

Gamers don't notice the ads when they're busy killing

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When people playing violent video games focus on killing and maiming, they don't often remember the corporate brands they see along the way.

That's the conclusion of a new study that is one of the first to look at whether product placements in video games are an effective form of advertising.

Results showed that gamers who played with nonviolent goals recalled 51 percent more brands shown inside the game than did those playing the exact same game with violent goals.

"Killing characters in video games may be fun for players, but it appears to be bad for business," said Brad Bushman, co-author of the study and professor of communication and psychology at The Ohio State University.

The problem is that when there is killing and maiming in a video game, players notice little else - including corporate brands.

"People are hard-wired to pay attention to violence. It has survival value," said co-author Robert Lull, a graduate of Ohio State who is now a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Pennsylvania.

"Violence is an emotional cue that dominates memory, leaving little capacity for more peripheral cues like brand names."

The study is published online in the journal *Psychology of Popular Media Culture* and will appear in a future print edition. Other co-authors were Bryan Gibson, professor of psychology at Central Michigan University; and Carlos Cruz, a PhD graduate of Ohio State.

While a variety of studies have found that people are less likely to remember brands linked to violent media content, almost all of those studies looked at television and print media.

"We really haven't had much research looking at video games, which are an increasingly popular form of entertainment," Bushman said.

The study involved two experiments. In the first, 154 college students played the video game *The Getaway*. In the game, they drove cars through a city while real brands - including McDonald's and Starbucks - appeared on storefronts along the way.

"It is a subtle form of product placement," Gibson said. "The brands themselves don't play a role in the game and they can be missed if the players aren't paying attention."

Half the players were told to play the game violently: Their instructions were to kill as many people in the game as possible, including by running them over or shooting them. The other half had nonviolent aims: They were told to drive as fast as possible, but to avoid hitting pedestrians.

Afterward, all players were given a pop quiz that they weren't expecting. They were asked to list as many of the 16 brands that appeared in the game as they could recall.

Results showed that those participants who played nonviolently recalled 51 percent more brands than did those who played violently.

Participants were also given a second type of memory test, in which they were given a list of 32 brand names and asked which ones of them had appeared in the game.

In this test, those who played nonviolently correctly recognized 18 percent more brands than did those who played violently.

But the brands in this study were all on the periphery of the game and could easily be missed. What would happen if the brands were much more prominent? And could players remember brands they had never heard of before?

In a second study, 102 [college students](#) played the [video game](#) Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas. In this case, they all drove taxis that were modified to show one of four fictional brands advertised on both sides of the car and the rear bumper.

A third-person perspective was used so that the brands were constantly visible to players throughout the game.

As in the first study, some participants were told to play the game violently while others were told to just drive around the city.

In this study, only 12 percent of participants who were driving violently recalled the brand name on their taxi, compared to 20 percent who were driving nonviolently.

Of those who played violently, only 41 percent could recognize the fake brand that was on their taxi when given a list of four possible [brand names](#). But 61 percent of those who played nonviolently could pick out the [brand](#) on their taxi from the list.

"Video game violence impaired the memory for brands in both of our

studies," Bushman said. "If they were driving through the streets in a violent way, they remembered less of the brands they saw along the way."

Bushman said the implications for companies are clear.

"Advertisers should carefully consider whether to place their products in [violent video games](#) where they are less likely to be remembered," he said.

Provided by The Ohio State University

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