The Wild West of Mobile Game Advertising

Kati Alha
Tampere University
Kanslerinrinne 1
FI-33014 Tampere, Finland
+358 40 190 4070
kati.alha@tuni.fi

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

While free-to-play mobile games have become extremely profitable as a market, individual mobile games rarely succeed and need to compete fiercely to reach audiences and paying consumers (Nieborg 2016). Advertisements function as one of the main channels to acquire new players. There are various strategies to make advertisements more appealing and effective, but sometimes their methods are borderline unethical or straight out illegal. In this study, I will investigate how mobile game advertisements can be harmful for their audiences by analyzing misleading advertisements.

Ethical aspects in free-to-play mobile games are still an under-researched area despite prominent public discourse among players and developers around their exploitative nature. Ethical aspects have been mostly studied from the perspectives of their relationship to gambling (e.g. Kim et al. 2015; Zendle et al. 2019), while some studies have looked into abusive design (Zagal et al. 2013) or predatory monetization (Petrovskaya & Zendle 2022). Misleading advertising practices have been studied merely from the impact of false advertisements on game reviews (Mago 2020). Meanwhile, misleading advertisements have become increasingly widespread and have evolved into a common practice even among some bigger mobile game companies. While free-to-play mobile game advertising has received more visibility in media and among players, it has rarely been studied.

This study will take an explorative approach to identify and analyze various mobile game advertisement practices through content analysis to uncover the ways game advertisements can be unethical. The content of the advertisements is then compared to the actual gameplay of the chosen games. The preliminary results of the analysis reveal that the ethical considerations of the advertisements can be roughly divided into two main categories: misleading or fraudulent content and offensive or harmful content. The analyzed advertisements typically featured both. All aspects of a game can be shown in a misleading or completely incorrect light, including audiovisuals, gameplay, narrative, and economical aspects. In addition, advertisements can use third-party intellectual property without permission or even show footage from other games as their own to create a false image of the actual game.

Likewise, the development of the narratives of these advertisements tend to reproduce heavily gendered and often heteronormative stereotypes to attract players. The advertisements for games presumably designed for female audiences (see Chess 2017)

typically show the female playable character as a victim who needs to become more attractive yet always fails, or to leave her life behind and try to survive in a harsh environment. The advertisements appeal to the audience to help the character by installing the game. The game advertisements presumably targeted towards male audiences typically repeat stories where the (often male) protagonist fights against others, becomes powerful, and saves or conquers and subdues women – or tries and fails to do so to attract the audience to do better. Sexual content targeted towards women and men both tend to include powerful, dangerous male characters subduing or mistreating helpless female characters. Some games promote content that can be considered harmful: misogynism and sexism, racism, classism, oversexualization, domestic violence, sexual harassment and assaults, and grooming. In some cases, the game's age limit is low, or the game might be even targeted to young audiences, yet the advertisements include mature themes. It is expected that young audiences are then exposed to the advertisements, as well.

The results show that there are currently many ways to mislead or directly lie about the advertised games, yet exposing audiences to stereotypical, offensive, or harmful content is frequent, as well. It is unlikely this practice will cease until more action is taken to regulate the advertisements. While legislation exists to prohibit both misleading advertisement as well as harmful content, these advertisements are rarely intervened with. The games are free to install and play, so while some advertisements are clearly against the law in many countries, they may be considered less serious infringements as cases where money is involved or when there might be health risks, such as with medical products. In free-to-play games, the player has already downloaded and seen the real game and knows the product before spending money on in-game content. In addition, while the platforms spreading the advertisements may have rules against misleading or harmful content, the motivation to actively intervene with advertising might be low when the platforms themselves benefit from the advertisements. Therefore, unethical advertising has become an unregulated and unpunished crime that has spread widely among mobile games.

Some legislation has targeted free-to-play games specifically, and platforms have complied with their own regulations. For instance, free-to-play games are not allowed to be called *free* but need to include a mention of *in-app purchases*. While the store pages for the games might list the disclaimer, the ads might not. An example of more active approach specifically towards mobile game advertising comes from UK, where some cases of misleading advertisements have been handled[1]. This has led some games to include disclaimers in advertisements that claim *the scenario only appears in certain point of the game* or that *the content is not actual gameplay footage*. The effect of such disclaimers is questionable in cases where the shown video is not even close to what the game is about and merely functions as a clickbait. Harmful content has also been tackled in UK in cases where mobile game advertisements were complained and regulated for including harmful stereotypes[2], trivializing and condoning sexual assault[3], and sexualizing a minor[4].

Individual cases and individual countries' regulatory actions against harmful advertising may have an impact, but to tackle the problem on a larger scale, the actions need to be more unified, while the responsibility could better include the platforms showing the advertisements. However, different legislations and what is allowed or acceptable varies in different parts of the world, making the regulation more complicated. In addition to the negative effects for the consumers, false advertisements becoming the norm has a negative overall effect on the free-to-play mobile game industry that already struggles with negative attitudes and coverage (see Alha et al. 2014). This study works towards uncovering the scale and the severity of the problem.

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ENDNOTES

[1] https://www.asa.org.uk/rulings/plr-worldwide-sales-ltd-g20-1061644-plr-worldwide-sales-ltd.html

[2] https://www.asa.org.uk/rulings/higgs-technology-co-ltd-a22-1156682-higgs-technology-co-ltd.html

[3] https://www.asa.org.uk/rulings/onesoft-studio-g22-1153489-onesoft-studio.html

[4] https://www.asa.org.uk/rulings/oasis-games-ltd-a22-1161063-oasis-games-ltd.html