

Call Of Duty: Marketing Warfare

Activision's use of marketing to construct Call of Duty: Modern Warfare's Brand Identity



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Abstract

One of the most successful video game franchises in the world is Call Of Duty, with the Modern Warfare series being one of the best selling series on the video game market. With millions of players and billions of dollars in revenue it continues to be one of the most lucrative games with an enormous player-base. There is a decent number of research papers regarding the franchise published by Activision as well as video game marketing in general. However, where there appears to be a lack of academic coverage is the topic of constructing brand identity within the video game industry. Thus the main goal of this master thesis paper is to create a better understanding of how this is done, with a specific focus on the Modern Warfare series which consists of four individual games, which were released in 2007, 2009, 2011 and 2019. This has been done through the use of visual analysis, where a number of promotional materials, such as different types of trailers, including gameplay and cinematic footage as well as forms of real life footage, specifically behind the scenes footage. In total the sampled dataset consisted of 36 video's, six for the first Modern Warfare game, another 6 for Modern Warfare 2, ten video's in regards to Modern Warfare 3, and the remaining fourteen represent the latest 2019 instalment to the series. The results of this visual analysis has led to a number of findings that appeared present within the analysed footage. Those being: Portrayal Of Military Life, Gender Representation, The Role Of Sound, Para-Text & Humour, Settings & Backgrounds, Realism Versus Gameplay and Promo & BTS. From these findings it has become apparent that some of the general key practices of building a brand identity also apply towards the video game industry. Additionally, the concept of militarized masculinity turned out to be extremely present in the sampled dataset. Thus, while the concept of video game marketing was already widely known and researched, through the research conducted within this master thesis paper, it has become apparent that the concept of brand identity and traditional forms of the representation of masculinity are also very relevant in regards to the Call of Duty: Modern Warfare series. The results have also shown a new form of video game trailer footage, a blend of cinematic and gameplay footage, which has not been discussed yet in academia.

KEYWORDS: *Brand Identity; Video Game Marketing; Militarized Masculinity; Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare; Video Game Trailers.*

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Introduction

As someone who has been playing video games for many years on top of the fact that I have spent some time working in the industry for Activision-Blizzard during my internship, the decision to write a thesis around the video game industry seemed natural. Additionally, the fact that my bachelor thesis was also focused on video games, specifically the FIFA franchise by Electronic Arts also played a role in the decision to explore the topic further. Call Of Duty is a game franchise which I have some of my fondest memories with, especially the Modern Warfare series. Even though I was not of legal age to play these games, I remember them playing a big role in how my free time was spent outside of my high school studies.

The central research question to this thesis is as follows: “How does Activision use marketing in order to construct a brand identity in regards to the Call of Duty: Modern Warfare video game series?”. As a fanatical Call Of Duty player, having spent many hours behind my console enjoying the first person shooter, in combination with being part of the marketing team responsible for promoting Call of Duty: Modern Warfare (2019) in Europe as well as the Middle-East, this topic is something that I have a personal interest in. Some of the sub-questions that will be discussed in this research are as follows: “What are the most common and effective marketing practices within the video game industry?”, “How are promotional materials, such as trailers and previews used by the Call of Duty franchise?” and “How is the notion of militarized masculinity present in the marketing campaigns created for the Modern Warfare games?”. Overall, these question should combine to form a coherent and representative idea of the marketing practices used by Activision to construct a brand identity.

The video game industry has been growing at very rapid rates over the last few decades. In 2012 video game console, portable hardware and video games sales generated a revenue of around \$67 billion (Marchand & Hennig-Thurau, 2013). On top of the console sales, there was an additional 14.8 billion dollars of revenue from in-game purchases (Marchand & Hennig-Thurau, 2013). In comparison to other entertainment industries, video games have already overtaken music and books, and are on par with movie revenues. Meanwhile, in 2020, this revenue within the video game industry has grown to over \$159 billion, and is predicted to continue growing to over 200 billion dollars in 2023 (Statista, 2021). Seeing how enormous this industry has grown, it becomes increasingly important to research the trends and practices that take place within, as there are more than 2.7 billion gamers on our planet (WePC, 2021). With Call of Duty being one of the biggest franchises

in the industry, being able to make more than a billion dollars in sales of *Modern Warfare 3* within 16 days (Marchand & Hennig-Thurau, 2013), one cannot ignore their relevance within the video game industry, and thus within video game studies and research. Based on these sales numbers, researching a franchise like *Call of Duty* could be very useful in order to better understand the dynamics and relations between the players/consumers, the publisher and the games themselves.

In regards to the scientific relevance of this thesis, something that needs to be noted is the existing papers that talk about *Call of Duty* as a franchise. Seeing as the genre of the game is a military shooter, most of the papers regarding the game tend to focus on (geo)politics, history, education and the portrayal of certain groups or nationalities within the games (Gish, 2010; Ramsay, 2015; Saber & Webber, 2017). There is a lack of papers that change the focus from strictly content towards the interaction between the publisher, and the players. This would be a gap in existing literature that this thesis would attempt to explore and fill with relevant findings.

The thesis will have a traditional structure, starting out with a theoretical framework, where existing literature regarding relevant concepts, such as Brand Identity, Marketing Practices and Militarized Masculinity will be addressed. Once that is done, the methodology section addresses the manner in which the research has been done and what the process of visual analysis was like. Logically this will be followed up by the results of the research, where the primary findings of the visual analysis will be addressed and explained to great detail. In the conclusion section, the results will be applied to the primary research question, an answer will be given to said question. On top of this, the implications and limitations of this paper will also be addressed, along with some recommendations for future research.

Theoretical Framework

In order to be able to properly answer the research question for this thesis, it is necessary to gain a better understanding of a number of concepts on which previous research has been done. As mentioned in the research question itself, brand identity and marketing are at the core of this master thesis. Of course, it is also very essential to research literature that focuses on Call of Duty, both from business perspectives as well as their societal repercussions in particular through discussions of militarized masculinity and para-text that are quite relevant regarding Activision's marketing practices for their Modern Warfare series.

Call of Duty

To analyse a video game franchise's brand identity and marketing practices as sizeable and relevant as Call of Duty, one must first fully understand the series itself. Additionally, it is also important to look at the rest of the industry and competition in the video game market. The first game in the Call of Duty franchise was released in 2003, very creatively named "Call of Duty" (Bauer, 2021). Through the game, the player gets to experience multiple perspectives within the Second World War, precisely the American, British and Soviet point of view (Gish, 2010). However, Call of Duty was not the first game that one could consider within the genre of a graphically realistic first-person shooters, specifically set in certain historic periods. Four years earlier, the game Medal of Honor was released, which was written and directed by none other than Steven Spielberg (IMDB, 2021).

Outside of the multiple perspectives within the first instalment in the Call of Duty franchise, other elements of the game that differentiate it from the rest of the competition were the incredibly clean user interface, alongside with clear objectives and well designed maps (Bauer, 2021). While these elements were simplistic, the game gave players some control, for example when deciding on which guns to use, thus creating a unique experience for each individual user. Overall, the level of detail within the games has managed to set Call of Duty apart from the rest, with the introduction of the use of "iron sights" in order to increase the players aim as well as the adoption of "shellshock" which takes place whenever explosions happen near the player, in turn blurring the users vision and leaving a ringing sound in their ears (Bauer, 2021). This first game was a launch point for the rest of the franchise, as they continued to build from their initial successful formula, leading to it becoming one of the most successful franchises in the history of the video game industry,

with sales number of games such as Call of Duty: Black Ops and Modern Warfare 3 reaching over 30 million units (McCarthy, 2019).

Overall, within the franchise, there are several series and settings, thus the games can be grouped differently, based on which approach is used. In regards to historical period categorization, there are five games set during World War 2, those being Call of Duty 1 through 3, as well as Call of Duty: World at War, which was released in 2008 and Call of Duty: WWII in 2017 (Hale, 2019). Then there is the game Call of Duty: Black Ops, which is set during the Cold War, and within the Black Ops series, the games progressively take place further in the future, ultimately returning to the original timeframe in 2020, with Call of Duty: Black Ops: Cold War. For a certain period, the games mostly took place in the far future, namely Advanced Warfare, Infinite Warfare and as mentioned before Black ops 3 and 4 (Hale, 2019). The remaining game outside of the Modern Warfare series - which as the name gives away, focus on current times and military conflict - is Call of Duty: Ghosts, which takes place in the near future.

Table 1:

Game	Year Released	Developer	Copies Sold
Call of Duty	2003	Infinity Ward	4.500.000
Call of Duty 2	2005	Infinity Ward	6.000.000
Call of Duty 3	2006	Treyarch	7.200.000
Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare	2007	Infinity Ward	15.700.000
Call of Duty: World at War	2008	Treyarch	15.600.000
Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2	2009	Infinity Ward	25.020.000
Call of Duty: Black Ops	2010	Treyarch	31.000.000
Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3	2011	Infinity Ward & Sledgehammer Games	30.970.000
Call of Duty: Black Ops 2	2012	Treyarch	29.600.000
Call of Duty: Ghosts	2013	Infinity Ward	28.800.000
Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare	2014	Sledgehammer Games	21.780.000
Call of Duty: Black Ops 3	2015	Treyarch	26.720.000

Call of Duty: Infinite Warfare	2016	Infinity Ward	13.360.000
Call of Duty: World War 2	2017	Sledgehammer Games	19.820.000
Call of Duty: Black Ops 4	2018	Treyarch	25.660.000
Call of Duty: Modern Warfare	2019	Infinity Ward	30.000.000
Call of Duty: Black Ops Cold War	2020	Treyarch	TBD

Call of Duty franchise overview (Ramsey, 2020; Deschamps, 2020)

As mentioned before, this thesis is specifically focused on the Modern Warfare franchise, a four-part series, of which the fourth part is considered a soft reboot. However, one of the consequences of being set in the present, rather than the past or the future is controversy and representation. As stated by Sicart (2016), due to the popularity of the series, they have also become vehicles for propagandistic discourses. The games tend to promote epic stories of conventional heroism, and the author elaborates by stating that the creators of the games do not care about origins, context or the role of politics within contemporary warfare (Sicart, 2016). Gagnon (2010) connects to this idea arguing that thanks to the sheer size of the audience that these games manage to reach, they have a significant effect on the way the military, war and global politics are perceived. The author states that the Modern Warfare games reinforce the militarist ideology that started post 9/11 where people feel as if the world is in a constant state of war, whether that be between the US and Russia, or the Middle-East for example. In turn, Gagnon (2010) states that games such as Modern Warfare, glorify the American war machine, while simultaneously downplaying the monstrosities of warfare. However, the same paper does emphasize the fact that assuming these players automatically are in support of such a militaristic worldview would be too farfetched. This theory of passive acceptance is also known as the “Hypodermic Needle Model”, but this has been debunked as inaccurate, due to the complex nature of encoding, decoding, resistance and rejection of media content and messages by individuals (Thomson, 2009). Väliaho (2014) studied the third instalment in the Modern Warfare series. Interestingly, the author reports similar findings, stating that the repetition of killing, dying, and respawning seems to make these activities meaningless to an extent. This constant presence of catastrophe can lead to players perspective on life being altered to constantly be weary of when the next crisis is going to take place. However, Väliaho (2014) manages to spin a positive message to this phenomenon, arguing that people can also

become more resilient to recurrent crises.

Something that needs to be kept in mind is that there is a very limited amount of relevant literature for the latest release of the Modern Warfare series, which was brought to the market in 2019. Speaking from personal experience with the game, the game presents more nuance to the topic of warfare in contemporary society. There is more dramatic footage, including the innocent victims that warfare brings, and the bureaucracy that goes on behind warfare itself. The game, mostly, takes place in a fictional country in the Middle-East, called Urzikstan. Additionally, the “bad guys” are a mix of a fictional Middle-Eastern terrorist group called Al-Qattala, and the Russian occupiers led by a man named Roman Barkov. This setting has led to Russia prohibiting the commercialization of the game within Russian soil (Kozlov, 2019). This decision by the creators seems questionable, seeing as they went through the effort of creating a fictional country in the Middle-East, where part of the game is set as well as a fictional terrorist organization, but then still leave Russia in the game as a secondary villainous group, thus they only tried to avoid the possible political problems partially.

In order to understand a series and franchise better, it is also important to take a look at the competition that they have to face in the industry. To specifically determine which games are and which are not directly competing with the Modern Warfare games is difficult, but it is a safe assumption to say that fellow military First Person Shooters definitely act as competition to the series. Most likely the largest competitor in this genre is the Battlefield franchise (Dolen, 2020). However, as Dolen (2020) says, the gap between these two franchises has become seemingly unbridgeable, with Call of Duty experiencing growth, and Battlefield noticing a dwindling player-base after the market failure that was Battlefield 5. As mentioned before, at the time of the release of the first Call of Duty game, the Medal of Honor franchise was one of the largest in the market, but this rivalry is long over nowadays, with the last release in the EA military franchise coming in 2012 (Stroud, 2019). However, they entered the market again, as there was a new entry into the franchise in the summer of 2020, through a virtual reality first person shooter, which was not greatly received (Faulkner, 2020). One could continue endlessly in naming possible competitors to the Call of Duty franchise, but a set of games that one should consider are the games that fit the Battle Royale genre. This includes games, such as Fortnite, PUBG and Apex Legends, which directly compete with Call of Duty: Modern Warfare’s Warzone game-mode (PCGamesN, 2019).

In regards to player demographics in video games, in total about 41% of gamers are female (Statista, 2021), meaning that the majority, although there is not a major discrepancy between the genders is male. However, seeing as this includes all genres of games, when taking a closer look at gender demographics per genre, First Person Shooter, of which Call of Duty is arguably the largest franchise, has one of the lowest percentages of female players at 7%, only ranking higher than the Racing, Tactical Shooter and Sports genres (Yee, 2018). Thus these statistics show that Call of Duty primarily caters towards a male audience, which should then affect their marketing and communications, which leads into the next topic of masculinity within video games.

Militarized Masculinity

To be able to discuss a topic like militarized masculinity, masculinity needs to be defined first. Connell (1995) defines masculinity as a configuration of practice within a system of gender relations. The same author went against the traditional gender conception of men simply having different traits compared to women (Connell, 1987). She adds to this by stating that, despite most historical research focussing on the differences between the sexes, it turns out that there a lot more similarities, rather than stark discrepancies between males and females. Thus, traditional scales which have been used in scientific research, where femininity and masculinity are at opposite ends to the spectrum have been found to raise confusion, rather than clarity regarding these topics. Thus, Connell (1987) proposes two independent scales, one for femininity and another for masculinity. And this idea in turn connects to the authors definition previously mentioned (Connell, 1995). Thus, there are multiple types of masculinity. Blackburn (2018) builds upon this idea, and states that these many types of masculinities are affected by factors such as gender, race, class, and sexuality. And since these components can be drastically different for each person, they produce many distinct and constantly shifting types of masculinity. A top of the masculinity hierarchy sits hegemonic masculinity, which Connell (1987) & Blackburn (2018) defines as specific set of traits and behaviours that reflect, and in turn reinforce patriarchal structures, even though it is nowhere close to typical male behaviour.

Masculinity is a concept that has been around for many centuries and has often been linked to notions of war and the military (Blackburn, 2018). For example, the idea of masculinity has been used in order to coerce men into joining the army all over the world, according to Blackburn (2018). The author expands on this concept by pointing out that despite only a small percentage of citizens have first-hand experience with war, the ideal of military masculinity still circulates throughout society, represented through imagery of the

soldier identity. Blackburn (2018) continues and states that these imageries of masculinity are seen everywhere, specifically referring to film, television, toys and of course military video games, directly mentioning Call of Duty.

Militarized masculinity is derived from the traditional definition of masculinity (David & Brannon, 1976), which consists of four norms; avoid femininity, strive for success and achievement, don't show weakness and seek adventure, even when violence is a necessity. Something that needs to be kept in mind is the fact that this paper is quite dated and old, and especially over the last few years, these traditional norms of masculinity as well as femininity have eroded and are under constant scrutiny. Kimmel and Messner (1992) establish that an essential factor of militarized masculinity is connection to violence, with Kimmel later stating: "Violence is often the single most evident marker of manhood. Rather it is the willingness to fight, the desire to fight" (Kimmel, 2012, p. 36). Interestingly, due to the presence of the military and war in a lot of media forms, such as cinema and video games, military masculinity is no longer something that has to be performed solely by someone in the military. One should then of course keep in mind the possible impact on young, sometimes underaged males (Kline et al. 2003), who are exposed to this form of traditionally masculine, violent behaviour, as they are the majority of the target demographic

Kontour (2012) has also conducted a case study regarding militarized masculinity, specifically focusing on the first of the four Call of Duty: Modern Warfare games. In this doctoral dissertation, the author states that the game itself manages to train the players based on norms such as efficiency, proficiency and masculine performativity. This is also something that is present in the book chapter by Blackburn (2018). Some major findings from Kontour's (2012) paper are the fact that many elements of militarized masculinity are present within the game. Firstly, the traditional good versus bad structure of the story is aligned with typical military masculinity. The bad guys are dishonourable, while the good guys are noble and friendly. Additionally, the men depicted in the game are close to superhero status, being competent, smart, confident and unfazed. However, they do differ from the traditional action hero's such as Rambo or Arnold Schwarzenegger (Kontour, 2012). The soldiers in the game are not lone wolf "bad-asses", unlike these Hollywood actors, but rather, they are supposed to be normal soldiers. Another element of militarized masculinity is their morality, that is ever-present in their actions (Blackburn, 2018). The way the story gameplay works is that none of the important actors and characters are designed to not fail or die, unless the plot asks for it to create a more compelling story.

Regarding specific gameplay features that push the idea of traditional militarized

masculinity, the player is supposed to take down their enemies, while advancing forward as quickly as possible (Kontour, 2012). But at the same time, there is such a thing as being too brash and aggressive. Thus, players need to be bold, rather than reckless. On the other end of the warzone, the enemy is a lot more incompetent with a lack of tactics and strategy, but they have power in numbers. And, of course, while the player might die repeatedly, because you 'respawn', the player's character is in essence, immortal. The mechanics of the game also make it so that the player has to do most of the work on the battlefield (Kontour, 2012). Blackburn (2018) draws an interesting conclusion based on similar findings, stating that the Call of Duty games do not realistically represent masculine models, as well as military service, but rather give players the ability to jump into the boots to experience a soldier identity, and in turn identify with one of the biggest symbols of hegemonic masculinity.

As these forms of masculinity are very much present within the games, it can be assumed that this will also be the case for the marketing communications, such as trailers, as long as the publisher intends to accurately portray the game in question. The fact that video game players are predominantly male (Yee, 2018) is also something that is constantly brought up by Kline et al. (2003), also adding the fact these males are often times also underaged. While one has to question whether or not these distributions, with boys being the largest part of the target demographic, are still accurate, it remains a fact that these games that contain traditional masculinity to a large extent are marketed towards male gamers, who are thus exposed to these forms of male "behaviour".

Video Game Marketing

Kline et al. (2003) have written a very detailed history of video games, as well as their marketing. In the 70's when video games emerged and spread to the consumers' homes, the game companies relied on the novelty of their brand-new inventions, which worked well at the time. However, this led to a market that became saturated with competitors who released mediocre products. And eventually, major conglomerates, who initially were outsiders to the industry, decided to enter the market, consequently failing in their marketing approaches, due to a lack of understanding of the specific subculture. Eventually, one of the first major and long-term players found themselves in more and more households, Nintendo (Kline et al., 2003). Nintendo was the first company to win the allegiance of consumers, which is especially powerful with a young target audience, within the video game market according to the authors. It first achieved recognition based on technological superiority, followed by a net of cultural events, slogans and spin-offs, which resulted in complete attention and purchasing power from the players.

Following this dominance of Nintendo, competition intensified within the market, which in turn led to rapid technological development in the 1990's, with companies like SEGA coming in and challenging Nintendo, but relatively quickly losing the battle. Additionally, games like Mortal Kombat and Doom made it so that violence became more prevalent in video games than ever before (Kline et al., 2003). Simultaneously, it became apparent, particularly due to SEGA's marketing practices, that market success depended on carefully thought out, costly and inventive promotional campaigns, which responded to and reshaped customer demand. At the end of the millennium, two new multimedia corporations joined the market, Microsoft and Sony. These two in turn introduced more innovative and impressive technological upgrades within the world of video games. Sony had decided to target a slightly older audience in comparison to companies like Nintendo & SEGA. Additionally, they also decided to create a "signature" character mascot, since Nintendo had Mario and SEGA had Sonic, thus Sony created Crash Bandicoot (Kline et al., 2003). Sony also had a higher release rate of games, which became apparent when about 100 games were released within the first year of existence of the PlayStation. In regard to global marketing, during these times marketing efforts were primarily focused on first world countries, as these consoles and games were and still are quite expensive, meaning that people from poorer area's of the world often times could not afford such commodities.

Wesley & Barczak (2010) have formulated many practices and key elements they believe to be crucial to the success of a product within the global video game market. While several of these are primarily targeted at the gaming console market, some still apply to the game industry. Statements regarding topics such as a Unique Selling Proposition, which is what makes a particular brand or product stand out from its competition, or the use of social media networks to increase interest among customers (Wesley & Barczak, 2010; Steinberg, 2007), are very relevant in the video game industry currently. Steinberg (2007) builds on the social element of video games in our modern society, by explaining the importance of building a community around or within your games in order to be enticing and interesting to a large audience. One way of accomplishing this, is by blurring the boundary between the player and publisher. This can be done through taking the consumer behind the scenes and giving them a look at how the game has been made. Another point that Steinberg (2007) makes is the constant output of new and interesting content, which increases the value of the game, as there is more content for the player to explore. A final statement by the author, regards the fact that there is a perception among consumers that the publishing companies only care about revenue, thus one must show they care for the players, which can be done

through the previously mentioned practices.

When taking the perspective of effective video game marketing strategies, a company has to understand that every consumer is different and thus require unique approaches concerning marketing and advertising in order to gain their interest. Zackariasson and Dymek (2016) state that consumers buying practices differ depending on the time of the year, as well as the fact that their consumption is in part dependent on their adoption of new games and technology. Regarding the time of the year, something that is apparent when analysing the sales figures over the course of the year, is a spike around the holiday season (Richter, 2020). Thus, the authors state that advertising around this time should be more focused on the customers who will be buying the games, rather than the ones playing them, as games purchased around this time are more likely to be gifts. Another aspect to keep an eye on as a publisher is whether any competitors are releasing a game around a similar date (Zackariasson and Dymek, 2016).

Based on individual adaptation practices, the two authors have established five different types of consumers or players. First there are the Innovators, who are very knowledgeable on the video game industry and market, thus they are often the first to play a new game upon release. Then there are the Early Adopters, who also are quick to jump on a new game, and often these people are opinion leaders, thus having a significant influence on any possible future success a game might have. The first of the two largest groups are the Early Majority, who also like to get games early, but it is not a necessity, unlike the innovators. They are also often the first people to look at reviews, thus being influenced by the opinion makers. The other large group is the Late Majority, who are more concerned with the enjoyment they get from a game, rather than being the first to play. Finally, there are the Laggards, who are the most sceptic of all these groups, and will only play the game when there are a lot of people enjoying it, and it has become mainstream (Zackariasson and Dymek, 2016). Thus, it is essential for publishers to understand that all of these people need to be communicated with differently.

Despite the previously stated claims that the use of social media networks is extremely important in order to be able to successfully market an upcoming video game, Zackariasson & Wilson (2012) state that the use of television for advertisement purposes is still very relevant, naming the example of Modern Warfare 3, which sold incredibly well, partly due to heavy TV support around the release of the game. Additionally, the authors also state that for certain games, the collaboration with traditional TV makes a lot of sense, particularly in the case of sports games, which can be advertised during major sporting

events, as the people watching the Superbowl for instance, would most likely also be interested in playing Electronic Arts' Madden NFL games.

Another relevant, and quite recent marketing practice that needs to be examined is influencer marketing. According to De Veirman et al. (2017), influencers can be defined as people who have built a sizeable social network of people following them. On top of that they are also seen as trusted opinionmakers within their particular niche(s). In the case of a franchise such as Call of Duty, the niche these influencers are relevant in would be video games. According to Törhönen et al. (2020) video game content has become increasingly popular over the last years, especially on YouTube. Due to this increased popularity it has also marked the arrival of various streaming platform where people can broadcast themselves to the world playing video games in real time. These include platforms such as the before mentioned Twitch.tv, Mixer and YouTube Gaming, which is a subsection of YouTube specifically focused on livestreams. Woodcock & Johnson (2018) state that the streaming of video games by influencers can play multiple different roles within the industry. Firstly, streaming can act as a form of reviewing and consequently advertising. Quite self-explanatory, if a possible consumer tunes into a stream of an influencer playing game "X" and he says it is terrible, but game "Y" is great, the viewer is more likely to go and buy game "Y" due to the positive review. Another reason why streaming is great for consumers to get an impression of certain games is the interactive nature of livestreaming according to Woodcock & Johnson (2018).

One of the few papers that has done research on the marketing practices employed by the Call of Duty franchise, focusing specifically on Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare, gives some interesting insights into the marketing process of military realism. Payne (2012) points out a detail that needs to be kept in mind when analysing this series of games, which is the fact that they take place in our modern society, something not many companies had attempted before on this successful a level. One of the key findings from this paper is regarding the possibility of backlash concerning the use of current military conflict by Activision in order to make a profit. Payne (2012) states that Call of Duty's release of parodic videos as part of the marketing process intended to alleviate any possible political pressure from the game itself. Through this practice of para-text, the creators of the content or product are able to guide the consumer, and in turn affect the way in which they perceive this content or product, which is a game in this case (Gray, 2008). Through this method of marketing content creation, Call of Duty can avoid the complex politics of representation (Payne, 2012). Thus, even though a large portion of the marketing emphasizes the military

realism, this use of para-text serves to say that its “just a game”.

One of the primary tools for video games marketing are trailers. There are two different types of video game trailers; cinematic and gameplay (Tanes-Ehle & Speedy, 2017). In accordance with the readings regarding video game marketing, these trailers will often times be released on both traditional media, such as television, as well as online, on platforms such as YouTube, social media and video game websites. The cinematic trailer, as the name suggests, takes its inspiration from cinema, as these are created in order to portray a narrative, with a mix of abstract representations of the game as well as some of the gameplay concepts (Tanes-Ehle & Speedy, 2017). The gameplay trailer also serves to promote the game, but it shifts the focus on the gameplay experience, by showing imagery and video that has been directly captured from the game itself, thus literally being gameplay. These gameplay trailers are thus more accurate representations of the actual game (Vollans, 2015).

Consumers seem to interpret trailers differently. Švelch (2017) states that these trailers are able to evoke emotion in the consumers and viewers. But not all viewers of the trailers are trusting in regards to the promise that is delivered by the publisher and creators through the trailer. This distrust leads to a discussion between the cynics and enthusiasts. Švelch (2017) elaborates by pointing out that the issue at the core of this distrust and discussion is representativity. This concept is related to how closely the trailer in question represents the actual game, or whether the trailer might be misleading, which again relates back to the dichotomy between gameplay and cinematic footage mentioned by Tanes-Ehle & Speedy (2017)

Through the use of focus groups, subjecting each to a set of trailers, Plothe (2017) was able to figure out which trailers were effective, and which less so. Based on the experiment, the most highly rated trailer, was for the game *Need for Speed*, which is a racing game. According to the participants, they enjoyed it because it transitioned seamlessly from gameplay to live-action, as well as the fact that it represented the actions within the game in great detail. Live-action is defined as content containing real people, animals or a real world environment, in comparison to for example animation (Smith, et al. 2012). The use of both gameplay footage and live-action footage in the trailer led to representation of play in the trailer as well as the evocation of the emotional experience in the game (Plothe, 2017). In turn, due to this boundary between what is real and virtual becoming blurred, a third form of space is created, according to the author, which is called Gamerspace. Gamerspace manages to encompass the virtual world of a video game and the real world of the player at the same

time. An example of a trailer used in this research, was the live-action trailer for Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3, which is a form of para-text as well. Despite the fact that this trailer contained no gameplay elements, it was still perceived as a representation of play according to the focus group participants, due to the fact that the actors managed to encapsulate the experience of playing the game (Plothe, 2017).

An important factor to consider for publishers when creating and releasing video game trailers is trailer literacy. This concept refers to the fact that any text can be interpreted in different ways, depending on who is the person on the receiving end of the trailer (Moore, 2010). A person is literate if they are able recognize or produce distinctive types of meanings after having watched a trailer. In the case of the Grand Theft Auto IV trailer, which the author mentions in the paper, there were certain affinity groups, outside of the gaming audience, with vested interests in the meaning of the trailer, such as politicians and other media outlets. Thus, upon the release of the trailer, for a game which is set in New York City, a number of the city's politicians spoke out against it in the media, due to the fact that criminal activity was being shown and encouraged, which they believed affected the city's image globally. So, while both the audiences take the trailer seriously, the gaming audience sees the trailer and reflects upon their previous experiences with the games in said franchise, while politicians might see the trailer as a false media representation of their city (Moore, 2010). Thus, it is extremely important for publishers to keep in mind what people outside the gaming affinity group might perceive their trailers as, especially in the case of a franchise such as Call of Duty, seeing as they are based around military conflict, meaning two or more sides need to face-off, often times making one of those the "bad guy", leading to the fact that the people from that area might be less fond of the game, due to their negative portrayal and representation within the games virtual world.

Overall, as mentioned before, the Call of Duty games contain a lot of aspects that are related to traditional forms of masculinity, such as militarized and hegemonic masculinity. And based on the articles discussed in this section, it has become clear that trailers intend to quickly encapsulate the essence of the particular game in question. That makes it safe to assume that these forms of masculinity should, most likely, be present in the trailer materials. And if these topics are omni-present in everything related to the game and publisher, it seems to be the case that this sense of traditional masculinity is part of the brand identity in regards to Call of Duty.

Brand Identity

Much like marketing, brand identity is also a widely researched topic, however, within the field of video games, there is a lack of literature that focuses on brand identity. Despite this lack of available literature, what can be helpful is the use of literature regarding brand identity which focuses on different fields and see whether or not these findings could be or are implemented within the video game industry. Nandan (2005) defines brand identity as the way a company wants to identify and define themselves. Thus, brand identity is something that is communicated by the company to the consumer and stakeholders, rather than brand image which is created through the perception of a brand by the consumer (Nandan, 2005). Brand identity consists of several factors: brand vision, brand culture, positioning, personality, relationships and presentation (Harris & de Chernatony, 2001).

Table 2:

Brand Vision	The brand's core purpose and reason for existing
Brand Culture	Employee's value and assumptions, which guide their behaviour
Positioning	What is the brand, who is it for and what does it offer
Personality	The brands emotional characteristics which are derived from the core values
Relationships	Resulting from the Personality, a relationship emerges between Brand and Consumer
Presentation	Ways of presenting the brands identity matching consumer aspirations and self-image

Six elements of Brand Identity (Harris & de Chernatony, 2001)

There are some clear connections between this definition of brand identity and some of the marketing practices, such as the fact that positioning is connected to the uniqueness of a brand, while relationships and presentation connects with the interactive community building mentioned by Steinberg (2007). Janonis et al. (2007) expand on these findings and state elements such as moral image, aim and values, which are emotional in nature, are also very relevant elements, that together form a brands individuality and play into emotional benefits. Overall, in line within all the articles regarding identity, the consensus seems to be that having a well-crafted brand identity is a significant competitive advantage (Janonis et al., 2007).

There is quite some overlap in comparison to the previously mentioned articles, seeing as the four aspects by Ghodeswar (2008) in regards to establishing Brand Identity are positioning the brand, communicating the brand message, delivering the brand performance

and leveraging the brand equity, or the PCDL Model for short. The author continues to state that during the positioning phase, a brand should focus on creating psychological values for their products or services, which will lead to intangible benefits, such as positive emotional associations, beliefs and values the consumer will automatically connect to the brand.

Within the positioning phase, there are eight different headings, specifically called Brand Keys (Kapferer, 2012).

Table 3:

Competitive Environment	Who are the competition and how are they positioned in the market
Target	Who are the target audience for the brand in question
Consumer Insight	What do you know about the target consumer
Brand Benefits	What benefits do certain brand bring to the consumer
Brand Values	What does the brand in question believe in and represent in their practices and products/services
Reasons to Believe	The proof the company shows to substantiate the positioning
Discriminator	The single most compelling reason to choose a particular brand
Brand Essence	The distillation of the brand's genetic code into one clear thought

Eight Brand Keys (Kapferer, 2012)

The next step in the PCDL Model for building a brand identity is communicating the brand message. And of course, this communication will be different based on a brand's positioning. Some of the main challenges for companies and brands are to be noticed and remembered, as well as change perceptions, reinforce attitudes and create strong customer relationships (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000). It is key to replicate the emotional elements of the brand in the marketing and advertising across several different platforms, in order to build that connection to the consumer. Externally to traditional marketing and advertising, the brand message can also be communicated through the use of events and shows, as well as celebrity ambassadors, who share similar standpoints, are active in the same industry or who can serve as a bridge between a brand and a large consumer base (Ghodeswar, 2008). The best marketing communication is a result of an understanding of factors that impact the brand, such as consumer trends, competition and technological breakthroughs (Parameswaran, 2001).

Following the communication, it is very important to deliver on what has been communicated. This part of the model is a bit less vague, since it is primarily focused on key

performance indicators, such as sale numbers, brand recognition and brand awareness for example (Ghodeswar, 2008). Additionally, customer service is very important, seeing as bad news spreads fast nowadays on the internet (Balakrishnan & Mahanta, 2004). Thus, when applying this step to the video game industry, the brand has to make sure that the game works smoothly, there are no bugs or errors occurring on their end. Additionally, if the game has online elements, this means that the brand needs to make sure they have strong enough servers in order to be able to accommodate all players in what region on the planet they might be. If the performance is up to the consumers standards, and they have built the connection towards the brand, the opportunity for brand loyalty arises. Brand loyalty measures the level of attachment a customer has to the brand, and whether or not they would switch to another brand in the case of a price change for example (Aaker, 2009).

Finally, a company needs to leverage their brand equity. Some strategies that are used to accomplish this are line extensions, brand extensions, ingredient branding and co-branding (Keller, 2012). Ingredient branding refers to the practice of taking key attributes of one brand and incorporating them into another brand. This often times will establish a brand alliance. Brand extension refers to releasing a new product under the same brand name (Keller, 2012). Within this concept, there are two options; line extensions and category extensions. The former refers to the addition of a new product that fits the category of the pre-existing brand, while the latter introduces a new product, outside of the existing categories of the brand, which have already been established. Finally, there is co-branding, which Keller (2012) defines as the action that occurs when two different brands are combined into a joint product, or at least marketed together in some fashion.

The connection that follows, between all of these concepts is quite straightforward. Seeing as mentioned before, all of the content that is put out by the publisher, is done in order to build and enforce the brand identity, of both the series as well as the company behind the games as well. Thus, all forms of video game marketing, are inherently related to the concept of brand identity. Additionally, seeing as, based on the existing literature, Call Of Duty is a strong example of militarized masculinity, it is quite safe to expect these forms of traditional masculinity to show up in their different types of trailers and footage used for marketing purposes, which in turn, again, has an impact on their brand identity.

Methodology

Research Design

This research will be conducted qualitatively. This decision has been made in order to be able to provide more detailed and in-depth results (Silverman, 2020), which will be useful for building a relevant set of findings and results. The specific research method that will be used in this master thesis is a visual analysis. This form of content analysis has an advantage over regular content analysis, by enabling a richer understanding and analysis, through a focus on objective formal relationships, which to some extent construct meaning of a text, image or in this case, video (Bell & Milic, 2002). The sample consists of visual promotional materials for the games within the Modern Warfare. One of the primary advantages of qualitative forms of content analysis is the fact that it offers the ability to discover underlying patterns that inherently might not be clear or obvious (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). Thus, in order to properly be able to understand possible intentions and hidden meanings from Activision in their promotional video material, the most efficient way to conduct this research is through visual analysis. As a result, a set of patterns/categories shall come to the surface in order to properly answer the research question.

As mentioned, the type of data that will be collected is promotional materials released by Activision specific to the games within the Modern Warfare series. To be precise, the focus will be solely on video's that acted as marketing tools to spread awareness of, and interest in the games in question. The data will be collected on the official social media pages of the Call of Duty franchise. Most of the data will be collected on YouTube, seeing as in the year where the first few Modern Warfare games were released, platforms such as Instagram were not yet released, with Instagram being released in October 2010 (Blystone, 2020).

In regards to time periods that need to be researched, due to the nature in which the games within the Call of Duty franchise are released, these years will be spread out, rather than continuous (Ramsey, 2020). The years that are relevant to this research are 2007, which is the release year of Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare, 2009, when Modern Warfare 2 came out, 2011, for the release of Modern Warfare 3 and finally, after a long hiatus, 2019 which is when Modern Warfare was released (Ramsey, 2020). Additionally, primarily due to a lack of promotional content available online for the first two games out of the four, the decision had been made to include video's used to promote the remastered versions of these first two Modern Warfare games, as the only difference between the originals and remastered versions is an upgrade graphically, while the content remained the same as all those years

ago.

Table 4:

Game	Year
Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare	2007
Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2	2009
Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3	2011
Call of Duty: Modern Warfare Remastered	2016
Call of Duty: Modern Warfare	2019
Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2 Campaign Remastered	2020

Modern Warfare Release Dates

However, factors that need to be kept in mind is the structure in which marketing in the video game industry, as well as cinema work. Often times trailers release far in advance of the release of the product in question, and with video games specifically, due to the fact that there are often updates after release, there can also be relevant marketing material that is shared after the release of said game.

Sampling

The sampling used is a form of non-probability sampling, more precisely a mix of convenience, purposive and quota sampling. Convenience sampling, which is one of the most commonly used sampling methods refers to the sample being selected on the base of convenience and how easy they were to find (Acharya et al., 2013). This method often times is combined with purposive sampling, as is also the case in this research, as the data that is selected still needs to be relevant towards the specific research, meaning that there are some parameters to which the selected data must adhere, which in this case would be the specific video games series, as well as a certain length per video, with some video's being slightly longer than a minute, while some of the more detailed and in-depth videos closing in on the ten minute mark. Quota sampling refers to the fact that, in this particular case, each game has to be represented in the dataset, in order to be able to draw any relevant conclusions about the series as a whole, thus there are certain quota's that need to be met.

The data would have ideally been equally distributed across the four games that make up the series, however, during the data collection process, it became clear that the games released in the late 2000's and early 2010's have a lot less trailer footage and marketing content online. Thus a few alterations were made to the original plan of equal distribution, in order to have enough content to get relevant findings. Firstly, in the years after the initial releases of the older games in the series, there have been remakes, also known as remasters, of the first two games in the Modern Warfare series. Thus, some trailers

for these two games have been released to promote the remakes, but seeing as the only difference between the original and remake is the visual upgrade, the trailers still accurately describe the original games. In the dataset, it is also clear that the latter games, and especially the latest release in 2019 are more heavily represented within the total data, due to the simple fact that there has been more content released by Activision in order to promote these games. This change can already be seen as a significant finding, as the later the release of the game took place, the more marketing content was released by the publisher.

In summary, the units of analysis will be video marketing materials released by Activision on the internet, more specifically YouTube, and relating to the games within the Modern Warfare series, which in turn is part of the Call of Duty franchise. This has been decided in order to be able to answer the research question as accurately as possible, as it is believed that these marketing materials, such as trailers, previews and gameplay play an extremely important role in the creation of interest and perception among the consumers (Boksem & Smidts, 2015; Finsterwalder et al., 2012).

According to the methodological guidelines, the sample size for content analysis of video's, it should be around 30 to 40 videos, of a length between three and five minutes. However, due to the fact that trailers that are released nowadays have the average length of 1-3 minutes or so, the sample size would have needed to be larger than the set guidelines. There are also promotional materials that have been released that are longer than 5 minutes, such as gameplay, with one of the video's in the dataset totalling to 24 minutes, thus equally somewhere between five and eight entries according to the guidelines. In-depth promotion and behind-the-scenes footage materials also were part of the dataset, as these pieces of content also function as ways of promoting the product, and by showing the hard work that was put into the creation of said product. Thus some video's were shorter than the recommended length, while others were over the given criteria.

Operationalization

To make sure that the analysis stayed focused on the theoretical concepts in question for this particular research, it was important to have a solid operationalization. The theoretical framework for this thesis paper, has done a good job of fleshing out the theory that was relevant regarding the research question, which in turn helped in the data analysis process. Since topics such as brand identity, video game marketing, militarized masculinity and para-text have all been defined in the specific context of video games, it created a solid foundation that portrays what the primary focus should be during the visual analysis of the data.

Overall, due to the manner in which the data analysis has taken place, which will be described in further detail in the next section, the initial goal during the analysis process was to simply describe the visuals on a very basic surface level. What was seen or heard on the screen during this scene, would in turn relate to some of the topics from the theoretical framework. For example, elements from trailer footage that related to militarized masculinity, could be men carrying guns, dressed as soldiers, big explosions and the sound of gunfire. In regards to brand identity and marketing, most text within the video's was likely be related to those topics, as well as any talk regarding the specific technical aspect of creating and releasing a video game to such a large audience.

Maier (2009) also emphasized the fact that since the trailer and its content are released by a company, all of the content within the trailer does not only represent the particular film or game, but it now also represents the company which is releasing or creating the trailer and the form of entertainment. This finding creates the notion that whatever is shown in the trailers or preview footage is going to be connected to the publisher by the audience, thus a publisher, which is Activision in the case of Call of Duty, needs to thoroughly consider what will be shown in the trailers and whether or not they want certain imagery to be connected to their brand.

Data Analysis

Once all the data for the sample had been obtained, it was analysed in the Atlas.ti program. In order to have been able to do this, all the downloaded video's were uploaded into the analysis program. Then snapshots of every scene of every video were created, which in turn were to be qualitatively analysed. This decision had been made to make the process of qualitative visual analysis more organized and reliable. The program gives the user the ability to efficiently analyse large amounts of data. The data was analysed on two fronts: connotation and denotation. Denotation refers to what is directly visible within the advertisement, while connotation refers to the meaning of the visuals (Hall et al., 2013). Looking for these elements was achieved through certain tools as explained by Machin & Mayr (2012). These tools were objects, setting and salience. The first of these three referred to the objects that were present in the particular visual content, as well as possible hidden meaning behind the object in question. Setting referred to where the objects were placed within the content, and what values were embedded within the content due to this setting. Finally, salience refers to how in some instances certain elements of the composition were made to stand out, and what meaning this might have brought to the image/video (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Additionally another element analysed, was intertextuality. This concept refers

to the possibility of connections between the dataset entries. Once the visual analysis was completed, there was to be a conclusion that was relevant and either completely in-line with existing literature, partially in-line with the prior discussed theory, or perhaps contrary to the existing articles and books regarding the research topics.

Reliability & Validity

One issue that every researcher must deal with is the reliability and validity of their research. Especially for qualitative research, these factors can become problematic, as this form of research deals with subjective viewpoints, while quantitative research primarily deals with facts and numbers (Thomson, 2011). Additionally, the higher a qualitative research's validity and reliability, the higher the generalizability, which means that the results are of higher quality and relevance (Golafshani, 2003). One of the most famous methods for testing and increasing these factors is called triangulation, which is defined as the use of multiple methods or data sources, specifically in qualitative research in the research process, which in turn leads to the possibility of theory modification, which can be fruitful (Golafshani, 2003). Of course, this paper makes use of many different sources to build a relevant theoretical framework, which in turn shapes the manner in which the results are found and presented.

Additionally, Golafshani (2003) also brings up the concept of constructivism, in regards to the justification of triangulation in qualitative research. Constructivism is defined as the notion that all knowledge is based on human practices, thus if the practices differ, people's knowledge and ideas regarding certain topics are different. This again, justifies the use of triangulation in the data gathering process, as this means that the theory is based on many different perspectives, which leads to more reliable, valid and relevant results.

Of course there are other practices in order to ensure better validity and reliability. Noble & Smith (2015) describe several possible considerations for researchers conducting qualitative research, such as considering personal biases, consistency in interpretations of the data as well as constant comparison between personal findings and existing research.

Results

Upon completion of the visual analysis, which consisted of 36 individual video's distributed across the four games in the series, the result showed nearly 2800 unique codes relating to elements such as object, setting and salience, as described by Machin & Mayr (2012). These initial findings were primarily connotative, as they were simply description of the content of said video's. These 2800 codes were then grouped together into 27 groups, which then were also put together to form seven primary findings. From these seven main findings, both connotation as well as denotation can be derived (Hall et al., 2013). The findings were named as follows: Portrayal Of Military Life, Gender Representation, The Role Of Sound, Para-Text & Humour, Settings & Backgrounds, Realism Versus Gameplay and Promo & BTS.

Table 5:

Portrayal Of Military Life	Portrayal Of Explosives Portrayal Of Guns Portrayal Of Soldiers Portrayal Of The Enemy Portrayal Of The Innocent Portrayal Of Vehicles
Gender Representation	Female Representation Male Representation
The Role Of Sound	Explosive Sound Human Sound Music Sound Sound Effects Vehicular Sound Weapon Sound
Para-Text & Humour	Celebrity Appearances Humour
Settings & Backgrounds	Backgrounds Fictional Setting Nature & Weather Real Setting Use Of Text
Realism Versus Gameplay	War As A Game War As An Experience Realism
Promo & BTS	Hype Quotes Product Specifics Behind The Scenes

Overview Of The Visual Analysis Findings

Portrayal Of Military Life

The portrayal of military life consisted of six sub-findings, each focused on separate aspects of the objects present within the dataset. To be precise, the specific objective elements were explosives, guns, soldiers, enemies, vehicles and the innocent. The term explosives was used to refer to weaponry such as rocket launchers, as well as grenades, which in turn showed up in multiple forms, from small scale lethal equipment, such as frag grenades, C4 and claymores, to non-lethal grenades, such as flash, stun and EMP grenades. Additionally, larger missiles, which would be fired from vehicles, such as planes, helicopters and tanks also fit into this category. Finally, while not very common over the entire series, but rather confined to the first entry, nuclear weapons are the final object to be included in the explosives category. The guns category of objects is quite straightforward, as it refers to the display of all weapons that make use of bullets, ranging from pistols to large machine guns, and from shotguns to sniper rifles, and anything in between. The vehicle category is also quite self explanatory, as it consisted of any modes of transport, which most often were military vehicles, specifically helicopters, planes as well as any form of armoured ground vehicles, such as trucks and tanks.

Next in line is the soldier sub-section, which specifically focused on the friendly forces that were portrayed in the games. As stated in some of the trailers for the 2019 entry to the Modern Warfare series, the line between good and bad is often blurry, which contradicts the statements made by Sicart (2016), who said that the creators do not care about politics, context and origins, but rather just want to put out an epic story of conventional heroism. This nuance also applied to certain cases, within the dataset, of trying to figure out whether a soldier that was shown in the footage was friendly or hostile. Overall, the distinction was made based on the context of the particular scene, and the actions of said soldiers. The other side of this coin is the portrayal of the enemy. While not very often, the enemy was at times shown as dishonourable, for example through the use of hostages, or killing of innocent people. This very much resembles what Kontour (2012) spoke about in regard to traditional story structure of good versus evil, which is very common in militarized masculinity settings.

Finally, there were some cases in which innocent victims of conflict were shown. These were mostly civilians as well as hostages. The presence of innocent people was more strongly apparent in the content for the latest instalment to the series, showing the people affected by airstrikes in the Middle East. This shift over the instalments, seems to move away from Gagnon's (2010) findings, which were about the glorification of the American

war machine and the downplaying of the monstrosities of warfare. Of the six types of objects, the innocent were the least common to be seen, while soldiers and guns were the most common objects within all of the promotional footage that was part of the dataset.

Overall, the way in which life in the military is portrayed seems quite glamorous and movie-like. While objects such as explosives, guns and vehicles are very often present in the promo footage, and their destructive power is shown, the amount of times they are used by either the protagonist, or friendly forces to the protagonist, in comparison to the opposing forces is quite surprising. It is rare that you will see friendly forces get killed or even shot, while the amount of times the opposing forces experience casualties and are hit by the power of friendly, often western weaponry is much higher. This appears to be in line with the findings by Kontour (2012), in which he stated that often times the enemy will be portrayed more incompetent regarding both tactics as well as weapon mastery. However, it is also apparent from the analysis, that the enemy will often time also be portrayed with lacking means of fighting back, specifically in regards to vehicles and explosives.

Additionally, much like Kontour (2012) has mentioned, the player at times seems to be portrayed quite closely to the idea of an action hero. A specific example of this is the fact that in a video longer than 20 minutes of gameplay, there was not a single instance of the player dying, as those were all edited out. Rather, the player went on to kill large numbers of enemies, often in quick succession, sometimes into the double digits, without ever coming close to getting a feeling of being in danger from the enemy. Another surprising finding was the high number of times a soldier was shown sitting on the side of a helicopter, with their legs hanging off the edge, while airborne. In general, the content within the dataset seems to portray soldiers quite closely to this idea of the hegemonic masculinity as explained by Blackburn (2018), who feel no fear, are experts in the use of guns, vehicles and explosives, and are always ready for their next fight, no matter the time or location.

The Role Of Sound

This next finding regarding the audio of the trailers, consists of a number of sub-categories; Explosive Sound, Human Sound, Music Sound, Sound Effects, Vehicular Sound, Weapon Sound. Some of these findings are closely related to the portrayal of military life, but in comparison to the visual aspect, this finding focuses solely on audio. To be specific, the sound of explosives, vehicles and weapons, as well as certain cases of the human sound category. All of these noises are so common, they seem to try and portray the fact that these sounds are central to the experience of being a soldier. The experience of firing weapons and explosives is something that the creators have put front and centre, which is also something

that Bauer (2021) has talked about. As stated by Kontour (2012) however, there remains a tendency within portrayals of militarized masculinity, where the main characters tend to be unfazed by things such as explosions and gunfire, which of course includes the sound of those as well. This appears to be the case from the visual analysis as well, as there were often visuals of soldiers running and/or driving from or past explosions and dodging gunfire like it's nothing, no matter whether it's from a frag grenade or a jet firing missiles. Of course, we are not dealing in absolutes here. There were some cases of seeing soldiers affected by the sound and shock of explosions for example. Whether or not these resulting effects were realistic or not will be discussed in later sections.

Human sound refers to all noise made by human beings, either friendly, hostile or innocent. For the innocent, it would mainly involve screaming, and general sounds of terror, as warfare is a terrible and painful experience, that only trained soldiers seem to be unaffected by, within the games that is. Concerning the sound made by friendly and enemy forces, it primarily consists of military communication, such as calling-out opposing forces as well as yelling orders and communicating what actions the person in question was about to make, such as entering a particular room, or throwing a grenade for example. On rare occasions, soldiers would communicate with each other in a rather casual manner, which helped humanize them to an extent.

Finally, there are the music and sound effect subcategories. Throughout the trailers and video's these played a role in the building of tension, suspense and action. While the music that was primarily used, was instrumental and from the games themselves, on the cases where real world music was used, it was often times either rock or metal music. One can assume this decision was made to emphasize the toughness and masculinity of whatever was going on in terms of visuals at the time. As stated by Best (2016) rock and metal music at the time of their rise in popularity shifted their representation within the world of music from the hypersexual age of disco to hyper-masculinity, which is, of course, in line with the concepts of militarized and hegemonic masculinity. The instrumental music that was used, ranged from very dramatic, and ominous, to very epic, almost as if it was taken from a stereotypical action movie. Often the music would slowly build up, until the visuals reached their climax, for example when the gunfire would start or an explosion would go off, in which the music would get faster and louder, as the pace of the video would increase as well. The use of sound-effects was also used to put emphasis on certain masculine military actions, such as breaching a door and detonating explosives. The most commonly used sound-effect was a heavy deep bass hit, almost like a thumping sound. This often during

very dramatic moments, in order to emphasize the gravitas of the situation.

Para-Text & Humour

A third finding resulting from the visual analysis is the use of para-text and humour at times. This theme consists of two subcategories, humour and celebrity appearances. An interesting aspect of this finding is the fact that there was close to no comedic or non-serious content in regards to the latest entry to the franchise. One can assume this was the case, since the topic of the game was a lot more contemporary, serious and close to home, regarding conflict in the Middle-East, terrorism and political involvement in proxy wars. Meanwhile the first three Modern Warfare games, focus on a very fictional, and farfetched story, in which a chain of events, started by a group of ultranationalists from Russia, eventually leads to the start of World War 3.

As mentioned in the theoretical framework, the primary idea of para-text is to alleviate any possible political pressure, by stating that everything is just a game, and thus it is not to be taken literally and seriously (Gray, 2008). Additionally, as Payne (2012) stated, Call Of Duty needs this method of marketing to avoid the complexity of political representation. Another possible reason why there might have been a lack of para-text, within the dataset for the latest instalment, is the fact that the locations used were partially fictional, with Urzikstan being the made-up nation in which the Middle-Eastern conflict takes place. One of the sides in this conflict is the fictional terrorist group Al Qattala. This does not hold up for the entire game however, as there is footage that takes place at Piccadilly Circus in London, England, which has become the scene of a terrorist attack. Russia also has a strong, negative presence throughout the game, which raises the question of why a real country, like Russia was portrayed as the “Bad Guys”, but the creators refused to pick a specific country to set the majority of the Middle-Eastern conflict in.

Concerning celebrity appearances, there were four major celebrities that have shown up in promotional footage for the modern warfare series, those being Jonah Hill, Sam Worthington, Rob Riggle and Dwight Howard, who is the only person not known for acting, but rather being a former all-star in the NBA. Interestingly enough, all the celebrity appearances took place for the promotion of Modern Warfare 3, with three of the four being part of the same video, that being “The Vet & The n00b”, in which Sam Worthington and Jonah Hill are dropped into a real-life rendition of the online multiplayer game mode. Worthington is an expert involving tactics, military communication and weapons handling, while Jonah is a “Noob”, which is derived from the word newbie, which is defined as an inexperienced newcomer to a particular activity, which gained popularity in the US military.

However, the difference between the original term, and the online version is the fact that a newbie has an interest in getting better and improving their skills, while the term “noobs” applies to those who seem to be uninterested in learning, or might act disrespectfully (Hill, 2015).

Over the course of the video, Jonah Hill is the epitome of what it means to be a Noob, as he blindly runs into conflict, fires his weapon without aiming, and even goes as far as shooting a single enemy sniper in the back with a rocket launcher, after which he proceeds to insult both the dead enemy, as well as his mother. As someone who has some experience playing the games online, I can confirm from the numerous hours that I have put into the games, that there are plenty of people playing online who will not shy away from any opportunity of insulting their enemies, or their family members for that matter. The two video's that are part of the series, through their heavy use of comedy do a surprisingly good job at representing what the experience of playing Call Of Duty online is like, which in turn shows a good understanding of the player-base and community (Steinberg, 2007). However, eventually, over time the noob gets better and hones his skills, to the point that Sam, the Vet, short for veteran, can simply sit back and watch Jonah Hill take on dozens of enemies on his own. As the two actors walk away from combat, a textual overlay pops up stating that there is a soldier in everyone. Finally, as a form of post-credit scene, Dwight Howard enters the battlefield, acting very similarly to Jonah when he first started, illustrating the cyclical nature of the game, with a continually growing player base, providing Noobs, who then go on similar journeys of growth and improvement.

Rob Riggle's involvement is slightly different, as he is simply there to promote a new paid service on top of the Modern Warfare 3 game, that was designed for players to look at their gameplay data, and improve upon their skills, called Call Of Duty Elite. This is a clear example of brand extension, as a form of leveraging brand equity, as mentioned by Keller (2012). Overall, the humour from that video is much less related to the gameplay experience, and more so the statements made by the actor, who himself was a US Marine for fourteen years, of which nine were active duty, in countries like Kosovo, Liberia and Afghanistan (Semper Fi & America's Fund, 2018). However, again through his use of language, he is able to paint this picture of himself being a funny drill sergeant and/or recruitment officer, making statements such as; “Camping is for Noobs & Hippies”, or his clan of female soldiers, inappropriately being called “The Bitch Slaps”. This pattern of the use of language in order to be funny, is the primary way in which comedy is used to lighten the mood of the game and indicate a lower level of seriousness. Another very comedic

example of a commercial for the second Modern Warfare game simply showed an elderly man, sitting in a leather chair, and consisted of sexual innuendos using statements that apply to the game, such as: “Sometime When People Do It Too Long On Their Own, Their Hands Cramp Up” or “Some People Go Into Domination Mode, And That Is Some Freaky Deaky Shit”. All of these humorous video’s are prime example of para-text usage in order to lower the stakes and decrease seriousness (Payne, 2012).

Gender Representation

Another finding from the visual analysis was the fact that there was a very skewed ratio in regards to the gender of people portrayed within the dataset. Logically, this theme consists of two elements, the male representation and female representation. When taking a closer look at the instances of the presence of female characters, one will see that the first three games contain no footage of women in the forefront, but only in cases where they are in the background and not relevant, or as innocent victims of conflict. It is only in the 2019 Modern Warfare game where there are some very significant and relevant female characters present in the content. In the most recent entry, there are two prevalent female characters, one of which is called Farah Karim, and she is the leader of a group of freedom fighters in the fictional country Urzikstan. The other female character is named Laswell, and she is a military officer, who is Captain Price’s superior, and thus is in charge of some of the events that take place throughout the story and within the trailers.

Despite these two major female characters, the ratio of female soldiers to male soldiers within the footage is still quite in the favour of the males. But in comparison to the previous three games where zero female soldiers were shown, any increase can be seen as significant. One in-game element that has led to the possibility of female soldier representation is the introduction of operators, which refers to the playable characters within the multiplayer game-mode. Within the Battle Pass Season 1 trailer, a female soldier named Mara is the primary focus, as this character can be unlocked by playing the game enough to complete all tiers.

When trying to find a reason for this lack of female representation, one can quickly envision the reason for the uneven distribution being the high ratio of males that play the games. As stated by Yee (2018), only 7% of First Person Shooter players is female, thus it would only make sense that, in order to connect with your audience, one mirrors their audience within the game. However, based on research conducted by Hook (2019) this idea of own gender-bias is not significant for male consumers. The author points out that for the male consumer, there was no difference in terms of identification with the characters,

whether those were male or female. Interestingly, for women there was a significant difference, as they more closely identified with the female protagonists compared to their male counterparts (Hook, 2019).

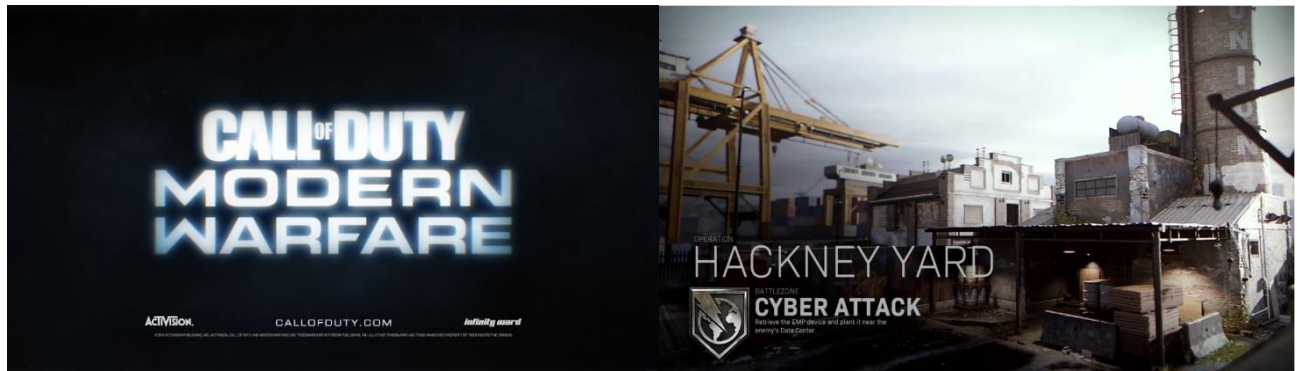
In regards to how accurate this representation is, according to Dickstein (2020) 16% of the US military is made up of women, a number that has only increased by one percent over the last 15 years. However, what has been found is that fact that women are 28% more likely to leave the military early in comparison to men, those reasons primarily being family-related and cultural. So, while this percentage does not match the representation of women within the games, Dickstein (2020) did mention the fact that all positions and units, including front-line combat, has only been open to women since 2015. And seeing as the first three games were released before this change has been made by the Pentagon, it would explain the lack of female soldiers present in the games which were part of the original trilogy.

Overall, this lack of female presence can be linked to the concepts of militarized masculinity, as mentioned by Blackburn (2018), Kimmel & Messner (1992) & David & Brannon (1976). Seeing as many of the prominent themes of the video game franchise relate closely to the elements of masculinity models, such as militarized and hegemonic masculinity, it makes sense that the majority of characters within the game, and thus its promotional materials are men. This does not necessarily have to be with the intention of suppressing or alienating people on the other end of the gender spectrum, but rather a case of conforming to present, and rather, stereotypical gender performance ideas.

Settings & Backgrounds

The next finding consists of five sub-categories; Backgrounds, Fictional Setting, Nature & Weather, Real Setting & Use Of Text. There were two background types used within the dataset, a plain black background, often times with white text in the forefront, or a cinematic background, in order to show the graphical quality simultaneously despite the focus being on another object.

Figure 1:



Plain Background (Left) versus Cinematic Background (Right)

Meanwhile, the use of text was predominantly used in order to convey essential information, such as the name of the game, the release date, the names of the companies that were involved in the creation of said game, as well as the ESRB Ratings, which were shown at the start in order to indicate that the following footage was intended for mature audiences. Through these ratings, the creators and publishers clearly state who their target audience is, which is one of the eight brand keys in the positioning phase (Kapferer, 2012). Kline et al. (2003) have stated that often times the audience for the Call Of Duty franchise is underaged, so whether these indications of blood, gore and violence have any effect can be questioned, but a personal presumption regarding this finding is that these mature content warnings are primarily there for legal reasons.

The more interesting facet of this finding are the remaining three sub-categories. Through the use of settings, either real or fictional, the creators are able to paint a certain picture of the military experience. As mentioned prior, the last game in particular has included a lot more use of fictional settings, in comparison to the previous three, of which MW3 has the most famous landmarks and locations contained in their trailers. Pairing this with the fact that the story started out quite fantastical and farfetched, and became much more grounded and realistic in the 2019 series entry, a logical pattern arises. When the story was very fictional in its nature, the developers and publishers felt secure in the use of real locations, such as downtown New York City, Westminster London, Prague, and Paris, with an impressive clip of the Eiffel Tower falling over after getting hit by a missile attack. However, in the latest game, with such a politically controversial story, the setting shifted towards more fictional locations, with the only case of real settings being Piccadilly Circus, turning to the site of a terrorist attack, and the canal street of Saint Petersburg, which has been renamed as St. Petrograd, and set in the fictional country of “Kastovia”. Interestingly enough, despite the fact that a rogue Russian general is the main “villain” his base is set in the fictional city of “Verdansk”, which was also used for the Battle Royale game mode.

This decision for increased fictionalization of the settings visited in the game seems to be related to the concept of trailer literacy, as discussed by Moore (2010). As mentioned in the theoretical framework, often times, people that do not regularly partake in the culture surrounding video games can assign negative meanings toward the visual content. This, of course, also applies to the Middle-Eastern setting of Urzikstan. While everyone can clearly tell, by the architecture as well as the names of the characters who hail from this fictional nation, it is based on existing Middle-Eastern countries, due to this fictional name, the creators can avoid any political problematic consequences. They even went as far as to create a map of the general area, in which Urzikstan seems to be located on a non-existing peninsula in the Black Sea, off of the coast of Georgia and Russia.

Finally, the aspect of nature and weather play a role towards creating an intriguing setting as well as building a certain ambience. For example, especially in the latest instalment, night time and darkness are clearly connected to stealth. The first footage ever shown of the 2019 game is a group of soldiers popping up out of the shadows of a dark forest during the night. There is no music, barely any sound, all you can hear is the rustling of leaves due to the wind and slight sound of footsteps. Meanwhile, all loud conflict seems to take place during the daytime. And most of the conflict that takes place in the Middle-East is loud, except for a single sequence, where soldiers are entering a compound, somewhat stealthily, due to their suspicion of the presence of the leader of Al Qattala, which gives the player and viewer quite a similar experience to the events surrounding the death of Osama Bin Laden, as seen in films such as *Zero Dark Thirty*. Other than that, most of the conflict which appears to be set in the Middle-East is full of loud gunfire and explosions. In regards to daytime, except for the terrorist attack on Piccadilly Circus and the White House in *Modern Warfare 2*, after it has nearly been destroyed by Russian troops, anytime a real setting is shown, it is always during the day, which would make sense, as the creators want people to clearly see the famous locations that are part of the game. Anytime nature is shown in any of the footage, the setting is always outside of the western world, interestingly enough. The western settings are very urban, with a lack of nature present, while the settings in both eastern Europe, as well as the Arabian peninsula and Africa are very rural, and there is more balance between nature and urbanization.

Realism Versus Gameplay

The penultimate finding from the visual analysis is this relationship between realism and gameplay. This theme consists of three sections: Realism, War as a Game and War as an Experience. The first way in which this difference becomes apparent is through the types of

trailers that are used. As stated by Tahnes-Ehle & Speedy (2017) there are two types of trailers, cinematic and gameplay trailers. While the cinematic trailers are there to focus on narrative more, perhaps some world-building, and lesser focus around actual gameplay features, it has the capability of appearing much more realistic, and thus painting a closer picture of what warfare might be like. Thus, these cinematic trailers manage to help increase realism, as well as the portrayal of the experiences a soldier has during warfare. Within the cinematic trailers, the viewer sees scenes of soldiers employing tactics in order to efficiently clear buildings for example. The footage also used its audio to portray modes of communication between soldiers themselves as well as toward people higher in the ranks. In the case of the 2019 game, it also showed the experience for the people in the affected nations, painting a realistic picture of what someone experiences during war and conflict.

Meanwhile gameplay trailers and footage directly show and tell the viewer that what they are seeing is a game, thus they more accurately represent the actual game and the consumers experience (Vollans, 2015). These gameplay trailers were also the main supply of data that created the sub-category of “War as a Game”. Certain gameplay elements, which are implemented to improve the players experience are purely there for entertainment purposes or to create a more comprehensible overview of whether or not a player is performing well. The first element that pertains to this is the fact that whenever the player manages to kill an enemy, they get a text pop-up that announces that they have gotten a number of points. Additionally, a real soldier does not have a mini-map, scoreboard, ammunition counter and kill-feed where one can see who has killed someone else in real time. However, all of these features have been added to give the player a smoother and more enjoyable experience, but in turn take away from the realism.

Another gameplay aspect which goes against realism is the implementation of killstreaks. These are rewards a player can unlock for getting a certain number of consecutive kills without dying and respawning himself. For example, if a player gets four kills in a row, they can get a UAV, which reveals all the enemy player locations on the mini-map. And the higher the killstreak, the better the reward, ranging from airstrikes to tank and helicopters; if a player manages to get 30 kills in a row, they get to call in a nuclear bomb and end the game. While being an entertaining feature and giving the player more reasons to try their best and perform well, it is far from realistic. A gameplay element that needs to be mentioned is health regeneration. During some of the gameplay footage, the player would either get shot, or hit by an explosive. While this of course is a very real experience, as soldiers often times can and do get injured, the fact that the player is then somehow able to

cure their injuries by hiding behind cover for a few seconds, while their screen has become black and white, is pure fantasy, but obviously put into the game for gameplay purposes.

At times however, something which the mentioned authors do not discuss takes place. During cinematic trailers, the viewer is shown a scene from the perspective of a soldier, which would normally be the case for gameplay trailers. This is where the consumer gets closest to a realistic experience of being a soldier, as they are literally in their shoes, without the Heads-Up Display that one gets during actual gameplay footage. I would call this sort of footage Cinematic Gameplay Footage, as it seems to be a balance between the two forms of trailers.

Figure 2:



Cinematic Gameplay Footage (Left) versus Gameplay Footage (Right)

A third type of trailer was also used on some occasions, which is the live-action trailer (Smith et al. 2012). On most occasions, in the specific case of the dataset, the real life footage was used for comedic reasons, as mentioned in the section regarding para-text. However, one particular real-life trailer used to promote Modern Warfare 3, showed a number of actors playing the famous characters from the franchise, such as Captain Price and “Soap” MacTavish on a mission to find the main bad guy of the second and third instalment of the series. This particular trailer was mentioned by Plothe (2017) as effective, due to the fact that the actors were able to encapsulate the experience of playing the game, and in turn increasing realism.

Promo & BTS

The final finding is related to direct promotion and behind-scenes footage, and consists of three sub-categories: Hype Quotes, Product Specifics & Behind The Scenes. The first of these three refers to pieces of text, either written on screen, or spoken by someone on screen or a voice-over that intend to speak positively about the game said video is attempting to promote. These quotes either came from some external company to the developer and/or publisher, or from an employee within the involved studios. Some example of these Hype

Quotes are; “A Seismic Shift The Industry Has Rarely Seen” or “Absolutely Jaw Dropping”. These sorts of statements are excellent examples of positioning towards a brand identity, as they give the game and series a unique selling proposition, since the games in the Modern Warfare series, supposedly, excel above the rest of the competition on the market (Ghodeswar, 2008; Wesley & Barczak, 2010).

Then there were the product specifics, which were often pieces of text, that were used to give important information regarding the specific game for which the video serviced as promotion. This included the release dates of the games themselves, which were all in the months leading up to Christmas, which is something that Richter (2020) also pointed out, as there is a spike in sales that time of the year, as a lot of big games tend to be released around that time of the year. Additionally, the release date of in-game expansions were also part of this sub-category, alongside actual in-game content such as the names of certain maps, game-modes, guns, and the explanation of certain in-game mechanics by the creators. These specifics are once again forms of positioning your brand as someone who can give the consumer something that no other game or company can (Ghodeswar, 2008). A specific example regarding the explanation of how certain facets of the game work, is a video, in which two of the creators of the game explain how the online network aspect of the multiplayer experience has changed and improved, to give as many people as possible a smoother and in turn more enjoyable experience. This example shows how the Modern Warfare games planned to deliver on what they promised in their cinematic and gameplay trailers, which is the third step of the PCDL Model (Balakrishnan & Mahanta, 2004; Ghodeswar, 2008). This shows that the creators understand the problems that some players are experiencing, that they listen and take these issues into consideration, and try to implement solutions, which is something that Steinberg (2007) emphasized is important, as there tends to be a perception among consumers that many video game companies only care about revenue, rather than the player-base.

Finally there is the Behind The Scenes sub-category, which primarily refers to behind the scenes footage that has been shared with the players. According to Steinberg (2007) this is an excellent way of bridging the gap between consumers and publishers within the video game market. In these video's a number of employees as well as others who helped create the game get to speak on their experience, and opinion on the end product. These types of video's are a great and very natural way of portraying a companies brand identity, more specifically its vision, culture, positioning and personality (Harris & de Chernatony, 2001). Specifically for the creation process of the latest instalment, there was an

emphasis on the fact that experts were brought in, to ensure a realistic experience. These experts were some former soldiers that were on duty in the Middle-East, as well as reporters who have spent time on location in countries affected by war and conflict. Another part of the behind the scenes footage that was unique for the latest Modern Warfare game was the fact that it was recorded using Performance Capture technology, rather than animated on a computer. The actor who got to play Captain Price, who is one of the most famous characters in the Call Of Duty franchise, got an entire video dedicated to the process of “Becoming Captain Price” which gave even more insight into the process of creating the game, which helps humanize the company and the people behind the game (Steinberg, 2007).

Conclusion

Now that the research has been conducted, the results have been analysed and the themes have been established, it is time to draw a conclusion to this thesis and officially answer the research question, which was as follows: *“How does Activision use marketing in order to construct a brand identity in regards to the Call of Duty: Modern Warfare video game series?”*. Additionally, there were the sub-questions; *“What are the most common and effective marketing practices within the video game industry?”*, *“How are promotional materials, such as trailers and previews used by the Call of Duty franchise?”* and *“How is the notion of militarized masculinity present in the marketing campaigns created for the Modern Warfare games?”*. Once these questions have been answered, there will be a section regarding the implications and limitations of this master thesis.

As mentioned in the conclusion section of this paper, the visual analysis resulted in seven unique findings; Portrayal Of Military Life, Gender Representation, The Role Of Sound, Para-Text & Humour, Settings & Backgrounds, Realism Versus Gameplay and Promo & BTS. All together, these findings manage to answer these questions quite coherently.

Answering the first sub-question cannot be done solely from this research. However, as Call Of Duty is one of the biggest franchises in the video game industry, one can only assume that the practices used by the publisher are proven to be some of the most successful and effective trends in the video game market. Firstly, the games in the Modern Warfare series use a multitude of trailer types, including cinematic and gameplay, as defined by Tahnes-Ehle & Speedy (2017). However, a category of trailer footage that has not been mentioned by any author is the cinematic gameplay footage, where the viewer gets a first person view, without the gameplay heads-up display. This type of footage, seems to be the most realistic form of content a company can release, outside of real-life footage. It manages to realistically immerse the viewer into the experience of a soldier, from their point of view. Real-life trailers have also been used in order to promote the games, including para-text and humour. (Smith et al. 2012). Finally, there was also considerable use of behind-the-scenes footage. From a personal perspective, it seems that this footage manages to humanize the company behind the games. Rather than the developing company appearing as simply a machine that pumps out these games once every few years, the consumer actually gets to see their fellow human beings and their thought process during the creation of the particular game in question.

All of this visual footage worked in combination with the use of text, which was

there for direct promotion of the game, mentioning important information such as release date and the name of the actual game. Of course, something very obvious, yet quickly forgotten, is the fact that all of the promotional footage is easily found online on social media, thus able to reach an incredibly large audience (Wesley & Barczak, 2010; Steinberg, 2007). There was also a clear distinction between the trailers which were targeted directly towards future players, compared to promotional material aimed at current players, with the video's building up to the release aiming to reel in new players, while content about in-game content releases targeting the current player-base (Zackariasson and Dymek, 2016).

In regards to how the promotional materials put out by Activision are used, there are a number of answers. Firstly, it's clear, that all of the video's analysed in this thesis are there to garner attention from the consumer, as that is what the primary goal of marketing and promotion is after all. Through the combined use of text, audio and visuals, the viewer does not only see what the product in question is, but rather what the experience of consuming the product will be like. Different types of trailers have different uses, with gameplay trailers showing future players what the experience of playing the upcoming game will feel like (Vollans, 2015). Meanwhile cinematic trailers are there more so to create a precedent of core principles which the particular game is built on. While the first three entries to the series, emphasize the exciting, fast-paced action, the latest release scaled down on the over the top action movie aspects, thus getting more grounded and real. Building on these forms of promotion, behind the scenes footage manages to humanize the promotional process, as employees explain how much hard work has went into creating this game, and how excited they are to have the player experience said game (Steinberg, 2007). Finally, there was also the use of para-text and humour in order to somewhat lighten the mood of the games that were being promoted, especially the second and third instalment (Payne, 2012; Gray, 2008).

The final sub-question, regarding the presence of militarized masculinity within the marketing campaigns for the Modern Warfare games, turned out to be a lot more prevalent than expected. Firstly, the distribution between male and female characters was very much skewed to the men's side. While the last of the four has made considerable efforts to include female characters, the first three have a complete lack in this regard. There seem to be multiple possible causes for this situation, with one of those being connected to the relatively small percentage of female soldiers, and the relatively recent legislative change in the United States to allow women to be part of all aspects and units within the military Dickstein (2020). One could also argue that this phenomenon is a result of the very much male-dominated consumer market (Yee, 2018). However, based on Hook (2019) this idea of own

gender-bias is not significant for male consumers. Whether that is something that is known by the creators and publishers cannot be said with certainty. Regardless of gender representation however, the entire experience of military life, both visually as well as auditory, appears to be close match to some of the definitions of militarized and hegemonic masculinity given by authors such as Blackburn (2018), Kontour (2012) and Bauer (2021).

In order to now answer the primary research question, it seems best to take the PCDL Model as mentioned by Ghodeswar (2008), and apply it to this particular case. Starting with positioning, of the Eight Brand Keys (Kapferer, 2012) all, expect for Competitive Environment and Brand Essence, are present within the data-set at a certain point. The Target is clear, as most video's start out with an ESRB Rating that indicates its target demographic, and the Consumer Insight appears to be there as well, based on the high representation of male characters for a predominantly male audience. Brand Values and Benefits are highly important in the positioning process and it seems to be the case here as well, as these elements are at the centre of most promotional material. While they are not directly stated in the cinematic and gameplay trailers, the behind-the-scenes footage put these two elements in the spotlight. The same can be said for the Discriminator brand key. These three factors all play a part in the process of creating clear separation between yourself and the competition (Harris & de Chernatony, 2001; Steinberg, 2007; Janonis et al. 2007). Finally, the Reasons To Believe key, which acts as the proof that the company is delivering on their promise, are the primary task of all the gameplay footage which has been released, alongside additional content release and the few times where the creators went in-depth regarding the manner in which they make the game work for everybody.

This has also indirectly described the communication phase, as one of the purposes of all the promotional footage that has been released and analysed is to communicate the brands positioning. The delivery aspect of the PCDL Model was not very much seen during the analysis, as this reflects how well the end-product performs once in the hands of the consumers. Finally, the leveraging of brand equity was only seen on one occasion, which is the promotion of "Call Of Duty Elite", as an additional paid service on top of Modern Warfare 3, which was only a viable option, due to the immense success of the game itself. One could argue that every game following the first instalment in the series is a form of leveraging the brands equity, as the company continued to build upon the existing success of the first game (Keller, 2012). This series was of course only possible due to the brand loyalty that was created between the players and creators (Aaker, 2009), seeing as if there was no brand loyalty, people would simply stop buying the sequel games, and switch over to

the competition.

Based on all of these findings, if I were to describe the Brand Identity of the Modern Warfare series, I would broadly say that it is a action-packed, fast-paced first person shooter video game, with aspects of militarized masculinity present throughout. However, something that has also become apparent from this research is the fact that there have been a few aspects of change within this brand identity. Where it started out as a overwhelmingly and traditionally masculine portrayal of the military and warfare, something to the likes of a Michael Bay movie, there has been a shift, predominantly in the last entry of the series, to create a more realistic and gritty experience, while also slowly shifting in regards to the inclusion of women into the story and gameplay.

Limitations & Implications

In terms of limitations, there are some that need to be addressed. First of all, there was a lot more content that could have been analysed, especially for the latest instalment in the Modern Warfare series. However, in order to not throw off the distribution too much as well as the fact that the sample was sufficient according to the guidelines, quite some content was left out. From personal knowledge, I can tell that around the time of the analysis occurring, a video was released for the promotion of some upcoming in-game content in the 2019 game, through the use of a lot of famous people, including musicians, athletes as well as video game influencers, which would have connected with the findings by De Veirman et al. (2017), Törhönen et al. (2020) and Woodcock & Johnson (2018).

Another limitation regarding this research is the fact that the consumer perspective has been left out of the equation. It could have possibly been very relevant to conduct some qualitative experiments, showing different types of trailers to different participants, and see which types of content perform better, and if there are any discrepancies in regards to for example biological sex, age or level of education. Differences could form regarding likelihood to play and/or buy the game in question as well as how well the communication of the brand identity and its positioning was received by the viewer. This could be an interesting suggestion for future research regarding this topic.

An implication regarding the research by Tahnes-Ehle & Speedy (2017) was also made, as a new form of trailer footage was found here, building on top of their two categories, cinematic trailers and gameplay trailers. While there was no complete trailer only consisting of cinematic gameplay footage, perhaps it can be researched in order to measure its effectiveness in comparison to the two pre-existing categories.

Another implication could be towards marketing employees, specifically those

within the video game industry, and cause them to reflect on their own practices. Topics such as militarized masculinity might not be directly on the minds of the people who create and promote games in this genre, but it is still very present, despite being a concept that dates back to the 1980's. Especially with the way things are in our current society, you would expect a move away from such "outdated" concept regarding gender representation.

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