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Brand-Related User-Generated Content in Simulation Video Games: Qualitative Research Among Polish Players

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Abstract

Purpose: The article sought to answer research questions regarding investigated branded content generated by players in simulation video games. How does the process work in video games? What are the characteristics of branded user-generated content in video games? To what extent players are willing to participate in branded content creation?

Methodology: I conducted 20 in-depth interviews among Polish players, with the application of snowball sampling. The study participants were adult users of chosen simulation video games: *The Sims*, *Second Life,* and *Euro Truck Simulator 2*.

Findings: We can distinguish content based on game mechanism, official add-ons, or game modding. Players frequently check some brands from a set offered by game developers and create content (e.g. in *The Sims* users can design house interiors with IKEA furniture). Some players are not satisfied by what a game offers and generate content based on modding (e.g. DHL trucks or McDonald's restaurants inside the *Euro Truck Simulator 2*). In this respect, the article refers to Smith's, Fischer's, and Yongjian's content dimensions. Branded game modifications described by respondents are characterized by a high level of similarity towards real brands and positive brand sentiment (valence). I noted no statement about player and marketer (brand) communication in gathered material. The biggest challenge for practitioners in the field of UGC in video games is how to manage brand messages.

Practical Implications: Brand-related user-generated content is an important phenomenon in terms of the brand-building process and its impact on brand reception, which all require marketers' attention. For game developers, such a content is a source of information about customer expectations. Players show their personal expectations by game modding.

Originality/Value: Brand-related content generated by users is frequently associated with social media. The scholarship shows a lack of knowledge of branded user-generated content in video games.

Keywords: user-generated content, branded content, video games, game modding.

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Introduction

Digitalization and wide access to the Internet led to the emergence of new forms of amateur and semi-professional production. This production is based on co-operation rather than competition (Hesmondhalgh, 2010; Roma and Aloini, 2019). Currently, prevalent platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, blogs, and Wikipedia gained popularity as sites for the presentation and management of identity or participation in community-based activities (Fergie, Hunt, and Hilton, 2016). Internet users share their opinions, experiences, and creations in the form of texts, photographs, and videos, which are generally defined as user-generated content or consumer-generated media (Yu, Carlsson, and Zou, 2014). Consumers frequently engage in creating content related to brands, which plays an increasingly important role in brand communication and brand image creation (Poch and Martin, 2015). Moreover, according to research, consumers involved with generating content are more likely to be brand advocates, and their opinions are perceived by other consumers as trustworthy. It makes this type of communication more effective than traditional advertising (Schivinski and Dabrowski, 2016). What is important, a vast part of brand-related user-generated content can influence customer brand perception (Roma and Aloini, 2019). This activity is criticized due to being unpaid work such as building websites, modifying software packages, or creating virtual spaces (Hesmondhalgh, 2010). The growing share of users in media content creation led to the necessity of identification of such activities from the viewpoint of creating a company marketing strategy (Poch and Martin, 2015).

Scholars expect a rapid growth of content creation and content sharing in the video game industry (Koch and Bierbamer, 2016). Players often change character appearance, specific skills, and equipment. They modify technical features such as annoying music or tasks perceived as too difficult or too easy. There also appear creations that fundamentally change the nature of a game (Behr, Huskey, and Weber, 2015). Players became hobbyist developers that perform unpaid labor for other fans and casual players to consume. The phenomenon of generating game content by users offers many advantages not only by expanding the period of time when the game receives high sales revenue (Sotamaa, 2005); e.g. in *The Sims* approx. 90% of the game content is crafted by users (Herman, Coombe, and Kaye, 2006).

Players frequently become game producers that design add-on components – known as "mods" (Postigo, 2007) – while user-generated content inside video games results from "game modding." Game modding is defined as an act of changing the game, usually through programming and tools that are not part of the game. Modding is not initiated by the game producers but by its users and fans. Sometimes companies support modders

(mod creators), for example by providing them with discussion forums. Modders show high belongingness to a certain community and take pleasure in helping each other. Many modders work jointly on the same content (Poor, 2014). Modding communities gather players eagerly building and sharing their passion for creating. Participants can discuss their work with others, gain feedback, and receive help (El-Nasr and Smith, 2006; Nielsen, 2019). They use diverse gaming platforms that offer social networking services. One of the most popular digital game distributors for personal computer (PC) gaming is Steam developed by Valve Corporation (Lin et al., 2019). Steam hosts video game communities in 237 countries and is available in 21 languages (Brunt, King, and King, 2020).

An example of a game rich in user-generated content is *Second Life*, a virtual world launched by Linden Labs (Herman, Coombe, and Kaye, 2006, p. 196). In *Second Life*, players frequently map real-life cities like London, with Hyde Park and the gateway to Buckingham Palace (www.secondlife.com/destination/london, retrieved 30.04.2019). Moreover, there is a remarkable recreation of Dublin's downtown area, full of interesting attractions and replete with Irish hospitality, bars, music, and great company (www.secondlife. com/destination/dublin, retrieved 30.04.2019). Similar to social media users, players also generate brand-related content. Among diversified game elements, players introduce brands and real-life products into virtual worlds.

This article seeks to describe brand-related user-generated content in simulation video games, especially how this process of generation works, what characteristics it presents, and what attitude players demonstrate toward brands introduced to the game by such actions. The presented approach is based on the results of 20 in-depth interviews conducted at the end of 2018. The article contributes to the theory of branded user-generated content and is a first step to fulfill the research project "Brand introduction into virtual worlds of computer game as a form of customer engagement," which received funding from Poland's National Science Centre (Preludium 17, 2019/33/N/HS4/01530).

The article is organized as follows. The first part pertains to branded user-generated content in new media and is based on a literature review. In the second part, I describe the research method and the sample. Next, I present the research results. The article ends with a discussion and final conclusions.

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Branded User-Generated Content in New Media: Theoretical Background

New media in current marketing contexts refer to digital technologies such as the Internet and mobile devices. These digital technologies are highly interactive, virtual, global, and base on the many-to-many model of communication (Kelly et al., 2015). New media – especially social networking sites like Facebook – gather an enormous number of users, as their communities continue to grow (Stankov, Lazic, and Dragicevic, 2010). Facebook had two billion daily users worldwide in 2017 and from 2009 to 2016, it noted growth in marketing spending by 234% (Mayrhofer et al., 2020). This type of platform has become a space for enterprises to promote products and engage customers (Ding et al., 2014). The content of new media is not only consumed but also produced by its users (Fergie, Hunt, and Hilton, 2016).

According to Song, Duan, Huang, and Zhan (2020), user-generated content comes in the form of texts, pictures, and videos voluntarily released by users on various network platforms, and the content reflects users' personal opinions, feelings, and thoughts (Song et al., 2020). The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) lists three key characteristics of user-generated content: it must be publicly available on the Internet, it must show creative effort, and it had to be created outside of professional routines and practices (Christodoulides et al., 2012; OECD, 2007). Crowston and Fagnot (2018) indicate that user-generated content includes large numbers of distributed contributors (dozens or more), mostly unpaid labor, users' cooperation in creating new content (e.g. texts, images, or software), and value to a larger audience (Crowston and Fagnot, 2018). When it comes to brand-related user-generated content, it is related to a particular brand, created by users, and shared with others (Kim and Lee, 2017).

The subject literature frequently compares user-generated content (UGC) to electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), which can be defined as a channel of communication dominated by consumers independent of marketers (Crespo, Gutiérrez and Mogollón, 2015). Despite similarities between concepts of UGC and eWOM, the literature opposes content creation with content dissemination. Content is created and shared by consumers while eWOM is only conveyed by them (Schivinski and Dabrowski, 2016).

In order to know what is the prevalent view in the literature about branded content creation and its sharing in video games, I conducted a systematic literature review, which is a widely accepted scientific method to illustrate academic trends (Czakon, 2011).

The literature review happened in two stages. The first stage focused on the video game modding phenomenon and brands, which offered only initial conclusions but indicated that there is a research gap in creating and using branded game mods in the field of marketing communications and branding. For the literature query, I used the ProQuest database with the following key words: modding AND brand OR "product placement" OR "brand placement" OR marketing; "game modding" AND company OR "customer engagement;" "player production" AND brand; "co creation" AND brand AND game; "user generated content" OR "player generated content" AND game AND brand; "value co creation" OR "value creation" AND game AND brand. Next, I analyzed titles and abstracts. The results of the literature review show that there is some research pertaining to game modding and prosumption, game modding and communities, and game modding and value co-creation. Value co-creation refers to cooperation between players and game developers. I found no research that investigates value created as a result of a cooperation between players and companies (brands used in game mods) or game modding and brand communications.

Because I found no research in the field of game modding and brands, I repeated the literature query. In the second stage, I used the Scopus database with the following key words: "user-generated" OR "consumer-generated" OR "customer-generated" OR prosum* OR co-creation OR co-creat* OR cocreat* OR modding AND brand OR compan* OR firm OR busines* AND "new media" OR internet OR "social media" OR online OR game OR mobile OR interactive* OR virtual*. The results included peer-reviewed scientific articles limited to journals from the Academic Journal Guide (AJG) list with at least three stars (3*). With the search update for the first quarter of 2020, I found 320 articles and then analyzed titles and abstracts, including texts with brand-related content but excluding articles about content with commercial sources (generated by marketers) or focused on eWOM only. As a result, 144 articles meeting the criteria qualified for a full-test analysis. Most articles referred to user-generated content in social media. A vast part is related to online review sites. One article considers collaboration between a producer and a consumer of video games but without reference to a brand.

Previous subject literature (Mitręga and Hofman-Kohlmeyer, 2017; Hofman-Kohlmeyer, 2019) recognizes that a brand placed inside the game exerts a significant influence on brand reception. Brand reception can be considered as a psychological response and behavioral outcome (Terlutter and Capella, 2013). For example, Van Reijmersdal (2009) states that brand placement improves brand image and attitude. Gabisch (2011) finds a relationship between in-game brand placement and decisions about buying a brand in the real world. According to Waiguny, Nelson, and Terlutter (2010), food products

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embedded in games can shape children's brand beliefs about food healthiness. Moreover, brand reception is moderated by a wide range of factors such as the age and gender of players (Toh and Leng, 2014), brand familiarity as a measure of the extent of a consumer's experience with the brand (Martí-Parreño, Bermejo-Berros, and Aldás-Manzano, 2017), type of brands like a well-known brand and a less-known brand (Rosado and Agante, 2011), the frequency of brand repetition (Martí-Parreño, Bermejo-Berros, and Aldás-Manzano, 2017), the frequency of playing the game, the type of game, and the type of product placement (Yang, Roskos-Ewoldsen, Dinu, and Arpan, 2006). Brands or branded products can be incorporated into the virtual environment in various ways. The simplest form, an "advergame," is a game developed by the marketing department of an enterprise to promote its own brand or product, and it is frequently available on the organization's corporate website (Winkler and Buckner, 2006). Another form is in-game placement (brand placement, product placement), when a brand or logotype is embedded in the game environment and the brand owner (enterprise) pays for the brand's appearance (Celtek, 2010). Although there is a lack of literature on brands placed inside a game through user-generated content or game modding, Nelson notices that players can customize their gaming experience by selecting brands from a brand set available in the basic version of a game (Nelson, 2002). For example, in *Nascar Racing 3*, users can personalize their racing cars by "repainting" them with any design, including the logo and colors of a brand from a collection of brands available in game (Nelson, 2005). In *FIFA 2001*, players have the option to change players' shirts by selecting the club badge and sponsorship advertisements (Nelson, 2002). Moreover, Nelson suggests that this type of placement forces recipients to be more engaged in the brand and create a brand image within the game (Nelson, 2005). We may hypothesize that the reception of brands introduced to a game by players will be different than when introduced by traditional brand placement. This study investigates branded content generated in video games by players through modding activities.

Research Method and Sample

In order to describe brand-related content generated by players in the virtual world of simulation video games, I conducted 20 in-depth interviews among Polish players. With reference to the current state of knowledge, I asked the following research questions:

1. How does the process of generating brand-related content by users works in video games on the example of simulation video games?
2. What are the characteristics of branded UGC in simulation video games?

3. What attitude do players demonstrate toward brand-related content in simulation video games?

Answering the above questions was to allow me to compare some features of user-generated content in video games to the user-generated content in other media.

The interviews were held from August 21, 2018, to December 5, 2018. Participants of the study were adult users of chosen simulation video games who had contact with one of the games at least six months before the interviews. I applied purposive sampling because I could not reach the whole group of Polish players and, instead, only examine a small set of users (Babbie, 2003). Moreover, I wanted to reach users of a specific type of video game. Participants were recruited for the study through the social networking site Facebook from among subscribers to fan pages of the chosen video games. Interviews were conducted mainly electronically via voice chat (17) and in person (3). Due to the territorial dispersion of respondents, the electronic form of interviews was predominant. After interviews, respondents were asked about the recommendation of possible subsequent players. I chose the snowball method because respondents with a large number of social connections can provide other respondents with similar characteristics (Etikan, Alkassim, and Abubakar, 2016). The data was collected as long as theoretical saturation was obtained, and further interviews would not bring new information about the investigated phenomenon (Jemielniak, 2012).

Respondents were informed about the purpose of the study and anonymous participation at the time of receiving the invitation. In order to avoid influencing the course of the interviews, the aim of the study was presented in general as "building knowledge about marketing aspects of video games for scientific purposes." The interviews were conducted according to a prepared scenario (Appendix 1). The scenario included five sections: introduction, virtual world participation experiences, in-game brands, game modding and brands, demographic questions. I asked open-ended questions to elicit information pertinent to the research subject. Each interview began with general questions about games and then the focus of attention gradually shifted to more specific topics. First, I asked respondents to briefly introduce themselves and describe their virtual world experiences. Second, they were asked about some similarities between virtual and real life, especially if they met some places or objects. Participants frequently talked about cities or landscapes that depicted the same cities or places from the real world. Moreover, they listed places like restaurants or roads and objects like cars or clothes. At this stage, respondents frequently listed names of restaurants or cars and mentioned branded products. When they did not, I asked further questions, such as "What else have you saw in the virtual world?" or "What about some places,

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maybe objects?" If a brand's name did not appear, I asked participants about branded products or firms that they met inside a game environment. When players indicated a particular brand's name, I directed their attention to descriptions of when and how these brands appeared. Among traditional brand placement, players talked about brands introduced to games as unofficial user modifications. Some respondents presented a wide knowledge of modding and the modding community, whereas others described activities related to modding but did not define them as modding. The exact questions in this section were formulated following elements emerging from practical discussions. An interview scheme is presented in Appendix 2. Each interview ended with demographic questions. The interviews lasted approximately 30–40 minutes, were recorded, and then transcribed. In order to obtain a high level of accuracy, as suggest Miles and Huberman (2000), all statements were written down in detail, including interviewees' breaks for reflection and incorrect statements (e.g. incomplete sentences, twisted words). Afterward, interviews' contents were coded according to a prepared set of codes. The codes were created with the use of user-generated content dimensions defined by Smith, Fischer, and Yongjian (2012). Each code was described by a symbol and name and then defined. Appropriate codes were assigned to sentences or longer fragments of statements. As Miles and Huberman (2000) recommend, the codes established at the beginning were modified during the analysis until achieving an efficiency of assigning codes to text fragments. During the coding process, brief notes were made at the end of each interview transcript. These notes mainly contained the most important observations and comments, especially focused on what the interview contributes to the research (Miles and Huberman, 2000). After the contents of interviews were coded, I created code cards. Each code card was assigned to the characteristics of a different category which constituted a certain set of statements. Each of the statements has been described with specific characteristics (Konecki, 2000). Due to the small sample size and the duration of the interview, the use of software was not necessary. Based on the code cards, I formulated research results and final conclusions.

Furthermore, to describe brand-related user-generated content in video games, I used content dimensions from my previous research as a framework. Smith, Fischer, and Yongjian (2012) investigate how brand-related user-generated content differ in various social media platform, namely YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. They identify a set of content dimensions for comparison: promotional self-presentation, brand centrality, marketer-directed communication, response to online marketer's actions, factually informative messages, and brand sentiment (valence). Promotional self-presentation is related to using brands and other symbols by consumers to construct their own image in offline and online contexts. Brand centrality describes the role of a brand in generated content. Brand can play a pivotal role and be the central part of content, or it

can be only an additional, peripheral element. Marketer-directed communication refers to the possibility of establishing communication between consumers and marketers, which is frequently offered by social media. Consumers ask companies questions, make complaints about branded products, and write comments under companies' posts. Sometimes, consumers create content in response to online marketers' actions. These actions encompass posting questions to consumers, posting coupons, or announcing events. Factually informative messages form a dimension that constitutes evaluation if content conveys real information about a brand that can be confirmed, e.g. the price of an offering, the timing of sales, styles of specific clothes. Brand sentiment (valence) is a measure of user-generated content (Smith, Fischer, and Yongjian, 2012). In this respect, sentiment is an opinion or feeling about something expressed in generated content (Wang et al., 2014). Brand sentiment can be positive, negative, neutral, or unclear. Smith, Fischer, and Yongjian choose content analysis as the method of comparing user-generated content across three social media sites. The study shows differences in each dimension of content. They also find differences in the generation of brand-related content according to brand, with more proactive social media strategies and brand with less proactive strategies. They recommend that future research extends the scope of the study to other media such as video games and virtual worlds (Smith et al., 2012).

Because it was impossible to interview players of all existing games, I focused on one type of game: simulators. Moreover, I purposively chose games in which user-generated content is being developed. This allowed me to gather more information in comparison to games in which players are less active in modding activities. As a result, for the present research, three following video games were chosen: *The Sims* (TS), *Second Life* (SL), and *Euro Truck Simulator 2* (ETS2; see Table 1).

The Sims (TS) is one of the best-selling computer simulation games. Players impersonate a virtual character and create a virtual family called the Sims, decorate their homes with furniture and appliances, and help them find jobs. Those characters cannot speak and only interact via gestures and a nonsensical language called Simlish (Ranalli, 2008, p. 441).

Second Life (SL) is one of the most popular and widely studied virtual worlds. Users can create avatars according to their own preferences, private virtual spaces, and objects like houses and clothes (Zhou et al., 2011, p. 261). *Second Life* has a virtual economy and its own currency (Partala, 2011, p. 787). Users can buy and sell virtual and real products using Linden Dollars (L$), which are exchangeable against the US dollar. Scholars recognize many business endeavors in the game, e.g. advertising,

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organizing meetings and conferences, training and recruitment, and testing new products (Zhou et al., 2011, pp. 261–262).

In *Euro Truck Simulator 2* (ETS2), players can drive a vehicle and complete a series of repetitive tasks like making deliveries (Leino, 2018, p. 2). The game environment depicts the real world in such a way that players are under the impression that they really move with a truck on real European roads (www.eurotrucksimulator2.com, retrieved 6.01.2019).

Each chosen video game is a simulation of real life. Players can walk in virtual worlds as avatars or by driving trucks. All three games have no clearly defined goals. There are no levels to achieve and no possibility to lose the game. Inside *The Sims*, players can build their own houses and live like in the real world in their avatars. Similarly, in *Second Life*, players imitate real life and socialize with other people. In ETS2, players impersonate truck drivers and carry loads from one place to another, which in a way makes the journey itself the goal of the game.

Table 1. The number of interviewed users of individual games

	The number of interviewed players
Second Life	11
Euro Truck Simulator 2	5
The Sims 1–4	4
Total	20

Source: own elaboration.

Most respondents were men and belonged to the age range of 20–30 years of age. They usually had higher education. The sample was diversified in terms of the place of residence and occupation. Among the 20 participants were residents of small and large cities, blue-collar workers (e.g. production worker, mechanic), white-collar workers (e.g. IT specialists), and students. The information about the participants is gathered in Table 2.

Table 2. Respondents' demographic profiles

Total number of participants		20
Gender	female	8
	male	12
Age	20–30	17
	31–40	0
	41–50	3
Education	vocational	2
	secondary	6
	higher	12
Population size of participant place of residence	up to 20 000	2
	20,001–50,000	3
	50,001–100,000	3
	100,001–200,000	6
	200,001–500,000	2
	more than 500,000	4

Source: own elaboration.

Research Results

Today, playing video games is a popular form of leisure. For a significant number of players, games are also life simulators, which they can freely modify and create. Sometimes respondents admitted that the possibility of building and creating was the main motivation for starting a game, e.g. "I focus on building and creating, creating the world rather than controlling characters. So I play because I feel relaxed when building and creating" (TS), "I play mainly because there are a lot of modifications to this game, among other things, there is multiplayer, and a co-op option" (ETS2). The simplest form of creation is changing avatars' appearances, "modifying the face, eye color, hair. We may select all of these elements in the latest part of the game, we choose the way the character will move. The name, surname. Of course, we dress later, we choose the appropriate character traits" (TS). Frequently, users modify game scenery and arrange real-life places, e.g. in *Second Life* "the Eiffel tower can be seen because someone came up with the idea of recreating Paris."

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This study focused on brand-related content inside the games generated by the players. Based on the conducted interviews, I distinguished content based on game mechanisms or official add-ons and content based on game modding activities.

User-Generated Content Based on Game Mechanisms or Official Add-Ons

When it comes to the first type, respondents described content generated with what the game offers. Game developers frequently offer a set of brands, from which the players can choose, e.g. in *Euro Truck Simulator 2* players first must decide what brand of truck they want to drive: "there is a Scania, Mercedes, Volvo, Daf, Man, Iveco; we have six types, I do not know if there is something else." Afterward, the players can also change elements of the truck such as tires: "Michelin, Krone, it is a semi-trailer producer … you can buy it and have a Krone semi-trailer," "it is a separate paid game add-on, but it is official, from the game developer. Then we have a sign on tires, the snowman [Bibendum, the Michelin Man]." Interesting examples are mentioned also by players of *The Sims*. One of them arranged a house with IKEA furniture: "there are such additions that introduce into this virtual world things that we can have in our [real-life] homes, and in this case of *The Sims 2*, it was probably an addition with IKEA." Another respondent described how it is possible: "to buy a piece of furniture from IKEA it would be enough to get into furniture buying mode. And this furniture was also bought for virtual money. But to have money, your Sim had to go to work." Similarly, players can use the Diesel brand to change their avatar's appearance: "all you have to do is enter the character creation option so that you could wear Diesel pants and have them all the time." Players' use of branded virtual clothes in the creation of their own styles was also noticed in the case of *Second Life*, e.g. how they employed t-shirts with a Play logotype.

User-Generated Content Based on Game Modding Activities

A group of players was not satisfied by the building and creating limitations in the games they play. During the interviews, some players admitted that they generate content by modding. Game modding is a process of changing, adding, or removing game code that changes graphic layout or creates new characters and objects (Wallace, 2014). Generating content by modding is difficult for most players: "another thing is skills because modeling and work on textures is one thing, but for example creating even an avatar of a wolf that I have, you need additional scripts. *Second Life* has its own programming language, it is based on a programming language, I don't remember

which one, but you also have to learn this programming language, you have to write with it to work, etc. There is really a lot of IT work" (SL). Players who do not have the appropriate skills use mods made by others.

Game modding can be observed in every investigated game, e.g. *Second Life*: "These are normal users like me. They have some predispositions in the direction of e.g. graphics … [they] create a model, apply some texture." In *Euro Truck Simulator 2*: "There's a creator out there who has an idea that he'll make e.g. pink rims with an inscription of any sort, even Hello Kitty, and he creates something like that in the program and then implements into the game and has some rims or a trailer with Hello Kitty. It is an unofficial add-on, but there are plenty of such things." According to respondents, game modding is not a single phenomenon but a very popular activity: "there is a huge community in which people do such things, share them, while others download them and test them … there is a special kind of workshop where you can put your stuff, there also are unofficial forums where there is a lot of such things" (ETS2). I asked the players if there appear real-life brands created through game modding activities. Most respondents confirmed that they implemented branded mods to the game environment. Many examples came from *Euro Truck Simulator 2* users, e.g. "in the game there are, for example, trailers from Raben …. The track with the logo of this company can also be downloaded online because it is not a problem to find it. … Fresh Logistics but this is probably Raben's subgroup … but I also think that Fresh Logistics was there. What else would it be… e.g. DHL;" "where there are even ads for Biedronka and Lidl [supermarket chains], so there are many such things;" "some advertisements there, on the pane, an energy drink … probably Tiger." Players mentioned placing company buildings near the road. As a result, one can drive a truck and pass markets of Aldi, Biedronka, or Tesco. Players also create real-life gas stations: "if you just download this add-on "Poland Rebuilding" then wherever you go, you will pass a gas station, for example BP or Orlen; well, these are ads, real ads;" and advertisements on track: "there are, for example, many real brands on trailers, you find Lidl, Biedronka, or CCC."

Branded content is also created in *The Sims*, as one of the players said "especially for *The Sims 4*, many modders create own models of things and then, of course, you can download appropriate packages with the things that interest you. And then you can actually have branded products in game." Another respondent gave an example: "while browsing, you come across clothes signed with a brand or decorative elements such as milk cartons. Oh, I know there were definitely breakfast cereals recently, some time ago I encountered breakfast cereals that you can also buy in the USA" (TS). Unfortunately, the player did not remember the particular brand of the breakfast cereals.

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Moreover, respondents talked about seeking information about mods: "on a discussion forum, I sometimes sit and watch for new or added elements" (ETS2), "this is a Steam platform … where you can also buy games, additions to games of all kinds, accessories; such things can be bought for real money and also sold for real money … some game achievements, some icons, such things can be sold." Then there appeared the interesting issue of buying and selling player creations: "I spent many hours in stores and buying clothes, items for real money" (SL); "there were also cases of amateur fashion designers, not some well-known designers from real-life but someone who just created in game. They made interesting clothes that sometimes appeared well. They opened a store, as there are many virtual ones" (SL). Creators often generate content related to their works for game purposes in other media such as YouTube or blogs: "there is a World of Trucks website … sometimes, when you enter this website, you can find photos from the game made by gamers. For example, trucks and some mountains in the background or trucks somewhere on the road or a convoy standing" (ETS2). We may say that the material is created first and then used in another media. We may infer that brands inserted in games by modding can spread further through other communication channels, which helps brand messages to reach broader audiences.

Some creators are afraid of using real-life brands in games and try to get official consent of brand owners: "in *Euro Track Simulator 2*, there are many such virtual companies, which are created… how to put it… based on real-life companies. Usually, people do write to real companies in Poland, for example, and these companies allow for something like this, so then those people can modify various types of trailers or semi-trailers in this game, which look exactly like in real life." Others try to create mods with fictitious brands but very similar to the real one: "There is no real McDonald's in the game. There is something… that you can see is similar to McDonald's but it is called differently… but everyone knows that it is a McDonald's restaurant, though instead of McDonald's it's called McDowel" (SL).

In order to learn if brands are the main goal of content creation, I asked respondents why do they generate content inside the games. They answered that they were very often guided by the need to diversify the game: "the basic version is not as fun as the one with add-ons because there are map extensions, for example, some additional paint and other things that make the game really fun, but when it comes to the standard version of the game I would be bored after a month." Moreover, respondents referred to game realism: "it certainly looks more realistic if we see Orlen or McDonald's in the game instead of a generic gas station invented for the game" (ETS2). Players asked about their need of placing brands inside the game usually confirmed that they want to see branded game elements: "many people use *Promods*, an unofficial add-on,

because the real brands are there;" "I would love to see real brands in this game such as real-life gas stations or McDonald's restaurants. Because they are not present in the official version of the game" (ETS2).

Promotional Self-Presentation

Furthermore, I analyzed the gathered material with reference to Smith's, Fischer's, and Yongjian's (2012) set of content dimensions: promotional self-presentation, brand centrality, marketer-directed communication, response to online marketer action, factually informative message, brand sentiment (valence).

Players generate game content to build their own image: "the basic version is the option to create characters. You choose hair color, figure, eyes, and can modify all of these of course … the additions provide a broader range of hairstyles and clothes" (SL). Their image is created in a similar way as in real life, frequently with the use of brands of clothes or cars: "Converse, Nike, Adidas, Reebok, mainly sportswear, Lamborghini, Porsche, etc. popular brands" (SL).

Sometimes creators gain recognition and fame such as one of the *Second Life* players who produced accessories for avatars: "the company that released the avatar that I wear is called Jomo and offers a few other avatars, a few clothes for these avatars, a few accessories, such as face animations or whatever. And then we say that it is from Jomo and everyone knows what's going on." Creators not only become recognizable but also earn money: "I think there are stores that are really well recognized [among players], especially when it comes to avatars, body models, or avatar heads," "many people made a lot of money on clothes design, e.g. clothes that could be dressed in a virtual store" (SL).

Brand Centrality

In terms of brand centrality, the situation is not obvious. We may list examples of content creations in which a brand takes a pivotal role and is placed as a central part of those creations. However, respondents also mentioned content in which brands play tangential or supporting roles. An accurate example was described by one of the players of *The Sims*, in which players could build their own H&M store: "there were all the accessories you need to create this store, e.g. hangers with clothes, various items with an H&M logo. Everywhere you can see white and red colors, characteristic for H&M brand. They cover walls in such colors, etc. This store really looked like H&M." There is no doubt that the H&M brand played an important role in this content.

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A valuable example of content creation in *Euro Truck Simulator 2* is the unofficial mod called "Poland Rebuilding" which extends the maps available in the game. A group of Polish players created content that allows players to visit Polish cities, towns, and villages, and see their specific sites and buildings. Moreover, some virtual items from the game become identical with objects from the real world and increase the game's realism: "and the most attractive thing for people is the realism of this entertainment and all the things that are used by real drivers, such as the axle lift in the truck, the physics of the whole vehicle. Recently, the functionality of buying own trailers has been added." The primary goal of generating this content was to raise the game's realism. The content of "Poland Rebuilding" also contains branded elements: "good additions are maps of Poland, in which there are even advertisements of Biedronka or Lidl." Aside from billboards near roads, players mentioned advertisements placed on trucks: "on trailers, for example, there are many real brands like Lidl, Biedronka, or CCC;" "you can even download Jack Daniels."

Those brands are examples of tangential elements in player-generated content. Inserting brands was not the main goal of content creation, but we should notice that – in some cases – those brands were placed in the central part of the content.

The interviews participants also talked about brands featured in peripheral places of the screen, e.g. in *Euro Truck Simulator 2* appeared buildings near the road, which the players pass when driving trucks: "generally, in the game as such there are only restaurants or buildings with fictitious names, but modifications released by game fans add real names;" "thanks to a modification, for example, I saw McDonald's or KFC restaurants."

Marketer-Directed Communication

According to Smith, Fischer, and Yongjian (2012), marketer-directed communication is linked to communication between consumers and marketers via social media channels. Consumers can gear a message for a brand by asking questions or writing comments on a company social media profile. In this study, participants did not mention such actions. I noted no case of content generated by players in order to reach companies.

Response to Online Marketer Actions

Smith, Fischer, and Yongjian (2012) state that sometimes consumers create content as a response to online marketer actions like posting questions to consumers, posting coupons, or announcing events. In the case of video games, such actions are not so easy, but they are not impossible. Marketer actions can be understood as such that allow

players to use their brands for the purpose of generating content, e.g. in *Euro Truck Simulator 2*, before the game begins, players can choose a truck that they will drive: "Yes, seven brands of trucks are available in the game;" "They are all European brands, Volvo, Scania, Das, Man, Mercedes, Iveco, and Reno." In the next step, the selected trucks can be further changed: "Moreover, there are add-ons that allow for the use of semi-trailers of real companies … at this moment we have two firms, Schwarzmuller and Krone;" "There are also tires, for example from Michelin." Respondents did not mention creating content after an action by a brand that is not a sponsor of the game.

Factually Informative Message

Based on respondents' statement, we may assume that branded content is characterized by a high level of similarity to real brands, e.g. *The Sims*' players described the virtual products that resemble real products from IKEA as "these are objects in the building mode, the most characteristic of recent IKEA products" (TS). Some players saw a specific flagship product from the company's offer in a virtual product: "it was really furniture like from IKEA, called the same as in IKEA, the most iconic armchairs, the most iconic sofas, some tables. And, interestingly, in this game it was the cheapest furniture, which could suggest that IKEA is affordable;" "I remember these pillows were very popular and the same red cabinet that I mentioned, even one of my classmates had it at the time. I also think that these were IKEA's flagship products at the time;" "we have an H&M logo, some brand-specific colors such as white and red, yes, these are the H&M colors. They also cover the walls in such colors, so this store really looks like an H&M" (TS). Some players stated that the image of virtual brands imitated the image of those brands in real life, for instance, Diesel products: "it seems to me that if there were jeans in the game, it would look real. They continued what this brand represents in real life" (TS). The same situation can be observed among content created for *Euro Truck Simulator 2*: "What else would it be… for example DHL… DHL is probably yellow, yellow and red, if I speak correctly; and *Second Life*: "prepared just as nice and purple as Play has its colors."

Brand Sentiment (Valence)

In general, user-generated content in video games demonstrates very positive brand sentiment: "if you drive a truck and you see a billboard from Lidl or Biedronka, from various stores or gas stations, it is really nice, because you feel as if you were driving this truck in real life and just passing such billboards;" "it really gives such a cool vibe, and so to speak, you want to travel these miles, I really always liked it" (ETS2). We may suspect that brand sentiment is positive because players in modding activities use

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those brands that they like or need. Some statements referred to the quality of content generated by other users, which could be categorized as neutral or unclear, e.g.: "they had such unattractive clothes that I never used them," "they were very simple, graphically very ugly, they did not fit the rest of the game" (TS). These statements show a negative attitude toward the quality of user-generated content, not toward specific brands that appear in the game. I noted no fully negative valence of content.

Discussion and Conclusions

The purpose of the article was to describe branded content generated in video games by players on the example of simulator games. To that end, I conducted 20 in-depth interviews among Polish players of chosen video games. The study enabled me to reveal answers to the research questions I posed earlier.

First, I asked how does the process of generating brand-related content by users work in video games? According to results from the conducted interviews, we may distinguish content based on game mechanisms or official add-ons and based on game modding. Game developers often offer a set of brands that players can use in game. As Nelson (2002) notices, players frequently check brands from the offered set and create additional content, e.g. in *The Sims* users can build their own H&M shops or design house interiors with IKEA furniture. Some interviewed players admitted that they are not satisfied by what the game offers and generate content by modding. They modify game elements by changing the game code or creating a completely new one and introduce it into the game. In this way, many brands appear in the game, e.g. DHL trucks or McDonald's restaurants in *Euro Truck Simulator 2*. Players who do not have appropriate skills to create their own mods use those made by others.

The second research question was about the characteristics of branded user-generated content in video games. In this regard, I referred to Smith's, Fischer's, and Yongjian's (2012) set of content dimensions: promotional self-presentation, brand centrality, marketer-directed communication, response to online marketer action, factually informative message, brand sentiment (valence). According to my study, players created content to build a character in virtual worlds. Respondents playing *Second Life* and *The Sims* gave several examples of modifications that help to shape their avatars' appearance and image. Previous research recognized crafting a personal identity as an important motive of creating branded user-generated content. For example, Babin and Hulland (2019) state that consumers collect content on portals like Instagram or Pinterest because they need to express their personal identity (Babin and Hulland, 2019). When

it comes to video games, players who are more outgoing, talkative, or energetic and players with more fluid emotions are more willing to present themselves. Kordyaka and Hribersek (2019) remind of the self-presentation theory (SPT), which assumes that individuals try to influence their perception by other people to achieve the desired image. In online video games, players create an "online identity" (Kordyaka and Hribersek, 2019). That is, digital technology allows consumers to reach a larger audience. Babin and Hulland refer the need to present own identity to the concept of "extended self" (Babin et al., 2019). The consumer chooses a specific brand that fits his concept of himself (Mittal, 2006). Muntinga, Moorman, and Smit (2011) remark that users are often motivated by the desire to show that a specific brand is an important element of their lives and identities (Muntinga, Moorman, and Smit, 2011). Both Babin et al. and Muntiga et al. turn their attention to digital media, which is to allow users to present their individual personalities to others. The personal identity is less demonstrated by players of ETS2. We may conclude that the type of game matters. According to Smith, Fischer, and Yongjian, the level of self-presentation differs across social media platforms and is higher on YouTube.

When it comes to brand centrality, the respondents listed examples of game mods in which brands play pivotal and complementary roles. Brand centrality also gains attention in the literature on brand placement in games. Scholars usually use in this case the term "brand proximity." A brand can be characterized by "focal placement" (the central point of action) or peripheral placement (brands placed in the background; Lee and Faber, 2007). Others distinguish "prominent placement" (e.g. big size of logotype) and "subtle placement" (e.g. short time of exposure; Cauberghe and Pelsmacker, 2010). In previous research on user-generated content, inside content with a high level of promotional self-presentation, brands played only a supporting role. Conversely, when the content did not promote the creator, the brand played a pivotal role in this content. As Smith, Fischer, and Yongjian write, brand information on YouTube is "often peripheral to the main message" (Smith et al., 2012). Perhaps brand centrality in computer game modding also depends on other factors?

During the interviews, I noted no statements about players and marketers (brand) communication. If there is a lack of communication, enterprises (brands) cannot manage or even control the content made by potential consumers. Brand message is most probably not under the control of brands. However, branded mods can be a valuable source of information for marketers. Nobre and Ferreira (2017) argue that games are an important branding tool because they allow marketers to collect data, opinions, and ideas from consumers on products, forms, and moments of consumption, but also help them with market segmentation and consumer profiles definition. Moreover, placing brands

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in virtual worlds allows marketers to shape communication between brands and consumers (Nobre and Ferreira, 2017).

The conducted interviews show positive the brand sentiment of content created by players in video games, probably more positive than in other media. Brand sentiment in social media differs depending on the platform. Smith, Fischer, and Yongjian find that for a proactive brand positive posts are higher on Twitter (64%) while for less proactive brands positive posts are higher on YouTube (52%). Moreover, they also record content with a neutral and negative brand sentiment (Smith et al., 2012). In comparison, Liu, Burns, and Hou (2017) note significantly more negative content on Twitter, especially when it comes to footwear brands (41.7%) and telecommunications (61.1%) because a vast part of posts they analyze appears to be customer complaints (Liu, Burns, and Hou, 2017). Their article is difficult to quantitatively compare with this study about video games, but the fact that the participants of interviews did not mention mods with negative brand sentiment is promising for the brands.

Noteworthy, game modding conveys a high level of factual information about a brand. The above study's respondents listed great examples of content whose creators tried to accurately reproduce brand features. Moreover, I tried to evaluate players' attitudes toward brand-related content in video games. In general, players need to generate branded content because they want to raise game realism, as they repeatedly admitted that there are too few brands in the official version of the game. They demonstrated a very positive attitude toward brands placed inside a game that was a result of others' work, which allowed players to have something that was missing in the official version of the game like a t-shirt of a favorite brand or advertisements on trucks. Previous research on brand placement in video games shows that players demonstrate a more positive attitude toward an embedded brand when the placement is subtle and congruent with the game plot (Peters and Leshner, 2013). When the brand is featured as the central point of action, its appearance is too frequent, or the type of branded product does not fit the game plot – players get irritated. The players' feeling of irritation contributes to the formation of negative attitudes toward the brands (Martí-Parreño et al., 2013). In the above study, the players demonstrated a positive attitude toward brands featured in games by game modding possibly because of the high brand-game congruency of the mods.

Moreover, the above study leads to another important observation. Content generation by players in video games contributes to content creation in other media. Players usually share their works on blogs, social networking sites, or video-sharing sites like YouTube. For example, a player creates a truck with an advertisement, next broadcast

from the game when he drives this truck, and then shares the recording on YouTube. Brand as a part of this work can be conveyed to other recipients, not only users who play a particular game but also users who watch a video on YouTube. The audience of brand messages can be broader than a group of users of a particular video game in which the brand was placed.

The above study is also interesting for practitioners. What is important for game developers is that the result of conducted interviews reveals information about players' individual preferences. The respondents showed a need for possessing real-life brands inside game environments. Players are aware that game developers usually cannot afford to put an unlimited number of branded objects in the virtual world. They also have a limited impact on what sponsors will agree to place their logos in the game. Game modding provides information on what type of brands or branded elements are desired by players, which simplifies game developers' decisions in which brand should they invest.

However, the presented qualitative study has several limitations. During the interviews, the respondents discussed examples of game modifications that they could remember and not modifications that existed at the time of playing the game. Thus, the mentioned branded mods do not reflect the exact situation inside particular games. Previous studies on product placement in video games reveal that brand recall and recognition depend on various factors, e.g. brand prominence (Wang and Chen, 2019) or game-product congruity (Vashisht, Mohan, and Chauhan, 2020). There is a need for a broader content analysis of branded game mods shared by its creators on online forums and blogs. Moreover, a quantitative survey would be helpful for an accurate assessment of the scale of the phenomenon and its characteristics. Furthermore, future research should explore why players engage in generating content related to brands and how they choose particular brands. We lack knowledge on how branded game modifications influence brands, e.g. brand image or beliefs. What is also important is to know how companies can manage and control branded content created and shared by players.

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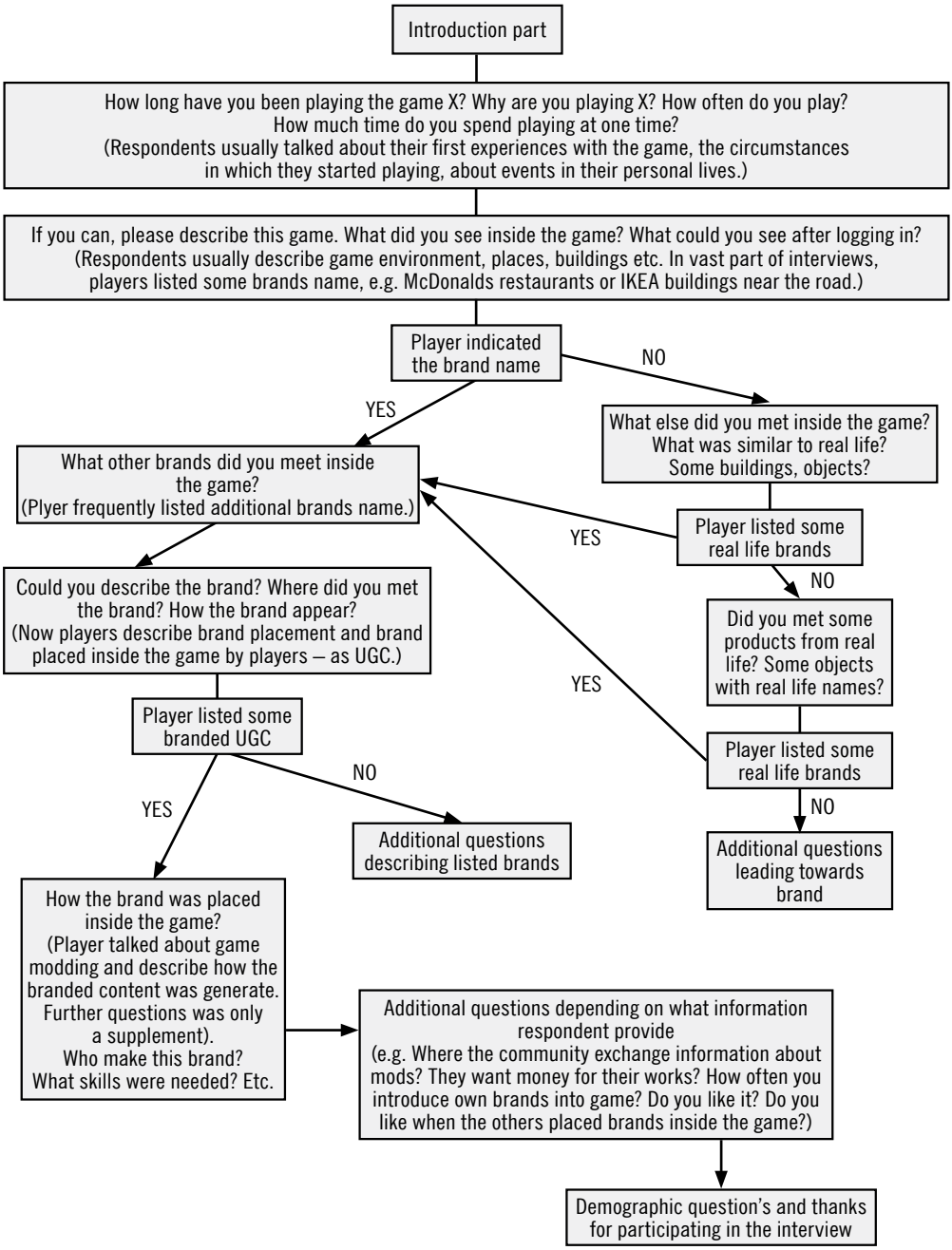
Appendix 1.

Interview scenario

Section	
Introduction	▪ presenting the purpose of the research, ▪ informing about anonymity, ▪ respondents were asked to briefly introduce themselves
Virtual world participation experiences	▪ respondents described own virtual world experiences
Brands inside the game	▪ respondents were asked about brands that they met inside a game environment, ▪ description when and how these brands appeared
User-generated content and the brands	▪ the topic of brands that were introduced to the game by means of unofficial user modifications was raised
Demographic question's	▪ gender, ▪ age, ▪ education, ▪ place of residence

Appendix 2.

Interview scheme



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