



**Piotr Para**  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8648-0380>

Uniwersytet Dolnośląski DSW we Wrocławiu

# GAMING ENVIRONMENTS AS A SPACE OF OPPORTUNITY FOR HEALTH PROMOTION AMONG YOUTH

## Abstract

The gaming environment created an opportunity for many brands to promote their products. Product placement has been a phenomenon for decades, and its mechanisms of action are known and recognized by recipients. However, gaming opens up new possibilities. The time spent watching a filmed gameplay is much shorter than the time spent playing a game. This is an opportunity for multiple and diverse exposure. In this article, based on an analysis of the literature and using own observations, I characterize gaming as a space of opportunity for promoting health among youth.

**Keywords:** computer games, opinion leadership, influencers, product placement, youth

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## Introduction

Reflection on the methods of promoting health and pro-health behaviors in the context of dynamically developing communication technologies and emerging new media forms is still a current challenge. The scale of this challenge can be related to the level of reception of these changes by users. Young people are a special group for two reasons. Firstly, the Internet is the “natural environment” for them to obtain all information and the main tool for communication and entertainment, they are so-called “digital natives” (Bennett et al., 2008). Secondly, young people acquire habits and behaviors only in the process of socialization, so they are more receptive than older people (Feighery et al., 1998).

The interest of young people, especially minors, in the gaming industry in recent years also provokes reflection on the use of this environment and the methods of communication functioning there for the promotion of health. For many young

people, the main form of entertainment they use is video games (Andrew et al., 2023). According to a 2020 report, there are 16 million players in Poland, of which 2 million are minors (Biedermann, 2020). Relating this number to the demographic situation in Poland from 2019, in which the population of teenagers between 13 and 18 years of age was 2.178 million, and in the age group from 7 to 18 years of age it was 4.648 million, this illustrates the scale of the phenomenon (Hryniewicz et al., 2020). Interest in video games among teenage youth is no longer a matter of subculture; it is becoming dominant within media culture. In addition to activity as a player, the second most popular form of entertainment in recent years related to the gaming industry is watching videos of players playing. Watching gaming content on YouTube increased by 100% in the years 2018–2020 (Bartnik, 2021).

Among the most popular Polish YouTubers-gamers who share videos on their channels showing gameplay with their own commentary similar to a TV report from a sports event, a record of over 100,000 views within three or four days of publication is the norm. These videos are a kind of instruction manual and insight into higher levels of the game that viewers have not yet reached, and those who publish such content thus become idols, or to put it more media-wise, influencers.

The gaming environment has the potential to promote health through various mechanisms, three of which will be examined in this paper: product placement, influencer marketing, and game design. The article does not provide examples of product placement as a health promotion tool in the in-game environment. It describes the opportunities the product-placement provides for health promotion, as it is already established that games may be used to support both physical (Ekasari et al., 2025; Siregar et al., 2025; Raeside, 2025) and mental health (Bonnetterre et al., 2025; Grant, Elaheebocus, 2024).

## Product placement in games

Brand or product placement in a fictional film or TV series environment is to some extent reflected in video game environments. However, there is a difference between the film medium and the game medium, which is an opportunity to use new solutions. A film or TV series is incidental entertainment, constituting a short-term escape. A video game can be a cyclical attraction, in the world of which the player spends much longer and more intensively. A film lasts about two hours, a season of a TV series lasts a few or a dozen hours, while completing a game is a challenge for several dozen hours (Oskar, 2012). Another difference is the recipient's decision-making during the screening and session. The film engages the recipient significantly, as it requires focusing on many pieces of information important for its full understanding. Lack of focus can cause misunderstanding, as the action continues, and the beginning of the next sequence in the film forces the recipient to follow the next sequence of events. In Marshall McLuhan's classification, this meets the

criteria of a hot medium, requiring sharp perception of the message that does not require additional participation of the recipient (Pisarek, 2013, p. 117). The game also engages the recipient, but its individual sequences are more clearly separated from each other. The player can repeat a sequence because he wants to, he liked it, or because he did not finish it or because he obtained a result that does not promote further play. It is the player who decides, at least to some extent, the pace of the game. He often also has an influence on the specification of the environment, attributes used by the characters, and other parameters designed by the game creators.

The advantages of the video game environment allow, on the one hand, to use proven product placement solutions from films and series, but on the other hand, they have become a challenge for new proposals. Examples of classic brand placement in games based on film solutions include the main character's car. Such is the game dedicated to children from the age of seven, *Super Mario Odyssey* from 2017, published by Nintendo Entertainment Planning, in which the main character travels in a small racing car with the Mercedes logo. The hero's successes during the game are partly determined by the advantages of the car used. The player's satisfaction with the successes of the character they drive also includes satisfaction with the brand. Although a child or teenager is not a real consumer of the product in the present, the association of success with the Mercedes brand left in their memory is an investment for the future. When they become a customer with their own wallet at their disposal and they come to buy a car, this association may influence the purchase decision. The gaming environment for motoring enthusiasts is the *WRC* series of games, the subsequent versions of which have been released every year since 2010 (with the exception of 2014 and 2018). Players can choose a vehicle for the game from popular brands such as Citroën, Toyota, Hyundai, or Ford, choose routes, type of surface, a driver from among the titled names competing in real competitions and many other parameters. Spending several dozen hours during the game with car brands placed in the game ennobles them in the minds of players to the elite among brands encountered in reality. The cyclical release of subsequent versions enriched with new solutions for players maintains the market demand for the game and is an open offer for car brand manufacturers.

PR departments' concern for a positive brand image when choosing the form and method of communicating about it is a potential challenge to using the media space in gaming for health promotion. Zachary Glass confirmed an interesting hypothesis in his research participants put in-game brands in the good category faster than they put those brands in the bad category (Glass, 2013). He explains in more detail the perception mechanism that takes place in the minds of players, as a result of which they remember more positive brands than negative ones. Health and health-promoting activities are a value positively perceived by people, brand producers need positively perceived media messages, the gaming environment is a dynamically developing entertainment industry, so these three factors represent a huge potential to be used for health promotion.

## Food placement

Examples of combining the food industry with in-game environments include: Subway and the adventure game *Uncharted*, Nissin placing its Cup Noodle in *Final Fantasy XV*, Frito-Lay with its branded Doritos chips and Pepsi-Cola with its Mountain Dew drink placed in the *Metal Gear Solid: Peace Walker* game environment, or Pizza Hut being an element of the scenery in *Crazy Taxi*. An example of a specific brand dominance in the game is the *Pepsiman* game released in 1999 by Kinle Imagine Develop for the PlayStation, in which the protagonist dressed in a blue and steel uniform runs through the streets and collects cans of the manufacturer's drinks. In the game environment, many elements are in the brand's layout, from cars, building facades, to shop awnings. The Pepsi-Cola Group had previously entered into cooperation with game producers, seeing the promotional potential in it, and had placed the image of its products to a similar extent in terms of brand dominance in the gaming environment, an example of which was the game *Pepsi Invaders* released in 1983.

The tradition of using gaming environments to promote food brand products is already quite impressive. Over the years, the product placement mechanism has been developed by brands and game publishers to a certain standard, in which the player interacting with brands in the game has a sense of greater realism, and on the other hand, their presence is not perceived as intrusive. Considering that for years, food brands have been cooperating with game publishers, probably for mutual benefit, it is worth noting the potential of this media message for promoting health, especially since the element influencing health is the quality of food and the way of eating. Antonina Ostrowska (1999, p. 52), among others, discusses the importance of this factor for health: "Poor nutrition is a direct cause or risk factor for many diseases. It is estimated that there are about 30–50 diseases or deviations from health, occurring frequently in the population, which are caused by unsatisfactory food quality and nutrition. [...] Prevention of all these diseases, health promotion, and in many cases also treatment require a proper diet..."

An example of a game in which food-related brands function is *Super Monkey Ball*, first released in 2001 by Sega. In the game, the character of a friendly monkey led by the player collects bananas, and during the game you can encounter the logo of the Dole Food Company, the world's largest producer of fruit and vegetables, and the suggestion to eat the company's bananas. The promotion of banana consumption, regardless of the producer's mercantile motives, is worth noting as an element of health promotion considering the scope of the company's activity and the scope of the game itself. An additional advantage is the banana market itself, the global production of which has been constantly growing for twenty years, and this growth is expected in the coming years (Załoska, 2021). Since the game is dedicated to children, whose eating habits are still being shaped, the proposal to promote a specific habit in the media entertainment message is worth noting as a construct of

symbiosis between the food producer, the entertainment producer and the value of health promotion.

Another title is the *Sims* series, in which the player controls the lives of virtual people, de facto creating their lifestyle, including professional activity, leisure, social contacts and food culture. One of the skills acquired by Sim is cooking. In the game environment, there is a refrigerator, products and recipes, and the quality of the prepared dish affects the moods of the character. The players' choices in this area also have their consequences. In the game environment, there is a huge space for shaping correct habits not only in the field of nutrition, but more broadly in the field of lifestyle.

## Sports equipment and apparel placement

Sports video games represent a distinct niche within the gaming industry, uniquely positioned at the intersection of digital entertainment and athletic culture. These games simulate real-world sports, offering players an immersive experience that often mirrors professional leagues, teams, and athletes with remarkable accuracy (Consalvo et al., 2013). Sports video games are among the most commercially and culturally successful segments of the gaming industry (Stein et al., 2012). Titles such as *FIFA*, *NBA 2K*, and *Madden NFL* not only provide entertainment but also serve as platforms for promoting sports engagement, strategic thinking, and a deeper appreciation of athletic disciplines. Through realistic mechanics, motion-captured animations, and advanced AI, these games encourage players to familiarize themselves with the rules, tactics, and intricacies of various sports.

Users of sports-themed video games are particularly sensitive to the products, brands, and behaviors encountered within such gaming environments. This sensitivity stems from the values associated with both sports and sports video games. In studies conducted over a decade ago on the acceptability of product placement in sports video games, players evaluated the placement of cigarettes, guns and alcohol negatively – in that specific order – while the placement of soft drinks and healthy consumer products was rated positively (Kim, McClung, 2010). The attentiveness that players exhibit toward products and brands encountered in video games is an asset that should be considered when developing strategies for using video games to promote a healthy lifestyle. Additionally, the specific characteristics of the game itself and the profile of the player should also be taken into account.

These games implement many real-life items, which may serve sales improvement but also health promotion. *FIFA* series (EA Sports) features official kits, cleats, balls, and branding from Adidas, Nike, Puma, and more. *NBA 2K* series showcases shoes from Nike, Jordan, Under Armour, and others, along with branded jerseys and accessories. *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater* series features real skateboard brands like Element, Birdhouse, and Vans. *SSX* (Snowboarding games by EA) includes Burton, DC Shoes, and other real snowboarding brands. *Skate* series features real-life

skateboard brands, gear, and apparel. These are just a few examples of product placement of sports equipment and apparel, that may affect young players and encourage them to start physical activity in an offline environment.

## The role of gamers

The gaming environment also encompasses an intriguing media phenomenon – namely, the viewership of YouTube channels featuring popular content creators who showcase their gameplay accompanied by commentary. This phenomenon bears a resemblance to sports event broadcasts, where viewers observe the action on-screen while listening to real-time commentary.

In the two years since 2018, the amount of gaming content has doubled, and among the most popular YouTubers in Poland are players who gained their position thanks to gaming videos (Dobroszek, 2021). The number of views and comments largely determines the level of influence of the YouTuber, what they themselves use for profit, and what can be used for health promotion purposes. It is not uncommon for Polish YouTubers to have a gaming video with a hundred or two hundred thousand views after a few days, and within a year they reach over a million. The measure of a given YouTuber's adoration is also the number of likes, which are directly sought after by those interested. By liking a given material, a young fan of a YouTuber not only makes it more credible in the eyes of others, but also somehow commits loyalty to the YouTuber. If the YouTuber promotes some action that requires cost-free online activity, they can expect the desired reaction.

The media format of the gameplay material usually presents the game itself, and in a small window in the frame, you can see the YouTuber commenting on the game. During the projection, the YouTuber recommends some products, demonstrating and praising them, then the window with him usually fills the entire frame for a few seconds. Another change of a few seconds in the broadcast is filling the frame with the YouTuber when he is eating something or drinking a drink, and an electronic sticker with the inscription 'aimbot' or 'power' is additionally pasted. After this procedure, the YouTuber-player gets a better result during the game sequence. This sticker even encourages beverage manufacturers to use this space for their brand. Such an invitation to cooperate is also an opportunity to promote health. Of course, the style of presenting the behavior and advantages of the example drink is not without significance, because Internet users can ignore or even ridicule ostentatious attempts at promotion. The credibility of the method of presentation and the YouTuber himself is capital that must be skillfully used (Loria et al., 2020). In the YouTuber's commentary during the game, there are comments not about the game itself, but about what they did, what they plan to do, while simultaneously weaving information about the product into the statement. Such media formats created by YouTubers-gamers are worthy of interest as a space for promoting health. A YouTuber-gamer, being an influencer,

has the potential to influence the recipients of his media messages in many areas (Establés et al., 2019; King, de la Hera, 2020), including the area of promoting pro-health behaviors (Micallef et al., 2022).

## Game design

While video games offer various cognitive and social benefits, they are often associated with prolonged sedentary behavior, which can contribute to negative health outcomes such as poor posture, musculoskeletal strain, and reduced physical activity levels. Many traditional gaming experiences involve extended periods of sitting, often in ergonomically inadequate positions, leading to issues such as lower back pain, neck stiffness, and postural imbalances. Additionally, excessive screen time and limited movement may exacerbate sedentary lifestyles, increasing the risk of conditions such as obesity and cardiovascular disease. As gaming continues to be a dominant form of entertainment across various demographics, concerns regarding its impact on physical health have prompted both researchers and developers to explore ways to integrate movement into gameplay. In response to these concerns, a growing segment of the gaming industry has embraced motion-based technology and interactive game mechanics designed to promote physical activity, thereby transforming gaming from a predominantly passive pastime into an engaging and dynamic form of exercise.

Some sports games integrate motion-based controls, such as those seen in *Wii Sports* or *Ring Fit Adventure*, actively engaging players in physical movement and blurring the boundary between virtual play and real-world exercise. These games leverage motion-sensing technology to track players' movements, requiring them to perform actions that mimic real-life sports and fitness activities, such as swinging a racket, throwing a punch, or running in place. This interactive element transforms passive gaming into an active experience, making physical activity more accessible and enjoyable, particularly for individuals who may not engage in traditional sports or structured exercise routines. Additionally, the gamification of fitness through achievements, leaderboards, and progress tracking enhances motivation, encouraging long-term engagement and habit formation. By fostering both cognitive and physical engagement, sports video games function as an influential medium that not only celebrates sports culture but also promotes physical activity and a more active lifestyle in an increasingly digital age, where sedentary behaviors are becoming more prevalent. Furthermore, such games have the potential to support public health initiatives by encouraging exercise in a fun and interactive manner, bridging the gap between entertainment and wellness.

Another prominent example of a sports and fitness-oriented video game that encourages physical activity is Ubisoft's *Just Dance* series. Unlike traditional sports simulations, *Just Dance* focuses on rhythm-based movement, requiring players

to mimic choreographed dance routines to popular songs while being tracked by motion-sensing technology. This format not only provides an engaging and entertaining experience but also serves as an effective form of cardiovascular exercise, improving coordination, endurance, and overall physical fitness. The game's accessibility makes it appealing to a broad audience, including individuals who may not typically participate in conventional sports or structured workouts. Additionally, *Just Dance* incorporates social and multiplayer elements, allowing friends and family to engage in physical activity together, reinforcing the role of gaming as a medium for both entertainment and communal exercise. By integrating music, movement, and competition, the *Just Dance* series exemplifies how video games can serve as a dynamic tool for promoting an active lifestyle while simultaneously fostering social interaction and enjoyment. Also, *Just Dance* series sometimes features Adidas branding in workout-related modes, which combines game design with product placement.

## Conclusion

The issue of health, healthy lifestyle, pro-health behavioral habits, including eating habits, is not an incidental matter, but a permanent one. Nowadays, the gaming environment is rather a feature of young people, and it will probably be the most popular form of entertainment among young people in the coming years, because “[...] habits and knowledge acquired in youth determine later behaviors and characteristics of a person” (Żmigrodzki, 2018). Therefore, interest in this environment for the purposes of health promotion seems to be a challenge for institutions that have health and its promotion in their statutory goals.

These institutions possess budgets dedicated to health promotion, within which they implement numerous short-term campaigns aimed at promoting health or a healthy lifestyle. Among them are also non-governmental organizations. Video game industry producers are generally oriented toward long-term operations, and it is difficult to envision such a time horizon without considering corporate social responsibility (CSR). By leveraging the value of CSR within the commercial environment of game developers, it is possible to facilitate collaboration between institutions whose mission includes health promotion and video game producers. Such cooperation would contribute to building brand equity, enabling companies to plan their development over the long term. Purpose-specific grants or competitions that commit both parties to support and feasibility may serve as effective tools for establishing such alliances.

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