Navigating Toxic Playgrounds: When and How Do Toxic Video Game Environments Pose Brand Safety Risks for Advertisers?

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Abstract

The growing video game industry offers brands new avenues for consumer engagement through virtual in-game ads, product placements, and branded skins. However, the prevalence of toxic player behavior in multiplayer games poses challenges for brands aiming to connect with consumers. Despite efforts to combat toxicity, its impact on brands remains unclear. Our research explores how exposure to in-game toxicity affects brand outcomes and the effectiveness of brand-led anti-toxicity campaigns. Four experiments show that while toxic behavior does not directly harm brands, it diminishes players' willingness to buy branded items due to increased blame on toxic players. We also show that anti-toxicity CSR campaigns may backfire in toxic gaming environments by reducing perceptions of brand commitment. These findings offer valuable insights for brands navigating brand safety in the dynamic video game landscape.