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Deceptive Advertising in Video Games

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Introduction

As of 2021, the market size of the video games industry has reached a figure of more than \$110 billion.¹ On top of this, the total revenue of streaming services in the video game industry reached \$78 million in 2021.² The data compiled by IBISWorld shows that the given figures have grown over the past decade and are predicted to continue growing, as shown in Figure 1. The growth of the video game industry and the increasing size of the streaming industry lead to the possibility that the industry could greatly impact people's financial decisions, given its size and power. Therefore, it is important to understand how consumers' decisions are affecting the market so that they can make better financial decisions. In order to understand consumers' decisions, the first step would be to analyze previous instances of companies abusing advertising strategies, such as those through streaming services, which unethically influence consumers' decisions to invest money or not invest money in their product.

In the case of Battlefield 2042, for example, the publisher, Electronic Arts (EA), produced and distributed advertisements on sites such as YouTube, which misrepresented the state of the game and led to a discrepancy between a large number of sales and the consumer perception of the game. They stated that the game was "way ahead of where we were in prior product cycles," according to Tom Ivan of VGC in February of 2021.³ However, the game was released in an unfinished, unpolished state. The players perceived the game to be bad, with a current average user score of 2.1 out of 10 on Metacritic, an online forum where consumers and

¹ IBISWorld. "Market size"

² Statista Digital Market Insights. "Esports Market Report."

³ Ivan, Tom. "EA Says Battlefield 6"

critics can post reviews.⁴ Despite the poor release, Battlefield 2042 had earned a spot among the top 5 most pre-ordered games on Steam, the most popular digital video game distributor on PC, by the end of the first week of October 2021.⁵ On its first week of sales, the game had reached a figure of more than 4.2 million total players cumulatively.⁶ This discrepancy in sales and perception of a video game is prevalent with too much regularity in the industry and is not looked at with a critical lens enough. Battlefield 2042 serves as an example of how video game developers and publishers are using deceptive advertising to manipulate consumers' financial decisions in an unethical manner, that is a manner which is detrimental to a consumer's ability to rely on facts in order to make financial decisions, such as lying to a consumer about what a product provides. That is what this paper plans to look at. Does deceptive advertising influence a consumer's willingness to buy a video game, willingness to play a video game, and perception of the video game? The research in this paper suggests that deceptive advertising is not guaranteed to increase or even stabilize video game player counts when looking over a 1 to 3-month period after release and may lead to negativity surrounding a video game.

Contextualization and Motivation

Deceptive advertising will be defined as “any type of advertising that is false, misleading, or has the effect of deceiving consumers.”⁷ The Federal Trade Commission does not officially

⁴ Metacritic. “Battlefield 2042,”

⁵ Calvin, Alex. “CHARTS: Battlefield 2042”

⁶ Henderson, Tom. “I’ve Also Been”

⁷ LaMance, “What Is Deceptive Advertising?”

define deceptive advertising but has ruled that “unfair or deceptive acts or practices” are unlawful.⁸ Given the discrepancies between the advertisements of games such as Battlefield 2042 and their performance, combined with the lack of attention by the FTC on deceptive advertising in the video game industry, deceptive advertising in the video game industry should be given more attention than it currently is. Deceptive advertising is unethical and could have a negative impact on a company’s health. Raymond Chimezie Ukaegbu, the Managing Director and CEO of Supreme Events in Nigeria, found that in the soap industry, 73% of consumers care about whether or not a product was accompanied by deceptive advertising.⁹ This indicates that a majority of consumers care about deceptive advertising. Even consumers who are not initially affected by deceptive advertising or do not care may still be affected in the future. Therefore, deceptive advertising affects consumers' perception of a product, which contradicts a company’s goals. A company wants to sell products to consumers and bring in as much revenue as possible. Building a positive relationship with consumers benefits companies as consumers are more likely to buy products they like.

Deceptive advertising, as per the FTC, does not require an “‘actual’ effect on purchase behavior to prove the adverse impact of a claim.”¹⁰ Therefore, in the eyes of the FTC, it does not matter whether or not consumers buy a product due to deceptive advertising. Deceptive advertising is bad regardless of the actual effect on consumer behavior. Deceiving consumers to gain revenue is unethical and harmful to consumers and the future of the industry. If consumers

⁸ Kenneth Clarkson and Timothy Muris, *The Federal Trade Commission*, 234

⁹ Ukaegbu, “Deceptive Advertising,”

¹⁰ Richards, *Deceptive Advertising*, 98

are being deceived, then they lack perfect information about the product they are buying. Deception may lead to a noncompetitive market and have a negative effect on the industry. If consumers want the video game industry to flourish, then a competitive market is needed, as having such a market leads to better products for the consumer. Consumers can spend money on companies they like and support the growth of products they believe in without being deceived. These factors give importance to this paper's existence and make it a more than worthwhile topic to discuss.

Methodology

The purpose of this study is to compare video games based on their reviews, player counts, and level of deceptive advertising by the publisher to determine whether a correlation exists between these aspects and deceptive advertising. Therefore, it can be determined whether or not deceptive advertising is more beneficial for firms than the decision to use non-deceptive advertising in the video game industry.

This study considered the publisher's user ratings, player counts, net promoter score, and the number of copies sold for thirty video games on Steam, the most popular digital video game distributor on PC. The selected video games are the top 26 video games on Steam for the list of highest concurrent player count. The other 4 video games selected were picked due to their controversy regarding deceptive advertising. This gives the study a good sample of video games that can be compared against each other. User ratings for each video game were taken directly from the Steam store page and were calculated by dividing the total number of positive reviews by the total number of reviews in a given time frame. This gives a representation of how many

people liked the game of those who gave a review in a given time frame. Player counts for each video game were pulled from SteamDB, a site that gives “more insight into the Steam database... [which tracks] updates for both applications and packages... [and keeps] a history of all changes made to both applications and packages.”¹¹ Steamdb is mostly accurate, but not entirely. The hope for using Steamdb is that by gathering data for one variable from the same site, the inaccuracy for said data will have an equal variation for each data point. In the case of this study, it could be assumed that each video game will have the same range of inaccuracy as every other video game in the sample. The number of copies sold for each video game were pulled from VGChartz.com, a website similar to Steamdb, which provides information on the entire video game industry. The same reasoning for using Steamdb applies to VGChartz.

The fourth variable utilized in this study is a deceptive advertising rating, which will be referred to as the DAR from now on. The DAR is treated as an ordinal variable. The DAR scale ranges from 0 to 3, including each integer in between. Video games are placed on the scale using the number of positive results the game has. The number of positive results refers to the number of instances in which a search result on Google that includes the term “deceptive,” “false,” or “misleading” when searching for the video game’s name followed by the term “deceptive advertising.” Each game was limited to the first page of Google as a result of time constraints. Counting instances for which a search result includes deceptive, false, or misleading will give a more accurate representation of how consumers perceive a video game’s advertising in terms of deceptiveness, as consumers may use the terms deceptive, false, and misleading interchangeably. Searches that include 0 to 1 positive results give the respective video game a DAR of 0. Searches

¹¹ “Frequently Asked Questions.”

that include 2 to 4, 5 to 9, or 10 or more positive results give the video game a DAR of 1, 2, or 3, respectively.

No Man's Sky

One of the most significant examples of deceptive advertising is the video game No Man's Sky by Hello Games. Trailers for the game were shown at E3, an event to show off and experience new video games. The trailers were presented as gameplay with no notice that said trailers were, in fact, pre-rendered scenes. Therefore, people perceived the trailers to display an experience that would vary greatly from the final product. Sean Murray, the founder and managing director of Hello Games, gave statements regarding the features that would be present in the game. No Man's Sky was stated to have multiplayer features and large-scale battles.¹² These statements were later discovered to be largely falsified. A Reddit post compiles over thirty instances of Sean Murray making false claims, with numerous more lost to deleted posts.¹³

An investigation by the Advertising Standards Authority in the United Kingdom found each deceptive advertising claim false, and Hello Games was cleared of all charges. However, the game had a 53% negative review rating on Steam throughout its first month of release. The game received a majority of negative reviews for each month of release until December 2022. Most negative reviews cite the false claims as a contributing factor to the disappointment of the game. The game reached over 1 million sales in its first week across all platforms, which is large considering No Man's Sky was Hello Games' first AAA-size game. An AAA-sized game,

¹² TerakJK. "No Man's Sky,"

¹³ Cymen90. "Where's the No,"

sometimes referred to as a triple-A game, is a game that has a high budget, high-profile, and is developed by a large studio. These classifications are generalized, and it has been accepted to classify a game by its price tag due to the assumed relationship between a game's price and its value. No Man's Sky was sold for \$60 despite not meeting all the requirements of a triple-A game, which created the impression that the game was going to have the quality of a triple-A game. The game did not release in the state it was expected to. This translated to the game having a DAR of 3, with 57 positive results of deceptive advertising on Google. Thus, No Man's Sky is a perfect example of how deceptively advertising a game, intentionally or not, can generate a large profit at the expense of the consumer.

Fallout 76

During his speech at E3 2018, Todd Howard revealed Fallout 76 and made numerous claims regarding the game. Fallout 76 was claimed to have all-new rendering, lighting, and landscape technology. The game would have sixteen times the detail compared to previous games, and the player would be able to view distant weather systems across the map. While these claims were not false, they did not paint the full picture of the game. The game was released in an objectively broken state with no prior warning. Of course, a company would not claim that its game is unfinished when releasing it to the public. However, the omission of the state of the game and the inclusion of the praise given to the game created a lopsided perspective.

This could lean towards deceptive advertising, as the Supreme Court ruled in *P. Lorillard Co v. FTC*, “[t]o tell less than the whole truth is a well-known method of deception... and he who deceives by resorting to such a method cannot excuse the deception by relying upon the

truthfulness per se of the partial truth.”¹⁴ Deceptive advertising was also found in the merchandising surrounding the game, the bundles of the game, and in-game microtransactions. Bethesda, the publishing company, marketed and sold a nuka cola bottle of rum, a real-life replica of an iconic in-game item, alongside the sale of the game. The advertising material and video implied that the bottle was made of glass and showcased it alongside other glass products.¹⁵ The bottle was instead a plastic mold shaped to look like the in-game item. On top of this, a \$200 edition of the game promised the consumer a copy of the game, a wearable power armor helmet, a terrain map, twenty-four figurines, a steel book, in-game items, and a canvas carrying bag. The carrying bag ended up being a nylon bag instead of the promised canvas bag. This change was announced after people ordered the game's premium edition and had been shipped their product.¹⁶

Fallout 76’s in-game store, where players can exchange real money for currency to buy in-game cosmetics and items, had at one point released an item listed as discounted to 1200 in-game currency from 2400 in-game currency. However, the item was released at a discounted price and was never intended to be sold for 2400 in-game currency, as evidenced by the discount being removed once players caught on.¹⁷ This would be defined as deceptive due to its undue influence on consumers’ decisions to purchase such items because of the false discount. These three incidents were the biggest cases of deceptive advertising alongside the launch of the game

¹⁴ Richards, *Deceptive Advertising*, 30

¹⁵ Silver Screen Bottling Video. “Nuka Dark Rum Bottling,”

¹⁶ Plunkett, “\$200 Fallout 76,”

¹⁷ Agossah, “Fallout 76 Is Having,”

and would translate to the game having a DAR of 3, with 41 positive results of deceptive advertising on Google.

Cyberpunk 2077

Cyberpunk 2077 was first teased at the beginning of 2013, though it had multiple delays and was finally released in December 2020. CD Projekt Red, the developing and publishing company of the game, released trailers and statements surrounding the game in 2019 and 2020. The CEO, Adam Kicinski, claimed the game had good performance on the PlayStation 4 and Xbox One, older hardware that had been released roughly seven years prior.¹⁸ Following the release of the game, tests show that the game ran at thirty frames per second on PlayStation 4 at a definition of 1920 by 1080 pixels with frequent dips in frames per second and crashes. This performance was not considered to be good performance by a great majority of consumers, as evidenced by a Metacritic user score of 3.8 on the PS4 version of the game.¹⁹

The consumer outcry was large enough to cause Sony, the producer of the PlayStation console, to allow customers to refund the game for any reason.²⁰ This is significant because Sony requires a game to be purchased within fourteen days and not downloaded to be eligible for a refund. Refunds for Cyberpunk 2077 were allowed for everyone regardless of when they bought the game and whether they downloaded it. This example proves to be deceptive as the given statements would make a rational consumer believe the game runs at a higher frame per second

¹⁸ Omerovic, "Cyberpunk 2077 Performance"

¹⁹ Metacritic. "Cyberpunk 2077."

²⁰ PlayStation. "Cyberpunk 2077 Refunds."

level of sixty frames when the game does not. As a result, the game would have 29 positive results of deceptive advertising on Google and give the game a DAR of 3.

Research and Analysis

These three games show how companies abuse deceptive advertising in the video game industry and how it can affect a consumer's decision to purchase a video game, which gives a reason for this study. Each game has a DAR of 3 due to its large number of positive results of deceptive advertising on Google, which shows that the examples of deceptive advertising for each game correspond to many consumers discussing the topic online. Research has been conducted on thirty games sold on the Steam marketplace. Each video game has been analyzed using data from the PC platform only. This method will ensure that the platform does not influence the research results.

Figure 1, as referred to in the introduction, represents the increasing market size of the video game industry. In 2015, the video game market had a revenue of \$50 billion. In 2020, the video game market had increased in revenue to over \$110 billion. This recent increase in market size shows the increasing reach of the video game industry and explains the relative lack of research on marketing in the industry compared to the movie and television industry, for example. Therefore, there is a great potential for knowledge to be gained from research in the video game industry that is unbeknownst to the public currently.

Figure 2 shows the one-sample t-test for the number of positive results of each game in the study. Figure 3, on the other hand, shows the one-sample t-test for the positive results of each game in the study, excluding the 4 video games that received a DAR of 3. Figure 3 had a

decrease in the mean from Figure 2 by 5.2205 positive results and a decrease in the standard deviation by 12.2511. The mean decreased by approximately 64.7% and the standard deviation decreased by approximately 86.6% from Figure 2. This shows that the 4 games with a DAR of 3 were significant outliers in the sample. Therefore, the games with a DAR of 3 should be closely compared with those with a DAR of 0, 1, and 2.

Figure 4 shows the mean average change in player count per day over the first 7 days after the release of the video games in each deceptive advertising rating category. The average change in player count from day to day was calculated for each game to create this figure. Once each game was given a DAR, the mean was calculated for the average change in player count for each game in the same DAR group. The same process was conducted for Figure 5. However, in Figure 5, a 30-day time frame was accounted for. For both Figure 4 and Figure 5, there is no significant trend immediately noticeable among DAR groups 0, 1, and 2. Games with a DAR of 3 showed a significant increase in the mean average change in player count compared to the previous DAR groups for both figures. In these figures, a higher number in the positive direction is representative of a larger decrease in player count. This may show that in extreme cases of deceptive advertising, consumers are more likely to stop playing a game than if the game had utilized non-deceptive advertising. Since this observation is consistent among 7-day and 30-day time frames, it may be possible to conjecture that the drop in player count is unlikely to have resulted from a bandwagon effect, in which people stop playing the game because of other people's decision to stop playing the game. It may be possible to conjecture that when deceptive advertising is present in extreme cases, consumers are likely to stop playing the video game as a result of their own decision due to a game's deceptive advertising. Therefore, to retain players, it

would be better for video game companies not to utilize deceptive advertising, as games perceived as less deceptive tend to gain players over the first 30 days of their release.

Figure 6 and Figure 7 show the mean user rating score on Steam of the games in each DAR group. These figures were calculated by dividing the total positive reviews for the given period by the total number of reviews and multiplying by 100 to get the percentage of reviews that are positive for each game. Then, the mean was found for the games in each DAR group. Figure 6 shows the mean over a period of 1 month after each game's release, and Figure 7 shows the mean over a period of 3 months after each game's release. For both figures, there is a steady decrease in the mean user rating for games as they move from a DAR rating of 0 to 1, 1 to 2, and 2 to 3. As both figures show the same pattern, it is possible to conjecture that as games are perceived to be more deceptive they are received worse compared to games that are perceived to be less deceptive in their advertising, irrespective of the period after a game's release. This conjecture would hold that the games with more deceptive advertising continued to utilize deceptive advertising or did not change their advertising methods. If a game changed its advertising, it would not be held back from increased positive ratings. A similar conjecture can be made using Figure 8 and Figure 9 as both figures show a similar trend using Metacritic user and critic scores. However, Metacritic is a site that shows scores for media at the time of observation. Therefore, Metacritic scores are used as a means of validating the data presented in Figure 6 and Figure 7 rather than as a means to make a conclusion.

While a claim cannot be made with certainty due to the lack of evidence, it could be possible that a video game's deceptive advertising rating does not have a major impact on how consumers view a company. Companies such as Electronic Arts, Activision, and Blizzard have

been goliaths in the industry for well over two decades. They have been known for creating great games in the past, and they may have built too good of a reputation to fail. Consumers may get upset, however, these companies still publish the highest-selling games each year, and their history could be a large factor. Call of Duty, a game published by Activision since 2003, has been the top-selling game nine times from 2009 until 2019, only beat by Grand Theft Auto V in 2013.²¹ Complaints about Call of Duty have been made for numerous years, yet these games continue to succeed and break records. These companies show how powerful a few select companies can be even when a large number of people dislike their products.

Conclusion

The data in Figures 4 through 9 indicate that the more a game is perceived to be deceptive in advertising, the player count is more likely to decline over a 7-day and 30-day period from the game's release, and the game is more likely to be disliked by players. These two aspects are important for the success of a video game. A successful video game in the long term more often than not has a healthy player count and decent reviews. If a video game does not have these aspects, it would be reasonable to conclude that consumers will eventually stop buying video games from the respective producer, and revenue will decrease for the company. While a video game with deceptive advertising practices is not guaranteed to lose players faster or slower than a game without such practices, the data proposes that it is more likely. Consumers may feel cheated when they buy a game that utilizes deceptive advertising and receive a product different than expected. This will lead to a drop in consumers, a drop in revenue and video game sales,

²¹ Webb, "The Best-Selling,"

and resentment towards the respective game by the consumers as suggested by the data.

Therefore, it is not only unethical to participate in deceptive advertising practices, but it can also be bad for businesses.

Figure 1: Shows the market size of the video game industry in billions of USD for each year starting in 2013. Sourced from IBISWorld. "Market size"

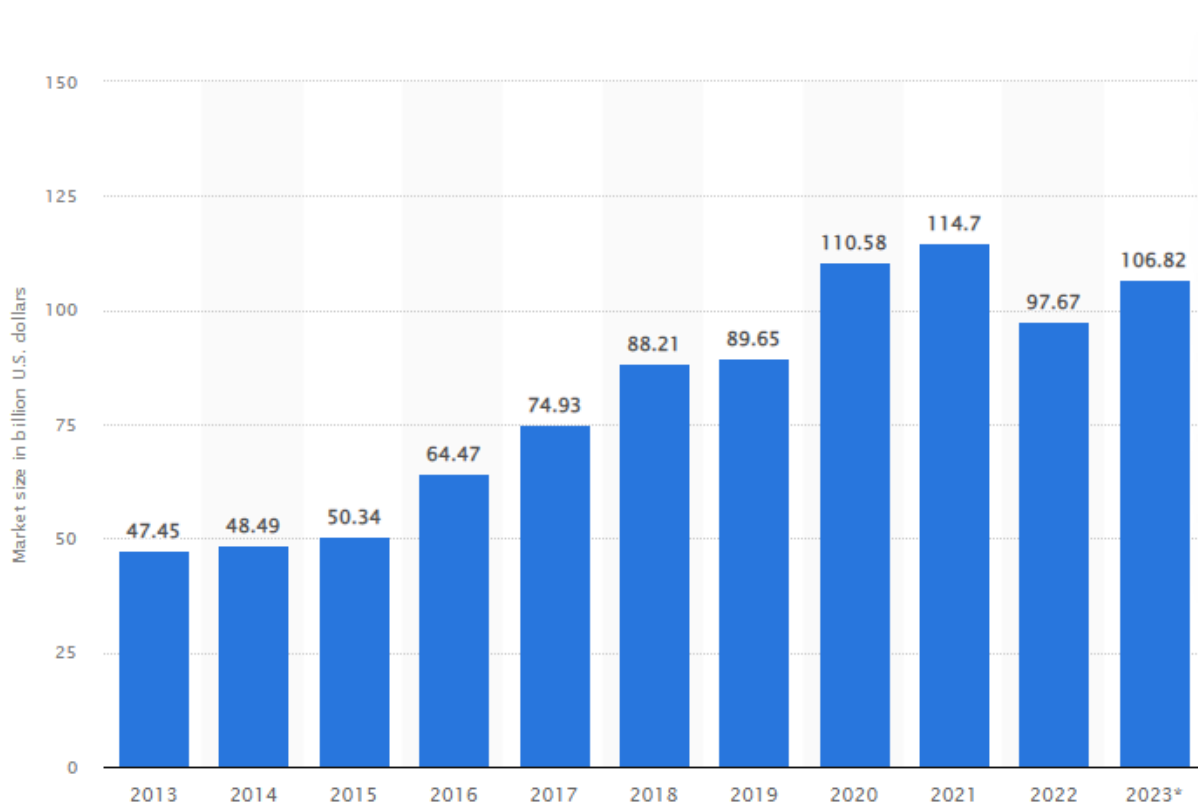


Figure 2: Shows the one-sample t-test for the sample of each video game's deceptive advertising rating positive results.

One-Sample Statistics				
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Deceptive advertising rating	30	8.0667	14.14197	2.58196

Figure 3: Shows the one-sample t-test for the sample of each video game's deceptive advertising rating positive results excluding those with a deceptive advertising rating of 3.

One-Sample Statistics

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Deceptive advertising rating	26	2.8462	1.89087	.37083

Figure 4: Shows the average mean change in player count per day over the first 7 days of the video games in each deceptive advertising rating category.

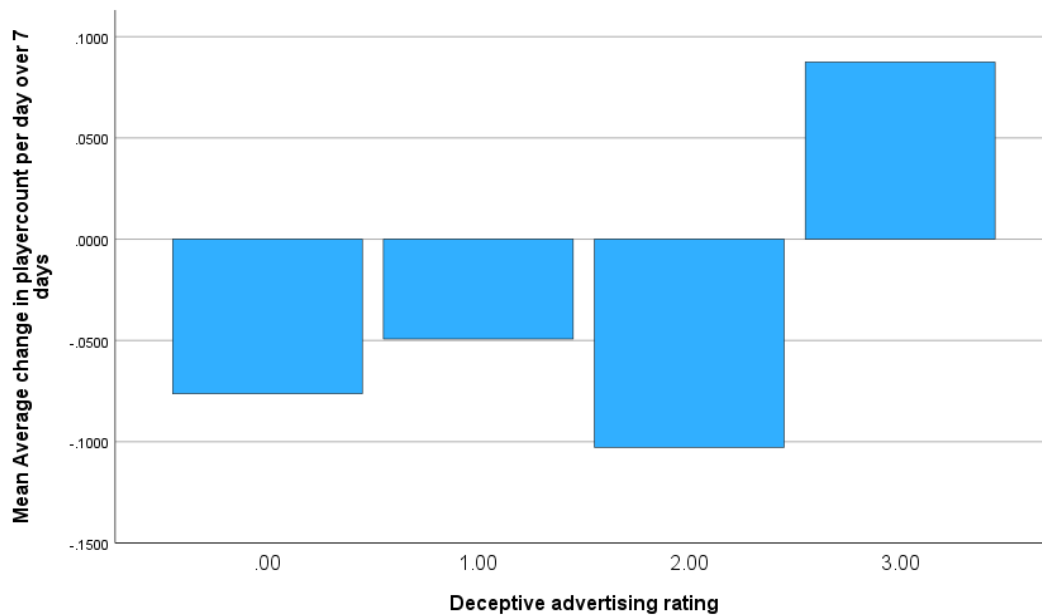


Figure 5: Shows the average mean change in player count per day over the first 30 days of the video games in each deceptive advertising rating category.

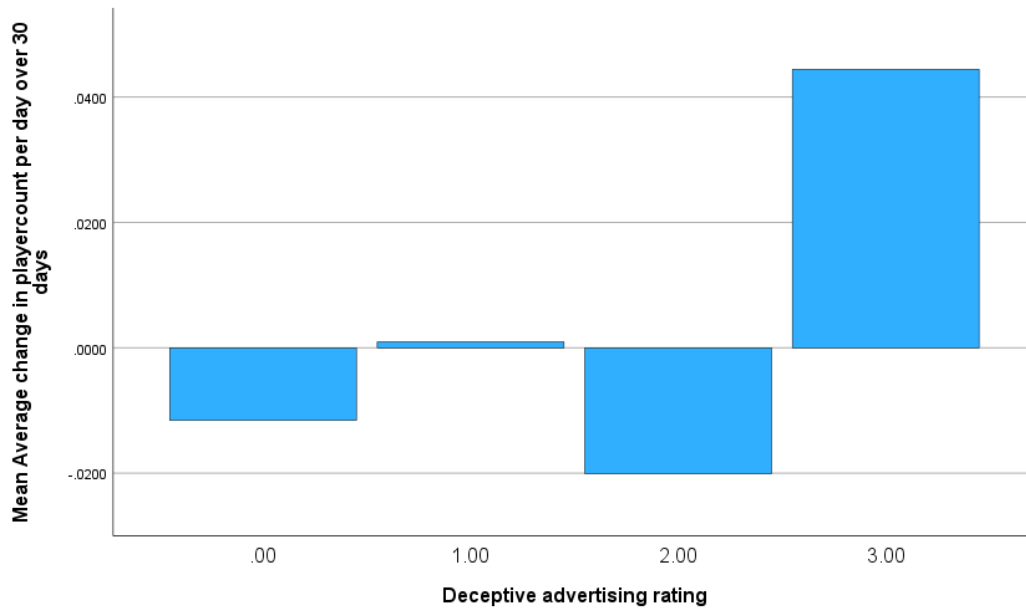


Figure 6: Shows the mean user rating on Steam of the video games in each deceptive advertising rating category for the first month after launch.

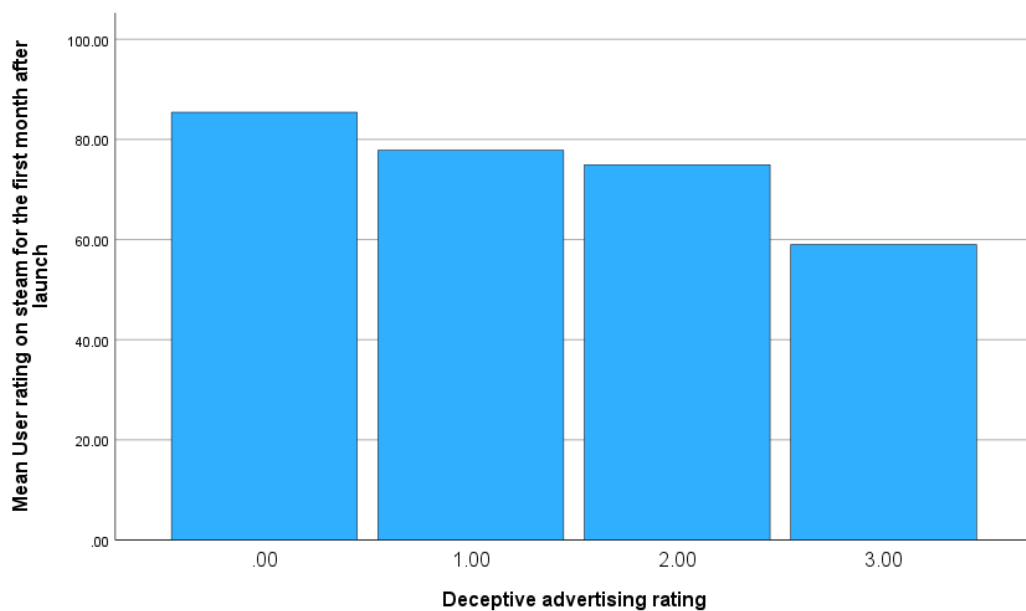


Figure 7: Shows the mean user rating on Steam of the video games in each deceptive advertising rating category for the first 3 months after launch.

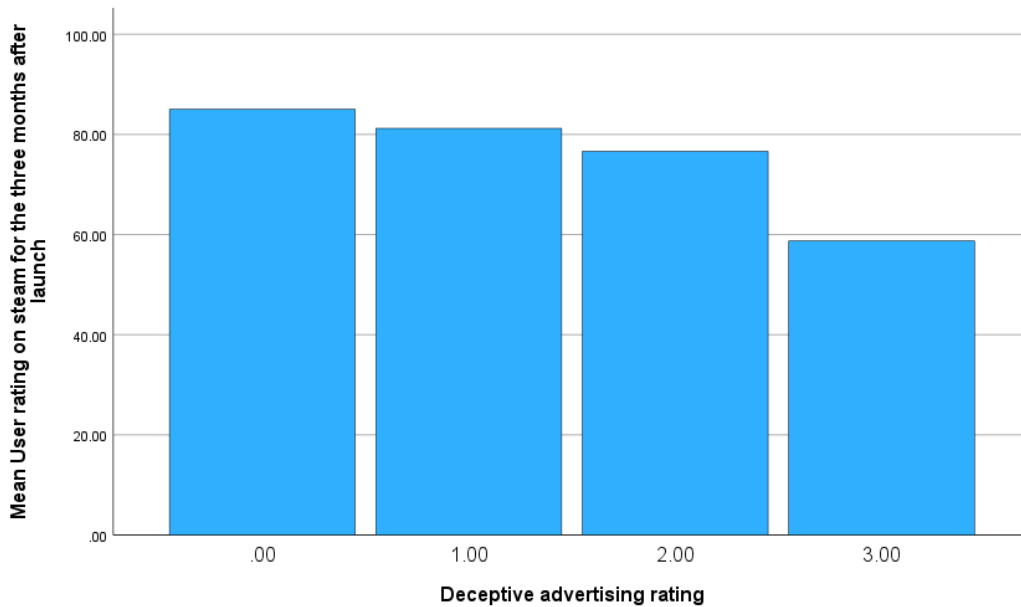


Figure 8: Shows the mean Metacritic critic score of the video games in each deceptive advertising rating category.

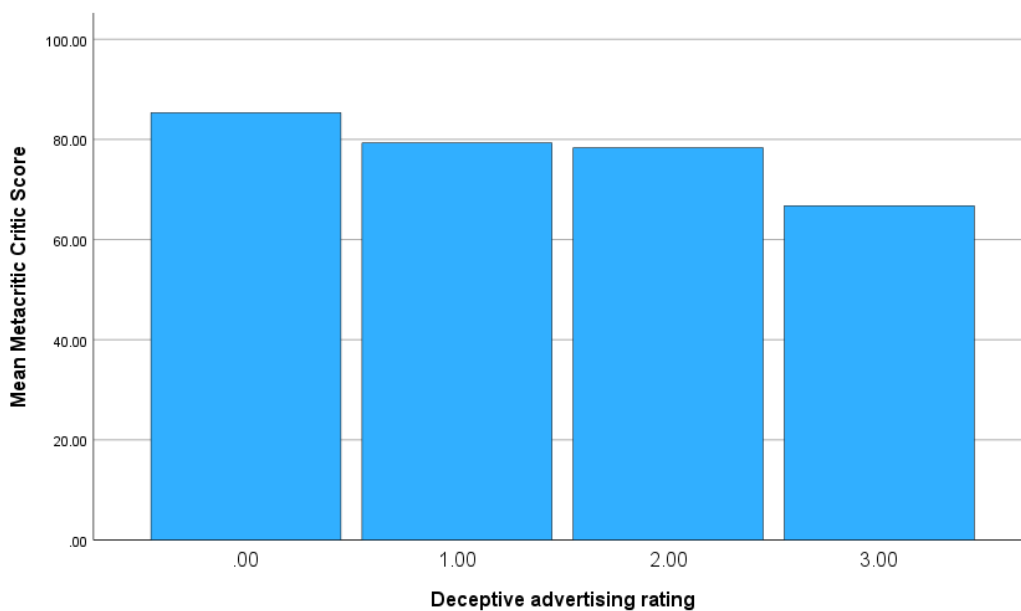
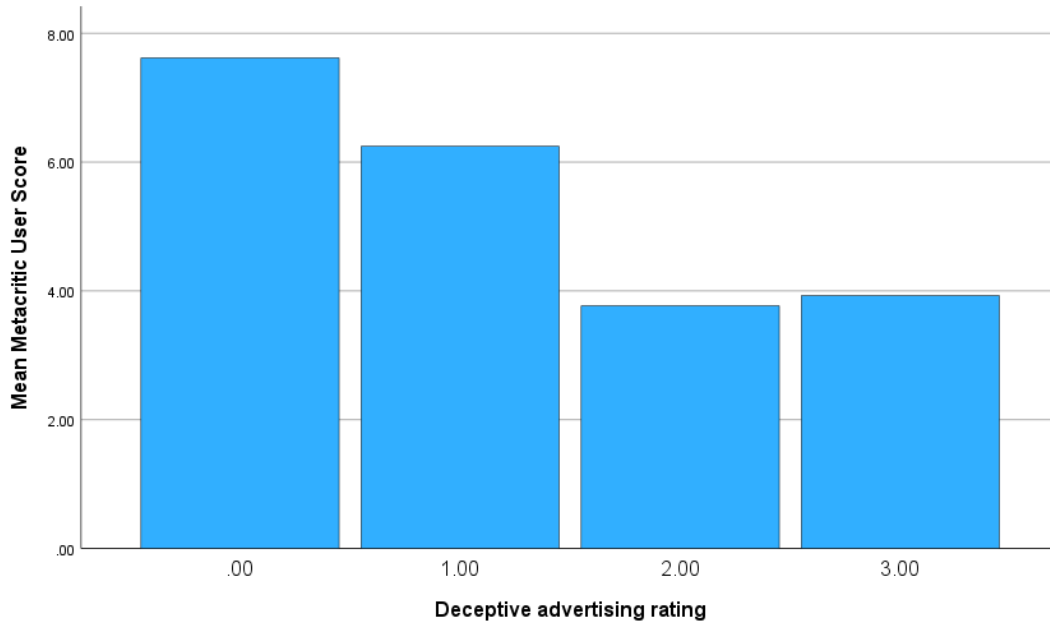


Figure 9: Shows the mean Metacritic user score of the video games in each deceptive advertising rating category.



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