Gamified Brand Building

Brand Empowerment in Video Games

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Abstract

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Purpose: To explore the phenomenon of brand building in digital media, specifically within online video games. The overall aim of this paper is to gain insights from the perspective of the corporations and the users so as to advance the understanding of brand communications that strengthen corporate brand building efforts within video games. We achieved our purpose by exploring the components contributing to the strategic planning of brand communications ultimately leading to building strong brands in video games. The research questions we used to fulfill our purpose were:

- *What is in-game brand building?*
- *How does in-game brand building happen?*
- *Why use in-game brand building?*

Methodology: A qualitative multiple case study supported by the journalistic method proposed by Pöttker (2003) which leads to a cross-case analysis approach proposed by Eisenhardt (1989) resulting in the development of a framework. The cases of the companies represent four distinct types of in-game advertising (IGA): Advergames, Co-branded Skins, Advertising Boards and Imitation branded skins. We employed a multi-method approach to collect empirical data for the multiple case studies.

Theoretical perspective: We introduce a new conceptual framework that was developed grounded in the realms of video games, brand building, identity and integrated corporate communications.

Empirical data: We conducted focus groups that consisted of 13 participants to obtain data from the gamer perspective as well as a literature review to obtain data about the 4 corporations' IGA efforts so as to gain insights about in-game brand building, Balenciaga, Louis Vuitton, Ferrari and Nissin Foods.

Conclusion: Brand building is an attractive option for corporations because people are accepting advertisements in games more so than traditional and native. Based on our findings, gamers are annoyed by certain types of communications. However, a surprising discovery is that gamers expect brands to appear in video games contributing to the realism component needed to fully immerse themselves in the world of video games. It is of utmost importance for brand managers to adapt their in-game communication strategies to the video game environment in order to create an immersive value adding experience for the audience. To assist brand managers in their brand building path within video games we introduce a new framework that provides the necessary guidance resulting in outstanding results for everyone involved.

Acknowledgements

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

As the landscape of advertising is rapidly evolving, the unique nature of video game environments creates opportunities for corporations to build strong brands (Ghosh, Sreejesh and Dwivedi, 2022; Oh, Kim & Choo, 2023). With advertisers continuously searching for new and impactful ways to communicate their messages, entertainment media, particularly digital video games have provided advertisers with a platform to promote brands (Peters and Leshner, 2013). Corporations in today's competitive environment should build a strong brand to survive in this competitive environment, but building that brand requires a focus on growing awareness, trust and reach. Brand building involves strategically marketing your brand to connect with the audience, whether it's through increasing awareness, promoting products, or fostering a meaningful relationship in the consumers' everyday lives (Barwise, 2014). Kapferer (1997) highlights that in the eyes of consumers, a brand serves an economic function, but also derives from a brand's worth from its capacity to acquire an exclusive, favorable, and recognizable meaning in the minds of a significant portion of the consumers. Success in today's market, where distinction is crucial, lies on the brand effective brand communication strategies, which involve carefully planning strategies to be able to express a company's identity, values, and messages (Ivens & Valta, 2012). Using digital platforms offers a modern way to organize such communication activities.

Using digital platforms goes beyond the traditional challenges and offers previously unknown opportunities for brand engagement, particularly within the realm of video games. Video games' immersive and interactive nature has allowed advertising to integrate seamlessly into the gaming experience (Alina, 2012). Online video gaming has attracted people of all ages to online gaming due to its popularity as a type of entertainment (Abbasi, Rehman, Hussain, Ting, & Islam, 2021; Chaney, Lin & Chaney, 2018), allowing brands to reach a large audience (Oh et al., 2023). The majority of gamers, particularly between the age of 18 to 39, actively engage in online gaming (Howarth, 2024). According to Statista (2024), the video game market worldwide is expected to reach US$283. 30bn in 2024 in revenue, thereby making it a valuable market that attracts a large audience and presents numerous opportunities for managers from different industries. Scholars such as Liu-Thompkins (2019) and Terlutter and Capella (2013) acknowledge the possibility that the advertising industry will pay more attention to the viability of IGAs, with studies showing its potential to increase awareness and promoting features. This potential can be achieved through In-game advertising (IGA) which is when brands are placed in existing games (Herrewijn, 2015). IGA aims to raise brand and product recognition and promote it to the intended consumer base (Cicchirillo & Mabry, 2016).

As digital video games have emerged as a prominent platform for brand promotion, researchers are increasingly exploring the broader implications. The immersive and interactive nature of online gaming mirrors the characteristics of what may become the next big thing in digital engagement - the metaverse (Koster, 2023; Mohammed, Aljanabi & Gadekallu, 2024). Comprehending brand engagement in gaming settings can thus offer insightful information on how similar principles could be applied within the evolving landscape of the metaverse. Metaverse is the evolution of the internet, it allows for interaction, unlike anything virtual reality could have offered before. Metaverse can be defined as "a massively scaled and interoperable network of real-time rendered three-dimensional (3D) virtual worlds that can be experienced synchronously and persistently by an effectively unlimited number of users with an individual sense of presence, and with continuity of data, such as identity, history, entitlements, objects, communications and payments" (Ball, 2022).

Metaverse is a multi-virtual reality environment in a sense which is a new innovation with much uncertainty about its evolution and its implications for marketing and brand managers (Koster, 2023; Mohammed et al., 2024). It could become a fully immersive channel that managers and consumers can mutually benefit from. The Metaverse offers brands promotion opportunities, allowing consumers to experience them in new ways, and enables companies to extend their brand in new fascinating ways that can revolutionize their business operations and maximize profit (Koster, 2023; Mohammed et al., 2024). Metaverse marketing opportunities are estimated to yield a staggering $3 trillion dollar market share by 2030 according to the calculations by McKinsey and Company (2023). It is therefore crucial for companies to understand how brands can benefit from and evolve in Metaverse. Brand communications in the Metaverse are immersive, allowing for communities to flourish, both brand-owned as well as user-owned, which benefits the brand greatly (Miao, Kozlenkova, Wang & Xie, 2022). At the same time, brands have the potential to grow within the Metaverse (Black & Veloutsou, 2017; Bourlakis & Papagiannidis, 2009; Chevtchouk & Veloutsou, 2021) because of the character of a brand that is intangible, can be defined by looking at the financial part as well as the emotional part (Kapferer, 2012). Because the metaverse is a recent technological advancement in the landscape of digital media their possibilities to investigate and explore the metaverse capabilities for brand building are limited, however the video games provide a base for future research of brand building in the metaverse due to the immersive nature of the video game world (Koster, 2023; Mohammed et al., 2024; Oh et al., 2023).

1.2   Problematization

There has been a lot of research within brand building. Brand building in existing literature has been explored from the product and service brand identity perspective (Kapferer, 2012; Roper & Fill, 2012), from a corporate brand identity (Urde; 2024) and the brand equity perspective (Keller, 1998; Aaker, 1996). However, there has not been enough research regarding the corporate brand building in video games that focus on the corporation behind the IGA efforts which according to Urde (2024) is at the heart, a component central to sustaining the life of the organization by driving its core essence throughout the organization. The corporate brand is a promise that enhances the image of their products, as well as evokes a sense of trust inside and out of the organization among the customers and non-customer stakeholders (Urde, 2024). By doing so they create meaningful relationships with their customers by enabling them to bond with the brand, developing a sense of attachment resulting in a sense of self-expression (Keller & Swaminathan, 2020). The sense of self-expression the corporations evoke in the customers is a manifestation of their self-identity that translates to behavioral patterns and feelings they experience (Higgins, 1998). The promise the corporate brand makes is conveyed through their marketing communication efforts (Balmer, 2023; Urde, 2024; Kapferer, 2012).

According to Balmer (2023) is crucial to further investigate from a strategic perspective for the corporation. New technologies and mediums affect the landscape of brand communications because they transformed the way corporations interact with their stakeholders (Balmer, 2023; Keller, 2009). The technological innovations available today allow for new communication channels and mediums to be established which creates a need to further explore brand communications in the digital world (Kannan & Li, 2017). Video games are one of the technological advancements that manage to not only entertain the gamers but also communicate ideas and values that affect their behavior (Fraser et al., 2023; Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith, Tosca, 2024); Jin, 2011), solidifying them as an attractive medium for brand building in the modern world (Oh et al., 2023). Existing literature focus on the effects of certain IGA forms in the customer purchase intentions (Anubha & Jain, 2022; Hussain, Islam & Rehman, 2022), on brand attitude (Vashisht & Chauhan, 2017; Ingendahl et al., 2022; Glass, 2007) and brand acceptance (Vashisht, 2019). Prior research has not explored to our knowledge holistically how brand building in the digital era of video games works and the different forms of IGA they can employ.

There is a substantial lack in the existing literature that explores the factors that contribute to successful corporate brand building efforts that expand on the digital realm of video games by leveraging their corporate brand identity and brand equity whilst ensuring it appeals to the gamers sense of self identity. The present study aims to provide a look behind the scenes of strategic brand building in digital media, specifically within video games.

1.3   Research Purpose

To explore the phenomenon of brand building in digital media, specifically within video games in order to gain insights from the perspective of the corporations and the users so as to advance the understanding of brand communications that strengthen corporate brand building efforts within video games. We achieved our purpose by exploring the components contributing to the strategic planning of brand communications ultimately leading to building strong brands in video games.

In order to do so the research questions we wish to answer are:

- *What is in-game brand building?*
- *How does in-game brand building happen?*
- *Why use in-game brand building?*

The overall aim of this research paper is to develop a theory that is grounded in the realms of video games, brand building, identity, and integrated corporate communications. We aim to propose a framework that represents different types of strategic decisions brand managers can take to guide organizations through their brand building journey in video games and immersive virtual media. The main focus is brand building, however corporate brand identity as well as the self-identity of the gamers are important components.

1.4   Delimitations

In order to explore the brand building in video games we wish to focus our attention in the forms of advertisement in-games a corporation can utilize in order to strengthen their brand identity whilst developing relationships with their customers and non-customer stakeholders. Therefore, any form of advertising efforts the corporation studies in this Master Thesis that take place out-of-the game or any form of digital communications efforts are not taken into consideration. The emphasis will be on how corporations leverage video games to enhance their brand identity, excluding individual personal branding or influencer marketing within gaming. Furthermore, this research includes a specific range of video game genres excluding puzzle, platformer, horror and multiplayer online battle arena games.

To fulfill the purpose of our research our analysis will focus on the relationship between corporations and consumers facilitated through video gaming, specifically looking at brand attitudes and associations, advertisement acceptance and self-expression of the gamers. Broader consumer relationship management strategies as well as any other experiences the gamers have with the brands outside of the video games are excluded. In terms of managerial implications, we aim to provide a guide for corporations to utilize in their journey to strengthen their brand identity as well as brand and marketing specialists that wish to understand brand building in video games. Finally, for the theoretical contributions we intent to develop a framework that combines the corporate dimension with the gamer dimension when it comes to communication strategies in video games which to our knowledge is the first attempt of accomplishing.

2   Brand Building in Video Games frame of reference

2.1   Preliminary Framework of Brand building in Video Games

In our efforts to understand brand building in video games we wish to propose a preliminary framework that will guide us in our promise to honor our thesis purpose. The framework consists of the different elements that contribute to brand building in video games. The concept of identity, both the corporation and the consumers (the gamers), alongside that of corporate communications and co-branding have been identified as the pillars of brand building in video games which we present furthermore in this present frame of reference.

Figure 1. Preliminary framework of brand building in video games
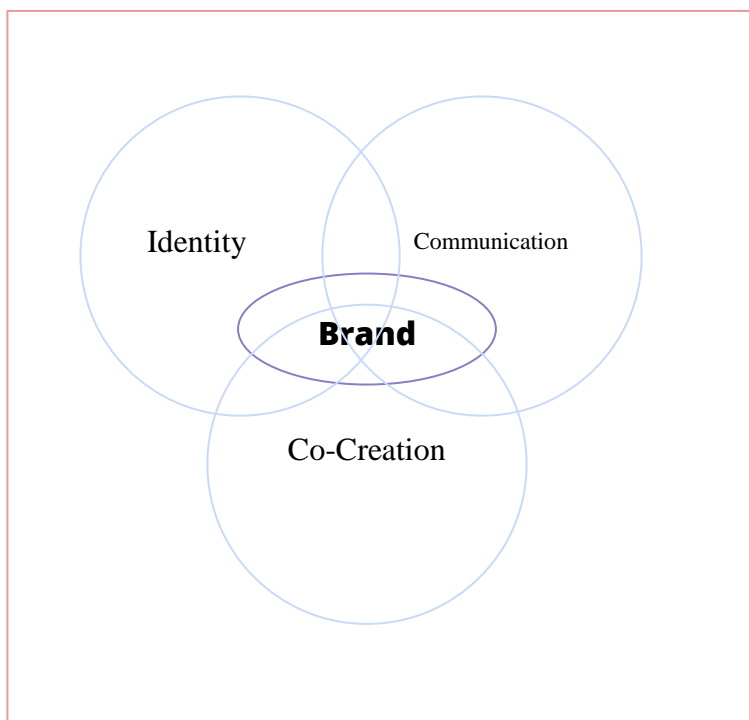
2.2   The Context: Video games

Video games can be defined as a form of interactive software that can be enjoyed by using electronic devices such as computers, specialized gaming consoles like Xbox and PlayStation as well as mobile devices, smartphones, and tablets (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith & Tosca, 2024; Palmas, Reinelt & Klinker, 2021). There is a wide variety of video game genres such as adventure games, action games, alternative reality games, online role-play games and simulation games among them (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2024), see appendix a for a detailed list of the game genres. Different types of video games have different goals the player needs to meet in order to play them, however all the video games have one thing in common which is the immersive environment that allows the players to explore the digital game world (Palmas et al., 2021). The rules of the video game world where the player can interact with the environment are known as mechanics. Mechanics are the set of rules that are written in the code of the video game. Dynamics is the way players can play a video game based on the mechanics, the limitations to their interactions with the video game items and world (Palmas et al., 2021). Players interact with the video game world through their avatars, representations of human figures or inanimate objects that player uses to navigate through and play a video game (Fraser, Slattery & Yakovenko, 2023). These interactions that occur in the video game world through avatars are part of the video game dynamics between the player and the video game as well as the other players in the game (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2024). The interactions between players are different to the real-world ones because online the players are able to socialize outside the boundaries of traditional societies in the world (Kowert & Quandt, 2016).

Video game interactions however are limiting the capability of the players to express themselves with means beyond texting and in certain cases voice calls (Kowert & Quandt, 2016) leading to unfavorable behaviors during the play time that can alter the behavior of the player (Jin, 2011). It is important for the players to have the various tools and functions in the video game that allows them to express themselves either as their desired interpretation of themselves or through diverse personas (Oh et al., 2023). Video games used to be tangible assets that could be obtained by the players in the form of physical however in today's world online games are constantly updated with new content, new expansions such as maps, game items, missions and overall improvements in order to maintain engagement in the video game world (Dubois & Weststar, 2022). In the video game world players function within a video game community of players which alongside the video game dynamics between the video game and the players establish the world of video games (Palmas et al., 2021). Video games therefore not only entertain players, but they communicate ideas and values that affect the players behavior (Fraser et al., 2023; Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2024; Jin, 2011). This special nature of video games makes them an attractive option for corporations to use video games as a communication medium, whilst it is important to understand the video game world in its totality to successfully manage brand building in video games (Oh et al., 2023).

2.3 Gamer self-identity

2.3.1 Defining self-identity

People are complex creatures which makes the task of defining who they are particularly challenging. Human existence is a set of individual and societal interactions (Alfrey, Waters, Condie & Rebar, 2023). There have been many scholars who suggest that in order to understand self-identity, we must explore how others interact with us. The identity of the individual is a combination of the different roles they can assume in society alongside special characteristics that differentiate them from the other members of society (Burke & Stets, 2022). Although the individuals are their own separate entities it is important to emphasize the relationship between identity and society as identity is a concept well defined through the lens of society. Identity and society are two sides of the same coin (Burke & Stets, 2022; Hall, 1996; Rogers, 1951;1955). Identity therefore is the middle point between the societal perspective and the individual perspective, where society and the individual perspectives agree that is the identity of a person. In order to define the identity of the individual one must look into how society operates. Interactions between humans are the basis of any society that consists of a group of people. People do not have positive or negative feelings toward interactions, they are specific responses (Higgins, 2019). The shared experiences affect the type of response people have; positive interactions form a positive self-perception whereas negative has the opposite effect. All of these perceptions formulate self-identity in a societal context (Alfrey et al., 2023) as well as an individual (Burke & Stets, 2022; Hall, 1996; Rogers, 1951; Rogers, 1955; Higgins, 1987). People have the chance to act independently, every decision they make shapes their environment (Burke & Stets, 2023). In return their environment, the society they exist in, provides the opportunity for them to express their identity in ways meaningful to them.

2.3.2 Self-identity and Behavior

Behavior is one of the ways people express their identity. The way people behave reveals how they perceive themselves, as well as the effect interactions within society have on them, alongside the role they assume in society (Alfrey et al., 2023; Ryckman, 2013). Identity theories attempt to understand and organize observations of behavior treating the self as a term for a set of psychological processes rather than a separate entity of the individual. (Ryckman, 2013). In fact, the theory of Snygg & Combs (1959) suggests that the self is the result of the person's experiences within society, of how they perceive themselves as well as how they behave. Furthermore, Sarbin (1952) expresses that self-identity represents a framework of various functions, the bodily functions, the sensory functions and finally the behavior of the individual. Stephenson (1953) argues that self-identity is the agent that determines how a person behaves, that is because the person is equipped with free will and is capable of formulating attitudes toward themselves based on interactions, without the experiences determining how the person thinks. According to the psychology theories one thing stands out about the identity theories, they all agree that the identity is individual, different people react to the stimuli they received from society in different ways which leads to different behavioral patterns for each and every one of them as well as express different feelings based on emotional responses to the stimuli (Higgins, 1987; Higgins, 2019). It is therefore hard to predict the behavior of a person, however if we understand more about their identity and their

surroundings, we can learn more about the decision-making process that leads to the behavior of a person (Alfrey et al., 2023; Rogers, 1951; Rogers, 1955).

2.3.3   Self-Discrepancy Theory

Self-Discrepancy Theory (SDT) of Higgins (1987) has many applications to a plethora of literature outside the boundaries of clinical psychology (Hardin & Lakin, 2009) specifically social psychology, consumer behavior, in the context of personification online by expressing oneself with the creation of avatars (Kim & Sundar, 2012), attitudes toward corporate communications (Pezzuti, Pirouz, Pechmann, 2015), brand attitude (Castro, 2024), purchase intentions (Shan, Jiang, Cui, Wang & Ivzhenko, 2022; Shuainan, Chee Wei & Hong, 2019). The purpose of the SDT theory of Higgins (1987) is to examine the discomfort of individuals that arises from discrepancies between individual and society perceptions of them. Understanding why people experience negative emotions that are a result of conflicting beliefs about themselves provides valuable insights into the person's psychological wellbeing, cognitive processes, behavioral patterns, leading to a greater understanding of human psychology and behavior (Alfrey et al., 2023; Higgins, 1987). The psychological wellbeing of the person is important for management theorists because they can understand people better and implement practices to prevent creating discomfort for their stakeholders. Conflicting beliefs create negative emotions which affect how a person behaves as well as their decision-making process, therefore understanding how the relationship between discomfort and behavior can assist not only in predicting but also modifying the type of behavioral responses corporate operations receive from their stakeholders. At the same time, managers are capable of understanding the cognitive process of their stakeholders, decision making processes as well as formulation of beliefs towards their corporation. SDT focuses on the individuality of each person and allows for personalized help, which is also useful for managers that can adapt to the needs of each stakeholder individually.

2.3.4   SDT self domains and self-discrepancies

To understand an individual, it's essential to distinguish between different self-domains, as defined by Self-Discrepancy Theory (SDT) (Higgins, 1987). SDT identifies three domains: the actual self (attributes a person currently holds), the ideal self (attributes a person wishes to have), and the ought self (attributes a person believes they should have). These self-domains represent personal perceptions and the perceptions of significant others, termed self-guides (Higgins, 1987).

Discrepancies between these self-domains, such as actual-ideal and actual-ought discrepancies, lead to discomfort and negative emotions, while matches lead to positive feelings (Higgins, 1987; Hardin & Lakin, 2009; Mason, Smith, Engwall, Lass, Mead, Sorby, Bjorlie, Strauman & Wonderlich, 2019). An actual-ideal discrepancy causes feelings of disappointment and unfulfillment due to unmet aspirations, whereas an actual-ought discrepancy leads to agitation from failing to meet personal or self-guide expectations. Actual-ideal and actual-ought

discrepancies with self-guides result in shame and embarrassment from not meeting their expectations (Mason et al., 2019).

2.3.5 Video gamer self-identity

Digital media offer people the opportunity to reconstruct their identity in their online community to achieve bliss (Huang, Zhao & Hu, 2019). Online people behave in a similar manner to that in real life, however the nature of the digital media has a considerable effect on their behavior (Kowert & Quandt, 2016). Digital media allow people to be anonymous which removes the social restraints and norms allowing people to be free to be who they want to be (Huang et al., 2019). As a result, the sense of discrepancy between their ideal and their actual self-decreases, further motivating them to pursue their reconstructed identity online. People online create a persona that is closer to their ideal self in real life which they are able to do without the limitations of real-life societal rules and norms (Kowert & Quandt, 2016; Huang et al., 2019).

Studies show that avatars often represent a mix of players' real and ideal selves depending on the level of the immersion the video game dynamics allow for (Bessière, Seay & Kiesler, 2007; Smahel, Blinka & Ledabyl, 2008), therefore in the video game context there are two domains of the self that are represented, the actual and the ideal omitting the ought self. Creating avatars or choosing in-game characters or objects with qualities as well as characteristics they wish they own in real life so as to feel better about themselves is the manifestation of gamer ideal-self persona (Leménager, Gwodz, Richter, Reinhard, Kämmerer, Sell & Mann, 2013). In video games where the player can create their own avatar the ideal self is prevalent, whereas in video games where customization of the avatar or the in-game items the real self of the gamer is evident (Huang et al., 2019; Leménager et al., 2013; Bessière et al., 2007; Smahel et al., 2008).

The customization of avatars and objects in games is a form of digital products. Digital products enable players to immerse themselves in their chosen digital identities (Li et al., 2019). These items, resembling physical products, can be purchased in virtual environments like video games and include clothing for avatars, virtual furniture, vehicles, cards, currencies, tokens, and characters (Lehdonvirta, 2009; Hamari, 2015; Hamari & Keronen, 2017). Digital products are categorized based on appearance, social function, and utility (Li et al., 2019). Realistic digital items enhance immersion and can increase spending in virtual environments, helping players align their actual and ideal selves, which developers capitalize on to appeal to gamers' ideal-self expectations (Oh et al., 2023; Higgins, 1987).

2.4 Brand and identity

2.4.1 Corporate brand identity

Corporate brands have emerged as a central point of discussion in brand management (Iglesias & Schultz, 2013), reflecting the concept of the term the stakeholder-focused brand era as described by Merz, He, and Vargo (2009). Unlike product brands that center on customers, corporate brands cover a wider range of spectrum (Roper & Davies, 2007), that engage multiple stakeholders (Hatch & Schultz, 2002). At the heart of corporate branding lies brand identity, the unique essence that differentiates a corporate brand and keeps it relevant in a competitive landscape (Kapferer, 2008). This differentiation is essential for business-to-business organizations seeking to strengthen their competitive advantage (Beverland, Napoli & Yakimova, 2007). Aaker (1996, p. 68) defines brand identity as "Brand identity is a unique set of associations that the brand's developer seeks to create or maintain.". These associations represent the value of the brand and the promises that are given to consumers by members of the organization.". Other scholars such as Keller (1998), have focused on defining brand identity as a visual arrangement of elements that represent a product strategy and are relevant to the brand. Balmer (2001) defines it as the foundation of the corporate image, a collection of elements that demonstrates the identity of the business, while Urde and Greyser (2016, p. 97) propose that corporate brand identity is related to root questions such as "who are we?" "Where do we come from?" "What do we stand for?" "What is our raison d'être?" and "What is our wanted position?".

Urde (2024) defines corporate identity as a combination of external and internal components and emphasizes the importance of this concept in aligning organizational values with external branding efforts. This alignment is important for effective management, which involves strategic planning, communication, and alignment among different organizational functions (Kiriakidou & Millward, 2000). Urde (2024) introduced a rather recent model, called the corporate brand identity matrix (CBIM). The CBIM has nine components, placed in three layers which include internal, external, and internal & external.

The internal process refers mainly to the interaction that exists between an organization and its brand, with the organization's internal goal being to live up to its brand. On the other hand, the external process focuses on the interactions between the brand and the stakeholders, with the goals of adding value and building a relationship with consumers. Internal & external includes the brand core, expression (how we communicate with others) and personality (how we behave towards others). The brand core represents the essence of the brand and is reflected in all other components. Brand core underpins how the organization operates and how it is perceived. The corporate brand identity is connected to the external layer of the CBIM that revolves around the communication of the corporate brand to their stakeholders, which the corporations have control over. Furthermore, Urde (2024) argues that a well-defined and coherent corporate brand identity that is communicated effectively leads to the establishment of corporate reputation, which is beyond the control of the organizations (Urde, 2024). Corporate identity, corporate communication and corporate reputation are all intertwined (Balmer and Greyser 2002; Urde 2024).

The impression the brand identity leaves to the customers and non-customer stakeholders is the brand image, the coherent representation of the brand as perceived by them (Urde 2024). Ultimately, the corporate identity is the fundamental basis of a company's reputation (King & Whetten, 2008), thus if the brand identity is communicated correctly, it can improve the company's perceived reputation (Argenti & Druckenmiller, 2004; Fombrun & Van Riel, 2004; Balmer and Greyser 2002; Urde 2024).

Value proposition	Relationship	Position
Expression	Core	Personality
Mission and Vision	Culture	Competence

Figure 2. Mats Urde CBIM framework (adapted from Urde,2024).

The identity core:
A defined and aligned
corporate brand identity …

1st outer layer:
… communicated and
positioned

2nd outer layer:
… builds a reputation
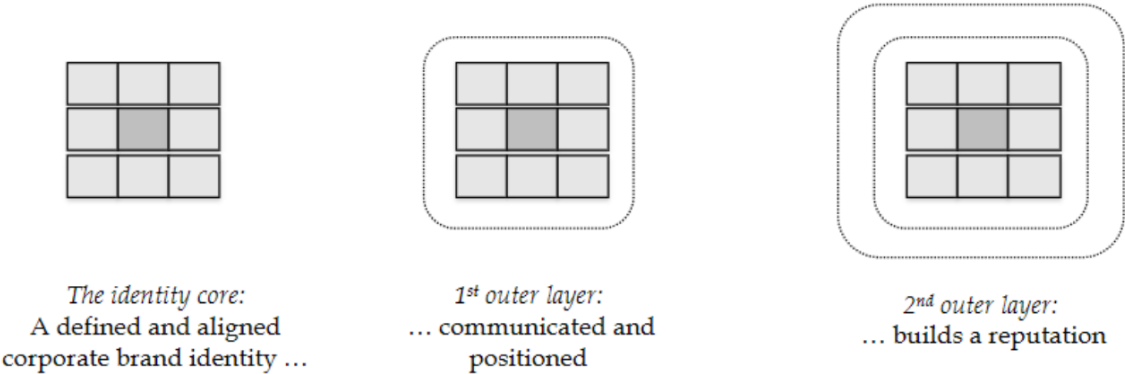
Figure 3. CBIM layers (Urde, 2024).

2.4.2   Identity and stakeholders

The behavior of corporate brands shapes their identity and determines the relationships they establish with stakeholders (Kapferer, 2012; Urde, 2024; Greyser & Urde, 2019). By delivering services and messages to stakeholders effectively, corporate brands become relatable to both customers and non-customer stakeholders (Kapferer, 2012; Urde, 2024). These relationships integrate external and internal components of the corporate brand identity, fostering emotional and psychological connections with stakeholders (Keller, 2016).

A strong corporate brand identity communicates the corporation's values, promises, and essence, instilling trustworthiness and fostering positive brand attitudes among stakeholders (Urde, 2024; Greyser & Urde, 2019). Successful positioning communicates to stakeholders that their needs are understood and valued by the corporation. These strong relationships reflect the corporation's ability to navigate its environment and fulfill its promises, creating enduring bonds with stakeholders.

Keller's brand resonance pyramid guides corporations in understanding stakeholder relationships, emphasizing the importance of effective brand communication (Keller, 2016). In today's digital media landscape, brand engagement surpasses mere loyalty, enabling active interaction between stakeholders and the corporate brand (Huang, 2022; Keller, 2009). The dimensions of Keller's model, including brand salience, performance, imagery, judgments, feelings, and resonance, provide insight into effective brand communication and stakeholder behavior in the digital era (Keller, 2009). Ultimately, strong corporate brand relationships strategically position corporations in the market, ensuring long-term success (Huang, 2022; Urde, 2024; Kapferer, 2012).

2.5 Brand Building and Communication

2.5.1 Building strong brands

Keller's (2016) model, visualized as a pyramid, called the brand resonance pyramid, illustrates consumers' perception and how it relates to the brand identity. It includes four stages of the pyramid as layers that result in the building of strong brands, the bottom part is "Salience", which represents the communication of the brand identity. The next stage is "performance" and "imagery", translating to what the company does. Performance relates to whether the product fulfills the customer's expectations, the value of the product for the customer. Performance is comprised by the tangible features and ingredients of the product, the design of it, the price of it, and how it performs, efficiency (Keller & Swaminathan, 2020). Imagery refers to the person or organizations that use the product of the company, however it can be both the actual representation of the end users as well as the ideal end customer. Imagery is associated with the user profile, the conditions that dictate the product usage by the customers, the brand personality and values that contribute to the product purchase and finally the brand heritage, the experiences consumers had with the corporation over the years since its establishment (Keller & Swaminathan, 2020).

The third stage includes "Judgements" and "Feelings", referring to the responses of what the brand evokes from consumers through brand judgment and their emotional response to the brand. Brand judgements refer to the personal opinions the consumer has about a brand based on impressions they cultivate through experiencing the company products. It includes the brand quality, brand credibility, to which extent they feel the product represents the company, brand considerations, how easy it is for the customers to purchase the product and finally brand superiority, to which extent the customers prioritize purchasing products of the company over competitors (Keller & Swaminathan, 2020). Furthermore, the feelings of the customers are an emotional response towards the brand, essentially it affects how customers feel about

themselves and their relationship with others. The feelings the brand evokes to the customers depend not only on the brand performance and imagery but also on transformational advertising. Transformational advertising is a special form of advertising designed to alter customer perceptions about the brand usage and experiences (Keller & Swaminathan, 2020). The last and top part of the pyramid is "Resonance", referring to the relationship between consumer and the brand, how the consumers identify with the brand. Brand resonance leads to behavioral loyalty, repeated purchases, attitudinal attachment, emotional connection with the brand, followed by a sense of community and engagement with the brand (Keller & Swaminathan, 2020). Ultimately building strong brands following Keller's pyramid leads to brand loyalty, encouraging the customers to engage with the brand in a meaningful way for them that is strengthened by their experiences with the brand (Keller & Swaminathan, 2020; Keller; 1998).
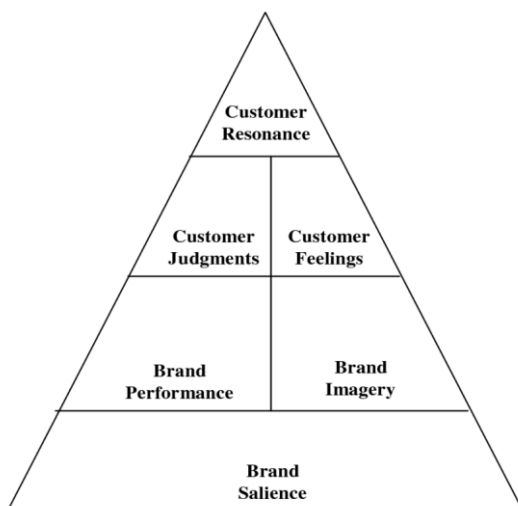
Figure 4. Keller's Brand Resonance pyramid (adapted from Keller, 2016).

2.5.2 Strong corporate brand

Building a strong corporate brand allows the organization to experience a variety of benefits in the short and long term. The process of establishing a strong corporate brand is rigorous as well as tedious, suggests Kapferer (2012). Kapferer explains in his book that strong brands depend on strong brand identities alongside superior products and services. There are two paths managers can follow in pursuit of creating a strong brand, either focus first on creating product advantage to strengthen their corporate brand identity, or from a strong brand identity to excellent product. Strong corporate brands according to Roper and Fill (2012) should engage with society in order to build strong relationships with all their stakeholders. Corporate brands bear the responsibility of being honest with their stakeholders by upholding the promises they make. It is important to understand that people look up to their favorite brands for what they stand for therefore corporate brands should incorporate society at the heart of their business by making sure their core values reflect that of society. Roper and Fill (2012) support Kapferer's argument over building strong corporate brands as they emphasize the importance of well-

defined core values. Strong corporate brands successfully communicate their identity to the stakeholders (Kapferer, 2012; Roper & Fill, 2012; Aaker, 1996). Essentially, a strong corporate brand is the manifestation of a strong corporate brand identity to the stakeholders, it communicates how the corporation creates value, what the corporation stands for, and all components to ensure the corporation stands out from the competition.

A strong corporate brand with a strong corporate brand identity leads to brands that hold great value for their stakeholders, brand equity (Aaker, 1996; Roper & Fill, 2012). Brand equity as defined by Aaker (1996) is a set of assets as well as liabilities that are connected to the corporate brand. These assets include brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality, and brand associations (Aaker, 1996). Keller (2009) defines brand equity as the result of effective brand communication which improves brand attitudes, enhances brand loyalty, greater price margins and elasticity and overall competitive advantage for the corporation. Urde (2022) with his corporate identity matrix verifies the relationship between strong corporate brand identity and high brand value as it strongly benefits the corporation (Greyser & Urde, 2019; Kapferer, 2012). Keller (2009) acknowledges the brand identity as the base of his model for brand value, supported by Aaker (1996) who highlights the importance of a strong corporate brand identity resulting in higher brand value for the stakeholders. Consequently, the key to building a strong corporate brand is dependent on establishing a strong corporate brand identity.

2.5.3   Counterfeit brands- a sign of a strong corporate brand identity

A strong corporate brand identity can still be a subject to adversity as strong brands inspire the creation of counterfeit brands (Hietanen, Mattila, Sihvonen & Tikkanen, 2018; Patel, Singh, & Parayitam, 2022). A counterfeit brand bears the resemblance of a brand with different levels of imitation (Van Horen & Pieters, 2017). The most powerful tool in a corporation's disposition to communicate their identity is the logotype (logo) (Kapferer, 2012). Brand logos are often the victim of counterfeit companies that use imitation versions of the original to get consumers' attention and encourage purchase intentions (Pathak, Velasco & Calvert, 2019). Some brands imitate colors of a leading brand's packaging design, and some might imitate other visual characteristics (Van Horen & Pieters, 2017). Imitating a brand name is a straightforward approach to get a customer to recall a strong brand forming an imitation effect (Danesi, 2013). In recent years a lot of counterfeit brands try to imitate market leading brands, strong brands, as much as possible to exploit the positive perceptions connected to the imitated brand (Vale Coelho do & Matos Verga, 2015). In order for corporations to overcome this adversity it is important to focus on maintaining strong relationships with their stakeholders, ensuring the emotional investment and trust of the customer and non-customer stakeholders (Hietanen et al., 2018). In fact corporations turn to the modern technological advancements such as blockchain and QR codes, which they incorporate in their internal operations as well as communication strategies, in order to tackle counterfeit brands, ensuring product authenticity which strengthens the trust of the stakeholders (Gupta, Hushain & Mathur, 2024). Overall, the existence of counterfeit brands leads to a certain paradox, the original brands are perceived as more valuable than the knock off ones, as the reputation the strong brands hold is a signal of trust for the customers (d'Astous & Gargouri, 2001).

2.6 Corporate Communications

2.6.1 Integrated Marketing Communications

In the digital age, consumers actively seek information and desire involvement in corporate marketing communication (Vernuccioa, Cesareo, Pastorea & Kitchen, 2022; Keller, 2016). Integrated marketing communications (IMC) strategically leverages brand assets and messages to yield favorable outcomes for corporations (Šerić & Vernuccio, 2020). Strong corporate brands effectively employ IMC to enhance brand equity and loyalty (Luxton, Reid, & Mavondo, 2017; Kitchen, Brignell, Li & Jones, 2004). Consistency across all communication channels, digital and traditional, is key to successful IMC implementation (Šerić & Vernuccio, 2020). IMC enables corporations to adapt to the digital reality, transitioning from mass media to customer-centric communication (Vernuccioa et al., 2020; Šerić & Vernuccio, 2020; Luxton et al., 2017; Kitchen et al., 2004). This approach builds and strengthens relationships with stakeholders, emphasizing customer centrality (Mishra & Vijay, 2023). Corporations operating in both physical and online realms are seen as experiential and relational brands, relying on digital media for relationship building (Kapferer, 2012). Despite initial skepticism, Keller advocates IMC as the optimal strategy for building strong brands, allowing adaptation to digital contexts and effective message delivery (Keller, 2016).

2.6.2 Digital Communications

Corporate communication's aim is to establish and maintain relationships with stakeholders by strategically managing all aspects of the communication process (Cornelissen, 2014). According to Argenti (2018), it includes both the communication that is aimed towards external stakeholders like investors, consumers, and the media as well communication taking place within the firm. Corporate communication has a big influence on brand perception and reputation (Van Riel & Fombrun, 2007). In a competitive market, a brand must be able to stand out and be built through effective communication techniques (Kitchen & Burgmann, 2010). The landscape of corporate communications is constantly changing with new technologies affecting the channels corporations can use in order to effectively communicate with their stakeholders (Balmer, 2023). Digital and artificial intelligence technological advancement are shaping and affecting the relationships between corporations and stakeholders, which is important for organizations to understand and adapt to. Although there are many benefits of digital marketing communications in the form of advertisement there are certain pitfalls that managers need to be aware of, with the memorability of the corporate communication efforts being the biggest challenge (Venkatraman, Dimoka, Vo & Pavlou, 2021). Recent studies emphasize the importance of the way advertisements are created and executed, as it can trigger if they dislike or like the advertisement (Moorman 2003; Halim et al., 2022). Being able to provide a valuable advertisement that is entertaining and informative is important as it is diminishing the risk of brand avoidance caused by irritation leading to ad-skipping behaviors (Halim et al., 2022). Other scholars have addressed the effect of marketing and claim that effective marketing and advertising should influence the consumer's experience through

interaction rather than just informing the consumers about the brand (Calder & Malthouse, 2005).

2.6.3   IMC in video games

Advertising has traditionally been used to encourage the sale of goods and services however it has evolved into behavior shaping efforts the corporations can leverage in order to influence stakeholder opinions and attitude towards the brand identity of the organization whilst facilitating and fostering relationships with their customers and non-customer stakeholders (Keller & Swaminahanm, 2020).   Additionally, the importance of effective marketing communications is enforced through interactions with the branded message beyond the informative goals of the advertisements (Calder & Malthouse, 2005). Today digital media, especially video games, have become an attractive channel corporations can employ to effectively deliver branded messages enhancing and fostering a dialogue with their stakeholders (Briones et al., 2011), leading to stronger relationships between them (Keller, 2016; Kapferer, 2012). Video games are immersive and captivating as they enable user engagement (Nicovich, 2005), therefore integrating brands within games, as opposed to placing them in the background, has a greater rate of brand identification and recall (Dardis et al., 2012). A study looking at narrative transportation theory suggests that people might become immersed or lost in the story through mental stimulation in the form of a narrative (Green and Brock, 2000). As participants are highly engaged in the story, they are distracted from the advertisement and do not tend to critically evaluate it, however they seemingly develop positive attitudes towards brands they are exposed to in-game more so than traditional or native advertising (Glass, 2007).

The way corporations promote their branded message in video games is through in-game advertising (IGA). IGA is the practice of integrating brands or products into a digital game, with the aim of the player having an enjoyable and engaging experience (Huang & Yang, 2012; Terlutter and Capella, 2013), where brands who are interested can purchase space within an established game (Winkler & Buckner, 2006). IGA can be incorporated into the game discreetly or prominently, with options for a fixed or dynamic way; fixed placement offers offline accessibility but can't be modified after launch, while dynamic placement requires an online connection for flexible advertising that can be changed and filled by various advertisers (Smith et al., 2014).

2.6.4   Advergames

Advergames, a special form of IGA, are made in the form of video game to promote a product, brand, idea or service (Kretchmer, 2005). They can be defined as video games designed solely to promote an advertising message of a corporation and are considered a variation of IGA because the branded message is seamlessly incorporated in the form of a video game (de la Hera, 2019). The primary goal of advergames is to use video games as a medium for delivering branded messages, it represents an exclusive type of branded entertainment (Mallinckrodt & Mizerski, 2007; Cauberghe & De Pelsmacker, 2010; Terlutter and Capella, 2013). Advergames, essentially are branded games created with the purpose of not entertaining the

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players but to convey messages, however it is important for the advergames to be entertaining in order to please the players (Zhao & Renard, 2018). They have a positive effect on brand attitude and increase user purchase intentions when combined with brand interactivity, such as consumer involvement with mascots, slogans, and brand visuals (Lee et al., 2013). Playing video games for fun in viral advertising campaigns as advergames have been positively affected e-wom with players recommending their favorite advergames to their friends that could be potential new loyal customers (Zhao & Renard, 2018). It is suggested that advergames can improve consumer-brand relationships (Terlutter and Capella, 2013; de la Hera, 2019) and enhance brand value (Okazaki & Yagüe, 2012; de la Hera, 2019).

2.6.5 Virtual Billboards

Outdoor media are various forms of screens that exist in public spaces outside the physical space of company offices and can assume the form of billboards that show infomercials, entertainment clips or news whilst allowing managers to display branded messages in a dynamic manner (Mposi, Roux & van Zyl, 2020). Video games are separate environments accessible to gamers, functioning similarly to digital outdoor media for corporate communications (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2024; Palmas et al., 2021; Kowert & Quandt, 2016). In-game advertising is a form of digital outdoor media, featuring static or dynamic billboards or seamless digital product placement (Mposi et al., 2020; Karisik, 2014). Traditional billboards aim to capture public attention, with a typical lifespan of around 4 weeks, and their effects take time as they are not targeted towards a specific audience (Bhargava & Donthu, 1999; Anubha & Jain, 2022; Hussain, Islam & Rehman, 2023).

Gamified billboards that serve as IGAs seem to share the shortcomings of the traditional billboards as they fail to evoke brand acceptance or cultivate a positive brand attitude if the brand is not in congruence with the theme of the video game world (Vashisht, 2019; Vashisht & Chauhan, 2017). Supported by Hussain et al., (2022) the importance of brand congruence is highlighted for effective communication; however, gamified billboards do manage to subtly capture gamers' attention, enhancing purchase intention when aligned with the game world and executed immersivity (Anuba & Jain, 2022). Dynamic gamified billboards have become one of the most extensively used tools in the online advertising environment, mainly outside-the-game advertisements in the form of billboards commonly referred to as banner advertisements (Sundar & Kalyanaraman, 2004). Contrary to static gamified billboards, dynamic gamified billboards increased brand recognition whilst producing positive brand associations in the minds of the gamers (Huang & Yang, 2012). Despite gamified billboards posing an attractive option for organizations to promote their branded messages, gamers' recall ability may be limited, possibly due to the immersive nature of the game (Chaney et al., 2004). Overall, there is a lot of skepticism around IGA in the form of gamified traditional advertising however there are a lot of benefits by implementing IGA in an effective manner for organizations (Anubha & Jain, 2022).

2.6.6 Co-Branding and corporate communications

Joint Branding or Co-Branding is the agreement under a contract between two corporations to leverage their identity in order to create a new product or provide a new service over a limited or a specific amount of time (Rao & Ruekert, 1994; Simonin & Ruth, 1998; Wilkins, Butt, & Heffernan, 2018; Fang, Gammoh & Voss, 2013). Co-branding alliances flourish when strong brand identities partner, however in case one identity is weaker than the other it can benefit from the partnership by association (Heffernan, Wilkins & Butt, 2018). This results in consumers accepting the quality of the co-branding efforts to be of high quality, as the corporate brands involved can be perceived as signals of trust and high quality (Rao & Ruekert, 1994; Heffernan et al., 2018; Fang, Gammoh & Voss, 2022).

2.6.7 Co-branding in video games-Branded skins

Prominent trending way corporations are using to communicate their brands in video games is by introducing branded cosmetic skins to evoke brand awareness (Ghosh et al., 2021). Skins type of brand partnerships in video games is a form of product placement, a paid inclusion of brands or brand identifying products in media (Karisik, 2014) as well as branded games (Kretchmer, 2005). They are virtual decorative appearances for avatars as well as objects such as accessories, weapons and vehicles (Vrooman, 2017). Skins are in-game products that can be obtained by players through in-game achievement or directly from an online marketplace, often having a monetary value in the real world (Macey & Hamari, 2018). The skins can appear in video games in 3 distinctive types of integration, associative, illustrative and demonstrative (Palmas, Reinelt & Klinker, 2021). Associative skin placement focuses on brand awareness by showcasing the skin in-game. Illustrative skin placement aims to seamlessly integrate the brand turning into part of in-game where the gamer accepts the brand as part of the video gaming ambiance earning their attention but not forcing it. Finally, demonstrative skin placement presents the brand in a realistic fashion allowing the gamer to experience the brand in an immersive manner by allowing them to interact with it and make it an extension of their gaming experience (Ingendahl et al., 2022; Palmas et al., 2021). Branded skins that allow for a realistic representation of the sponsored product are part of the demonstrative skin placement which is a type of co-branding alliance that essentially leads to the development of a new product upon agreement between video game publishing companies and corporations with strong identities (Ingendahl et al., 2022). Skin placements allow the corporations that showcase their brand in video games to build and maintain a relationship beyond the boundaries of the real world (Reay & Wanick, 2023) in a non-forceful manner (Ingendahl et al., 2022). Brands that are unapproachable by the masses in real life become easier to approach in the realm of video games enabling the corporations to strategically utilize corporate communication efforts within the gaming community.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research Philosophy

The purpose of this research is to provide guidance in which research philosophy to employ in order to investigate successful brand building in video games from both the corporate brand and self-identity factors. In order to fulfill the purpose of this research paper we require guidance that accrues from the appropriate research philosophy (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019). Research philosophy is a term that describes assumptions and beliefs regarding the idea about developing knowledge (Saunders., et al, 2019), it consists of various aspects of philosophies such as ontology, epistemology, and methodology (Easterby-Smith, Jaspersen, Thorpe, & Valizade, 2021). Research philosophy essentially is a set of beliefs and assumptions that help us develop knowledge. These assumptions affect the way research is conducted, from the formulation of the research questions leading to the methods employed that researchers utilize so as to interpret the results of a study (Saunders., et al, 2019; Easterby-Smith et al., 2021).

The first step to trustworthy research is establishing a strong foundation utilizing the appropriate philosophical assumptions. Ontology is the assumption that is regarding the nature of reality, it helps us answer one very important question about our research, "how do we perceive reality?" (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). The present research accepts no single truth. On the contrary we believe that reality depends on the viewpoint of individuals. Ultimately there is no right or wrong perspective, it is all relative to the viewpoint of the observer. The process of brand building in a digital context is a tedious task that requires to appeal to a large group of people with distinct identities, therefore it is up to the researchers to determine the factors that contribute to effective brand building in video games.

Furthermore, epistemology is the assumption about learning in the most effective way to gain knowledge about the nature of the world (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). The complexity of the effect self-identity and corporate brand identity have on brand building within online games highlights the importance of considering multiple angles in order to fully understand the phenomenon. According to Saunders at el., (2019), social interactions formulate reality around different perspectives in a continuous manner based on human interactions with one another, which can be described as the social constructionist approach. The contrasting view to social constructionism is positivism, which is the idea that properties should be measured in an objective approach (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021), however the nature of this study suggests that such an approach is not ideal. This study accepts facts as products of interpretation by those involved in the brand building within online video games rather than accepting different occasions as facts, which is this study's epistemology. Social constructionism expects the researchers to not only collect data but also understand the different meanings individuals

associate with their experiences, essentially it is the appreciation of all these experiences. Easterby-Smith et al. (2019) argue that determining the assumption about the nature of the world, epistemology is not enough, it is crucial for the researchers to define the level of the involvement they have in their research. Due to the nature of our research purpose, we are following an engaged research paradigm as we believe the lived experiences of the participants in this study alongside the strategies employed by corporations to achieve effective brand building in video games provide valuable insights about brand building in a digital media specifically within video games.

Finally, the last assumption that helps the researchers conduct the research is that of the methodology. Methodology is the philosophical assumption regarding the arrangement of techniques and processes to create a unified representation of the research study (Easterby-smith et al., 2021). The methodology allows the research to formulate the right questions, collect data and analyze them in order to produce knowledge (Saunders et al., 2019). The purpose as well as the nature of the research proposes the appropriate methodology used. There are 2 distinct methodologies, positivism and interpretivism. Positivism is focused on the establishment of law-like generalizations based strictly on data, a philosophy that aims to explain and measure relationships in the world around us rather than understand phenomena in a deeper sense. Interpretivism focuses on the complexity of multiple interactions as the researcher strives to make sense of the environment they research with the appropriate context. Interpretivism is a methodological position that allows the researchers to explore meanings, draw their own conclusions about the world around them which they are able to transform into insights. In terms of business research, interpretivism allows for in-depth examination of a wide range of different perspectives within and outside of an organization and the participants of the study. The Interpretivism method allows us to explore the brand building phenomenon in video games as we can develop a rich understanding of the process from a holistic perspective of various perspectives simultaneously (Saunders et al., 2019).

Research philosophies do not come without limitations regardless of how well structured and defined the research design is (Easterby et al., 2021). To ensure that the research is valid there are three criteria that we strive to fulfill, authenticity, plausibility, and criticality. Authenticity of the research is established when the researchers effectively demonstrate they have a deep understanding of the phenomenon. Plausibility is achieved by being able to acknowledge skepticism and concerns among other researchers. Finally, criticality requires the researchers to evolve existing knowledge around the phenomenon they study, provide original insights whilst encouraging the reader to question assumptions and formulate their own opinions about the research findings. It is also important to ensure the objectivism of the researchers so as to prevent bias whilst being transparent about every component of the research (Easterby et al., 2021).

3.2   Research Strategy

3.2.1   Qualitative Research

In order to fulfill the purpose of this research we must decide on the appropriate research strategy. The research strategy helps us answer the questions, collection of data and analysis of them around brand building in video games in a coherent manner that is in alliance with the ontology, epistemology, and methodological approach we acknowledge as representative and appropriate for our research (Saunders et al., 2019). The nature of the research helps us decide on the best research strategy. Our research is exploratory as we aim to understand how brand building works in video games. There are two strategies that we could follow: quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative approaches focus on relationships between the variables of a study by measuring the effects of them on the units of analysis. Quantitative methodology is the numerical collection of data and analysis of them that helps the researchers determine the contributions of their study. On the other hand, qualitative methodology allows researchers to explore a phenomenon by collecting non-numerical data and interpreting the data. The purpose of this study is to explore the phenomenon of brand building in video games therefore the qualitative methodology allows the collection of non-numerical data is more appropriate for us to fully grasp the essential data that will help us gain valuable insights (Saunders et al., 2019).

3.2.2   Inductive approach

There are two different approaches a researcher can use to develop a theory, deductive and inductive approach (Saunders et al., 2019). Deductive reasoning occurs when the conclusions research makes are derived logically from confirmed theory derived premises. On the other hand, inductive approach derives from observed premises by the researcher regarding a phenomenon, it is "a gap in the logic argument between the conclusion and the premises observed, the conclusion being 'judged' to be supported by the observations made" (Saunders et al., 2019, pp 152). Inductive reasoning allows the researchers to reach a deeper understanding of the nature of the phenomenon they explore. The conclusions researchers make result in the development of theory based on interpretation of the data provided and analyzed, rather than theoretical restraints around the research premises. The researchers that use inductive reasoning are capable of providing explanations based on context which deduction approach does not. Our research is strongly focused on the video game context around brand building which in accordance with the interpretivism research paradigm deployed constitutes for the induction reasoning as the ideal approach for us to develop our theoretical contributions (Saunders et al., 2019).

3.3   Research Design

A research design serves as a blueprint for deciding what questions to study, what relevant data to collect, and how to analyze results. It is a logical framework that links the empirical data to initial research questions and eventual conclusions (Yin, 2018). Our aim is to answer the research questions What is in game brand building? How does in-game brand building happen?

And why use it in game brand building? by conducting multiple case studies, which can be a form of qualitative research method (Yin, 2014; Priya 2020).

To achieve our aim of developing a comprehensive theory in the area of advertisement collaboration, specifically in the context of video games, we have chosen a case study approach as the most suitable method. Multiple case studies are favored in exploratory research areas, as they offer a deeper understanding of a complex phenomenon (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Yin, 2003) A case study is an in-depth study of a subject or phenomenon in the context of real-world events (yin, 2018). This aligns in accordance with our research focus on exploring the alignment of brand identity and the self-identity of online gamers within brand collaborations carried out through online channels.

Additionally, our research method is supported by the preference for case studies in qualitative research, particularly when examining "how" and "why" questions as it requires an in-depth explanation of a social phenomenon (Yin, 2018). Since our case study delves into understanding the dynamics of brand building in a digital context, especially in the online gaming industry, where external influence is restricted from the researchers, a case study design becomes necessary (Yin, 2003). It's especially relevant and important for this study since the information collected comes from marketing communications that have already been published, which we exert no influence on.

3.4   Time Horizon

This study wishes to explore the reality of brand building in video games in today's world. The time horizon of the study should reflect that of the research question (Saunders et al., 2019). The time frames can be distinguished between a snapshot of the phenomenon or a diary time frame. The cross-sectional time frame is based on the premise of exploring a phenomenon within a specific time period, which our research question suggests that we are focusing on the in-game advertising methods of corporations in the current time this study is conducted. On the other hand, the longitudinal time frame enables the researchers to document a phenomenon whilst tracking how it develops over an extended period of time. Due to the complexity of the phenomenon we wish to focus on a short period of time to truly deepen our knowledge about brand building, so we wish to conduct the research in a cross-sectional time frame (Saunders et al., 2019).

3.5   Sampling

3.5.1   Case Selection

The in-game advertising cases that were selected in order to explore the phenomenon of in-game advertising were well defined examples of the theories deriving from the phenomenon (Saunders et al, 2019; Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). The purpose of this thesis is to not only understand game advertising but to add to existing literature by developing a framework.

Interpretivists with a purpose such as the current research paper's that work inductively require to select cases that are linked to the theory, analyze data so as to identify patterns and themes leading to theoretical contributions as suggested by Saunders et al. (2019). The cases that were selected focused primarily on 4 different forms of IGAs, the genres of games should be video games that can be played by multiple people including online sports games, online action games, online role-playing games, online battle royal games and multiplayer online battle royal games. The chosen video game genres constitute the target population of this study (Saunders et al., 2019). We acknowledge the importance of multiple cases in supporting the robustness of theory since they provide a wider range of empirical evidence (Yin, 1994; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). We employ four cases, each representing the distinct observation that we have identified around the IGA phenomenon. Replication logic is a key concept of multiple cases, in which every case serves as a distinct experiment that is used as a stand-alone analytical unit (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). We selected cases for this study that correspond with the concept of polar types in theoretical sampling as described by Eisenhardt & Graebner (2007), which is characterized by the use of extreme cases that will allow us to understand contrasting patterns reaching valuable conclusions about the IGA phenomenon.

To highlight the value of choosing these 4 cases we selected examples based on the premise of brand building in video games to different degrees. The IGA cases are well-documented occurrences from corporations with strong brand identities that effectively leverage their brand in order to effectively communicate with their stakeholders cultivating strong relationships with them. Furthermore, a common obstacle to developing theory from cases is the case selection (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). The phenomenon of IGA involves a plethora of stakeholders from both corporations as well as customer and non-customer stakeholders resulting in theoretical sampling of cases. We have chosen a methodological approach for this thesis of theoretical sampling rather than a random selection while developing our sampling strategy, meaning that the sampling is chosen to extend emergent theory, as recommended by Eisenhardt (1989). The purpose of theoretical sampling lies in the carefully chosen selection of cases that are particularly suitable for demonstrating, expanding the relationship and logical connections between the different concepts (Graebner & Eisenhardt, 2007). This approach aligns with our aim of exploring emergent theories and examining the process of interest by selecting cases that illustrate distinct situations. According to Eisenhardt & Graebner (2007), cases are picked in theoretical sampling because they are especially well-suited for illustrating and extending the connections and logic between constructs. Initially, we recognized several types of IGAs and categorized them based on the type of advertising to uncover the distinct examples for each category by accepting only 4 in-game case studies which can represent the theoretical aspect of the phenomena investigated in this study (Denscombe, 2017).

Based on embedded design concepts (Yin, 1984) in case studies, we will conduct 4 case studies. Case study research gives the researcher the flexibility to have leeway to use any method of data collection approach that best serves their goals because an in-depth study is undertaken, as long as the method is practical and ethical (Priya, 2020). This will allow us to conduct a multi-level analysis and examine the different components of the corporate brand identity and its impact on gamers' self-identity within video games resulting in stronger brands and meaningful relationships with the gamers. To ensure the validity of the research the method of focus groups in order to collect data is selected.

Table 1. Overview of Cases Selected Louis Vuitton, Balenciaga, Ferrari & Nissin Foods

	Corporation	Form of IGA	Strong Brand	Brand Empowerment	Gamer Relationship
1	Balenciaga	Cosmetic Skin	Yes	Strong	Close
2	Louis Vuitton	Branded Game	Yes	Strong	Distant
3	Ferarri	Replica skin	Yes	Weak	Close
4	Nissin Foods	Virtual Billboard	Yes	Weak	Distant

3.5.2   Sampling of Focus Group Population

The participants were chosen using non-probability sampling, where the focus of the sample is selected relying on the researchers' subjective assessment as opposed to employing random selection (Elfil & Negida, 2017). The type of non-probability sampling used is purposive sampling, which was chosen as the most appropriate for this study. Purpose sampling means that the participants are chosen based on their attributes as they are most likely to contribute the most valuable data (Denscombe, 2017). They were chosen based on the criteria that they have or are playing the same genre of online video games as in the case studies, can speak English and are between the ages of 18 to 39, which is suitable for exploratory small sample size where random sampling won't be enough to include groups that are present in the population in relatively small numbers (Denscombe, 2017). This approach enabled the collection of relevant insights and experiences important to the research topic. Additionally, since we evaluate and observe whether or not participants meet the requirements, the decision of purpose sampling is consistent with our interpretivist approach (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021).

The participants were reached out through various spaces, online gaming forums, social media platforms and student gaming association groups. Interested individuals were evaluated for their eligibility, followed by scheduled group interviews. 20 people replied, 18 people deemed suitable, however, in the end, 13 people participated and were used in the research. The group participants were divided into 3 groups based on the stages in their life, the first group consisted of students, the second of people that work, and the third group consisted of students that have part time jobs. According to Saunders et al. (2019) the participants of the focus groups should be divided in order to prevent inhibiting each other's contribution based on factors such as hierarchy and background among others. We realized that our participants were in different stages of their life, so we chose to categorize them based on this major difference to ensure a harmonious atmosphere during the focus groups.

It should be noted that purpose sampling has a risk of being unrepresentative of the population if the participants are chosen based on bias and not being able to draw a generalizability on the data (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019; Andrade, 2020). To tackle the question of validity, the authors addressed the criteria used to choose the participants in an effort to obtain a representative and valid sample.

3.6   Data Collection Method

The nature of the research suggests what type of data collection method is most appropriate for the researchers to make use of according to the scholars (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021; Saunders et al., 2019). Oftentimes using one method is not enough for the execution of a study instead a multi-method approach is more appropriate, which is the approach we chose for this research study. Multi-method qualitative studies allow researchers conducting studies within the field of management and business to overcome weaknesses that arise by using one method, suggest Saunders et al. (2019). Multi-method data collection allows us to obtain a variety of insights in order to explore the phenomenon of IGA holistically whilst ensuring the quality of the collected primary and secondary data.

In order to collect primary data, we used focus group interviews with a format of semi-structured questions (appendix b), whereas for the collection of secondary data we used publicly available information online and academic literature. We conducted a pilot study prior to the focus group interviews so as to compose interview questions that would provide us with accurate and reliable data (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021).

3.6.1   Primary collected through focus group interviews

Primary data entails that the researcher gathers the data and conducts the analysis (Bell et al., 2019). Primary data was collected in this research, with each data collection method customized to suit the research purpose (Malhotra et al., 2006). The data was collected through focus group interviews and case studies. For the focus groups, the moderators use the groups social dynamics to stimulate and explore the behavior of each participant (Kabir., 2016). A combination of focus group interviews and the collection of media outputs for data were used as multi-method qualitative data research. Including two approaches offers a broader comprehensiveness and robustness of the research data (O'Reilly et al., 2020). Through the use of qualitative primary data, the viewpoints of the participants can be further explored on particular subjects (Maylor & Blackmon, 2005), while the use of qualitative case study helps the researchers explore the observation and the phenomenon in question (Priya, 2020).

The data collection of the focus group interviews was conducted in English. A pilot study was carried out to guarantee the effectiveness and utility of the primary data collection (Babin & Zikmund, 2016). The researchers were able to identify possible improvements with this pilot study (Denscombe, 2017), such as determining a safe space where participants feel comfortable to open up and improving questions provided.

Focus Group Interviews

Focus groups interview was conducted to collect primary data, it's where a group of participants is interviewed by interviewees that record responses to questions on a defined topic (Saunders et al., 2019). Focus groups allow for the collection of interactive data by highlighting the individual differences and similarities among the participants (Babin & Zikmund, 2016). The reason for a focus group is that we wanted to have a collectively constructed idea of the phenomena. With the use of focus groups, researchers can facilitate the collection of dynamic interaction among participants (Bell et al., 2019). The aim of the focus group was to explore and gather data on the perspective of gamers to understand their perceptions, preferences, and interaction with brands.

The focus groups were formed to explore the multidimensional phenomena being researched. A typical focus group involves between 4 to 12 participants, some suggesting it should be 6 to 8 participants, the exact number varies on the nature of the participants, the more complex the subject the smaller the number of participants is suitable (Saunders et al., 2019). Due to the complexity of the research topics, a smaller number of participants chosen was determined appropriate. This allowed us to gather information and give room for the participants to discuss and explain in depth their thoughts. The participants in the focus group consisted of people from different backgrounds and experiences, all engaged in online gaming, thus offering a diverse perspective with various gaming styles, preferences, and levels of expertise.

A written consent form (appendix c) was provided to the participants with assurance of their anonymity, considering we wanted the participants to be able to speak freely about their perceptions and experiences so that what had been said wouldn't be traced back to them. Saunder et al. (2019) suggest that informing participants about anonymity will increase a sense of openness and relaxation. In addition, one group was conducted face-to-face, one hybrid because of personal reasons and sickness, while the third was conducted online, through a conference call, where all participants were at home. The moderator suggested that the participants should be in a safe space during the focus group interview to minimize participation bias, as suggested by Saunders et al. (2019).

The moderator guides the sessions with questions but does not participate in the discussion to influence the answers but rather to observe (Bell et al., 2019). The moderators introduced and explained briefly the aim and the role of the participants to ensure homogeneity with the participants. This enabled the members to properly blend in, leading to a productive conversation (Sreejesh et al., 2014). Introductory questions were asked to understand the context and background of their experiences generally, and then questions regarding perception of themselves in relation to games, how they felt followed by questions regarding brands in games.

Throughout the process, an interview guide was used (appendix b), along with follow-up questions with the avoidance of sharing our own opinions which according to Santhosh et al. (2021) can contribute to bias. The interview guide was used as a tool to follow the research questions and the purpose of the research. The questions were non-leading, and the language was changed based on the flow of the interaction in the focus group interview and were based on the consideration of what information was required to address the research questions, as suggested by Bryman & Bell (2015). The questions were categorized and used in a logical order as suggested by Saunders et al., (2019). We addressed the theoretical areas that we think

needed to be covered and explored in the field of brand building in regard to self-identity since the aim is to build on and develop a theory.

To enable a thorough exploration of the multifaceted phenomenon related to gaming, three focus groups were formed. Four to five people in each group, the number of participants were selected based on the level of depth required for qualitative analysis. Smaller groups of participants are suitable when the topic is complex (Morgan, 1998). The participants should have similar status and similar work experience, so factors such as trust don't affect their answers (Saunders et al., 2019), so the students were placed in one group, workers in one group and students with part-time jobs in a group separately. After the third focus group, the interviewees did not receive new information, which means that researchers have heard the full range of ideas and saturations have been reached (Bell et al., 2019).

Table 2. Overview of focus group details

Respondent	Age	Time	Date and Location
F1	2002	123 mins	15/04/2024 In person
F2	1994		
M3	2000		
M4	2003		

Group 2, Workers:

Respondent	Age	Time	Date and Location
M5	1988	109 mins	17/04/2024 Conference Call
M6	1989		
M7	1993		
M8	1996		
M9 Patrick	1995		

Group 3, Students with part time jobs:

Respondent	Age	Time	Date and Location
F10	2001	84 mins	22/04/2024 Hybrid
F11	2002		
F12	1999		
M13	2000		

3.6.2   Secondary data collected through literature review

Information available in literature, such as raw data or published summaries (Saunders et al., 2019) for purposes other than the current research study constitutes the secondary data we collected (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). The secondary data sources we used include company pages, blogs, online news outlets and social media. The information available that we found and coded for each case study required us to be critical due to the fact that we had no control over the distribution alongside production of the information available. The secondary data available was interpreted and coded in a manner that best represented the case studies of our study. Employing secondary data allowed us to document the four different types of IGA without depending on corporations to allow us access to such information. Collecting secondary data gave us the opportunity to objectively delve into the brand building of corporations that chose video games as one of their digital media.

The secondary was collected by reviewing relevant literature. Literature review of relevant sources allowed us to identify valuable data to fulfill the purpose of our research (Easterby et al., 2021). Numerous academic journals and books were reviewed regarding brand building, self-identity, corporate communications, co-branding and video gaming industry were accessed through online databases, presented in table 3. The books were accessed in person by accessing the library of the business school campus in Lund. The data about the IGA was collected by accessing company sites and non-company sites. The information available was evaluated objectively with caution and confirmed by employing the focus group interview method to collect empirical data.

Table 3. Overview of literature review search

Overview of literature review	
Databases	Lub Search Discovery, Lund Univeristy Library, Google Scholar, Google Scholar
Main theoretical fields	Brand Building, Self identity
Key words	Brand Building, Self identity, Corporate Brand identity, Corporate Communications, Co-Branding, Video Games
Types of literature	E-books, Peer Reviewed Articles, Books, Company sites, Non-Government sites
Criteria for consideration	Date of publication, Number of citations, Keywords

3.7   Data Analysis

3.7.1   Structure of empirical results

The collection of empirical data was neither restricted nor guided in a direction during the analysis, as stated by Rennstam and Wästerforst (2018), the aim to analyze the data should be interpreted independently. Qualitative research often offers the difficulty of synthesizing a vast amount of data into a narrative that can be well argued and persuade the reader (Easterby-smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2010). We therefore chose to follow Eisenhardth (1989) instruction for analyzing case studies using within-case data and cross-case research for patterns. As well as Ryan & Bernard (2003) for a systematic reduction of empirical data, for structuring and interpreting qualitative data. An inspiration for giving a rich description and presenting the findings of the case studies is using Pöttker's (2003), and Lehmann & Åkerlund (2017) order of reporting a story. Pöttker (2003) informs that the genre that is most thoroughly taught is "hard news", which challenges the selective perception of a reader by explicitly stating the most significant information at the outset of the story. "Hard news" is typically considered an objective way of reporting on events. The author further emphasizes that the "lead sentence", which is supposed to address four or five w-questions such as who, when, where, what and why, contains the most important information. Our research will be following this sequence since they are comprehensive and have the ability to address the potential phenomena in a broad sense.

Analyzing the case companies

We followed Eisenhardt's (1989) proposed approach, which is that in case study research aimed at theory-building, data should be analyzed through two ways; first by within-case analysis and then through cross-case pattern and search employing various techniques. A within-case analysis typically includes in-depth case study reports for each site, which are frequently pure descriptive summaries that are essential to the process of producing insights as they help researchers to process the large amount of data (Gersick, 1988). However, there isn't a set of formats for this kind of analysis, the importance lies in becoming familiar with each case as a separate entity. Before the researchers attempt to generalize patterns across cases, this technique allows the distinctive patterns of each case to emerge (Eisenhardt, 1989).

Together with within-case analysis is cross-case, searching for patterns, it pushes researchers to see past their first impressions and consider the evidence from other angles. The reason is that people tend to be poor information processors (Eisenhardt, 1989), drawing conclusions based on minimal data (Kahneman & Tversky, 1973). There's a risk that the researchers would draw inaccurate and hasty conclusions, therefore a thorough examination of the data from a variety of ways is essential for a good cross-case comparison (Eisenhardt, 1989).

A strategy argued by Eisenhardt (1989) is to select categories and then search for the within group similarities connected to intergroup differences, these categories can be made by the

researchers. We chose to follow this strategy and chose the category ourselves. We separated the analysis into two perspectives: the focus of the view of how the IGA performed in relation to the brand and then a focus on the viewpoint of the gamers. We discovered themes of the different cases in the findings which serves as a structural guide through this analysis and will have a significant influence to the gamified brand building matrix framework that was created and will be presented at the end of the analysis. It combines the two main dynamics of brand empowerment and gamer relationship, with the thematized components of the multiple cases that has been analyzed for brand building in IGA.

Analyzing the focus group interviews

A systematic reduction of the empirical data by carefully categorizing relevant themes is another goal of the data analysis. Coding the data with labels that were related to the research questions, then it led to patterns that emerged to identify categories (Percy, Kostere, & Kostere, 2015). The following technique used for identifying the relevant themes were based on Ryan & Bernard (2003) instructions, which involves firstly, discovering themes and subthemes, secondly, filtering and building relevant themes that is relevant to the research questions, thirdly, following with building hierarchies of themes or codes that is also linked to the research questions, then fourthly, connecting the various themes together and compare them with the thoery. Certain terminologies and expressions such as emotions, such as annoyance and fun were frequently used among all the focus groups which determined the themes and subthemes that suggested certain patterns, like "IGA feelings" for example. These repeated themes would be in focus when analysing the cases. After reviewing the purpose of the research, themes that were not relevant were removed. Examples of such themes would include "Gendering characters" and "Board games", that is not part of our purpose of IGA brand building.

3.8   Trustworthiness

It is incredibly difficult to create research that has no flaws. The main evaluation criteria used in business research to evaluate the quality of research includes reliability and validity. However, there has been discussion among qualitative researchers about the applicability and appropriateness of these characteristics for qualitative research (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The use of trustworthiness is the suggestion for evaluating the quality of the qualitative research approach. The four components of trustworthiness are dependability, credibility, transferability and dependability (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

3.8.1   Credibility

Arguably, one of the most crucial factors in ensuring trustworthiness is credibility, it focuses on how well the researchers can demonstrate the appropriateness of their data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The credibility was enhanced when we employed triangulation, a multimethod data collection that is not dependent only on secondary data collection but also the use of focus

group interviews to deepen our understanding. Triangulation is when more than one method is used to validate the findings, when comparable data is produced by several data collection methods, the results become more reliable (Saunders et al., 2019). By using a multi-method data collection by using secondary data and focus group interviews, we ensured a broader comprehensive exploration of our research, to enhance our validity with diverse perspectives. What companies choose to communicate with is also dependent on the receivers' side. Additionally, to increase the credibility, some participants were able to help check the findings to confirm the accuracy of the transcript and the researcher's understanding.

3.8.2   Dependability

In qualitative research, dependability is in parallel to reliability which aims to provide that the study's empirical study is reproducible and consistent so that the research can be traceable, logical and thoroughly recorded (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015). This study relied on case studies and focus group interviews, which produced an immense amount of data. The focus group interviews were transcribed and saved in Google documents and audio files on our phones and computer hard drives, as well as Google Drive for preservation purposes, which further improved the trustworthiness of the research. For the case studies, all documentation was on Google Drive and our computer hard drives.

3.8.3   Transferability

The transferability of our study refers to the external validity, which concerns whether the research can be applied to other contexts (Bryman & Bell, 2017). The use of multiple case studies increases the robust theory creation since the cases offer empirical evidence illustrating the theory in diverse contexts (Yin, 1984). Generalizability is increased when multiple cases are used (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Yin 1994). By comparing the research results to preexisting theory, it is possible to further validate and generalize the results. It is however also important to compare the results to existing literature that contradicts them, since this enables researchers to gain deeper insights into the results while also limiting how broadly the results can be applied (Eisenhardt, 1989). For theory building research, it is argued to be necessary to compare the results with existing theory because the research is typically based on a limited number of cases, which is four in this research.

3.8.4   Confirmability

The confirmability relates to the level of objectivity that the researchers had (Bell et al., 2019). Total objectivity is unachievable in business research, but confirmability shows that researchers act in good faith. It should be evident that the researchers have not allowed theoretical tendencies or personal values to blatantly influence the way the research and the empirical findings are conducted (Bell et al., 2019). One issue that may be a concern is that due to personal reasons, two interviewees in group 3 were not able to participate face-to-face and joined the conversation over video conference which may affect the immediate contextualization and nonverbal communication as well as conducting the second focus group

only on video conference for the same reason (Easterby-smith et al, 2015). This was accepted after moving sessions multiple times after canceled appointments in the last minutes which could not be moved more.

3.8.5   Ethics in Research

Ethics in research are a crucial component of a trustworthy study that researchers require to acknowledge and address (Saunders et al., 2019). The purpose of the study underpins the ethical context that inspired the research of it alongside the ethical issues that arise by doing so (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021; Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). There are six key principles we ensured were addressed to ensure we conducted our study in an ethical manner. The first principle is regarding the protection of the participants, we showed the utmost respect towards the participants, or our focus group interviews whilst no harm was done to them mentally or physically. All the participants of our study are kept anonymous to safekeep their privacy safe and were well informed about the premises of the research details before securing their written consent, which can be found in appendix c. Our decision to protect their privacy alongside the consent form ensures the confidentiality of the data we collected. At the same time, we also wanted to protect the integrity of our research by avoiding deceptions regarding the research nature as well as explained to the participants that it is an independent study that is not supported by any organization; our research is purely conducted on the premise of academic curiosity with the ultimate goal of contributing to the brand building knowledge. We strive for transparency throughout the written process of our research study by explaining every step that led us to our conclusions as well as being honest with the participants to gain their trust in us because we deeply respect their eagerness to assist us in the execution of our master dissertation. Finally, we withhold our promise of a trustworthy study by avoiding misleading conclusions and assumptions (Easterby et al, 2021). The ethical conduct of our research is reflected and documented throughout our master dissertation whilst our personal bias, opinion and backgrounds never disturbed any part of it (Saunders et al., 2019).

4 Empirical Findings

4.1 Case Studies

Table 4. Overview of Case Studies

Case	Branded Skin	Advergame	Fake branded skin	Advertisement
Company	Balenciaga	Louis Vuitton	Ferrari	Nissin Cup Noodles
Industry	Luxury Fashion	Luxury Fashion	Luxury Automotive	Food
International Brand	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Video Game	Fortnite	Louis the Game	GTA V	FF XV
Genre	multiplayer action	adventure	open-world multiplayer rpg	fantasy action rpg
Timeline of IGA	21/09/2021-28/09/2021	4/08/2021-present	17/09/2013-present	29/11/2016-present
Exposure (in millions)	150	2	165	10
Outcome	positive	positive	positive	positive
Theoretical Components	Brand Core, Expression, Relationship, Personality,Communication, Reputation	Brand Core, Expression, Relationship, Personality,Communication, Reputation	Brand Core, Expression, Relationship, Personality,Communication, Reputation	Brand Core, Expression, Relationship, Personality,Communication, Reputation
References	Kering, 2024a;	Louis Vuitton, 2024;	Luebering, 2024;	Zelasko, 2024;
	Epic Games, 2024;	Steele, 2021;	GTA Wiki, 2024b;	IGN, 2020;
	Dexerto, 2024	McDowell & Shoaib, 2022	Active Player, 2024b	Statista, 2024

Balenciaga

Maison Balenciaga (Balenciaga) is a high fashion house founded in 1917 in San Sebastian in Spain by Cristobal Balenciaga (Kering Group, 2024a). Cristobal Balenciaga after founding success in his home country Spain decided to relocate his atelier in Paris in France in the midst of World War II in 1937 (Malach, 2022). Balenciaga was one of the fashion houses that were operating under the national socialist Germany's undertaking of Paris in 1940 alongside the likes of high fashion houses such as Chanel. Balenciaga revolutionized women's fashion with the prominent silhouettes whilst Christian Dior admittedly explained that high fashion house Dior was merely following in the footsteps of Balenciaga (Malach, 2022). Since Balenciaga was founded, it has been revolutionizing fashion to this day whilst the death of the founder Cristobal Balenciaga has not affected the success the powerhouse has met (Duncuff-Charleston,

2004). Balenciaga has caused such an impact in the Fashion world that haute couture is coined by Cristobal Balenciaga (Vogue, 2013).

In 2001 Balenciaga was acquired by Kering Group (Kering) (Kering Group, 2024a). Kering coordinates and harmonizes all functions for each house under the luxury conglomerate, however each house is capable of making their own creative decision in pursuit of growth (Kering Group, 2024b). Today Balenciaga has been under the art direction of Demma Gvasalia since 2015 (Kering Group, 2024c). The mission of Balenciaga is empowering the imagination of all talents by supporting and collaborating with talent of a diverse background from all around the world, whilst creativity is their utmost priority and promise as a high fashion brand (Balenciaga, 2024a). The high fashion house also engages in a variety of societal causes as well promises to operate with sustainability at the core of its operations (Balenciaga, 2024b). Balenciaga offers a variety of high fashion apparel for women, men, accessories, perfumes, footwear and has even expanded in the music industry (Balenciaga, 2024c). Balenciaga targets younger affluent consumers that care about fashion and appreciate the house's innovative and bold designs (Highsnobiety, 2021).

Louis Vuitton

Louis Vuitton is a luxury fashion house that was founded in 1854 by Louis Vuitton in Paris, France (Louis Vuitton, 2024). Louis Vuitton started off as a leather luggage crafting atelier that revolutionized the luggage industry with the innovative lock design that was made to endure lock tampering, transforming travel trunks to leather luggage treasure chests. In fact, the lock system developed by Louis Vuitton is so impeccably constructed that it is used to this day by the luxury conglomerate. Louis Vuitton was met with so much success that imitators became a huge issue during the 1890s (l'Etoile de Saint Honore, 2024). Monsieur Vuitton's son George found the perfect solution to his big knock-off problem, inspired his father's name initials he created a logotype that collage of it gave birth to a signature pattern that would make copying it nearly impossible for the imposters, which became one of the world's most iconic logotypes to this day (LVMH, 2024a). Louis Vuitton during the 1980s grew from a leather luggage crafting atelier to becoming a global leather goods giant under the stewardship of Henry Racamier, George's son Gaston-Louis Vuitton's son in law (Ostberg, 2024).

In 1987 Louis Vuitton under the leadership of Bernard Boussac merged with Moët et Chandon and Hennessy, the leading manufacturers of champagne and cognac, to create the luxury goods powerhouse LVMH (TFL, 2024; Ostberg, 2024). Today the LVMH luxury goods conglomerate has ownership of 75 houses with a promise to respect their distinct identities (LVMH, 2024b). LVMH has a mission to embody art de vive, sophistication and elegance for ever more with their maisons as vessels to fulfill their promise. Louis Vuitton strives to uphold the perpetuated vision of its founder Monsieur Vuitton for innovation with a rigorous spirit and settle for nothing more than excellence, iconic creativity (LVMH, 2024a).

The culture at Louis Vuitton reflects that of the houses positioning, luxury not only in terms of goods but also in terms of treatment of their employees as well as their customers, everyone is met the utmost respect worthy of a very important person that works or enjoys the Louis Vuitton goods (HSBC, 2023). Louis Vuitton is very serious about their communication strategy, they

not only focus on the digital aspect of it, but Louis Vuitton also actively focuses on establishing relations with all the stakeholders externally as much as internally (LVMH, 2024c). It is very important for the fashion house to effectively use their communication channels and adapt their strategy around the needs of the receiver of the message inside and outside the organization. Louis Vuitton has not only a strong identity, which is complimented by effective communications, it also has an astonishing reputation that highlights the excellency that the fashion conglomerate has characterized for over 160 years (Shults, 2023).

Ferrari

Ferrari is an Italian luxury sportscar manufacturer founded in 1929 by Enzo Ferrari under the name Scuderia Ferrari (Luebering, 2024). Scuderia Ferrari was a formula racing team that prepared Alfa Romeo cars, but soon after Enzo Ferrari was pushed out of the company in 1939. Signore Enzo carried out on his own creating the infamous Ferrari model Tipo 815 for another racing company to compete with the same year marking an important moment for the Ferrari legacy (Machado, 2023). In 1947 signore Enzo founded Ferrari Società per azioni (Ferrari) The first car to be designed and built entirely by Ferrari was the Ferrari 125S model with the iconic V-12 engine which became a signature feature of the corporation's cars (Luebering, 2024). Ferrari soon became synonymous with quality fast cars, solidifying the corporation's position as a global luxury car manufacturing industry, a position the company reclaimed in 1988 after a time of struggle. Ferrari was acquired by Fiat Chrysler, but in 2016 became an independent company (Ferrari, 2016). Today Ferrari is known for their fast cars with their iconic red color and their horse emblem (Autosprint, 2017).

Ferrari's mission is to create timeless icons for a changing world that epitomizes the power of a lifelong passion and limitless achievements (Ferrari, 2024a). The company's values are grounded in integrity of teamwork, tradition and innovation alongside ambitious expectations pushing limits where passion becomes the beauty of achievement. The horse symbolizes exclusive performance which the company embodies by crafting exclusive, authentic, and memorable experiences. Apart from manufacturing sportscars, Ferrari also offers a branded merchandise line that offers a wide selection of jackets, t-shirts, hats, and other accessories that bear the iconic horse logo of the company (Ferrari, 2024b), which is a sign of the brand's strength. Ferrari's culture is built around integrity towards their employees as well as their valuable customers that has made such an impact it became a pop culture sensation reflecting the company's core values of excellency in their manufacturing as well as design in fashion, sports and business (Shults, 2023).

The impact Ferrari has made on society is evidence of the strength of the brand that inspires people daily. Ferrari maintains a strong relationship with their customers as the company introduces themselves as customer-centric corporations that settles for nothing less than superior value adding cars as well as offerings in all the company's operations (Ferrari, 2024c). It goes without saying that Ferrari has an impeccable reputation to complement their excellent communication efforts on top of their superior luxury brand that is desired by the masses but accessible to few privileged (Brand Finance, 2021; Ferrari, 2019).

Nissin Foods

Nissin Foods is a Japanese food company that was founded in 1958 by Momofuku Ando (Zelasko, 2024). After World War II there was a food shortage in Japan so Momofuku after intense experimentation created the company's iconic instant noodles. Momofuku believed that "Peace will come when people have food." (Edwards, 2016). In 1971 Momofuku noticed that customers were reusing cups to rehydrate their instant ramen, so he produced the Cup Noodles people enjoy to this day. Over the years Nissin Foods expanded its operations to the United States of America, Europe, China, Thailand and India in Asia (Nissin Group, 2024a). The company offers a wide range of instant noodles that are adapted to the local market demand where Nissin Foods operates. The instant noodles invented by Momofuku were a great innovation that only fed the people on Earth, but also enjoyed by astronauts in space missions developed by Nissin Foods (Li, 2020). Once again, the idea of developing a new product was a result of customer needs, as the astronaut Soichi Noguchi who expressed his wish to enjoy a cup of noodles on his next space mission. Nissin Foods created a subsidiary company dedicated solely to developing food products for astronauts, providing them with a wide selection of noodle flavors and rice curry (Baseel, 2020).

The decisions Nissin Foods has made since its foundation show the customer-centric character of the corporation and speak volumes about how much they value their customers and non-customer stakeholders. Nissin Foods' core values can be described as per the company's site as a food C-R-E-A-T-O-R, Nissin emphasizes core values: creating food accessible worldwide (C), respecting ingredients and customers (R), ensuring enjoyment for all (E), advancing through innovation (A), training and development (T), staying open-minded and creative (O), and rewarding employees for their contributions (R) (Nissin Foods, 2024). The Nissin Foods communication efforts are always adapted to the market needs whilst the company treats their marketing operations with utmost respect in order to express their everlasting respect towards their stakeholders with transparency by employing digital channels, traditional media as well as public relations (Nissin Group, 2024b). Nissin Foods holds a reputation of a truly team-oriented company (Indeed, 2024) whilst from the customer perspective Nissin Foods is a company that is reliable, with convenient food products they can enjoy all round the world (Kaiser, 2022). Nissin Foods represents modern Japanese cuisine and makes it accessible for everyone to enjoy on Earth and outer space (Oh so Tasty, 2024).

4.2   The five Ws

4.2.1   What?

The question 'What" focuses on the type of brand message the corporations aim to deliver through their IGA efforts. By collecting and reviewing information available by the corporations as well as focus group interviews, we managed to identify what brand the organizations were trying to communicate effectively to the players and their customers. Upon meticulously researching the IGAs we recognized and categorized four distinct types of IGA alongside the presence of the brand in the video game. The types of IGA are Branded Skin, Advergame, Fake Branded Skin, and Advertising Board as for the noticeability of the brand in the video game environment it is categorized as strong and weak to create awareness.

Cosmetic Skin

We came across that a lot of companies have collaborated with video game developing companies to produce branded skins. After researching a variety of cases, we concluded the best example of this form of IGA for brand building is the Balenciaga Skins, a result of collaboration between Balenciaga and Epic games (Fortnite, 2024). The Balenciaga branded apparel avatar and accessory skins, and stickers that can be seen in figure 5 below.
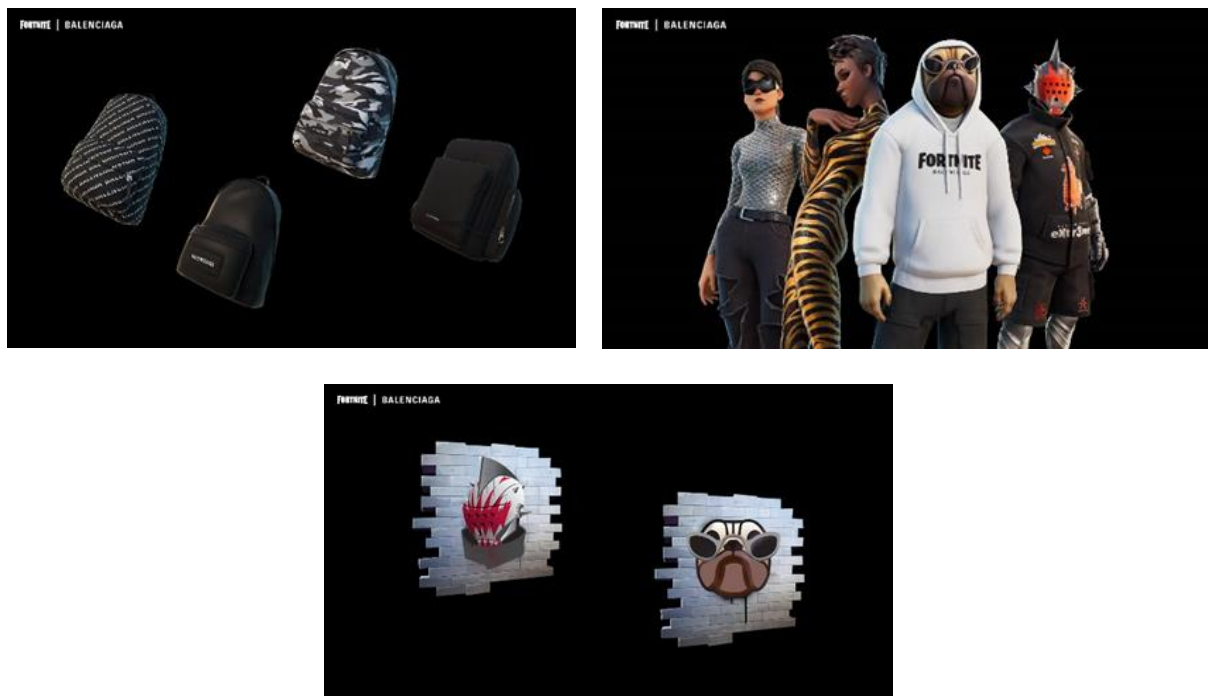
Figure 5. Balenciaga accessory skins in Fortnite (Fortnite, 2024).

Branded Game

When it comes to advergames, the gamification of advertising is a tool used by brands in recent years, however one case stood out. Louis Vuitton developed an adventure video game app for mobile devices, inspired by the signature Louis Vuitton prints the player navigates a world that resembles that of the popular video game The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild (Highsnobiety, 2021), see figure 6. The player is able to customize the character that resembles a bag charm, whilst the goal is to collect as many objects in the game as possible alongside 30 collectible NFTS (Highsnobiety, 2021), non-fungible token which is a digital branded asset (Zelazko, 2024).

Figure 6. Preview of Louis the game (Steele, 2021).

Replica Cosmetic Skin

We noticed that strong brands inspire the creation of counterfeit skins in video games. Developers often use them in order to avoid copyright infringement from the original brand owners. Counterfeit skins in games are not done in a malicious manner instead they are used to legitimize the video game environment and enforce the immersive nature of their world. A great example we discovered when we researched the topic was Ferrari and the skins the brand has inspired in the video game Grand Theft Auto V (GTA V). Ferrari has inspired the developers of the popular game GTA V to create Ferrari looking skins for the players to choose from in the game (GTA wiki, 2024a). Examples are shown in figures 7 and 8 of the fake Ferrari car skins and figure 9 and 10 the real-world models that inspired them.

Figure 7 left and Figure 8 right Fake Ferrari skins in GTA V, left Furia and right Itali RSX model (GTA wiki, 2024a).

Figure 9 left and figure 10 right Real Ferrari (Banks, 2019) left SF90 Stradale

and right F8 Tributo model (Ferrari, 2024).

Virtual Billboard

Companies always try to find new and exciting ways to advertise their products and deliver meaningful branded messages to their stakeholders. A company that is innovative with their advertising is Nissin Foods that used the video game Final Fantasy XV (FFXV) to advertise their iconic Nissin Cup Noodles (IGN, 2016). The brand was showcased on a billboard in the game, and as a branded truck that kick starts a mission for the player to collect the best ingredients to create the ultimate noodle cup to enjoy further into the game's campaign.

Figure 11. Nissin Cup IGA (Square Enix, 2024).

4.2.2 Who?

The "Who" question refers to who the IGA is for. Who are the people the corporations tried to reach with their IGA efforts for. Upon researching the nature of the IGA from the existing information available from the company sites alongside news outlets and other blog spot sites we concluded that all the companies wished to appeal to the gamers but depending on the form of the IGA different segments were recognized. The forms of IGA suggested the group of people the companies aspired to reach.

Cosmetic Skin

Balenciaga introduced branded skins in Fortnite in order to predominately reach young fashionable people that otherwise would not have been able to experience the brand outside the realm of Fortnite (Epicgames, 2021). The players that enjoy Fortnite are mainly around the ages of 18-24 predominantly (Worldmetrics, 2024), however, the game is enjoyed by all ages around the world (Shewale, 2024). During our pilot study we identified 6 people between the ages of 23-28 that have played or were playing Fortnite when they were approached to participate in our focus group interviews. The majority were familiar with the Balenciaga branded skins that appeared in 2021. Demna Gvasalia, artistic director at Balenciaga said during his Vogue interview:

> Our partnership with Epic Games didn't start with Fortnite, actually, it started with our own first video game, Afterworld, which we built using Unreal Engine (Epic Games's proprietary 3D design technology) to debut our Autumn 2021 collection…From there, we have continued to be inspired by the creativity of Unreal and Fortnite communities, it made total sense to me that we collaborate further by creating these authentic Balenciaga looks for Fortnite and a new physical Fortnite clothing series for our stores (Maguire, 2021).

The partnership leader of Epic Games Emily Levy said in Vogue, "We have lots of different people within our community. So, we know that fashion is of interest, " (Maguire, 2021), followed by Alan Cooper director, product and consumer communications at Epic Games also commented for the interview in Vogue:

> At present, brands cannot sell items on Fortnite independently. Fashion activations in the game are more about market awareness — reaching a hard-to-target audience of 'young, enthusiastic, digital, native folks (Maguire, 2021).

On average the player is estimated to spend US$ 85 per year, which translates to 7 US$ per month (Sacra, 2024). The Balenciaga skins available during the Balenciaga partnership with Epic Games cost US$ 12. In the real world the Balenciaga items from the house's collections cost on average over US$ 1, 500 (Balenciaga, 2024). The skins of the collaboration between the two companies are more affordable than the collection items of house Balenciaga, making them accessible to a greater group of people, especially the younger customers.

Branded Game

Louis Vuitton wanted to honor the memory of the eponymous founder and create an exciting new way for their young customers and fans of the brand to interact with the brand. The game developed for Louis Vuitton allows the lovers of the brand to interact with the brand in a fun and entertaining manner. Louis Vuitton expressed in their press release about the 200th anniversary of the luxury fashion house, "Beyond the homage, these entertaining alternative formats are an invitation to explore the history of the Maison from a contemporary perspective.", (Louis Vuitton, 2021).

Louis the Game is free to download in iOS and Android (Steele, 2021), which makes the mobile game accessible to everyone that wants to enjoy its content and navigate the world of Louis as Vivienne. By offering the game on mobile platforms, Louis Vuitton ensures that it can reach a wide range of users, from dedicated fans to casual mobile gamers who may not yet be familiar with the brand.

Replica Cosmetic Skin

GTA uses fake branded skins for the players in the game to choose from. There have been 140 million players since launch and are targeted at mature audiences above or the age of 18 (Sapieha, 2022).

In total, 195 million units have been sold worldwide between 2015-2024 (Clement, 2024). Even though GTA V was published more than 10 years ago, it is still one of the most popular video games. The implementation of fake brands in GTA V is designed to serve this largely engaged audience. When it comes to the Ferrari fake skin in the game, the players have the option to choose it in the story-mode. It does not cost real-world money, but you have to spend in-game funds to purchase the car. However, when playing online you have the additional option to use real-world money to get in-game currency to buy the car (RockStar, 2013). This approach can serve two main segments in the player base, it can be appealing to dedicated gamers who invest significant time to earn rewards but also to casual gamers who are willing to spend real money for quicker access to desirable in-game items.

Nissin Foods

Nissin Foods by collaborating with Square Enix aimed to target the niche yet loyal fan base of the FF franchise (Duran, 2018). Jaclyn Park the director of marketing for Cup Noodles told Duran for AListDaily, "There's a strong synergy between Nissin and Final Fantasy in terms of who our fans are, our brand personalities and our authentic Japanese roots, this partnership sets us up to continue to explore win-win." (AListDaily, 2018). Ryan Lacina, director of product marketing at Square Enix North America told Duran for AListDaily, "We both have incredible, passionate fans, and by the way of this partnership we are able to provide a unique way for both of our fans in the US to interact with each other's product in a way that feels like a natural extension of (*Final Fantasy*) history, " (AListDaily, 2018).

The game in 2016 was available in 2 editions, the normal as well as the ultimate deluxe edition (Kollar, 2016). The price point of the normal edition was US$ 84, 99 whereas the ultimate deluxe edition was $269. 99, however only 30, 000 copies were available for purchase, and they sold out immediately. Today FFXV costs US$ 32, 99 on Xbox (2024a), PlayStation (2024) and Windows (Steam, 2024). FFXV offers expansions of the world of FF for the price of US$ 5 for each pass, but it does not offer additional in-game purchases (Steam, 2024; Xbox, 2024b; PlayStation, 2024). The price point of FFXV is one that the majority of players can afford to spend in order to enjoy the video game, especially the current price in 2024.

4.2.3   Where?

The "where" question answers which medium the brand used in their efforts of trying to convey their branded message. Where the location is, the IGA is located. By analyzing various games and researching related websites, we identified the specific games that the advertisements most prominently featured.

Fortnite

The "where" question answers which medium the brand used in their efforts of trying to convey their branded message. Where the location is, the IGA is located. By analyzing various games and researching related websites, we identified the specific games that the advertisements most prominently featured.

Figure 12. Fortnite environment (Willings, 2022).

Figure 13. Example of skins in Fortnite (Reynolds, 2023).

GTA V

Grand Theft Auto V is an open-world action game that can be played as a single player with a main campaign story as well as online where the player can create a party with up to 4 players (GTA Wiki, 2024b). The game was released on the 17ᵗʰ of September in 2013 by RockStar Studios. The player can play the main campaign as 3 different characters whilst online the player can create and customize their own avatar. The game is available on Windows, Xbox and PlayStation for people to enjoy (GTA wiki, 2024b). There is not an exact number published by RockStars of the players that have downloaded the game however it is estimated to be over 165 million since its release (Playbite, 2024). The game is enjoyed by approximately 20 million players every month and 450 thousand players hourly (Active Player, 2024b). GTA V has met a lot of success ever since the game was released. GTA V has earned RockStars an astonishing estimate of US\$ 1 billion (Acres, 2023).

Figure 14. Overview of GTA V world (Sinha, 2014).

Final Fantasy XV

Nissin Foods advertisements were placed within FFXV in the form of an advertising board, blending real-world branding with the game's fantasy environment. FFXV is a Fantasy Action RPG video game available on Xbox and PlayStation developed by Square Enix and was released on the 29th of November in 2016 (IGN, 2020), that can be played on Windows as of the 6th of March in 2018 (Final Fantasy Wiki, 2024). The player navigates the open world of FFXV as the character Noctis Lucis Caelum. The video game is characterized by a sense of realism that is complimented by a hefty dose of fantasy, an example of what the FFXV world looks like can be seen in figure 15. FFXV is the 15th installment of the eponymous game franchise (Final Fantasy Wiki, 2024). FFXV has sold over 10 million copies around the world, whilst when the video game was released over 5 million players downloaded in 2016 (Statista, 2024).

Figure 15. Overview of the world of FFXV (Square Enix, 2024).

Louis The Game

Louis Vuitton developed an adventure video game app for mobile devices, inspired by the signature Louis Vuitton prints the player navigates a world that resembles that of the popular video game The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild (Highsnobiety, 2021), where brand is visible throughout the gameplay, see figure 16. Players can download the game through apple, android and google devices (Northman, 2021). The player is able to customize the character that resembles a bag charm, whilst the goal is to collect as many objects in the game as possible alongside 30 collectible NFTS (Highsnobiety, 2021), non-fungible token which is a digital branded asset (Zelazko, 2024).

Figure 16. Preview of Louis the game (Steele, 2021).

4.2.4 When?

The question of "when" is used to express the timeline of the IGA, we wanted to investigate the lifecycle of the IGAs. We noticed that in three out of four cases the timeframe of the IGA is perpetuated. However, when it comes to branded skins the time frame appears to be limited, players could obtain the skin for a limited amount of time only. The cases where the IGA is perpetuated are advergame, fake branded skin as well as in game advertisement board.

Lifecycle of cosmetic skin

The Balenciaga partnership with Fortnite was announced by Epic Games on the 20th of September in 2021 (Fortnite, 2021; Maguire, 2021; Yotka, 2021) followed by the in-game skins release a few hours later (Fortnite, 2021). The skins were available to purchase for a limited time between midnight of the 21st of September until midnight of the 28th of September in 2021 (Moore, 2021). The players that obtained the branded skin are enjoying it to this day, however the players that did not, no longer have the option to do so past the 28th of September in 2021. The branded skins are speculated to come back but at the time this research is conducted nothing is confirmed by Balenciaga or Epic Games.

Lifecycle of Louis the Game

The advergame Louis the game was released on the 4th of August in 2021 to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the luxury fashion house founder's birthday Louis Vuitton (De Klerk, 2021). The advergame is available to play on all iOS and Android mobile devices even in the present day (Steele, 2021; Google Play, 2024; Apple, 2024).

Lifecycle of Replica Cosmetic Skin

The fake car skins of Ferrari are available to all players to interact with since the release of the GTA V game, the 17th of September 2013 (GTA 5 Launch Timeline, 2022). These skins remain accessible to players to this day, as they are part of a long-lasting feature within the video game, game mechanics. The GTA V lifecycle of the offline scripted version is expected to last for as long as the video game graphics meet the compatibility requirements of the consoles the video game is available on as well the Windows requirements (Ponsford, 2020). The online version of GTA V is expected to last as long as the release of the next installment GTA VI of the eponymous franchise (Friend, 2023).

The availability of these fake branded skin like Ferrari, throughout the entire lifecycle of the game ensures that all players, regardless of when they start playing, have the opportunity to

interact with these imitated skins. The more time players invest in GTA V, they are more likely to come across these imitated branded skins, contributing to their frequent exposure.

Lifecycle of Nissin Foods Virtual Billboard

The appearance of Nissin Cup Noodles has been a part of the FFXV world, released 29th of November 2016 (Final Fantasy XV, 2016), and players are able to experience the content when they play and explore FFXV (IGN, 2024). Throughout the course of the game, the Nissin Cup Noodles virtual billboard is a feature in FFXV. Gamers have seen these advertising boards while playing since the game's first release to the present. This continuity ensures that players, both new and existing, are exposed to the brand promotion during their interactions with the game world.

The lifecycle of Nissin Cup Noodles within FFXV is closely connected to the availability and accessibility of the gaming console lifecycle and ongoing software updates provided by the game's developers, of which the game is played on, Xbox, PlayStation and windows. The sustained presence of Nissin Cup Noodles in FFXV reflects the enduring appeal and relevance of the game across multiple console generations (Playstation, 2024). Furthermore, as long as the company ensures compatibility with updated windows software, there is no expectation for the game to be removed from the digital distributor's platforms.

4.2.5   Why?

Relationship

Cosmetic Skin

Fortnite is a video game that has been popular and beloved by players all around the world ever since the online game was released in 2017 (Argentics, 2024). It is considered to be a cultural phenomenon in the gaming world amassing millions of loyal fans over the years (Argentics, 2024), with players spending well over 102 hours combined in one single weekend when the online game hosted a special event (MacDonald, 2023). The reason Fortnite is beloved by the fans of the online game is due to the developers' decisions to adapt to the player needs, expectations and wishes allowing them to live their fantasies in the world of Fortnite (MacDonald, 2023; Argentics, 2024). The online offers the player a unique experience where they can choose from a wide selection of skins to customize their avatar, weapons, vehicles complimented by frequent content updates, events among other features that keep the players engaged in Fortnite. This unique approach the developers of the online game have taken has led to the undeniable success of Fortnite, solidifying its position against other popular BR games such as PUBG and Warzone, as the most influential video game in history (Argentics, 2024). Inevitably Epic Games' decision to collaborate with Balenciaga, the first fashion brand to appear in the online game, was a natural continuation of the online game's value proposition

to the player base. The President of Epic Games Adam Sussman commented about the Fortnite collaboration with Balenciaga in an interview with Vogue, "Fashion has a long history in the Fortnite community, where players have the agency to show up however they want in our world…Self-expression is one of the things that makes Fortnite so unique, and there couldn't be a better first fashion partner than Balenciaga to bring their authentic designs and trendsetting culture to millions of players around the world." (Argentics, 2024).

Balenciaga's decision to partner with Epic Games allowed the brand to create meaningful relationships with the younger audience outside the realm of the everyday world and become part of an entertaining environment they chose to spend their time on for years. The partnership was both digital, in-game branded skins (Fortnite, 2021), as well as physical with Balenciaga releasing an exclusive Fortnite apparel collection that could be purchased through their online and physical stores (Maguire, 2021). The real-world collection included t-shirts, shirts, hoodies and hats that showcased the Fortnite logo alongside Balenciaga's logo.

This strategic decision of the two companies to introduce a physical collection allows the players to experience the partnership outside the realm of the pixel Fortnite world. The physical branded collection was sold out immediately after its announcement which you can see in picture y below. The price of the branded skins was roughly US$ 12 for the bundle which contained all the skins whilst the price of the physical collection apparel items ranged between US$ 300 to US$ 800 (Campbell, 2021). The earnings from the online partnership are estimated with simple calculations from the player daily number average and the price of the bundle to be roughly US$ 24 million assuming a 25% of the daily average player base purchased the skins. It is safe to say that the partnership between Balenciaga and Fortnite was a huge success for Balenciaga as well as Epic Games, as Balenciaga created precious experiences for the fashionable gamers both in a video game as well as in the real world.

The gamers during the focus group mention, "I totally forgot about Balenciaga omg they also were in Fortnite! [...]Wonder who got these they look weird (she is referring to the skins) [...]" (F1, G1), "Oh yeah omg I remember this! [...]I didn't buy it, not the vibe, but I saw a lot of dogmen (he refers to the branded skin of Balenciaga that was an avatar with a Bulldog's head instead of a human) running around." (M13, G3), ". . I didn't know this was the Balenciaga skin, I thought it was cool tho…" (M4, G1), "Did you get it? I didn't buy it, I thought it was ugly (laughs). I like Balenciaga, I think they are cool and high end but the skin was nothing like what I know Balenciaga is in real life. My friends got the skin though, I'm not sure as it has been a while since the skins were available in the market" commented another participant (M4, G1), "Yeah there's no way a grown man would buy these…I love fashion in my day to day life but I would never get these skins[...]I see the skin but I struggle to see the luxury fashion, where did it go? All I see is a hoodie on a dogman." (M7, G2).

Branded Game

The game was designed to appeal to the younger demographics Louis Vuitton aims to target by introducing a mobile game that incorporates NFTs in the gaming experience of the advergame. The NFTs were popular among the age group of 18-34 during the time the mobile game was released (Vigderman, 2024) and accounted for US$ 815 million in 2021 (Statista, 2024). The majority of the people that play mobile games are generation Z, between the ages of 15-27, followed by an older generation the Boomers (Freer, 2023). Mobile games appeal to a mixed audience of people of all ages with the majority of them being women (MAF, 2024). Mobile

games are a fast-growing segment of the video game industry with approximately 88 billion total mobile game downloads worldwide and accounts for the greater market share of 45% total earnings compared to other segments within the industry (MAF, 2024). The game is still available to download and be played to this day this research is being written with no suggestions of it being withdrawn anytime soon. The game has been downloaded by over 100 thousand people on Android devices (Google Play, 2024) and 2 million players overall since the day of its release (McDowell & Shoaib, 2022).

The game was met with positive reviews (Google Play, 2024; Apple, 2024) and managed to earn a lot of positive attention from the media (Encila, 2021; Steele, 2021). The game was praised by the major business news outlet Financial Times for the innovative advertising method that is employed by more and more luxury fashion houses (Prempeh, 2021). The game allowed people outside of the target customers to interact with Louis Vuitton in an entertaining manner (Steele, 2021), ensuring that the world would always remember who the legendary Monsieur Vuitton was and what the organization stands for (Prempeh, 2021). Louis the game was a great success for Louis Vuitton which led to the release of two additional expansions for the mobile game in 2022 (Trajcevski, 2022).

The gamers commented, "This is an advertisement? Wow that looks cool! [...]yeah I'd go play it, where can I find it?" (F11, G3), "Omg they copied Zelda holy frick! I mean yeah it looks cool cause it's Zelda but like I don't know how to feel about this[...]" (M5, G2), "Ohh that looks so pretty! I saw the article about it but haven't played it myself but I "want" to now (laughs in excitement) [...]" (M2, G1). Participants during the second focus group discussed Louis the game and said, "Video games are a form of art and I respect them for this reason [...]when I play a game (he refers to video game) is not only because I enjoy playing, it's also because I think it looks cool." (M5, G2), "Absolutely, games are art! (he expressed his opinion very passionately) I love playing video games, I started playing video games because I like how the characters looked…" (M7, G2). In another focus group another participant expressed her love towards the design of the video games, "I play video games that I like how they look, I really like the design and the different looks games have (she refers to video games) [.] so I think advertisements need to do the same[.] I wouldn't choose a skin that looks ugly and I wouldn't choose a skin that is my favorite brand because it is my favorite brand, it needs to look good, you know?" (F11, G3).

Replica Cosmetic Skin

Fans of the game are not only playing the game a decade since it was first released but are waiting for the next installment in the game series GTA VI. GTA has become such an essential part of popular culture due to the game's representation of urban life, addressing of societal issues, corruption, and politics among others with a sharp deliverance (Anderson, 2023). The game installments are always published with a curated list of soundtracks that have affected mainstream culture outside the marketing boundaries of RockStar efforts. The influence of GTA does not end there, with multiple films, shows and other media being inspired by GTA. Although GTA has endured a fair share of controversy due to the raw representation of gang violence, drugs, and sex among others, GTA embodies a cultural touchstone that has made a legacy in gaming, music, storytelling, and immersion, resonating with audiences worldwide

(Anderson, 2023; Kumar, 2024). The cultural impact GTA has made seeps into Ferrari that although is not officially collaborating with the popular game franchise it allows players to live their fantasies of owning a Ferrari car even if it is not the real branded skins, they get to drive around the world of GTA V. Zelnick, the CEO of Take-Two, a holding company that owns RockStar Games, explained in an interview that the reason for why GTA V is a fictional world that requires help of certain items such as fake brands to make it come to life, he expressed the importance of iconic brands for the setting in that world (Sinclair, 2022), "The world of GTA is a fictional world, so to bring real-life brands in, they really have to be iconic and they have to fit within that world. " (Sinclair, 2022).

The gamers commented, "I would just pick whatever is cool […] I think all my life choices are pretty purely aesthetics. [...]I just pick whatever I feel looks cool. If it's, sometimes it's like always the fastest car. Yeah, as long as it's the fastest car and it looks cool, then I'll probably pick it. I don't care about the brand or anything." (M7, G2), "I would firstly choose the stats if, I think M7 mentioned it, like if there was a way to transform it to choose how it looks after stats, but that's because stats are more important for me. I might choose something that might look like a brand, but only if it was aesthetically pleasing for myself." (M5, G2), " the games have many cars in this like with the real cars in the reality in GTA and Need for Speed. And my favorite one was actually one red Ferrari car because it's a famous car in real life and I will have no chance buying it in the near future." (M3, G1), "I won't see it as the original brand, I will think it's funny and I will know it's like they're referring to the original brand" (F11, G3), "I feel the same, the brand doesn't matter to me. If it's a big or some small version of the original brand, oh it's interesting like it might be even creative if they change the brand in a very very funny way." (F10, G3), "But if I create my own character, I probably would choose mine to have one that looks like an iPhone." (M3, G1), "I would have picked something that is according with the character because I want to feel the whole gaming experience to be more cohesive" (M4, G1), "I mean, if it's something I like, I would pursue it in the game. Let's say if it's a GTA or a racing game, I like the Nissan cars, especially the GTR. I would choose it, but otherwise. I mean, if it's not relevant to the game or I would just say it doesn't fit in, then I would not choose it. This would be weird. I wouldn't say that they appeal to me differently. I mean, it's cool, but it's not something that has the appeal to me." (M9, G2)

The implementation of imitation brands in GTA, RockStar Games facilitates a higher level of player involvement. Since the release, GTA V has generated around US$7. 7B in revenue (Lu, 2023), through game sales, in-game currency purchases and expansions via GTA online. Even though it has been a decade since its release, it is still being bought and is topping downloading rankings and sales charts (Clementc, 2024), indicating that it has fostered a sustained interest and a loyal fan base.

Virtual Billboard

The impact FF has made in the video gaming world is apparent from not only the multiple installments in the popular game series, but also the many ways FF has altered the video gaming world we know today (Shea, 2024; Stephen, 2024). FF is the leading example of action fantasy role-playing video games with impeccable mechanics and outstanding design that create an ere atmosphere that transcends the player in the world of FF (Stephen, 2024). The 15th installment of FF has sold over 10 million copies around the world, whilst when the video game was released over 5 million players downloaded in 2016 (Statista, 2024), exposing Nissin Cup Noodles to every player that has enjoyed the game. FF revolves around the concept of the cycle of life as it stands for an allegory of the real world visualized as the dreamy cyberpunk world of FF (Shea, 2024). FF has created a legacy in the video gaming industry over the past 25 years

that has inspired industries outside of the mainstream like luxury fashion, Louis Vuitton using popular characters from the FF world to pose as models for campaigns (New Wave, 2024). The attention that FF has amassed over the years contributed to Nissin Foods' positive attitude towards the brand's appearance in FF. People found the advertisement peculiar, however being exposed to the Nissin Cup Noodles in FF made them crave a cup of Nissin Foods noodles (Buckley, 2017).

Nissin Foods together with FFXV target a diverse audience. The core demographic includes individuals between 18-35 that appreciate rich narratives and expansive virtual worlds. When integrating advertising within the video game, Nissin Foods aims to connect with the gaming community, which shares a significant overlap in its target market with FFXV, particularly among younger consumers who are both gamers and frequent purchasers of instant noodles (Yeung & Ogura, 2023).

The focus group participants expressed the importance of ads needing to fit with the audience. It was also expressed that since it simulates real life it's necessary to have it in the game as well. The gamers mention, "I'm really not noticing the brands unless they're, like, right in my face, you know, sometimes even some parts of the game that they will make it obvious to see like McDonald's or a Pizza Hut ad. Feels as if they force you to see the brands you know, but if not, I won't notice them." (F11, G3), ". I can understand and kind of accept real-life advertisements. That kind of matches the setting, like a huge billboard in an open place like in GTA. If it has a huge billboard that says Pepsi or Sprite or something though, I have a caveat for this [..] even if it's used as an imitation tactic, even if the company is getting money from the advertisements, if it fits the concepts, I can vibe with that. I mean, if it makes the setting more realistic, it's OK for me." (M5, G2), "I feel like if you don't have it (the same type of advertisement placement like in real life), it just breaks immersion. It feels like it was just empty, or it didn't exist. I wouldn't mind. I probably wouldn't notice it either because I don't really notice it as well like there, but for me then if I am, I rarely play these types of games, but it adds to the authenticity of it like you are there in real life, either looking at it or playing it right. That's how I feel about it." (M7, G2).

Following the placement of billboard ads in FFXV, Nissin Foods capitalized on the collaboration by releasing special edition noodle cups featuring FFXV themes. The cross-promotion strategy showcases perceived successful promotion of it in the game and boosting sales to further strengthen the brands connection with the gaming community (Yeung & Ogura, 2023).

Halo Effect

Cosmetic Skin

Fortnite is a video game that is beloved by players all around the world so much that it is a pop culture staple as well as the most influential online game (Argentics, 2024). The reason Fortnite is so successful is because Epic Games have created a video game with a strong brand identity that is a reflection of the corporation's core brand identity. Epic Games brand essence is the creation of collaborative environments that inspire creativity and welcome everyone to contribute as the organization values their employees as much as their external stakeholders and even more (Epic Games, 2024). The respect the organization holds for its employees is reflected on the treatment of the players of Fortnite, the same way employees feel valuable actors in the company, the players inspire the company to develop and incorporate features in

Fortnite for them to enjoy (MacDonald, 2023; Indeed, 2024). Fortine is an online game designed for everyone to enjoy, express themselves, be creative, overall is the perfect pixel world for people of all ages to have fun in (Argentics, 2024; MacDonald, 2023; Indeed, 2024; Epic Games, 2024).

Balenciaga on the other hand is a luxury fashion house that prides themselves in creative innovation, offering their customers pieces of art they can own for a lifetime (Balenciaga, 2024a). The brand is not for everyone to enjoy, it is designed to meet the expectations only of the most eclectic fashion lovers who will invest in owning pieces from the Balenciaga collection. Luxury fashion brands are perceived as distant, a fantasy oftentimes (Kapferer, 2009). Balenciaga benefited greatly from collaborating with Epic Games, as it allows customers and non-customers to not only experience the brand outside the realm of the confining real world, but the brand is associated with a brand that is equally strong however is beloved for being a fun experience for all (Maguire, 2021). The partnership was covered by a multitude of news outlets with Vogue and the New York Times being the biggest mainstream media to cover the partnership (Friedman, 2021; Maguire, 2021; Yotka, 2021), bringing a lot of positive attention to the partnership between the fashion and the online game titans.

The gamers' thoughts during the focus group about the effect Fortnite had on Balenciaga's brand were positive, regardless of their thoughts about the skins personally. The gamers expressed, "Yeah, definitely, I have noticed brands in video games. The games like Fortnite have a lot of brands in the game with all the collaborations that they do, there's so much branding in the game and yeah, like you see it throughout all aspects of the game and the collaborations they do, that's just a tons of different brands interacting with each other so I definitely pay attention, It's hard to miss them that is what Fortnite is known […] I don't get annoyed no, the opposite like if it's brands I know…" (M13, G3), "[...]For me, collaborations between gaming companies and other companies, the collaboration represents what the company is about, you know, like Fortnite wants to be trendy which is why they partnered with Balenciaga[...]". (F11, G3), ". . it makes a lot of sense for them to want to be where the kids are [...] I mean it's obvious what Balenciaga is trying to do, they want to come off as cool, hip and trendy, although we all know that's not the case (laughs) [...]". (M7, G2), "[..] I would think that my favorite game is collaborating with some high-level brand, which means the game is also very high level." (F1, G1).

Branded Game

The decision of Louis Vuitton to develop a mobile game had a positive effect on the brand's association with an upcoming new form of technological advancement, NFT, as well as taking advantage of the appeal of mobile games. It modernized the brand that has a rich history in the world of luxury fashion. The gamers expressed their opinion and mentioned, "[...]I mean kind of like that cause if you want to play the game, this kind of game (Louis the game), you've got a lot of options [...]". (M3, G1), "Never seen that (Louis the game) [...]I love when they do that, it's very funny for me[...]but it doesn't make me mad. I think it's very funny and I love when they do that because sometimes it's funny to see like these characters in another space, in like a game-way.". (F11, G3), "[...]if they have this game (Louis the game), they (Louis Vuitton) won't put too much focus on this game and I think it's not their main task the gameplay, is their branding[...]". (M10, G3).

Replica Cosmetic Skins

The association between GTA V and the imitation branded skin can create a powerful halo effect. Ferrari, known for its luxury, performance and exclusivity, lends these attributes to the vehicles within the game. It can significantly enhance the game's overall appeal. The desirability of vehicles enhances players' motivation to earn, purchase and customize these cars, which can foster a sense of achievement and pride in their virtual collection. The gamers mention, "Me and my friend used to spend a lot of time to just get money in the games to afford things in the games, just like GTA. That was until I realized that there were a lot of cheat codes to get money, but that took away the thrill and motivation to continue playing. So I became a bit against using them to make it fun again. " (F2, G1), "If Aston Martin had a car skin in the game I was playing of course I would choose it if even I don't like the colors or the design of the car because I could never own an Aston Martin car in my life so I would choose it in the game." (F11, G3), to which another participant commented, "I could never drive an Aston Martin car in real life because they are very expensive but if I saw it in a game, I would definitely choose it. The same thoughts I have for Balenciaga, but only if the skin looks appealing to me, in the case you show me I see a skin that looks ugly in my opinion so even if I can't buy a Balenciaga t shirt in real life, I wouldn't choose the Fortnite skin regardless of if it is a luxury brand." (F12, G3).

Nissin Foods

By placing billboards in a popular game like FFXV, Nissin Food align themselves with the gaming culture, demonstrating an understanding and appreciation of the interest and lifestyles of the target audience. Some in the focus groups expressed the connection of the branded advertisement and the game should be targeting the same group, "I would say for example an advertisement of hotels. com is not that related to the game like FIFA. But for example, beats by dre would be related to the NBA games, cause that's the equipment you're going to wear while playing it." (M3, G1), M4, and F2 agreed to the statement of M3 stated above.

The focus group participants suggested a halo effect when familiar and favored brands are advertised in beloved video games. Participants consistently expressed positive reactions when brands they liked were promoted, which highlights the emotional connection and pride they feel towards these brands. The gamers said, "I feel like, for example, in my home country if I see like a start of a brand. "OK, so I will say this just an example if it helps you. So there's a brand with clothes and stuff, that one of my friends started it, and right now I see like their social, their Instagram. They have even a website that they didn't have and I'm like happy, proud that I see this brand." (F12, G3), "I would feel happy that my favorite brands will be known by more people and others will know how good the brand is and how good the product is." (F1, G1), "It feels great when a favorite brand is shared more with the world. Absolutely. […]" (F2, G1), "It's let's say for example, if you see the form of advertisement on the TV shows like you're seeing a bunch of people you don't know and they are introducing how good this brand is, I don't like that. but if you say, let's say they have a, they pick a kpop stars or a famous artist in this world and they have shown some whatever the cosmetics or the jewelries or the bags or the fine clothes. I'd love to see that especially for let's say. Because you can see that their advertisement is still in high quality, and you can appreciate how good it is. […]" (M3, G1).

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Gamification of marketing communications

Cosmetic Skin

Balenciaga engages in both traditional and digital advertising. However, the luxury brand has been implementing modern ways of advertising their collections by employing innovative mediums and tactics such as the collaboration with Epic Games in Fortnite.

The gamers' thoughts during the focus group towards the gamification of Balenciaga's advertising was not perceived in a positive way, the gamers were rather skeptical. The gamers expressed, "My dude you already said what I was thinking, Balenciaga is a brand I only know of because of stunts like this (he means publicity stunts) [...]They didn't choose Fortnite randomly, it was planned[...]What I mean is they chose (Balenciaga) a game that is played by kids to make them like them too (he refers to Balenciaga.". (M6, G2), "As much as I despise brands and I really do, I hate marketing no offense to you girls (he is referring to aggressive and oversaturated advertising), I think it's smart for the companies to have skins in games (he means video games) [...]like this Balenciaga skin is ugly as frick but it sticks to you, I get why kids would take their mom's credit card to get it (he refers to the skin) [...]" (M5, G2), " I want to mention, I feel like in this way they can contact new customers[...]" (M3, G1).

Branded Game

The decision of Louis Vuitton to develop a mobile game is evidence of luxury fashion's efforts to modernize their communication efforts by gamifying their advertisement. Participants of the focus groups' thoughts on advergames overall as an advertising method were mixed, some were more skeptical than others, however the majority perceived the advergames as a fresh take on traditional advertising. The gamers said, "It's interesting that you mentioned advergames, I read about it happening since all the way back in 2000's something like that. Burger King actually made a game for Xbox, and it kind of brought the company back because they made an advertisement in a way that you couldn't tell that it's Burger King…" (F2, G1), "That's such a perfect way of advertising[...]I feel like the focus is not on gameplay however but instead on the advertisement (she means the brand message) [...]" (F10, G3), "Yeah, I think it's nice. I wouldn't play it regularly. I wanna play it once and have like, all these little skins that we were talking about and think it looks cute. I think it's great. I'd really like if companies they do ads like this, I like it, it's so cool." (F11, G3).

Replica Cosmetic Skins

The integration of the Ferrari imitation branded skin in GTA V does not translate to a traditional marketing revamp considering it is not actually the real brand's intention to implement it in the game, but rather illustrates the gamification of real-world brands. By using imitation branded skins, GTA V enhances the gaming experience while leveraging the power of electronic word-of-mouth. This strategy demonstrates significant progress in how games can incorporate and benefit from brand associations without direct partnerships. Just in January 2024, the average watched number of viewers at once was 243 thousand (Clement, 2024). Overall, the participants did not express any strong opinions in regard to the evolution and gamification of e-wom with one exemption.

Virtual Billboard

Historically, Nissin Foods used different traditional marketing techniques to promote their Noodles. Using television commercials and print advertisements (iSpot. Tv, 2024), billboards and outdoor advertising in high-trafficked areas (Smith, 2007) to increase visibility. Social media presence such as Facebook and Instagram (Nissin Foods Europe, 2024). Recognizing the growing influence of video games, Nissin Foods integrated their marketing effort in video games (Yeung & Ogura, 2023), which signifies an evolution in their marketing approach.

In general, the response of the majority of the focus groups was that they mentioned that these kinds of advertisements make the game realistic but expressed that the advertisement needs to be related to the type of game and expressed that as long as it's not interrupting their gameplay, they accept it. The gamers said, "the advertisement make the gaming feel more like the real life" (F1, G1), "[...]it would be more as to what F1 said that OK, it makes the game more realistic." (F2, G1), "I mean, if it makes the setting more realistic, it's OK for me." (M6, G2), "I feel like if you don't have it, it just breaks immersion. It feels like it was just empty, or it didn't exist." (M7, G2), "[...]having advertisements like those in the real world that would be reasonable and relevant because it may look boring and empty without that skin. " (M9, G2), " So depends on the game, for example, If they weren't there, it wouldn't feel like it's real […]" (F12, G3), "[...]the product you promote in the collaboration have to be in the related kind of industry." (M3, G1), "So there's, like you show up too many times. That would be kind of like annoying." (M4, G1), "It makes me not like the brand because it pops up too much, then it's annoying. So yeah, it depends on how they are advertising." (F11, G3), "I would say for example an advertisement of hotels. com is not that related to the game like FIFA. But for example, beats by dre would be related to the NBA games, cause that's the equipment you're going to wear while play it." (M3, G1).

Aesthetics of the IGA

The participants of the focus group focused a lot on the IGA aesthetics and expressed their disdain against skins and brand appearances in the video games in such a way that breaks the video game immersion and rather feels more like the real-world advertisements especially in video games where the genre demands it.

The participants of the 2nd and 3rd group expressed very strong feelings about the importance of the overall video game design alongside the IGA. The gamers explained, "Video games are a form of art and I respect them for this reason [...]when I apply a game (he refers to video game) is not only because I enjoy playing, it is also because I think it looks cool." (M7, G2), "Absolutely, games are art! (he expressed his opinion very passionately) I love playing video games, I started playing video games because I like how the characters looked…" (M5, G2), "I play video games that I like how they look, I really like the design and the different looks games have (she refers to video games) [.] so I think advertisements need to do the same[.] I wouldn't choose a skin that looks ugly and I wouldn't choose a skin that is my favorite brand because it is my favorite brand, it needs to look good, you know?" (F11, G3).

Conflicting outcome

Overall, the media praised the companies that decided to gamify their communication efforts were perceived as innovative, a fresh take on otherwise traditional means of advertising. The comments the gamers made during the focus group were convoluted, some were accepting of the IGA efforts of the company cases, however others were not convinced that advertising belongs in video games.

The gamers mention, "No way, is this legitimate? It's like They stole Zelda and just slammed Louis Vuitton all over it (he means they replaced the video game Zelda with Louis Vuitton) [...]It's a win-win (he means for Louis Vuitton) but I don't like that they copied a game I love (he was physically uncomfortable when presented with the case example) [...]I understand why they do this though they are trying to appeal to kids" (M7, G2), "[...]I feel like this, if the game is fun I will enjoy it even if it's a brand game like Louis Vuitton." (M8, G2), "I would say that the consistency between the brand and the game is very important. If it's a good collaboration, that means the attributes of the brand and the game are consistent. And that will make gamers know more of this brand. But if it's an FPS game and collaborate with cosmetic brands, that will be very weird, that will maybe have some negative impact on the brand (she refers to the video game brand)." (F1, G1), "[...]I feel like they launch a game just for promotion and they are not professional [...] like is ok for games by gaming companies, but not for a non-game company to launch some games (the respondent was confused by Louis Vuitton decision to make a mobile game)." (F1, G1), "That seems to be the case (F2 agrees with F1 concerns about the brand purpose of making an advergame). Like, why would you play a game that is created by a company through? To just tell you like, 'Hey, I am a company that you can buy my products from, but I'm going to make you have fun with me." That doesn't make sense to me, I guess it does for the company though." (F2, G1).

The participants that had strong negative reactions toward the IGA cases during the final part of our focus group reflected positively towards the IGA cases. They said:

> I would like to say that M6 said something really good, that if something is done in an aesthetically pleasing way, in an artistic way, although I consider myself to not be affected by advertisements, I think IGA can work for everyone, the gamers and the companies but obviously that's just my opinion… (M5, G2),

> Look, I think in the context of a game that's like said in a modern setting. I don't like to be advertised to or like to be used as advertising myself, maybe even by just showing off a brand in a very like, obvious way [...]Everything depends on context. [...]So if you can be any part of it, but that just pulls me out of the game [...]it affects somewhat both the main brand (he refers to companies that collaborate with video games) in terms of whatever they are trying to advertise, but also whoever accept that the money (he refers to the video game companies), it tarnishes the reputation a little bit as them almost becoming a sellout, which is like do you have no dignity in terms of like yeah, obviously everyone has a price, but it's just feels kind of shit where it's like, do you really want to sacrifice your artistic vision just for money that. And it's like edges tarnishes it a little bit. So yeah, but if the context is correct, then I think IGAs are fine (M7, G2).

In the case of fake branded skins, although strong brands experience the effects of counterfeit representation of their items in video games, the players perceived the fake brands as a nice touch to the video games, legitimizing the video game world as a simulation of the real. They mention, "I think, in that case I would have picked something that is according to the character because I want to feel the whole gaming experience to be more like a whole…I don't care for the fake brands (laughs), it's funny to like show brands like that in games, that's really funny." (M4, G1), as well as another gamer said:

> But I think for me it doesn't matter. Yeah, like even in Saints Row, I think it's the same as GTA. I don't play GTA a lot, but Saints Row is actually the same and I just chose it because of the design. If I like the same for me, I mean it's cool if it's like a Ferrari or whatever. But I think if it is not a car game, for example specifically, then I don't care like I don't care about the brands. I won't see it as the original brand, I think it's funny, like when they make a knock off, like in real life, I wouldn't choose a knock off over an original. But like if I'm in a game and it doesn't matter (F11, G3).

4.3 Summary of case study findings

Table 5. Aspects that contribute to effective IGA efforts as per our findings

Aspect that contributes in succesful IGA	No. of participants
Type of brand	13
Brand loyalty	10
Brand awareness	13
Brand personality	13
Match between video game and IGA	13
Positive Feelings	9
Self-Expression	12
Aesthetics	13
Frequency	10
Saturation	11
Immersion	13
Price	4
Cosmetic Skin	7
Branded Game	4
Virtual Billboard	9
Replica Skin	13

Table 6. Focus group IGA impressions

First word	No. of participants
Fun	8
Interesting	13
Kids	9
Irrelevant	5
Wow	4
Greedy	6
Beautiful	5
Ugly	8
Unnoticed	10
Creative	9

Table 7. Type of gamers in the focus groups

Participant F=Female M=Male	Casual Gamer	Engaged Gamer
F1		X
F2		X
M3	X	
M4		X
M5	X	
M6	X	
M7		X
M8		X
M9		X
F10	X	
F11		X
F12	X	
M13		X

5 Analysis of empirical fidnings

5.1 Corporate Dimension

5.1.1 Gamification of advertising

The most important aspect of brand building is the type of advertising the corporations select to be showcased in video games. In most cases the IGA is incorporated in the environment of the video game development company the organization partners with. The types of IGA can take in a video game are branded skins, sponsored skins and fake branded skins. There seems to be an exemption of one type of IGA which is the advergame, the branded game is specifically developed for the communication purposes of an organization's brand, for example Louis Vuitton developed a mobile game to celebrate their founder's memory.

Cosmetic Skin

Each corporation we examined had a very unique type of IGA that expresses the focus that was placed around brand awareness. The most prominent way to identify the corporation during the communication efforts was branded skins, as was the case for luxury house Balenciaga with branded skins in Fortnite. Upon reviewing the Balenciaga branded skin case it became clear why the house chose this type of IGA, "it made total sense to me that we collaborate further by creating these authentic Balenciaga" said Demna Gvasalia the artistic director at Balenciaga in an article for Vogue (Maguire, 2021). Balenciaga chose this form of IGA in accordance with our frame of reference as the luxury wanted to focus on an immersive form of IGA (Ghosh et al., 2021), that strives to promote the brand heavily by leveraging a partnership between two independent organizations (Ingendahl, et al, 2022; Palmas et al., 2021). This form of Cosmetic IGA allows organizations to strategically leverage the video gaming environment to effectively integrate their communications efforts (Birk et al., 2017). Balenciaga created in collaboration with Epic Games a demonstrative branded skin placement the players of Fortnite could enjoy by opting to use the skin for their avatar, accessories, and stickers (Birk et al., 2017; Reay & Wanick, 2023; Ingendahl, et al, 2022;), "But for me, it's not about the appearance of the skin (Balenciaga skin), I know that I'm wearing something, that I know in real life, that makes me feel the character I'm playing is more personalized." (M4, G1).

Branded skins allowed the players of Fortnite to interact with the luxury house beyond the confines of the real world, where the brand is enjoyed by a secluded group of individuals (Reay & Wanick, 2023), "We have lots of different people within our community. So we know that fashion is of interest, " said Emily Levy, the partnerships lead of Epic Games (Maguire, 2021). The players we had the opportunity to interview during our focus groups although were skeptical about the collaboration because they were not the target audience of the co-branded

collaboration expressed that they believe it was an effective form of IGA for Balenciaga, "I think it's smart for the companies to have skins in games (he means video games) [...]like this Balenciaga skin is ugly as frick but it sticks to you, I get why kids would take their mom's credit card to get it (he refers to the skin) [...]" (M5, G2), "I would buy it (he refers to the Balenciaga skin) because it's quite interesting, you wear something, you know, in real life." (M4, G1), "I don't have much to say to be honest, I think Balenciaga is smart because it is easy to remember, it stands out a lot, but I don't want to buy this…" (M9, G2).

Although the players had concerns regarding the house of Balenciaga appearing in Fortnite because they are skeptical around IGA, they agreed unanimously that it is an effective immersive way of promoting a brand in a video game setting. They commented during the focus groups, "[...]I would think that my favorite game is collaborating with some high-level brand to make skins, that means the game is also very high level." (F1, G1), "Yeah, definitely, I have noticed brands in video games. The games like Fortnite have a lot of brands in the game with all the collaborations that they do, there's so much branding in the game and yeah, like you see it throughout all aspects of the game and the collaborations they do, that's just a tons of different brands interacting with each other so I definitely pay attention, It's hard to miss them that is what Fortnite is known […] I don't get annoyed no, the opposite like if it's brands I know…" (M13, G3), "It would still be somewhat funny, and I wouldn't be as mad because in context, it's somewhat fits, but if it's too immersion breaking, there's just no. Then I don't like the brand because it's like, Nah, you're just. Something's not right with doing this like Balenciaga and monster energy drinks." (M7, G2).

Regarding the look of the cosmetic skins the gamers expressed that they perceive video games as a form of art which is why the design of the IGA needs to meet some very high expectations to not only represent the brand but also live up to the gamers' anticipation over high level of artistry. They commented during the focus groups and here is what they said, "Video games are a form of art and I respect them for this reason[...]when I play a game (he refers to video game) is not only because I enjoy playing, it's also because I think it looks cool." (M5, G2), "Absolutely, games are art! (he expressed his opinion very passionately) I love playing video games, I started playing video games because I like how the characters looked…" (M7, G2). In another focus group another participant expressed her love towards the design of the video games, "I play video games that I like how they look, I really like the design and the different looks games have (she refers to video games) […] so I think advertisements need to do the same[.] I wouldn't choose a skin that looks ugly, and I wouldn't choose a skin that is my favorite brand because it is my favorite brand, it needs to look good, you know?" (F11, G3).

Branded Game

Of all the cases of IGA we examined, branded games were the most special type of IGA. branded games are a fascinating form of advertising employed by corporations that want to communicate their branded message to their target audience in an entertaining manner, supported by the theory of de la Hera (2019), and Birk et al. (2017). Kretchmer (2005) argues that advergames are developed in a way that imitates classic video game formats and world-enabling organizations to effectively promote their branded message to the desired audience, "That's such a perfect way of advertising[...]I feel like the focus is not on gameplay however but instead on the advertisement (she means the brand message) [...]" (F10, G3), another participant commented "No way, is this legitimate? It's like they copied Zelda and just put Louis Vuitton in it [...]It's a win-win (he means for Louis Vuitton) but I don't like that they copied a

game I love (he was physically uncomfortable when presented with the case example)." (M7, G2). Zhao & Renard (2018) highlight the importance for the video game component of the advergame to be entertaining. "I feel like this, if the game is fun, I will enjoy it even if it's a brand game, like Louis Vuitton." (M8, G2), which was an opinion expressed by another participant of our focus group interviews "Entertaining sure [...]is not what they do (he refers to Louis Vuitton) not what they are known for, but I hear it[...]what I mean is it's an entertaining way for Louis Vuitton to promote themselves but it's confusing to me." (M5, G2).

Overall, the participants of our focus groups expressed that it was an entertaining alternative to advertising, "Never seen that (Louis the game) [...]I love when they do that, it's very funny for me[...]but it doesn't make me mad. I think it's very funny and I love when they do that because sometimes it's funny to see these characters in another space, like in a game-way." (F11, G3), "You have many of these kinds of games. Games that exist with better quality, but yeah this can be fun for some I suppose." (M3, G1), "It's very creative and I'm impressed! I didn't know that this existed, and I will definitely play Louis the game." (F12, G3), "These are the type of games I would sometimes get because if you open up the Kellogg's packet or whatever and you would get like a CD or whatever you'd play those because there was the type of games you would get usually, and they were fun to a certain extent." (M7, G2).

Replica Cosmetic Skin

The in-game brands mimic real-world automotive brands such as Ferrari that creates a sense of familiarity among players. While the brand used is not real, they remind players of the real high-end car brands, therefore maintaining a level of subconscious brand recall as suggested by Danesi (2013). This technique takes advantage of gamers' existing associations and impressions of performance and luxury, which are central to these real-world brands. GTA V is a prime example of a contemporary approach by using imitation branded skin that blends into the game's satirical take on modern society. The reason for the replica cosmetic skin is because of the mechanics and design in the game (Sinclair, 2022). The use of parody brands serves to entertain and whether intentionally or unintentionally, promotes the concept of luxury and automotive excellence associated with the real brands they are imitating. The halo effect that the actual brand imitates has a high recognition effect that makes the players recall a leading brand that can exploit the positive perceptions connected to the imitated brand (Coelho & Verga, 2015). One gamer explained, "If Aston Martin had a car skin in the game, I was playing of course I would choose it if even I don't like the colors or the design of the car because I could never own an Aston Martin car in my life so I would choose it in the game." (F11, G3). This shows that there is an effect of the choices in game connected to the real-life perception of the brand.

GTA V leverages the use of imitation brands, closely mimicking the design and feel of real-world counterparts, thereby increasing brand recall and player engagement. The availability of these imitation-branded skins throughout the game ensures that all players, regardless of when they start playing, have the opportunity to interact with these imitated skins. The more time players invest in GTA V, the more likely they are to come across these imitated branded skins, contributing to their frequent exposure. Even more so when the players interact with the imitated skin to imitate the usage of it.

The use of imitation brands means that the real brand is not fully realized within the game. Players recognize the cues and recall real-world brands, but they do not associate the in-game imitations directly with the actual brand. As a participant said, "I won't see it as the original brand, I think it's funny, like when they make a knock off, like in real life, I wouldn't choose a knock off over an original. But like if I'm in a game and it doesn't matter." (F11, G3). This suggests that replica branded skin can trigger recognition and even amusement, but they may not effectively reinforce the real brand's identity and value within the game.

Virtual Billboard

As we explored the landscape of branding communication within the gaming environment, one particular placement stood out, which is the strategic placement of the Nissin Foods billboard in FFXV. This type of co-branding can enhance the perceived quality of both the game and the Nissin Foods brand (Fang, Gammoh & Voss, 2022). Brand awareness in Final Fantasy XV can be enhanced through the use of strategic placement of Nissin Cup Noodle billboards through a form of IGA that feels relevant to the game world. This strategy is in line with the concept of illustrative skin as proposed by Palmas et al. (2021), in which the brand blends in with the gaming environment, making it part of the natural environment rather than a disruptive force.

However, the effectiveness of these in-game virtual boards can vary. Williams (2019) points out that although virtual billboards can mimic real world environments, how well they are executed can have a significant impact on brand recognition and recall. Repeated advertising helps consumers bring brand awareness, but it also has the risk of disrupting the immersion of the gaming experience as noted by Chaney et al (2004). The following comments from the focus group demonstrate this tension: 'I'm really not noticing the brands unless they're, like, right in my face, you know, sometimes even some parts of the game that they will make it obvious to see like McDonald's or a Pizza Hut ad. Feels as they force you to see the brands you know, but if not, I won't notice them." (F11, G3). ". I can understand and kind of accept real-life advertisements. That kind of matches the setting, like a huge billboard in an open place like in GTA. If it has a huge billboard that says Pepsi or Sprite or something though, I have a caveat for this […]" (M5, G2). According to these findings, while players may accept the brand placement that feels natural within the game's setting, forced brand placement can be disturbing and take away from the gaming experience.

Nissin Foods used to use traditional marketing techniques, which included television commercials and billboard advertisements outdoors in high-traffic areas (smith, 2007), and social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram (Nissin Foods Europe, 2024). As they recognized the growing influence of video games, they integrated their efforts into video games, marking a significant evolution in the marketing approach. The Nissin Foods billboards in FFXV are strategically placed to blend in with the video game's aesthetic and setting but have the potential to distract players.

5.1.2 IGA Performance

Cosmetic Skin

The performance of the IGA in the case of cosmetic skins depends heavily on the video game world the skin is introduced in. It is important for cosmetic skin to be a natural component of the video game world as well as the dynamics of it (Palmas et al., 2021). The video game mechanics dictate the various goals a player needs to meet in order to experience the video game as intended, and the video game dynamics (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2024). Skins are a cosmetic appearance of the avatar and in-game objects the player has at their disposal to interact with the video game world (Vrooman, 2017) which can be purchased or unlocked by completing achievements (Macey & Hamari, 2018).

For the case of Balenciaga Cosmetic skins, we noticed that the skins developed in collaboration with Epic Games were following the design guidelines of the online game whilst the identity of house Balenciaga was intact. During our focus groups interviews the participants were indifferent to the house of Balenciaga skin looks because they are not loyal to the brand, however they expressed their opinion on the skin appearance which represents Balenciaga according to the Fortnite environment. A participant from group 1 had a strong reaction to the Balenciaga skin and commented, "Is this supposed to be fashion? Isn't Balenciaga a luxury fashion brand? It looks like one of the Fortnite skins, however it doesn't seem very stylish, it's a hoodie, a pair of dark jeans and instead of a human avatar it's a bulldog." (M3, G1). Another participant in group 2 had a similar reaction to participant M3 and during our focus group interview he expressed his opinion "That is such a minimal effort on behalf of Balenciaga, they could have done so much better than simply releasing an anthropomorphic avatar that wears a hoodie with the Balenciaga logo[…]my issue lies with the clothes of the skin not so much the fact that is a anthropomorphic avatar, Fortnite is known for avatars that are non-human." (M7, G2). It is evident from our interviews that the players accepted the skin as part of the Fortnite universe which is in alignment with the theory of Palmas et al. (2021) that recognizes skins are part of the video game dynamics.

The performance of the cosmetic skin is also associated with the price the skin is available for (Keller, 2009). The price of the cosmetic skin is determined by the video game pricing strategies employed by the developing company (Macey & Hamari, 2018). The Balenciaga skin was available to purchase for US$ 10. Our focus groups consisted of 3 different groups of players that are in different stages in their life as explained in our sampling. The players of all 3 different focus groups told us that they have purchased skins in the past as well as other in game items. Specifically, one of the loyal Fortnite fans mentioned, "I buy whatever looks the best, I love the fact that Fortnite has a variety of skins to choose from, that's what Fortnite is known for." (M13, G3).

The cosmetic skins were developed to appeal to a younger audience. Fortnite is played by people between the ages of 18-24 mainly as we mentioned in our findings, which is in alignment with the target group of Balenciaga that is focused on young affluent consumers. Although the opinions of many participants were skeptical towards games being used for product placement, they expressed their understanding towards younger audiences purchasing the skins in Fortnite, especially for the case of Balenciaga, "Like this Balenciaga skin is ugly as frick but it sticks to you, I get why kids would take their mom's credit card to get it (he refers to the skin) [...]" (M5, G2).

Branded Game

During our research around advergames, specifically Louis the Game, we noticed that the special nature of advergames requires different aspects the corporations require to take into account during the development of the advergame. Online games are developed to last for a long time in order to keep the player base engaged and entertained (Dubois & Weststar, 2022). In fact, Louis the Game is available for players to enjoy during the time of conducting this research (Google Play, 2024; Apple, 2024). Louis Vuitton developed a mobile game that was met with great success from the players so much, so they introduced an additional expansion for them to enjoy shortly after the mobile game was released (Showstudio, 2019). The players however we interviewed during our focus groups expressed their reservations in playing the game more than a few times suggesting that the theory applies for a certain type of advergames, "I don't think it works as a game, it works like as an advertisement because I will play it like three times and then I will like skip it." (F11, G3). Overall however for the case of more popular and well known advergames that are developed to promote movies and shows they expressed that the longevity of the advergame is an important aspect that makes them an attractive form of IGA, " I love those games, I have played all of that I found enjoyable to play [...]because I love the movies, you know like Marvel Spiderman, that was cool. They made so many it's crazy! I had no idea they were advergames." (M7, G2).

Another important aspect of IGA in the form of advergames is the price (Keller, 2009). In the case of Louis Vuitton, the mobile game is free for everyone to download (Google Play, 2024; Apple, 2024). The price of the corporation offering towards the consumers is a component of the performance of the brand (Keller & Swaminathan, 2016). The players we interviewed found the free option to play the mobile game attractive, "Yeah in the past I remember you would get those CDs that came with the cereal package or like the magazines, so what you showed us now is also free, that's nice." (F2, G1).

Overall, for all the cases we examined the players stressed the importance for immersion within the video game world and advergames are no exemption. The immersion arises from the advergame's ability to promote the branded message in a harmonious fashion in the video game they develop for communication purposes (Smith et al., 2014). Integrating the branded message in an immersive manner in the video game encourages brand recall without triggering brand avoidance (Dardis et al., 2012). Indeed, the participants agreed that what was special about the Louis the Game was the overall look of the mobile game design that had managed to incorporate the Louis Vuitton brand tastefully. The participants of the 3rd focus group were mesmerized by the Louis Vuitton case we presented to them, "Even the customization is very Louis Vuitton. That is so cool, I will definitely play that!" (F11, G3), "That's so beautiful (she refers to Louis the Game), perfect way to advertise!" (F10, G3).

The advergames are designed to convey the branded message in an entertaining fashion as we have already discussed, however during our focus groups the participants highlighted that the game they were shown and the ones they were aware of were not targeted towards the average gamer. They mentioned that the advergames are clearly targeted towards a younger audience with a few participants remembering playing advergames growing up as they were widely available with the purchase of food items and magazines. During the first focus group one participant commented:

> I think it's even more popular nowadays to have advergames, but when I grew up it was somewhat common [...]if you open up the Kellogg's packet you would get a CD with a Kellog's game on it or other brands you could play because there

were not a lot of games in the past, now there are a lot more, you would play those games because they were fun to a certain extent." (M7, G2).

Louis the game is developed as a mobile game, a popular video game format among the younger players. Louis Vuitton created an advertising medium that is based on what the consumers enjoy, allowing them to reach out to the diverse audience by creating an entertaining and unique experience, allowing the consumers and fans of the brand to own priceless branded tokens. The participants thought that advergames are a smart way for companies to promote their products and organization, however the majority agreed that they appeal to a younger audience rather than everyone who plays video games. An older participant mentioned during focus group 2:

> This advertisement game doesn't concern me at all. It's not something I would ever play under any context unless I was like a very young child that had no access to real games. If I was very young, like 20-25 years ago, maybe I would play this game, but now it's extremely uninteresting to me, I wouldn't give it a chance in all honesty. (M6, G2).

Replica Cosmetic Skins

The primary users for imitation branded skins in GTA V are the mature audience that are 18 or over (Sapieha, 2022) and are those that value customization, realism, and immersive gameplay. These include dedicated gamers that spend considerable amounts of time in the game, as well as casual players, as we can see in the comment from the following participant, "Me and my friend used to spend a lot of time just getting money in the games to afford things in the games, just like in GTA. That was until I realized that there were a lot of cheat codes to get money, but that took away the thrill and motivation to continue playing. So, I became a bit against using them to make it fun again." (F2, G1). The design of the imitation branded skins in GTA V is crafted to enhance the player's immersion and allows the player to customize the car to their liking. Similarly to Keller & Swaminathan (2020), who noted that the ability of a product to satisfy customer needs and wants is important, the game allows players to achieve this since they can choose cars that suit their preferences. These skins are designed to closely resemble real-world luxury cars, with attention to detail in terms of the body design, and colors (see figure 7, 8, 9 and 10). These types of cars resemble the brand with different levels of imitations, this fits into the description of a counterfeit brand as described by Van Horen & Pieters (2017).

It resembles high-quality textures and models to look visually appealing and blend into the gaming setting. The players have the option to choose its aesthetics as well as the performance of the car, which the majority of the players signified were important for them. As indicated by one player, "I would firstly choose the statistics if, I think M7 mentioned it, like if there was a way to transform it, to choose how it looks after stats, but that's because stats are more important for me. I might choose something that might look like a brand, but only if it was aesthetically pleasing for myself." (M5, G2). It's integrated with the functionality of the game, affecting the vehicles performance attributes like speed.

The style and design as mentioned by Keller & Swaminathan (2016), is an important aspect that affects the customers perception of how the product is performing. The integration of these

imitation brands within the game creates a realistic and immersive environment. These elements are perceived as an organic part of the game, enhancing the overall experience without disrupting the gameplay. The following participant in the focus group highlights the importance of brand relevance and personal preference in their gaming experience:

> I mean, if it's something I like, I would pursue it in the game. Let's say if it's a GTA or a racing game, I like Nissan cars, especially the GTR. I would choose it, but otherwise. I mean, if it's not relevant to the game or I would just say it doesn't fit in, then I would not choose it. This would be weird. I wouldn't say that they appeal to me differently. I mean, it's cool, but it's not something that has the appeal to me. (M9, G2).

This comment expresses the effectiveness of imitation cosmetic skins, such as the case of Ferrari, depending on the relevance to the video game and the player's personal preferences. When the imitation brand immerses the video game environment and the player's interest, they enhance the overall experience.

In terms of the cost of the replica cosmetic skins in the video game, since the cost of the imitation brands doesn't cost real monetary money, it is for free. The players may need to invest time and effort to purchase using in-game money to unlock these imitation skins through gameplay. It is designed to last as long as the game remains active. Unlike limited-time items, these skins do not expire or disappear, these imitation branded skins will remain relevant and accessible. This ensures that the player can enjoy their customized vehicle throughout the game.

Virtual Billboard

In our findings we discovered that the billboard advertisement for Nissin Foods in FFXV aims to resonate with a specific audience within the gaming community. As highlighted by Keller & Swaminathan (2020), part of a strong band is how well they meet customers' needs and wants. By integrating its advertising within FFXV, Nissin Foods wants to connect with the gaming community, which has a large overlap in its target market with FFXV gamers (Yeung & Ogura, 2023). The placement of the Nissin Foods advertisement within the fantasy setting of FFXV, blending the real-world setting with the game's immersive narrative. Players can encounter Nissin Cup Noodles billboards during their journey in the game world (IGN, 2016), enhancing their gaming experience with subtle referencing to real-life brands. The user profile for the Nissin Foods billboard advertisement includes gamers who are both fans of FFXV and potential consumers of instant noodles.

FFXV placement of Nissin Foods virtual board is designed to blend into the game's aesthetic and setting. The Nissin products' billboard placement alone does not provide tangible benefits to players in the game. However, the mere presence of the billboard can still have an impact on brand perception. Aaker (1996) signifies that one element that a strong brand has includes brand awareness that relies on effective brand communication. While the virtual board does not directly contribute to gameplay, their integration into the game's world helps to create a sense of realism and authenticity. As stated by Dardis et al (2012), integrating brands in the background has a lower rate of brand identification and recall as opposed to when it enables

user engagement. However, our findings show that depending on the visibility during their gameplay, it may reinforce the brands' presence and potentially boost brand recall. As one participant signified this, "I'm really not noticing the brands unless they're, like, right in my face, you know, sometimes even some parts of the game that they will make it obvious to see like McDonald's or a Pizza Hut ad. Feels as if they force you to see the brands you know, but if not, I won't notice them." (F11, G3).

Similarly to the advergame, there is no cost in relation to the billboard advertisement in the game, since the placement is placed at the background of the game and will remain there for the entire lifespan of the game, as long as the game's components continue to function and support gameplay. The use of Nissin Foods virtual board does not contribute to perceived value through pricing. Because billboards don't provide players with any immediate practical advantages, it serves a more passive role. Because of this, its effects on brand performance are less significant compared to the benefits that come from Nissin Foods items integrated into the game as stated by Dardis et al. (2012).

5.1.3 Brand Judgements

The judgements of the gamers towards the IGA refer to the personal opinions they have about the brand using video games as advertising mediums. Keller acknowledges these judgments as the opinions of the customers towards the brand based on impressions that are cultivated by experience with the brand (Keller (2016); Keller & Swaminathan, 2016). The judgments of the gamers about brands behind the IGAs were noticeably dependent on the form of IGA.

Cosmetic Skin

For the case of the cosmetic skin of Balenciaga we noticed that during the focus groups when participants were presented with the case, they were surprised with the look of the cosmetic skins in Fortnite. The brand image is the impression the corporation leaves to the customers (Urde, 2024). The impression the gamers had about Balenciaga did not match that of the opinions they had when they saw the cosmetic skin. During the focus group interviews the gamers expressed their confusion around the brand image of Balenciaga, "I love fashion in my day-to-day life, but I would never get these skins[...]I see the skin but I struggle to see the luxury fashion, where did it go? All I see is a hoodie on a dogman." (M7, G2), "I didn't buy it, I thought it was ugly (laughs). I like Balenciaga, I think they are cool and high end but the skin was nothing like what I know Balenciaga is in real life." (M4, G1). Another aspect that forms the judgments of the brand behind the IGA revolves around how attainable the product is for the customer to purchase (Keller, 2016; Keller & Swaminathan, 2016). In real life many players mentioned that luxury fashion brands such as Balenciaga are outside of their spending abilities, so having the option to purchase or unlock a cosmetic skin of a brand in-game makes it an attractive option for them, regardless of their feelings towards the brand in real life. During our

focus group one participant had a very interesting opinion about the case, "If the skins are how Balenciaga clothes look like in real life I would consider buying them, but since they don't, I didn't buy the skin. I do own Balenciaga clothes. I like the brand, I find it kind of expensive, though for the way the clothes look, it is not my favorite, but I like some of their collection items." (M4, G1). During our third group another participant expressed a similar opinion:

> I could never drive an Aston Martin car in real life because they are very expensive but if I see it in a game, I would definitely choose it. The same thoughts I have for Balenciaga, but only if the skin looks appealing to me, in the case you show me I see a skin that looks ugly in my opinion so even if I can't buy a Balenciaga t shirt in real life, I wouldn't choose the Fortnite skin regardless if it is a luxury brand. (F12, G3).

Branded Game

For the case of Louis the Game the brand judgment around Louis Vuitton was met positively from the players in our focus groups. The impression of Louis Vuitton's brand image was not affected by the choice of the house to develop a branded game. The brand image of Louis Vuitton was in coherence with the real-life brand (Urde, 2024). The players expressed that Louis Vuitton is a luxury brand and the branded game conveyed their identity appropriately because of the innovative form of IGA they employed. Specifically during the third group the participants mention, "I don't think Louis Vuitton needs advertisements, we all know the company is luxury fashion, but that's so cool they created a game!", (F12, G3), "I'm skeptical over this game, I'm aware of Louis Vuitton they are known for luxury fashion and bags, but I think they focus more on promoting the company than the actual gameplay." (F10, G3). The gamer's opinions about how easy it is for them to purchase the Louis Vuitton items in real life were similar to that of the other luxury brands they were presented with. They expressed to us that they couldn't afford them in real life so if they liked the design of them in-game they would select them over other items. They didn't make an association however between the Louis Vuitton brand items and the branded game, with the exemption of participant F11 who explained to us during the focus group 3, "I cannot even afford a bag charm in real life (laughs) I will definitely try to get an NFT or two if i play the game because it is Louis Vuitton NFT." (F11, G3).

Replica Cosmetic Skins

As a part of brand building, people's opinions and evaluation reveal how they perceive the brand (Keller & Swaminathan, 2020). Today Ferrari is well known for their fast cars with their iconic red color and their horse emblem (Autosprint, 2017). This brand also has a strong reputation on top of being a superior luxury brand which has been highly desirable, a sign of strong corporate identity as Urde (2024) argues in his corporate brand identity theory. It is acknowledged by the gamers that the brand is associated heavily with luxury, as one participant mentioned:

The games have many cars in this like with the real cars in the reality in GTA and Need for Speed. And my favorite one was actually one red Ferrari car because it's a famous car in real life and I will have no chance buying it in the near future." (M3, G1).

However, when it came to imitation brands in the game, the majority expressed that they didn't care much about the brand itself, while some, like M4, G1, that already enjoyed a brand from before would pursue it in the game. He mentioned, "Of course I love Cartier in real life, they are so elegant, but if I see a skin in game, I wouldn't buy it if it didn't look good [...]fake skins too, if I love the brand I want to have the copy too (laughs) but please be tasteful, it's Cartier after all." (M4, G1).

Although GTA V features replicated Ferrari skins rather than the official Ferrari branding, because it fits the setting of the game's world, as stated by the CEO of RockStar Games, "The world of GTA is a fictional world, so to bring real-life brands in, they really have to be iconic, and they have to fit within that world. " (Sinclair, 2022). The inclusion of these high-performance cars fits well within the game's narrative of high-stake crimes and luxury lifestyle. The coherence of the integration of these replicated cosmetic skins helps maintain the realism and immersion of the game. This feature of imitated skins matches the game's theme, making the presence of these vehicles feel appropriate.

The use of replicated Ferrari skins in GTA V suggests that Ferrari has already established a strong corporate brand identity (Urde, 2024), as strong brand identity can often lead to challenges such as the creation of counterfeit brands (Hietanen et al., 2018; Patel et al., 2022). The inclusion of these replicated cosmetic skins in the game shows the brand's strong influence and the appeal it holds, even when replicated in a virtual environment. GTA V leverages on the reputation that Ferrari holds since the use of a leading brand can make people recall a brand and form an imitation effect, similar to the findings shown by Danesi (2013).

While the aesthetic appeal of imitation brands in GTA V plays a significant role in how well they are received by the players. The design of these cars, including the shape, size and color, reflects the luxurious and high-performance image of the real-world product Ferrari. As reflected by one participant: "I mean, if it's something I like, I would pursue it in the game. Let's say if it's a GTA or a racing game, I like Nissan cars, especially the GTR. I would choose it[.]" (M9, G2). This detail enhances the overall experience for players, making the cars visually appealing and desirable. As stated by Coelho do Vale & Verga Mato (2015), imitation of the leading brand exploits the positive perceptions connected to the imitated brand. In the game, players can access the use of imitation Ferrari cars, which are available in the game's vehicle selection. While the real Ferrari is known for being expensive and exclusive, the in-game imitations allow the players to experience such high-end cars virtually, making it more accessible to the gamers.

Virtual Billboards

Customers' judgment regarding a brand, how they perceive the brand is an important part for brand building (Keller & Swaminathan, 2020). In our research, we found that customers perceive the Nissin Cup Noodles as a convenient and affordable food option, easily accessible to a wide audience (Kaiser, 2022). It fits well within the daily lives of many gamers that may seek the quick and satisfying meal option.

In accordance with Keller & Swaminathan (2020), prior brand knowledge and attitudes impact brand judgment. Similarly, how the gamers perceive the brand in the game is influenced by how they already perceived the brand from before. Players noted that if they like a brand, they will enjoy their presence being advertised. One participant mentioned, "I would feel happy that my favorite brands will be known by more people and others will know how good the brand is and how good the product is." (F1, G1). This means that if gamers already perceive Nissin in a positive perception, it's likely to carry over into the game. The statement of the participant F1 (G1), reflects on the IGA ability to reinforce existing positive judgements but also advocate for the brands popular among loyal consumers who wish to see more of the their favorite brand. This aligns with Aaker's (1996) emphasis on brand loyalty and brand association as components of brand equity. The in-game billboard ad can leverage existing positive brand associations, potentially enhancing brand loyalty and encouraging word-of-mouth promotion among players.

In regard to this kind of placement, players generally perceive it as a positive addition to enhance realism and immersion. However, they also emphasized the importance of relevance and moderation. Advertisements that are related to the game's context and setting are more acceptable and less intrusive. A player stated, "Why would I want to see a hotels. com advertisement in FIFA? That makes no sense to me, if anything it makes me feel as if FIFA doesn't care about their players and try to use the game as advertisement space. I used to play a lot of FIFA so apologies for my strong reaction, but to balance my comment I would like to say that if I saw Burger King or Coca Cola in the background as an ad that wouldn't make me mad. I'm not a fan of either brand but gamers like to eat when they game and drink. They don't think of traveling (laughs) they are too busy gaming to do that." (M3, G1). However, it's important to note that beyond mere visibility of the virtual boards, Nissin Foods has also integrated Nissin's cup noodles into the gameplay through mission and character interactions, thus increasing its presence. This approach allows players to interact with the brand in a meaningful way, enhancing the perceived quality and relevance of Nissin products within the game world. The Nissin Foods billboard's presence within FFXV contributes to the overall user experience by adding a feeling of realism to the game world. Players may encounter the advertisement multiple times during their gameplay, which can increase brand familiarity and association. The design of Nissin Foods billboard within FFXV is made to blend in with the game's environment. However, unlike the usual in-game virtual boards, which may go unnoticed by many players as stated by Williams (2019), the active use of Nissin product within the gameplay may ensure they are consistently in the players focus.

5.2 Gamer Dimension

5.2.1 IGA Feelings

It became evident through our research that the players had not only formulated opinions about the performance of the brand cases that were presented to them but also these opinions evoked emotional responses. Keller argues that brand performance affects the emotional responses of the customers (Keller & Swaminathan, 2016). These responses depend not only on the brand management efforts, but they depend on the advertising efforts that aim to alter the customer

perception and usage of the brand. According to Higgins (1987) identity is defined as the reaction people have to stimuli that leads to them behaving or feeling as a result. The feelings the gamers experienced when they were presented with the 4 IGA cases were a part of their self-identity. According to our frame of reference when the gamer creates their avatar or is free to customize it the ideal self is evident (Huanga et al., 2019; Leménager et al., 2013; Bessière et al., 2007; Smahel et al., 2008), because people online do not represent themselves according to the real world, they are free to create their ideal personas (Huanga et al., 2019).

During the focus group interviews the gamers expressed a mix of feelings towards IGAs, as they did not all appeal to their ideal self. They explicitly explained to us that their video game self is similar to the real one however the majority assumes different types of personas in video games, confirming the theoretical assumptions defined in our frame of reference. The gamers told us when we asked them about their self-identity during the focus groups, "In real life I assume a leadership role, I'm not only a manager in my workplace, but I'm also the friend that could be called the 'dad' of the group. I like being responsible, I like the sense of responsibility, people depending on me making me feel good. In games, however I assume a more passive role, I want to escape this sense of responsibility I bear in real life. It allows me to be who I want to be without worrying about the consequences [...]I don't go crazy, that is not what I insinuate, I mean I can play as a girl avatar or a fashionable guy that just enjoys the game." (M7, G2), "In real life I am an introverted person, I spend a lot of time alone, I definitely don't initiate social interactions, university is my priority, and my job is translating. Online however I like talking to people, I always choose characters that wear clothes I would never wear at university, or they look like mythical creatures, strong." (F10, G3).

Cosmetic Skin

The feelings the Balenciaga cosmetic skin evoked to the gamers during our focus groups were a result of not only the house's actions but also emerged from their identity as individuals that play a video game where the skins made an appearance on. According to Higgins (1987) identity is defined as the reaction people have to stimuli that leads to them behaving or feeling as a result. The feelings the gamers experienced when they were presented with Balenciaga cosmetic skin were mixed and were a response to the skin appearance. The gamers expressed a mixed range of feelings towards the Balenciaga skin specifically they said, "I don't get annoyed no, the opposite especially if it's brands, I know [...]In the case of Balenciaga I don't like this skin, it's not for me, I don't like Balenciaga and the skin looks so simple I have better options." (M13, G3), "I only know Balenciaga because of stuns like this [...]personally I don't like this skin, not my style, but it's clearly not a skin created for me, it's a skin for kids. I don't feel it represents me so why would I buy it?" (M6, G2), "I get why kids would take their mom's credit card to buy it (he refers to the skin), but I wouldn't buy this I don't care much for fashion in real life but the cosmetics I choose in games need to look good for my style, I don't choose them based on brands why would I start with Balenciaga?" (M8, G2), "For me it's not about the appearance of the Balenciaga skin, I know that I'm wearing something, that I know in real life, that makes me feel the character I'm playing is more personalized because I love fashion, but not this luxury brands a lot." (M4, G1). Digital products that are designed to reflect the objects

they embody online provide the gamers a sense of realism that enables them to fully immerse in the video game world as their avatar (Oh et al., 2023), which was evident throughout our focus group discussions with the gamers. According to the SDT theory of Higgins (1987), self-discrepancy between the real self and the ideal of the gamer leads to experiencing discomfort feelings, which the gamers expressed was the case for the ones that Balenciaga did not appeal to their ideal self nor their real self, with few exceptions as mentioned.

Branded Game

For the case of Louis the Game the feelings the gamers experienced were mixed once again however they explained it is related to perceiving the branded game as advertisement that feels more like an advertisement than a game, which did not evoke their ideal self. A participant in the first focus group said, "I feel this is how luxury brands like Louis Vuitton promote their brand to approach the lower classes. A lot of people can't buy their products in real life, they are too expensive, but they can play the Louis the Game, so it makes it easier for Louis Vuitton be discovered by people that couldn't buy anything outside of the game, makes them feel as if Louis Vuitton thinks about them." (M4, G1). Another participant explained how she felt about Louis the Game, "I love when they do that, it's very funny for me[...]but it doesn't make me mad. I think it's very funny and I love when they do that because sometimes it's funny to see these characters in another space, like in a game-way." (F11, G3). Finally, the comment that stood out from the second focus group was, "They stole Zelda and just slammed Louis Vuitton all over it!" (M7, G2), because the participant reacted in a strongly negative manner towards the branded game. The gamers did not have a sense of their ideal self-present in the branded game case, therefore there was no discrepancy experienced among them.

Replica Cosmetic Skin

The feelings that were evoked by the participants regarding the replica cosmetic skins, many players cared about the brand and if possible, they would want to choose it in the game. One participant indicated this, " But if I create my own character, I probably would choose mine to have one that looks like an iPhone.", which shows that gamers are able to choose the options that represent their need to feel connected to their ideal self in-game which does not create a gap between their real self in real life as proposed by Higgins (1987) avoiding negative feelings. However, there also were many players who felt that choosing a replica cosmetic skin based on the real brand, but rather the aesthetics in the game, how it performed and how it matched the game. One participant showcases this in their answer, "I think, in that case I would have picked something that is according to the character because I want to feel the whole gaming experience to be more like a whole…I don't care for the fake brands (laughs), it's funny to like show brands like that in games, that's really funny." (M4, G1). They didn't mind choosing replica cosmetic skins and also expressed that sometimes they perceive it as funny. Some took pleasure in a satirical take on consumerism that might improve the overall gaming experience. As one participant expressed, "I feel the same, the brand doesn't matter to me. If it's a big or some small version of the original brand, oh it's interesting like it might be even creative if they change the brand in a very funny way." (F10, G3). The participants' responses indicate that their enjoyment of the game is significantly enhanced when the in-game features like the replica

cosmetic skins and the game's mechanics give them the freedom to change the looks which can be matched with their ideal self of a cohesive and immersive gaming experience. This alignment leads to positive feelings and more engaging gameplay experience, reaffirming the idea that a match between ideal and actual self contributes to positive emotions (Mason et al., 2019).

Virtual Billboard

In the case of Nissin Foods IGA the majority expressed a high emphasis on the way the advertisement should match the appearance of the game "[…] even if it's used as an imitation tactic, even if the company is getting money from the advertisements, if it fits the concept, I can vibe with that. I mean, if it makes the setting more realistic, it's OK for me." (M5, G2). Additionally, the advertisements evoked mixed feelings regarding the placement. A majority of gamers explained that they would accept the IGA if the brand were fitting to the identity of the video game world. Everyone agreed that if the IGA is done in an appropriate way it does not evoke feelings of annoyance towards the brand in the video game. During the focus group they mentioned, "I'm really not noticing the brands unless they're, like, right in my face, you know, sometimes even some parts of the game that they will make it obvious to see like McDonald's or a Pizza Hut ad. Feels as if they force you to see the brands you know, but if not, I won't notice them." (F11, G3). The brand placement could feel intrusive or out of context, leading to negative response. However, when the advertisements were integrated well, they added to a feeling of realism, making the game feel more genuine. "I feel like if you don't have it (the same type of advertisement placement like in real life), it just breaks immersion. It feels like it was just empty, or it didn't exist." M7, G2. "[...]having advertisements like those in the real world that would be reasonable and relevant because it may look boring and empty without that skin." M9, G2). The participants emphasized the importance of advertisements blending with the game environment (Oh et al., 2023; Ingendahl et al., 2022; Palmas et al., 2021).

5.2.2   Brand and Gamer Relationship

The relationship between the corporate brand and the gamer is the result of the IGA performance, the judgements about the IGA as well as the IGA feelings, which according to Keller's (1998) theory of brand building corresponds to the brand resonance, how much in sync is the customer with the brand and the type of relationship is developed between the two parties. The relationship is not only a result of the brand resonance it is also a crucial component of the corporate brand identity according to Urde (2024) who highlights the importance for the organization to include the nature of the relationship they hold with their stakeholders internally as well as their customers and non-customer stakeholders. In terms of IGA the gamers that participated in our focus group expressed their own opinions and feelings about the IGA ultimately contributing to a sense of relationship that has been cultivated between them and the corporate brands of Balenciaga, Louis Vuitton, Ferrari and Nissin Foods through their IGA efforts. The relationship that has been established derives from their sense of self identity, as self-identity is the driver behind responses to external stimuli from society that results in behavioral and emotional responses (Higgins, 1987). In the video game communities, the interactions that provide stimuli for the gamers are the game dynamics as they are based on not

only the video game mechanics (Palmas et al., 2021), but also on the interactions between them and the other gamers (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2024). Although it is possible for brand managers to understand the gamers it is impossible for them to predict their behavioral patterns (Alfrey et al., 2023; Rogers, 1951; 1955), however they can affect them through transformational advertising as proposed by Keller (1998; Keller and Swaminathan, 2016) and supported by video game scholars that argue over the effect video games pose on the gamer behavior (Fraser et al., 2023; Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2024; Jin, 2011). The response we received during our focus groups is the result of the IGA efforts of Balenciaga, Louis Vuitton, Ferrari and Nissin Foods.

5.2.3 Self-Expression

Cosmetic Skin

Gamer behavior is strongly associated with their need to express their ideal-self according to Higgins (1987) and Oh et al., (2023). In the case of Balenciaga cosmetic skins, the responses we received from the gamers were mainly negative as they expressed that the cosmetic skins did not appeal to their preferred aesthetics of skins in video games. The gamers during the interviews mentioned, "I didn't buy it, I thought it was ugly (laughs). I like Balenciaga, I think they are cool and high end, but the skin was nothing like what I know Balenciaga is in real life." (M4, G1). The participant explained that although he has a sense of connection to the brand of the house of Balenciaga in real life the skin did not appeal to his ideal-self taste which is why he did not purchase it as well as identified as distasteful. In another focus group a participant mentioned, "like this Balenciaga skin is very ugly but you remember it, it sticks with you. I get why kids would take their mom's credit card to buy it (he refers to the skin) but I never would" (M5, G2), followed by a comment from another participant of the same group, "That is such a minimal effort on behalf of Balenciaga, they could have done so much better than simply releasing an anthropomorphic avatar that wears a hoodie with the Balenciaga logo[…] like I said I like fashion in real life but I couldn't see myself buying this" (M7, G2). Overall, the gamers when they were asked about the importance of appearance of the avatar skins over performance in the video game expressed that they prioritize appearance over performance in video games such as Fortnite. They explained that although the skin does not offer any benefit it affects their perception about their ability to perform in video games which is an argument made by Birk et al. (2017). It was clear that the gamers did not feel any sense of connection with the Balenciaga cosmetic skin, nor the house of Balenciaga.

The gamers, however, explained that they would feel connected to brands that they liked prior to playing a video game. During the first focus group, one participant said, " Yeah, I don't really buy fashion skins, but in some instances I buy them, because I want to feel more attached to the character that I'm playing because I want to wear something in the game that doesn't look like real life [...]especially if they are brands I know in real life if they make pretty skins I will definitely buy the, that's only when I buy fashion skins." (M4, G1). Participant M4 from G1 is familiar with the house of Balenciaga however he did not identify himself as a loyal fan of the brand. The majority explained that regardless of them being aware of Balenciaga and their luxury fashion collections, they did not feel any sense of loyalty toward the brand because of the cosmetic skin appearance failing to fulfill their need to self-express their ideal persona. One of the participants however explained to us that in the case of another luxury brand she would

buy the cosmetic skin purely because it is a brand she feels attached to even though the items are out of her reach in real life, specifically she told us, "If Aston Martin had a car skin in the game I was playing of course I would choose it if even I don't like the colors or the design of the car because I could never own an Aston Martin car in my life so I would choose it in the game." (F11, G3), to which another participant commented, "I could never drive an Aston Martin car in real life because they are very expensive but if I saw it in a game, I would definitely choose it. The same thoughts I have for Balenciaga, but only if the skin looks appealing to me, in the case you show me I see a skin that looks ugly in my opinion so even if I can't buy a Balenciaga t shirt in real life, I wouldn't choose the Fortnite skin regardless if it is a luxury brand." (F12, G3).

Branded Game

In the case of Louis the game the gamers did not express any sense of self-expression. However, a few participants expressed their interest in learning more about the game and told us they would like to play it because the mobile game looked intriguing and was developed by the luxury house of Louis Vuitton. The participant M4 of the first group explained to us, "I feel this is how luxury brands like Louis Vuitton promote their brand to approach the lower classes. A lot of people can't buy their products in real life, they are too expensive, but they can play the Louis the Game, so it makes it easier for Louis Vuitton be discovered by people that couldn't buy anything outside of the game, makes them feel as if Louis Vuitton thinks about them." (M4, G1), as stated earlier in the context of feelings towards the IGA form of branded games. Participant M3 from the same group expressed to us, "The advergame actually is not that useful in my opinion because there's no money for the luxury brands to make off of gamers. But if the luxury brands make skins, then everyone will see it and feel closer to a brand like Louis Vuitton, which is what F1 said before me." (M3, G1), supporting the theory of Urde (2024) about strong corporate brands incorporating the relationship of all stakeholders in their identity.

Replica Cosmetic Skins

In the case of replica cosmetic skins, the gamers mentioned that they felt a connection to Ferrari even if the cosmetic skins were not the real brand. The corporate brand identity of Ferrari is so strong that it inspired the developers of GTA to create a series of replica cosmetic skins that imitate the real-life brand (Hietanen, Mattila, Sihvonen & Tikkanen, 2018; Patel, Singh, & Parayitam, 2022). The CEO of RockStar Games revealed that by imitating strong brands the gamers are familiar with makes the world of GTA feel realistic, adding to the enjoyment of the gamer during their time spent in the game (Oh et al., 2023). Although imitation brands are rejected by the customers, in the case of the Ferrari replica cosmetic skins the gamers responded with positive feelings towards the developer's decision to incorporate them in the video game as well other video games they play. Participant M5 during the second focus group expressed his opinion on replica cosmetic skins as, "The Balenciaga skin is the same kind of product placement as Coca Cola in Fallout. The game has Nuka Cola, which is what they call their version of Coca Cola. This advertisement fits the game Fallout because it has a different type of name and branding. You correlate it with Coca Cola, but you see Nuka Cola and you think it is funny because it's a well thought fake version of Coca Cola. It's fun, It doesn't break immersion." (M5, G2).

The participants of group 3 were very positive towards replica cosmetic skins appearing in their video games under the condition they are immersive as well as brands they like in real life or fantasize about but cannot attain due to purchasing power limitations. Participant F11 expressed her concerns over the replica cosmetic skin by mentioning, "It's not about the brand exactly when it comes to fake skins it's about the design. I love Audi in real life, and I cannot afford it right now, I am a poor student working in the weekends trying to get through law school; Even if I love Audi I won't think about it twice if I see it in Saint Rows, a game like GTA, unless it looks cool because it's my favorite brand. I don't want to spoil the brand by choosing fake skins. They need to respect the real-life version of it even if they try to avoid copyrights infringements or create an immersive gaming world. I expect them to do right by Audi and me who can't own one of their cars currently." (F11, G3). Her comment is the paradox that exists around imitation brand; the fake versions strengthen the sense of relationship and attachment the gamers have with the real-life version of the strong brand by rejecting the replica (D'Astous & Gargouri, 1998; Zhou, 2021), unless it is executed in realistic manner as expected by cosmetic skins (Oh et al., 2023). Self-expression is crucial for the gamers to feel in alignment with their ideal self in the video game (Higgins, 1987) in order for them to engage with the replica cosmetic skins and develop a sense of attachment, emulating the relationship they have or wish to have with the real brand in real life (Urde, 2024).

Virtual Billboard

Virtual billboards were a form of IGA that the gamers were indifferent to as the Nissin Cup Noodles was not a brand that represented. The gamers expressed that they are irritated by advertisements in their day-to-day life so they are skeptical over their appearance in video games. During the focus groups a few interesting comments were, "If the brand is in the background in a discreet way, I won't mind I'm used to seeing ads in games, usually they are fake, but I guess real ones I would say I am ok with. It needs to be harmonious with the game though, but also not overdo it. I don't like seeing ads in real life and I don't really want to in games either if they feel very greedy trying to fit as many ads as possible." (F10, G3). Another gamer explained, "If I see my favorite brands in games, it's amazing because that means more people can learn about the brands, I find amazing! (laughs) Kylie cosmetics wouldn't make sense to see in game, that would piss me off and I love her glosses, so I think I'm ok with in game advertisements, but I expect to see ads that make sense for the game, cosmetics maybe in Sims never for League of Legends (laughs)." (F1, G1).

From the gamer comments it is evident that the virtual billboard appeals to the actual self and not the ideal (Higgins, 1987), as they associate advertisements that resemble that of real life. She expressed that the video game cannot really affect their behavior or attitudes but could potentially guide them as suggested by the scholars in our frame of reference (Fraser et al., 2023; Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2024; Jin, 2011). However, some expressed the need for a brand match between the video game and the IGA, specifically one participant explained:

> Why would I want to see a hotels. com ad in FIFA? That makes no sense to me, if anything it makes me feel as if FIFA doesn't care about their players and try to use the game as ad space. I used to play a lot of FIFA so apologies for my strong reaction, but to balance my comment I would like to say that if i saw Burger king or Coca cola in the background as an ad that wouldn't make me mad. I'm not a fan of either brand but gamers like to eat when they play game and drink. They don't think of traveling (laughs) they are too busy gaming to do that (M3, G1).

These comments are aligned with the theory around video game interactions and gamer responses to them (Palmas et al., 2021), the video game world interactions affect the gamer but in the case of virtual billboards the response emulates the response they would have had in real life (Higgins, 1987). The relationship they build with the brand feels distant to them as it does not relate to the video game, it is purely transactional. Although organizations that have strong brand focus on the relationship with their customers as argued by Urde (2024), often times can be more distant yet still meaningful depending on the type of organization. In the case of Nissin Foods, the company shows off their most food brands in the game to create awareness and alter the perception of the gamers about noodles, the foundation to build a relationship with them as argued by Keller (2016).

5.3   Defining gamified brand building

The components of our matrix derive from the case studies findings we examined based on the theoretical realms that inspired this framework and were acknowledged as important throughout our research findings. Based on the analysis we conducted of our case study findings we can define gamified brand building as the process of building a strong corporate brand identity by employing interactive and immersive marketing communication strategies that resonate with the ideal or real self of the target audience in interactive digital environments.
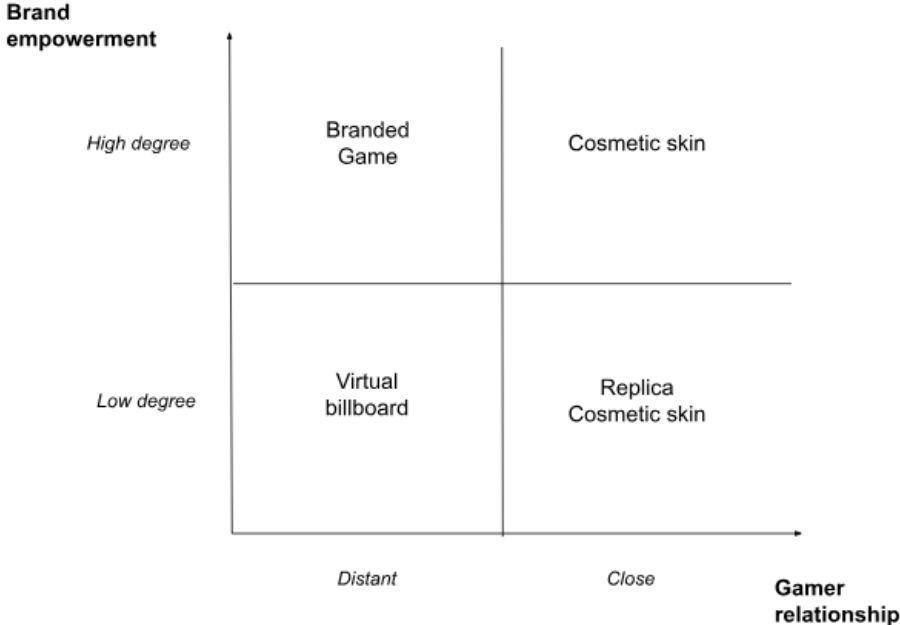
Figure 17. Gamified Brand Building Matrix developed by the authors

6 Discussion

The gamified brand building matrix (see figure 17) is a theory inspired by the different components of the brand building theory developed by Keller (2009), corporate brand identity matrix developed by Urde (2024) and the self-discrepancy theory developed by Higgins (1987). Our matrix has two dimensions that define the gamified advertising approach a corporation can employ in an interactive digital environment, brand empowerment and gamer relationship. The two dimensions are two sides of the same coin, as the brand managers have their own perspective as to what they wish to achieve whereas the gamers have their own expectations of what their video game experience should entail.

Brand empowerment is the company's dimension, each corporation has their own agenda of how they wish to strengthen their brand identity. The components that contribute in the empowerment of the brand derive from Kevin Lane Keller's brand building theory that emphasizes the importance of brand salience, brand performance and imagery (Keller, 2016; Keller & Swaminathan, 2020). The brand salience is dependent on the corporate brand identity as defined by Mats Urde however some dimensions of the identity are more important than others, the brand essence, the brand expression, the personality, the relationship of the brand with the employees, the customers and non-customers that transcend into the corporate communications and resulting in the reputation of the organization (Urde, 2024; Urde, 2019). The degree to which the corporation wishes to empower their brand identity determines the form of gamified advertisement they should follow. Different corporations have different goals they wish to reach in different stages of the organizations' lifetime, it is only logical to require the implementation of different strategies to realize their goals. The strength of the brand results from effective efforts to not only maintain the position of the corporation in the market as well as the minds of the consumers, but also from the constant efforts the organization puts to maintain or build a legacy that will echo in time. The corporations need to be aware of trends as well as up to date with the reality of the markets they operate in and the new ones they wish to commence operations in.

At the same time the relationship they wish to develop with the gamers also dictates the form of IGA they should implement. The relationship with the gamers is grounded on the domains of the self according to the SDT of Edward Tory Higgins, the actual and the ideal self of the gamers (Higgins, 1987). Furthermore, the appeal the IGA has to the gamers self domains depending on the form the IGA assumes, results in different judgements the gamers have about the IGA and the corporation brand identity, feelings the IGA evokes subsequent to degree of self-expression they experience by being exposed to the IGA (Keller, 2016) resulting in a sense of relationship between them and the organization (Keller, 2016; Keller & Swaminathan, 2020; Urde, 2024). Depending on the self-domain of the gamer the corporations aim to appeal to require them to construct the IGA in such a way that they do not create discomfort to the gamers. It is important for the organizations to acknowledge and understand who the person behind the video game is, making the transition from the game world to the real world seamless and

conceivable. Corporate brands that are exclusive to a secluded to group of customers in the real world could potentially make the gamer's fantasies come true and allow them to experience the brand outside the boundaries of the real world however they need to do it without creating promises they cannot live up to in the gamer's day to day life. This discrepancy is one of the many in the SDT theory that the companies avoid causing, because managers cannot predict human behavior, they can simply try to affect how the gamers behave and what they think of their corporate brand identity (Higgins, 1987).

It is crucial for corporations to create strategies that are based on both dimensions, their own vision regarding brand empowerment as well as the audience they aim to reach, the gamers. The different points where the two dimensions intersect in the gamified brand building matrix dictate the forms of IGA the organizations can implement as a result in different degrees of the relationship between the corporate dimension, brand empowerment, and the gamer perspective, gamer relationship.

Cosmetic skin is the form of IGA corporations we suggest through our finding analysis should develop when the focus on the degree of brand building is high, whilst the relationship they wish to develop with the gamers is a close relationship. Cosmetic skins are co-branded skins which are a product of the partnership of the corporation and a video game developer designed to fit the video game world harmoniously. In the past product placement was common in movies, tv shows and radio, but video games provided an attractive option for the corporations to promote their brand in (Karisik, 2014). Cosmetic skins were created to enhance the appearance of the gamer avatars, weapons, vehicles, or other in-game elements without affecting the gameplay allowing the gamers to customize and personalize their appearance in game, which is a crucial aspect of their gaming experience (Oh et al., 2023). Cosmetic skins can be obtained through in-game purchases or granted as rewards for completing tasks in the video game.

The cosmetic skins need to appeal to the ideal self of the gamer (Higgins, 1998), their persona they construct to express themselves outside of the traditional societal rules of the real world without disturbing the immersion in the world of the video games (Kowert, 2016). According to our findings gamers were accepting of their appearance in video games more so than traditional product placement but was met with some skepticism reading the frequency of their appearances as well as the brand nature. Particularly luxury brands created a confusion among the gamers as they are clearly a promotional effort that does not translate to any form of relationship with the brand in the real world. Cosmetic skins allow the organization to strengthen and maintain meaningful relationships with the gamers in video games that could potentially transcend to the real world, as seen in the case of Balenciaga and Nissin Foods where there were real life collaborations between the video games and the corporations. Cosmetic skins fulfill the wish of the corporations of building strong connections with their customers, as well as establishing relationships (Urde, 2024; Keller, 2016) with people that could never experience the brand outside of the video game world, as presented in our finding analysis.

We encourage corporations however to create cosmetic skins with caution as gamers expressed mixed reactions towards their appearance in video games. Gamers were divided between those loyal to brands and those who were indifferent, suggesting that brand loyalty is important for cosmetic skins to be an effective form of IGA. At the same time, they stressed the importance

of the cosmetic skin appearance, it needs to be designed in harmony with the video game world aesthetics, even if it is a gamified advertisement it needs to be designed as it belongs in the video game world it appears on. The cosmetic skins are the most advanced form of IGA as it entails multiple actors collaborating to create a digital product for gamers to enjoy encouraging a high level of brand empowerment as well as cultivating relationships with gamers that can live their fantasies unlike the real world.

A branded game is the form of IGA we identified the corporation can follow when the corporation aims at a high level of empowering their brand, but they wish to maintain a distant relationship with the gamers. Branded games are the evolution of infomercial advertisements broadcasted in mass media such tv, radio and digital such as social media and streaming sites. Advertisements used to be a means for companies to encourage the sales of their goods, however branded games are an advanced form of infomercials that aim to not only encourage sales but be interactive (Calder & Malthouse, 2005) and shape consumer behaviors and attitudes towards the corporations (Keller & Swaminathan, 2020). Branded game is the development of a video game explicitly to promote the brand towards an audience in an entertaining manner, that can be either a game only for the corporation needs or a partnership between corporations with the same goals, which is the IGA form commonly referred to advergame (Kretchmer, 2005). The branded game can assume the form of a popular video game, or combination of video game mechanics, elements and dynamics developed to promote a branded message. Another form the branded game can assume is video game developed in collaboration with gaming development organizations to create an exciting new video game to deliver the branded message but aim to entertain the gamers.

According to our findings gamers perceive branded games as an entertaining form of IGA overall, however they will not play a game from a brand they do not feel a connection to or engage with in real life. The gamers perceive branded games are a better version of traditional infomercials, particularly because they are not exposed to them unless they choose to do so. The branded game aims to promote a branded message in such a way that appeals to gamer's expectations developing a substantial yet transactional relationship between the organization and the gamers, as we identified through our findings.

Virtual board is a basic form of IGA we recognized according to our findings from the case studies that corporations can produce when the degree of the brand strength is not as prominent whilst the relationship, they wish to maintain with is distant. Virtual board is a form of IGA that resembles the traditional billboard form in an immersive fashion that does not dictate the attention of the gamer, rather seamlessly blends with the video game world that enhances the sense of realism of the video game world. The form the virtual billboards can assume can be categorized as static and dynamic. Static virtual billboards may appear as traditional billboards, sign advertisements, printed advertisements, or product placement in video games. The dynamic form virtual billboards can assume could be native advertisements, radio, television or social media content advertisements. This gamified brand appearance tactic enables the corporation to adapt their advertising efforts in the contemporary digital environment of virtual worlds within video games. Virtual billboards result in brand awareness that is the first step towards establishing a relationship with the gamers. Initially, billboards were large, printed advertisements along highways and public spaces (Bhargava & Donthu, 1999). With the evolution of digital technology, they have transformed digital displays integrated into video

games, where they mimic real world advertisements and enhance the video game's realism. The shift allows companies to concentrate their efforts on enhancing their brand in a straightforward approach, which reflects closely the traditional way of advertising.

The key findings of virtual boards were that they can enhance brand awareness, but their effectiveness varies. There is a need to blend naturally with the game environment to avoid disrupting the gaming experience, similarly, as proposed by Vashisht, (2019) and Vashisht & Chauhan (2017). Forced brand placement can be perceived negatively by the gamers, impacting brand recognition and recall. Virtual boards play a passive role in IGA performance as their impact on brand perception may be less significant compared to other forms of brand integration such as interactive forms or in-game items. Participants were wary about the importance of advertisements matching the appearance and the context of the game world. Many gamers are open to IGA if it enhances realism and fits seamlessly within the game's setting. However, advertisements that feel intrusive or out of context can lead to negative responses. Participants expressed mixed feelings about virtual billboards, which indicated indifference or irritation if advertisements disrupt their gaming experience. Gamers preferred advertisements that were discreet and well-fitting with the game environment, and they responded more positively when the brand felt relevant to the game and players.

Finally, Replica Cosmetic Skin is a type of digital brand integration that the corporation can benefit from when the focus on empowering their brand is an indirect result of their brand management efforts whilst the result is close relationships with the gamers that are familiar with the brand by association. Replica branded items in the real world exist because entities wish to benefit from the success of strong brands by offering a similar experience to the customers without being authentic or fulfilling their promise over quality and trust (Van Horen & Pieters, 2017). However, with the advancement of digital technology, entities such as video game developers create imitation brands to bring a sense of realism into the game world as we learned from the CEO of RockStar Games who explained that GTA needed the iconic brands to bring the world of GTA to life. Although replica cosmetic skins are outside of the corporate communication efforts it reflects the strength of the corporate brand identity that results in a strong reputation which inspires video game developers to create imitations of their brands to incorporate in their game worlds (Urde, 2024). The corporations should strive to leverage the replica cosmetic skin appearances in popular video game franchises in order to approach a new segment of audience without having to worry about the adversities of the false representation of their brand identity as well as the way the gamers perceive the brand. Replica cosmetic skins are a sign not only of a strong corporate brand with an outstanding reputation because imitation is the greatest form of flattery but also because gamers seek out the original brand more so when they are exposed to an imitation version of the brand, the paradox of the imitation brands (D'Astous & Gargouri, 1998; Zhou, 2021). Indeed, in our findings we confirmed the paradox as gamers explained that replica cosmetic skins encourage them to seek the original brand more so than before being exposed to the replica version of them in the form of skins.

Another reason replica cosmetic skins benefit the corporation is because the replica branded skins may not affect the perception of the real brand since gamers realize it's not the original brand, according to the gamers from our focus groups. Gamers often felt a strong connection to the replica cosmetic skins that resonate with their ideal selves, helping to align they're in-game and actual-self identities. The ability to personalize these skins allows players to select

items that suit their preferences and enhance the immersion and overall experience in the game, without disrupting the gameplay (Huanga et al., 2019; Leménager et al., 2013; Bessière et al., 2007; Smahel et al., 2008). Recognizable strong brands like Ferrari trigger positive feelings due to their strong corporate identity and the match to the games setting resulting in the development of a relationship by proxy between the gamer and the original corporate brand. Although the corporation does not actively engage in brand building initiatives, indirectly the corporation benefits from the appearance of replica cosmetic skins in video games by establishing a brand with a distinct and strong identity. Replica cosmetic skins nourish and strengthen the relationships with existing customers that play the video games they appear on but manage to create meaningful relationships with gamers that have not experienced the brand outside of the video game world. The corporations can leverage the replica cosmetic skins as they have been developed into in-game imitation cosmetic skins that gamers can use to personalize their avatars and items resembling that of familiar strong brand products, allowing the corporation to strengthen their identity indirectly as well building meaningful relationships with the gamers that wish to engage with the imitation version of the brand.

Overall, a surprising finding while we were conducting our research to develop our framework was that gamers accept IGA more than traditional advertising efforts in the real world. The gamers explained to us that they do not mind seeing brands in video games, if anything they are expecting to do so, especially replicas of them. However, they are concerned with the frequency of the IGA, specifically in the case of cosmetic skins, to produce cosmetic skins more than their video game company. In the case of virtual billboards, they did not want to see a lot of them in their video game as it breaks immersion. Acceptance of the IGA has also contributed to their design aspect. The gamers highlighted the importance for the IGA to be characterized by excellent design and reflect the brand as well as the video game world it exists in. Furthermore, the gamers explained that the same way they have learned to avoid advertisements in the real world, they manage to do so in the video game world as they have the power to choose to engage with it, which is their greatest argument in favor of IGAs to traditional and native advertising efforts. The gamified brand building matrix is a powerful tool for the organizations that wish to strengthen their brand identity as well to build and maintain valuable relationships with their customers and non-customer stakeholders in video game environments.

7   Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to explore the phenomenon of brand building in digital media, specifically within video games, to understand what brand building is, how it happens and why it is used. The overall aim was to gain insights and deepen our understanding of brand communications in a digital context, by examining different factors that contribute to effective brand building strategies and to develop a theory.

In doing so, the study was guided by the following three research questions:

RQ 1: What is in-game brand building?
RQ 2: How does in-game brand building happen?
RQ 3: Why use in-game brand building?

This resulted in an in-depth analysis containing rich data from mainly focus groups and secondary sources from case companies, which led to the creation of the Gamified Brand Building Matrix framework (Figure 7), consisting of four themes: Branded Game, Virtual Billboard, Cosmetic skin and Replica Cosmetic Skin, placed in relation to the two-dimensional axes of Brand empowerment and Gamer relationship. We can now draw a conclusion and provide answers to our three research questions. Regarding *What in game brand building is*, it is the process of building a strong corporate brand identity by employing interactive and immersive marketing communication strategies that resonate with the ideal or real self of the target audience in interactive digital environments. The question regarding *How does in game brand building happen,* we conclude that the gamified brand building happens by strategically placing branded or imitation branded content and advertisements within video games. The placement needs to adapt to the game's environment, ensuring that the advertisements enhance rather than disrupting the gamers' experience. Additionally, to achieve a stronger connection with the consumers it requires excellent design that represents the corporate brand accurately. Furthermore, there needs to be a match between the brand personality and the video game world the IGA exists in. Finally, our last question as to *Why use in game brand building,* we discovered that as the gaming industry is experiencing exponential growth alongside the emergence of other interactive virtual spaces such as the metaverse it is important for the corporations to adapt their strategies according to the emerging technological advancements in order to appeal to the evolving expectations of their stakeholders. The benefits of integrating brand communication strategies into video games provide organizations the opportunity to build connections with the audience outside the boundaries of the real world in an immersive and entertaining fashion.

8 Contributions

8.1 Theoretical contributions

The first contribution is the introduction of the Gamified Brand Building Matrix. One advantage of theory building from case-study is the possibility of producing a unique theory as suggested by Eisenhardt (1989), which we would propose is applicable to this thesis, given that this study is, at least to our knowledge, the first to combine the fields of brand building and IGA. Throughout our study, we developed a framework as a guide provided for researchers and managers that can enhance an understanding in mainly three fields: Brand building in a digital environment (Keller, 2016), corporate brand identity (Urde, 2024) and the identity of the gamer, the end user (Higgins, 1987), with a focus on communication efforts specifically IGA. This research has the potential to provide valuable insights into the communication strategies and mechanics of gamified brand building, which may inspire more exploration and further research in this field. As a result, our research contributes to existing literature by offering a new theoretical framework that connects brand building theory with the emerging field of IGA and metaverse.

Secondly, the study contributes to the brand building theory of Keller (2016), by illustrating how brands can achieve greater strength and resonance within the digital environment, specifically through video game integration. We provide a different application of the brand building pyramid, where the product and IGA are intertwined. Through this exploration, we discover that certain parts of the theory are represented in different ways for IGA, which offers valuable insights into the adaptation of brand building in a digital gaming environment. This deepens our understanding of brand building strategies in the digital age while also contributing to Keller's framework. Additionally, we contribute to Urde's (2024) corporate brand identity matrix in brand building, where we discovered that some components were more significant than others. We highlight the importance of brand identity expression, relationship, and personality in the digital context specifically within the video game environment. Our study demonstrates how IGA in all of its forms is impacted by certain components present in Urde's framework, providing an understanding on how corporations can leverage these aspects in video game brand building. Furthermore, our results are consistent with Higgins (1987) theory of the presentation of the selves, but in the context of being online the ought self is omitted. The domain of the ought self is not prevalent online, rather stands as a dimension of the ideal self of the gamer in the gaming context since people create personas that reflect their actual or ideal version of themselves.

Lastly, our research provides a contribution to the brand building definition within a new context. The world of video games creates new opportunities for corporations to build stronger brands which by rigorously exploring the phenomenon of IGA in the modern world recognize a different perspective in the brand building process. Our research highlights therefore the importance to introduce a new definition for brand building which according to Keller is the process of building strong brands contributing to brand equity resulting in brand resonance by

following four steps: "The brand resonance model looks at building a brand as a sequence of steps, each of which is contingent on successfully achieving the objectives of the previous one." (Keller & Swaminathan, 2020, pp 77). Our research focuses on interactive digital media, which is not acknowledged by Keller, rather his brand building theory focuses on the real-life brand building efforts that should comply with the online ones when he refers to brand building online in the virtual world (Keller & Swaminathan, 2020). Although Keller acknowledges the virtual and real world as two separate realities, he does not express the need for a separate definition as he focuses on the experience aspect in the brand building process and not the realms it takes place in. We propose a separate definition for brand building in interactive virtual worlds after rigorous research of the cases used in our thesis, we can define gamified brand building as the process of building a strong corporate brand identity by employing interactive and immersive marketing communication strategies that resonate with the ideal or real self of the target audience in interactive digital environments.

8.2 Managerial contributions

The gamified brand building matrix provides guidance to corporations that wish to empower their brand identity within video games, however we believe that our framework is valuable to managers who actively work with the communication of branded messages without focusing on brand building. Brand building is the process of adding value to organizations, brand equity as argued by Keller & Swaminathan (2020), but the gamification of the process allows corporations to explore its potential in various directions outside of the realm of the interactive virtual world where our theory is grounded. The people that make important strategic decisions regarding the whole corporation are the executives, but the benefits of the gamified brand building matrix could be of value to marketing managers working in agencies that assist organizations deliver effective marketing campaigns. We also believe that the gamified brand building matrix is valuable to graphic and 3D designers as well as video producers who are part of the creative process of making the advertisements.

The gamification of the brand building aims to create strong brands in video games or in the form of video games. The brands are as strong as their corporate identity, which we argue is the first managerial contribution of our framework. The corporate brand identity needs to be well defined, as well as for the managers to actively work towards maintaining a coherent identity between all the different aspects of it. The managers can actively work towards the alignment by focusing their attention on the different aspects of the corporate brand identity so as to understand what creates value for the organization. We have identified the importance of brand expression, personality, and the relationship, we argue that the gamified brand building matrix provides a guide to managers to investigate their effect. It is crucial to identify misalignments in order to ensure a well-defined corporate brand that is effectively communicated towards the customers and non-customer stakeholders resulting in an impeccable reputation. A lot of corporate brands with a legacy are leading examples of how to build and maintain a strong brand identity however as time progresses it is necessary to constantly make sure that efforts of the organization contribute in maintaining their strength as well as evolving it. The gamified brand building matrix can not only assist corporations to strengthen their brand identity but also give them the opportunity to evaluate their standing to ensure that the brand is adapting to the reality of the modern world.

The second managerial contribution we have identified is the importance of the form of the IGA. Different types of IGA harness different results for the corporations seeking to empower their brand identity therefore different forms of IGA are necessary for different goals. The power of the IGA arises from the immersive aspect of the advertisement. The immersiveness is achieved through the design of the IGA. The IGA is expected to follow the aesthetics of the video game world it exists in. Video games are a form of entertainment however the gamers are invested in the design of the game world alongside the game dynamics that collectively result in a joyful experience. The design of the IGA needs to meet the expectations of the gamers set by the game developers, which in cases such as branded games and cosmetic skins is of utmost importance. In terms of virtual billboards and replica cosmetic skins it is crucial for the IGA to blend with the game world, especially virtual billboards as replica cosmetic skins are developed by the game developers so the immersiveness and coherence is part of the game world already. In the case of cosmetic skins and branded games the immersion is secondary and instead emphasis is on the aesthetic aspect of the IGAs. The aesthetics of the IGA should reflect the corporate brand identity in order to communicate the branded message effectively without evoking feelings of disappointment among the gamers. Companies like Balenciaga that are well known for their high level of artistry and innovative design are expected to create cosmetic skins that translate their strong design in video games. Louis Vuitton successfully developed a mobile game that effectively represents the expression of the house's brand as it exceeds the expectations of the gamers. Immersion is achieved by incorporating the imagery associated with the brand in a gamified fashion resulting in a successful branded game Louis the Game.

Another important aspect that managers need to take into consideration for the IGA creation is the lifecycle of the IGA. In most cases the IGAs are created to last as long as the game lasts, specifically for the case of virtual billboards, cosmetic skins and replica cosmetic skins. In the case of branded games, it depends on the nature of the branded game, some are created to last for a limited period of time depending on the corporation's communication strategies in regard to branded messages they wish to deliver. Louis Vuitton created Louis the Game to last for a long time to commemorate the memory of the house's founder Monsieur Vuitton. Other companies, however, might create branded games with the purpose of promoting a new product or service which does not require the branded game to exist for an indefinite amount of time. The timeless nature of the IGA is a powerful aspect of this form of advertisement that is of great value to the managers that wish to actively work towards creating strong brands using video games as a communication channel. The exposure the IGA can yield due to the prevalent lifecycle goes beyond the exposure the corporations can gain through any other form of advertisement, as video games are played by millions of people frequently over long periods of time. The benefit of the lifecycle of the IGA results in great exposure that leads to exceptional financial benefits alongside the creation of relationships with audiences that corporations would not have been able to reach outside of the video games.

The cost of the IGA is another important component managers need to take in consideration during the planning stage. In some cases, the IGA costs the corporations the same amount of money as other forms of traditional and native advertising, such as branded games and virtual billboards that are the gamified version of them. However, in the case of cosmetic skins, which is a form of collaborative communication strategy, the cost can be lower as it depends on the agreement between the corporation that wishes to partner with a video game developing company. In the case of replica cosmetic skins, the corporation does not need to invest any amount of money as it is not a decision made by them, rather the game developers. The financial benefits, however, of the IGA are greater than those of their traditional and native

counterparts. In the case of cosmetic skins, the corporation receives royalties from the collaboration with the game development company, which depends on the period of time the skin is available for purchase in the video game. In all cases, however, the corporation reaps financial benefits from the perpetuated exposure of their brand in video games. Even from the replica cosmetic skins the corporation manages to leverage the association between the original brand and the replica cosmetic skin as gamers develop attitudes, feelings and relationships with the original rather than the imitation brand. The cost of the IGA is another advantage this form of advertising provides the corporation with, as we identified through our research which is a valuable insight for the managers.

The next managerial contribution the IGA provides to the corporations is the ability to connect with their audience in a non-disturbing manner. The IGA provides valuable experiences to the gamer while they are playing their favorite video game as it adds to the realism of the game world in most cases. The cosmetic skins do not enhance the realism of the game world however they introduce skins that are impeccably designed that overall add value to the experience of the gamer in the game world by offering a variety of skins to choose from in order to express themselves or feel closer to their avatar without breaking immersion. In the case of virtual billboards, the gamers appreciate their appearance in video games that require the world to feel as a simulation of the real world as well as serve as a non-intrusive form of advertisement that allows the gamer to enjoy the video game without distractions from unwanted branded messages. In the case of branded games, the gamers appreciate that the corporation creates advertisements that they actively have to seek for rather than being guided towards being exposed compared to traditional infomercials that appear without the audience choosing to. Furthermore, the replica cosmetic skins are an indirect form of advertising that is not only less intrusive as there is no real brand present in the video game, it also allows the gamers to express themselves and fully immerse themselves in the game world. The corporations need to understand who the gamer is and what they expect from the IGA, but at the same time need to reach the people behind the video games by providing value-adding experiences to their audience.

Finally, the managerial contribution can be summarized in a list of recommendations for the managers to follow in the gamified brand building journey:

- First the managers should always try to adjust their communications efforts to the modern media and keep up with the trends in order to create effective communication campaigns. Video games are a new medium that has not been used to their full potential yet, however it is important for managers to evolve their advertising strategies by incorporating their advertising efforts in video games effectively.
- Secondly, managers need to realize the power of the IGA compared to the traditional and native advertising lies within its non-intrusive nature that creates an entertaining experience for the gamers. Gamers accept IGA as it creates a game world that feels real to them, enabling them to fully immerse themselves in it. IGA prevents triggering brand avoidance more than any other form of advertising.
- Third, the managers need to remember that IGA exists for a longer period than any other form of advertising, therefore it is crucial to clearly define the goals of the IGA as well create IGAs that echo in time adding to the corporation's legacy as well as building a stronger brand. The managers should create timeless IGAs that successfully communicate tactical branded messages.

- Four, the managers are expected to deliver aesthetically pleasing IGAs that reflect the corporation's brand identity whilst the IGA becomes a valuable component of the game world. Video games are perceived as a form of art among gamers therefore the IGA should be designed with a religious level of respect towards the artistry of the game world.
- Five, the cost of the advertisement is another advantage of the IGA that managers should aim to leverage in order to generate more profit and reap the financial rewards of creating a stronger brand sooner than with any other form of advertising. The cost of the IGA varies depending on the form it assumes; however, the managers have the freedom to choose the type that corresponds to the financial goals of the corporation. The price of the IGA the customers pay for produces immediate financial regards for the corporation unlike any other form of advertisements that generates profit over a longer period of time by encouraging brand loyalty and positive brand emotional attachments and associations.
- Six, managers should understand who is exposed to the IGA. Compared to other forms of advertising IGA exposes the corporate brand to an engaged diverse audience that has one thing in common, their shared love for video games. Knowledge is power when the managers are capable of using it effectively to communicate the branded message to the gamers, therefore they need to approach the gamers in a more strategic manner than the audience of their different forms of advertisements.
- Finally, the IGAs exist to appeal to the fantasies of the real people behind the video games. It is not only important to understand who the person behind the avatars is but it is also important to realize the power of the IGA to transcend into the real world when executed effectively. IGAs can cultivate relationships with people that otherwise the managers could never reach evoking feelings and behavioral responses that could lead to brand loyalty and favorable brand attitudes and associations with the corporate brand.

9   Limitations

In this research we have explored the phenomenon of brand building, and how it can be applied in video games with the potential to be applied in what could become the future mainstream platform of metaverse. To achieve this, we developed a framework, presented theoretical contributions, and discussed managerial implications. However, as this research is the first to explore the concepts of brand building through IGA in video games, it has some limitations that will be outlined.

In this research we have used four companies and the perspectives from focus groups, to determine how brand building is made. Nevertheless, a more precise evaluation of the brand building efforts requires deeper insights into the management of the corporate brand and a thorough understanding of how it is carried out. This would provide a deeper understanding of which key points of brand building are emphasized and of importance within a corporate brand. Because of the limited access to the insights of the management strategies in these corporate brands, we were not able to gain this level of depth. Instead, we focused on the general aspects of the corporate brands, their product placement, and the available communication materials.

In addition, the researchers' selection of sampling is another significant limitation. A theoretical sampling method was used to choose the case companies. As a result, the study's analysis of the number of case companies was restricted. The possibility that if this study had included other companies instead, the findings might have been different, this would potentially offer different views on the impact of IGA and brand building. As for the participants in the focus groups, they were chosen using purposive sampling. This approach of sampling was chosen to guarantee participants in the study with relevant experiences and diverse perspectives which provided us with a range and depth of valuable insights. It is crucial to recognize, nevertheless, that the results might not accurately reflect the larger gaming community due to purposeful sampling, which limits the effects of our findings to be applied on a bigger scale. Despite this, this method provided insightful information relevant to our research aim, however repetition of the study is required to validate the framework developed by the authors.

10 Future research

This research can provide great significance for future researchers that want to research the field of IGA, brand building, applications for meta verse and other similar fields. The concept of metaverse is still an ongoing topic of interest which requires it to be investigated closer to understand its potential as well as many challenges. Since the metaverse is constantly evolving, there is room for exploring how brands can effectively integrate themselves into virtual space. The findings of this master thesis may serve as a foundation for future researchers that want to investigate brand building in the metaverse with a focus on the role of the brand, customer associations and behavior and the potential challenges and opportunities for marketers and brand managers in the metaverse.

A second suggestion for future research could be exploring the integration using other types of IGA and corporate brands than the ones used in this research. Future research has the exciting opportunity to explore a wider range of IGA formats and brand building strategies. This could be different forms of virtual billboards, like sponsored in-game events and infomercials in-game to understand their impact on player engagement. In addition, branded skins and replica branded skins could be thoroughly examined in order to explore the benefits and adversities each poses for the corporations. Advergames is another fascinating area of study, where future research can focus on gaining in relation to how consumer behavior is affected resulting in brand loyalty. The in-depth research of different IGA formats and brand building strategies of a wide variety of corporations can provide a holistic understanding of IGA as well as their implications for brand and marketing specialists.

Additionally, future research should look into ethical implications and considerations of IGA when targeting younger audiences. Younger audiences are vulnerable to the promotional tactics employed by corporations that seek profit therefore it is important to not subject them to actions meant for adults. Moreover, there is a need to investigate the long-term impact of exposing IGA to this demographic in terms of the psychological impact as well as the impact of the brand. Corporations must follow regulations designed to protect younger audiences and ensure that their IGA practices are transparent and fair, prioritizing the younger audience's well-being more than the financial benefits. Future research should aim to create ethical guidelines and regulatory frameworks to ensure ethics in their IGA and overall corporate communication efforts in virtual media.

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Appendix A

Types of Video Games

Types of Video Games	
Video Game Genre	**Description**
Action	An action game is a video game genre that emphasizes physical challenges, including hand–eye coordination and reaction time.
Adventure	An adventure game is a genre of video game characterized by exploration, puzzle-solving, and narrative-driven gameplay, focus more on story and character development
Battle Royale (BR)	A battle royale is a sub-genre of multiplayer video games that blends the last-man-standing gameplay with exploration, scavenging, and survival elements.
Fantasy	A genre of video games that transport players to imaginative and often magical worlds filled with fantastical creatures, epic quests, and mystical powers.
Horror	A genre of video games designed to evoke feelings of fear, suspense, and dread in players through atmospheric storytelling, psychological tension, and terrifying encounters with supernatural or grotesque entities.
Massively Multiplayer Online (MMO)	These games can support thousands of players simultaneously in a persistent world.
Massively Multiplayer Online Role Play (MMORPG)	A genre of video game that combines elements of role-playing games (RPGs) with large-scale, online multiplayer capabilities.
Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA)	A genre of video game that involves two teams of players competing against each other in a strategic, real-time environment.
Platformer	A genre of video game characterized by players controlling a character who navigates environments by running, jumping, and climbing to progress through levels.

Appendix A (continuation)

Types of Video Games	
Puzzle	A puzzle game is a genre of video games that emphasizes problem-solving skills. These games often require players to think critically and logically to overcome challenges.
Racing	A genre of video games that simulate the experience of driving or piloting a vehicle in a competitive environment.
Role Play	A genre of video game where players assume the roles of fictional characters within a narrative-driven setting
Rhythm	A genre of video games that primarily focus on music and timing-based gameplay.
Shooter	Shooter games, also known as first-person shooters (FPS) or third-person shooters (TPS), are a genre of video games that emphasize combat and shooting mechanics.
Simulation	Simulation games are a genre of video games that aim to simulate real-world activities, environments, or systems.
Sports	A genre of video games that simulate real-world sports activities, allowing players to participate in virtual recreations of various sports.
Stealth	A genre of video games that emphasize avoiding detection, sneaking, and covert tactics to accomplish objectives.
Strategy	A genre of video games that emphasize strategic thinking, planning, and decision-making to achieve victory.
Survival	A genre of video games that focus on players' efforts to stay alive in hostile environments, often against the backdrop of limited resources, environmental hazards, and aggressive enemies.

Appendix B

Focus Group Interview questions

Questions:	Relating to	Purpose (gain)
1. What types of games do you play?	Gamer	Understand type of gamer they are
2. How often do you play games? How many hours/day do you play?	Gamer	Understand type of gamer they are
3. What games have you played in the past?	Gamer	Understand type of gamer they are
4. What is your favorite game/games?	Gamer	Understand type of gamer they are
5. Why do you like playing games?	Gamer	Understand type of gamer they are
6. How does playing games make you feel?	Gamer	Escaping reality
8. Who do you play games with? If solo, what is the reason you do not play games with friends?	Gamer	Social relations, the role of them

Appendix B (continuation)

15. Do you notice brands in games? If not, why not?	Brand	Brand awareness, identity, existing in strength.
16. What do you think about brands appearing in your game? (should be max 1h into our convo now)	Brand	Acceptance to advertisements
17. What are your feelings towards brands?	Brand	Brand loyalty and brand avoidance.
18. What makes you like these brands?	Brand	Brand perception/attitude
19. How do you feel towards advertisements and product placements in the media in real life? (tv, billboard, flyers etc)	Brand	Acceptance to advertisements
20. Case 1: What would be the reason or reasons you choose a skin?	Brand/Gamer	Consumer perspective on the proposed framework (built based on corporate perspective)
21. Case 2: What do you think of this billboard ad?	Brand/Gamer	Consumer perspective on the proposed framework (built based on corporate perspective)
22. Case 3: What do you think of advergames?	Brand/Gamer	Consumer perspective on the proposed framework (built based on corporate perspective)

Appendix B (continuation)

23. Case 4: What do you think of fake skins in video games and what reasons do you have for choosing them or not?	Brand/Gamer	Consumer perspective on the proposed framework (built based on corporate perspective) Them portraying themselves
24. How do you feel about these brands after seeing them in games?	Brand	Brand salience. How effective is communication?
25. If you have seen/interacted with brands in games does that affect how you feel or interact with them in real life?	Brand/Gamer	Brand salience. How effective is communication?
26. What are your thoughts about in game advertisements/product placement/ branded content in general? Any final thoughts/comments	Gamer	Give opportunity to self-reflect. Additional info.

Appendix C

Consent form for focus group participants

SCHOOL OF
ECONOMICS AND
MANAGEMENT

LUND
UNIVERSITY

Gamified Brand Building: Brand Building in Video Games
Dimitra Papangeli & Ida Xing Fredmark

Interview Consent Form.

I have been given information about Gamified Brand Building: Brand Building in Video Games and discussed the research project with Ida Xing and Dimitra Papangeli who are conducting this research as a part of a Master's in International Marketing and Brand Management supervised by Mats Urde.

I understand that, if I consent to participate in this project, I will be asked to give the researcher a duration of approximately 2 hours of my time to participate in the process.

I understand that my participation in this research is voluntary, I am free to refuse to participate and I am free to withdraw from the research at any time.

By signing below I am indicating my consent to participate in the research as it has been described to me. I understand that the data collected from my participation will be used for my thesis only and will be deleted after completion, and I consent for it to be used in that manner.

Name: ....

Email: ....

Telephone: ....

Signed: ....