaming, which integrate game content with advertising, the most important question is which agency should be involved in its regulation. The hybridized nature of advergaming highlights the need for comparable coordination of government legislations and self-regulatory organizations for its effective monitoring.

Yet another effective way of protecting children from the undesired effects of modern media practices is to provide the family control via media literacy education programs. In a study about the effectiveness of media literacy trainings in reducing media violence, Byrne (2009) has stated that when children participated in a cognitive activity after receiving media literacy intervention, they devoted much more attention to and pondered more deeply about the concepts they were learning in the lesson. This resulted in an immediate reduction in a willingness to use aggression after exposure to violent media. However, the same exact lesson without the cognitive activity led to an increase in a willingness to use aggression (i.e., a boomerang effect).

Thus, the success of media literacy education of families depends on the power of communication between parents and children. One of the most important steps in this education is to set some rules about limiting the time the children spend watching TV or playing video games. Children's use of media should be limited to one to two hours a day, after they finish their homework and/or sport activities. Parents should keep a watch on their children to check what they are watching on electronic media so as to teach them how to interpret the media messages or content of commercials. Parental supervision during cartoons and movies enables children to distinguish between reality and fantasy.

## CONCLUSION

From the above discussion, it could be concluded that advergames is one of the advantageous and unique methods of marketing communication, as it targets a wide range of audience and has an immense endorsement potential. However, instead of economic benefits, there are certain social and ethical issues associated with advergames, particularly when they are targeted at young children. The use of advergames should be regulated in order to ensure honesty and integrity. Regulations should be established in terms of content. Disclaimers should be present on sites featuring advergames.

Although self-regulation and media literacy are significant, and potential steps that have been taken to protect young minds against the misleading impacts of such digital marketing techniques, yet in a country like India, government mechanisms to monitor, control, and check the content and messages of such advergames should be in place.

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