

# **SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING AND GAMER EVENTS: THE CASE OF THE LAUNCH OF APEX LEGENDS AS A MODEL OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Spain has become the ninth largest gamer market in the world in terms of the number of eSports players. The participants correspond to a profile of a young public susceptible to be approached in an effective and efficient way by the digital marketing. In this sense, new technologies have altered the traditional role of the receiver, forcing communicators to implement new communication strategies to interact with this target.*

*In parallel, the so-called influence marketing starts from the use of social networks on a regular basis to communicate with their followers. The aim of this study is, therefore, to deduce the possible instrumentalization of event organization as a specific management and communication tactic in the video game industry through influence marketing. And, besides, to check whether this type of campaign is effective or not. To do so, we start with the methodology of discourse analysis and direct observation, through the monitoring of content creators, completed with the bibliographic technique. The results obtained confirm the use of influence marketing as an effective technique for achieving advertising and communication objectives. Influence marketing is a key element in the purchasing process as a prescriber, due to the credibility it implies. The organization of events is a more persuasive and effective form of two-way communication than traditional advertising campaigns.*

**Keywords:** Advertising, ESports, Events, Influence Marketing, Social Networks

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **Social Media Marketing (SMM) and Gamer Events**

Spain has become the ninth largest gamer market with 24 million people playing video games (generating revenues of almost two billion dollars) and four million viewers consuming eSports (Molina, Sepúlveda & Bueno, 2018).

The arrival of new technologies has redefined the role of the receiver and forces communicators to establish communication strategies to interact with them (Barrios, 2014). The ability to exchange information derived from social networks suggests new models of social interaction (Tulgan & Martin, 2001) which, applied to the launch and positioning of products, gives rise to a new branch of marketing, SMM or influencer marketing (Launchmetrics, 2017), based on the concept of peer-to-peer recommendation (Pulido & Benítez, 2016). In the digital sphere, companies, organizations and other entities use social networks on a regular basis to

communicate with their customers (García-Fernández, Fernández-Gavira & Durán-Muñoz, 2015).

Digital marketing is considered one of the most widely used tools in recent times as it helps to enhance brand awareness and interaction with consumers (González Romo & Contreras Espinosa, 2012), as well as their purchasing motivations (González Romo & Plaza Romero, 2017) and, more specifically, social networks, in particular, are one of the most widely used instruments to enhance communication with the target audience (Pintado & Sánchez, 2017). From this perspective, influencer marketing or social media marketing (Rouse, 2011) transforms traditional marketing systems (Monserrat-Gauchi & Sabater-Quinto, 2017), placing the influencer at the epicenter of the purchasing decision process given their high prescriptive power (Segarra-Saavedra & Hidalgo-Marí, 2018).

Influencers are prosumers (McLuhan & Nevitt, 1972) of the digital era who consume process and return personalized information in a virtual face-to-face dialogue that increases consumer trust in the brand or product through the feeling of closeness. In this sense, according to Manikonda, et al., (2016), publications made by celebrities and influencers are the ones that most attract the attention of users and users are also those with which they interact the most, obtaining a greater number of "likes" on social networks. In the field of video games, gamers are expert players who represent a specific type of influencer who "assimilates information, gains expertise on certain games and consoles, develops skills, learns to use the new devices launched on the market" and from there develops "a reputation that is consolidated proportionally with the increase in gaming skills and extensive knowledge about video games" in a "peer-to-peer" community characterized by access to and expert mastery of various social network platforms (Rosales Peralta, 2014). Their capacity for influence and growing professionalization means that the so-called gamer events, the organization of shared spaces for the lucrative or recreational competition of professional and amateur gamers, have been increasing enormously in recent years, and can be identified as a specific technique for managing relations between the organization and its clients and consumers through the reputation of the players involved and the trust they generate in their audiences or followers. The use of 2.0 technologies increases the interactive possibilities of organizations with their audiences, thus generating effective spaces for two-way communication (Castillo, Fernández & Castellero, 2016; Lee, Sha, Dozier & Sargent, 2015; Petrovici, 2014; Sancar, 2013; Weisgerber, 2012; Wichels, 2014). As Grunig (2009) concludes, the new digital media have important dialogical, interactive, relational and global properties that make them perfectly suitable from the point of view of strategic public relations management. Precisely, the organization of acts and events has been widely studied as a genuine public relations technique (Castillo & Fernández, 2015; Fernández, 2016; Otero, 2017; Sánchez, 2017; Xifra, 2011) that guarantees the personal interaction, in the same spatial-temporal coordinates, of the issuing organization with its publics of interest or stakeholders (direct or indirect attendees), and the effective transmission of strategically designed corporate messages (Otero, 2017).

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Global Relevance of the Video Game Industry**

Although video games began to develop in the twentieth century, they did not become a

relevant sector within the cultural industries until the beginning of the twenty-first century. The development of the video game industry has also been marked by the accumulation of large conglomerates that have occupied most of the market, leaving little space for other participants (Rodríguez & Pestano, 2012) and presents an exponential evolution since 2012. As can be seen in graphs 1 and 2, the video game industry will have a turnover in 2021 of more than 180 billion dollars in a market led by the United States and China, which will account for 48% of global turnover in 2019.

And it is that video games have held a dominant position in the entertainment sector since 2010, comparing it with the music and film industry (Digital, 2018).

### **Apex Legends, the Videogame**

Created by Electronics Arts (EA) and Respawn, Apex Legends is a free-to-play video game belonging to the Battle Royale subgenre in which legendary characters with powerful abilities form teams to achieve fame and success in the far reaches of the Frontier (Electronics Arts, 2019). This subgenre was born after the arrival of the hunger games saga to the cinema in 2012. The well-known video game Mine craft included a mode that simulated the arena where the characters of the movie faced each other, and which was named survival games. Other titles were created with this game dynamic, but they did not reach popularity until 2017, with the presentation of Player Unknown's Battlegrounds (PUBG). Finally, when the company Epic Games launched Fortnite for free the genre became the social phenomenon in whose category Apex Legends falls (Peña, 2019a & 2019b).

At launch, its download was available for all major gaming platforms, such as Play Station 4, Xbox One, and PC. Allowing any player, regardless of the device they use to play, could access the download.

### **eSports or the Professionalization of Video Games as a Form of Entrepreneurship**

eSports, also known as 'competitive gaming', 'organized play', 'e gaming' or 'pro gaming', imply a new social and collective way of understanding video games through the organization of competitions, professional or amateur, structured through players, teams, leagues, organizers, sponsors, spectators, ... (Spanish Association of Video Games, 2015).

Its most remote antecedent can be placed in 1972 with the so-called intergalactic Olympics organized at Stanford University, which brought together 10,000 players who faced each other with the game Space war (Rueda Escabias, 2017). However, the first country that began to professionalize eSports was South Korea, where Star craft games were broadcast on television. In the West, this phenomenon begins with the development of War craft and, later, with that of League of Legends (Pérez, 2018) and is consolidated in 2019 with the celebration of the Fortnite World Cup, a competitive final of the Battle Royale Fortnite, held in New York from July 26 to 28, which had more than 19. 000 fans in attendance and an audience of 2.3 million simultaneous viewers across Twitch and YouTube platforms, making it the game event with the largest number of followers in the history of eSports in the West (Epic Games, 2019).

The global eSports market exceeded \$1 billion in 2019, with an annual growth of more than 26% (Newzoo, 2019), which seems that it will be a more than encouraging trend for the world of eSports in particular, and video games in general (Pannekeet, 2019) in the coming years thanks to streaming platforms. The best known are those created for the distribution of series or

movies such as Netflix or HBO, however, platforms related to eSports are those developed so that content creators can share live their games in different video games. The difference is clear, behind these programmers there is no production team, they are the ones who develop the entire process of creation and communication and, practically always, they broadcast from their own homes. It implies, therefore, a new form of dialogic communication of trust (evolved from video gamers who uploaded their game experiences on YouTube) that allows players an immediate feedback with their audience, unthinkable until today. It is no longer about users playing videogames but about expert gamers advising an audience that enjoys watching how others play, and this implies a new opportunity for brands to reach their stakeholders. Video games are no longer measured only by their success in sales, but by the audiences they reach through this type of platforms, mainly Twitch, Youtube, Facebook Gaming and Mixer. According to the study by Stream Elements (Yosilewitz, 2019), Twitch, owned by Amazon, is the platform that holds on to the largest share of the audience, congregating just over 70% of users. Next on the list is YouTube with 19.5%, which had an application specifically for gaming and will no longer be available so that all traffic is deposited on the main platform. With 5.3% is Facebook Gaming, developed in 2018 (Redondo, 2018) and, finally, Microsoft's Mixer with 3%. In addition, this study indicates that 75.8% of the audience of these channels is concentrated on individual broadcasts (content creators), rather than brands or sports, which shows that the audience prefers closeness with the streamer. This data has two implications for our work:

- Individual creators are the real target for brands, who prefer credible and natural influencers who work "with few brands" (Mo, 2019), and
- It is the content creator, not the platform, who determines the number of followers, although not all streamers have that privilege (Mateo, 2019).

The professionalization of video games, through eSports, and the success of streaming implies a necessary new categorization of the new gamers. According to the Newzoo study (2018), the radiography of these new gamers, by percentages, is as follows:

- **The ultimate gamer (13%):** Users who dedicate all their time to video games. They bring together all aspects of the gaming universe. They dedicate many hours to playing, viewing video game content and have the passion and funds to acquire new hardware technology and peripherals. The majority is between 26 and 30 years old, and in terms of gender within this category we find 65% of men and 35% of women.
- **The all-around enthusiast (9%):** Divide their time between their work (and studies) and video games. Even so, they invest a lot of time and money in gaming, viewing and hardware acquisition. The average age of these users is 27 years old, and as in the previous case, 65% are men and 35% women.
- **The cloud gamer (19%):** For this type of gamer the most important thing is the software, they do not acquire some kind of hardware until it is not necessary or because they have received it as a gift. They are very regular gamers, but spend less time viewing content. Most of them are concentrated between 21 and 25 years old, and in this case 59% are men and 41% are women.
- **The conventional player (4%):** They are the "ultimate gamer" ones from ten years ago, where there were no live video game broadcasts and eSports had not proliferated, so they do not usually see other users playing. They enjoy having new technologies in both hardware and peripherals and spend many hours playing. They are mainly between 31 and 40 years old and are 62% male and 38% female.
- **The hardware enthusiast (9%):** Are not that interested in either playing or watching others play but they are passionate about having the latest hardware and if they do play, they do it on a late-model computer. They are passionate about electronics and computers, and all the technology surrounding video games. Most of them are in the 10-15 age range (60% male and 40% female).
- **The popcorn gamer (13%):** Users who play casually and are not very interested in investing in hardware acquisition. For them it is more interesting to spend time watching others play through social

platforms such as Twitch. Most of these users are between 21 and 25 years old, and are 54% male and 46% female.

- **The backseat viewer (6%):** Enjoy the broadcasts of other players, such as eSports competitions, either because they enjoyed playing in the past and no longer have time for it, or because they are very fanatical about traditional sports and enjoy the spectacle. The average age is around 31 years old, and they are 57% male and 43% female.
- **The time filler (27%):** Only play for a few hours a week to pass the time and do not spend time watching other players on streaming. They are concentrated between the ages of 51 and 65 and, interestingly, involve more women (61%) than men (39%).

## OBJECTIVES

These considerations justify the academic interest of our main objective: to find out and deduce the possible instrumentalization of the organization of gamer events, as a specific management and communication tactic, in the launch of the video game Apex Legend in Spain, using influencers as a tool of social media marketing or influencer marketing. To develop this main objective, it is important to achieve the following secondary objectives:

- SO1 Generate a theoretical framework around the concept of social media marketing or influencer marketing and the organization of acts and events and gamer events.*
- SO2 To identify the gamers involved and the role played in the observed launch campaign according to their modes of involvement and/or participation in it.*
- SO3 Because of the previous objectives, demonstrate whether the campaign has been a success through its degree of effectiveness (coverage, impact and reaction).*
- SO4 To check if the campaign can be considered a milestone in video game advertising, taking as a reference the innovation applied to the launch strategy.*

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

In order to meet the proposed objectives, a methodological design based on the case study (single case design) has been proposed, for the application of which the following research techniques have been used:

1. The use of data from secondary sources:
  - Academic sources: as it is a recent launch, we have observed the scarcity of scientific works about study, an issue that results in the interest of the observed topic).
  - Newspaper sources and corporate websites: we have selected those sources specialized in the video game and advertising sector in order to reconstruct the launch of our object of study. On the other hand, we have made use of several reports on the video game sector, the result of research by private companies and articles from different reference media. Finally, we have obtained data provided by the companies directly involved, such as Respawn and Electronics Arts.
2. Secondly, we have followed up on different content creators who have participated in the campaign, to learn first-hand what they do and how they communicate with their audience. The creators we have analyzed in greater depth are the Spanish streamers. Because of their proximity, mainly due to the language, it has been easier for us to analyze them. Another criterion we have used is that they have many followers. The data have been collected mainly by observing the different social networks where they share their content, and through the portal Social Blade (n.d.), which reports updated data on the main social networks and their content creators. Finally, with respect to these creators, we have defined some characteristics that they should have in order to be ideal to participate in a campaign, which we have exemplified through Rubén Doblás, Rubius, since he is the one with the largest number of followers in our sample of Spanish creators and is the one we have followed most exhaustively.

Since our project aims to demonstrate whether the campaign has been a success, we will focus on demonstrating its effectiveness. We will focus on coverage, impact and reaction to the campaign. If both factors are affirmative, the launch campaign can be considered a success.

## RESULTS

### Coverage

Brand's target audience are regular players of shooter video games, of the battle royale modality (genre to which Apex belongs), through streaming channels and who tend to watch others playing video games. In fact, according to the Newzoo report, there is a close relationship between the variables playing video games and watching content about others playing video games. Only 4% showed interest in simply playing video games and not in watching content about video games. In this sense, streamers of different nationalities specialized in shooter games such as Call of Duty or battle royal games such as PUBG or Fortnite were selected.

A week before the launch they invited 60 of these streamers to go to Los Angeles to test the game. The streamers did not know what game they were going to test and after the trip to Los Angeles they commented on their networks that they could not advance anything about the game, that it was secret. This generated great expectation in their audience since these figures constantly share their life through their social networks. On February 4, they each connected live through their personal channels where they shared on their screens the company's official live stream where the trailer was played and it was communicated that the game was available from that very moment and that it was free to play. After watching the premiere of the game with their audience, they all started to play to show the gameplay of Apex Legends. In addition, other content creators were sponsored and played on their personal accounts.

To get an approximation of the actual coverage, below is the impact data of the main Spanish streamers who were sponsored by Apex to attend Los Angeles:

1. Ruben Doblas, El Rubius, streamed through Twitch where he currently has almost 2 million followers on the platform. He is the content creator with the most subscribers on Youtube in Spain. The content of his videos on Youtube is very varied, from gameplays to travel blogs. The content he shares on Twitch is mainly related to video games, but none. In 2018 he organized an online Fortnite tournament where 100 youtubers competed and managed to break the record of live viewers in a gamer event on Youtube, reaching more than 1 million live viewers (Siccardi, 2018). In addition to his live participation playing Apex, he uploaded to his Youtube channel a blog narrating the trip to Los Angeles sponsored by Apex that currently accumulates more than 8 million views.
2. Samuel de Luque, Vegetta777, made the Apex sponsored live video through his Youtube channel where he has more than 27 million followers; the live video uploaded on his channel currently reaches the figure of 1 million views. Vegetta's content on his Youtube channel is about video games, he currently shares mainly about Mine craft or Fortnite.
3. Guillermo Díaz, Willy Rex, like Vegetta777 made the live broadcast through Youtube where he has two channels. In the channel from where he performed the live stream he accumulates almost 15 million subscribers and the video with the live stream currently accumulates 1.2 million views. Willy Rex's channel is exclusively about video games and his content right now is mainly about Fortnite.
4. Manuel Fernandez, LOLiTO, performed the live stream through Twitch where he has close to 2 million followers. Lolito started to increase his popularity through playing Fortnite on Twitch, which is mainly his content, he has come to be considered one of the best Fortnite players. He participated in the online tournament organized by El Rubius, accumulating live 400,000 viewers. Remaining in second position of most viewed live on the platform, another streaming beats him by 200,000 viewers. (Siccardi, 2018).

As for streamers of other nationalities, the following stand out:

Shroud. Almost 7 million followers on Twitch. He was a professional player of the shooter Call of Duty and uploads mainly Fortnite and PUBG content.

Dr. Disrespect. Accumulates almost 4 million followers on Twitch. He mainly plays Fortnite, PUBG and Call of Duty.

Dr.Lupo, with 3.5 million followers on Twitch and mainly Fortnite content.

CouRage. Close to 2 million followers on Twitch. He was a professional player in Call of Duty.

Ded. Has 1.5 million followers on his Twitch channel. Shares content on various video games in which Fortnite is included.

Internationally, Apex also had important figures in the days after as is the case of Ninja, the best known Fortnite player with 14 million followers on Twitch or. In the Spanish case, it counted on The Grefg, with more than 11 million subscribers on Youtube and a result of 1.6 million views in the sponsored video he uploaded about this video game.

Apex's sponsorship of these streamers was limited to the first day of launch, although some of them continued to play in the following days on their own. In total, Apex achieved during the first week 40 million hours of viewing, (Donoso, 2019) doubling even Fortnite that had consolidated as leader to date. So we can conclude that in terms of coverage, which corresponds to the first variable on effectiveness, both Respawn and Electronics Arts managed to make their potential audience aware of their new product.

## **Impact**

Impact can currently be measured as the campaign's ability to generate conversation, which we are able to measure, in part, thanks to social networks. Normally, the arrival of a new video game is announced many months before its launch, while it is still being developed, in order to generate expectation, which is why the Apex campaign took everyone by surprise: the media coverage of the game a week after its launch was very extensive, everyone wanted to report on a new game that had revolutionized the rules of the game. This phenomenon evidently also occurred on social networks. From News Ship, a company that is responsible for analyzing trends in social networks among other things, they report that Apex reached a maximum of 600,000 interactions in content (Ellis, 2019). If we search for Google trends through Google Trends we can discover that the term during the days following the launch obtained the highest score offered by Google in relation to the search for a term on its platform.

To exemplify the importance that Apex was taking in its first days of life we will comment on how Fortnite included ads when a user performed a Google search about the Apex video game. So, all those who went to find out about the new game found as the first result a link to the Epic Games website announcing its Battle Royale (Bennett, 2019). All this added to the fact that Apex continued to be the most watched game on both Youtube Gaming and Twitch in the days after its launch, with the campaign already finished. With a total of 63.7 million hours viewed across Twitch from February 4-14 (Wijman, 2019; Newzoo, 2019). Streamers continued to play because they were having fun with the game and because the audience supported it, due to the number of followers who followed the broadcasts day by day. The publicity of the media, the interactions they got the following days and the hours of views they reached on streaming platforms (such as Twitch), confirm that the campaign achieved a more than significant impact.

## Reaction

But all this would be meaningless if the public had not reacted to the product. Since the product we are analyzing is a video game we will have to try to find out what was the number of players who purchased the game after the campaign. But this is a special case, because like Fortnite, the game is free to play, meaning that the consumer does not have to pay to play. The video game has in-game purchases, but they do not make the gameplay better, they are simply cosmetic accessories for the video game characters. Fortnite already implemented this system in its video game format and Epic's turnover levels thanks to Fortnite exceed most games that are not free to play.

According to data offered by the Apex Company itself, the game was purchased by 1 million people in the first 8 hours it was available (Hayward, 2019). In just one day, there were already 2.5 million, after three days there were 10 million players. Within a week they were hosting 25 million players and by celebrating the launch month they surpassed the 50 million barrier of players who had purchased the game (Rasmussen, 2019).

According to the Super Data report, Electronics Arts and Respawn grossed \$92 million during the first month of life, ranking sixth on PC game revenue (Altay, 2019).

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Based on the above data, we are in a position to affirm that the success of the Apex launch campaign in terms of the items analyzed (impact, coverage and reaction), which translates, fundamentally, into high levels of recognition, views and purchases, lies in its ability to channel an SMM strategy exclusively through gamers, which demonstrates not only the socioeconomic and academic interest of the subject under study, but also the capacity for empathy that the influencer generates through the fluid and constant dialogue that he maintains with his followers, which allows him to generate high levels of trust. These data confirm the theories that:

- They place the influencer as a key element in the purchasing process as a key prescriber (Castelló-Martínez & del Pino-Romero, 2015; Sanz-Marcos, Jiménez-Marín & Elías-Zambrano, 2019) that culminates in the interactions, face-to-face or online, caused by the organization of gamer events.
- They argue the consolidation of the organization of events as a form of persuasive communication "that surpasses in effectiveness many advertising actions" an issue that implies that "between 18 and 20% of the marketing budget of Spanish companies" (between 5000 and 6000 million euros per year) (Jiménez-Morales & Panizo, 2017) are dedicated to managing the relationships of organizations with their audiences (Otero, 2017).

Centralizing in a single SMM strategy the persuasive bidirectional potential of eSports, gaming events and streamers, is the key to the success of the launch campaign of Apex Legends, being unanimously considered by the specialized media as one of the best video game launches in history. This issue allows us to observe an important evolution in the history of video game advertising (Martínez López, 2015). Although, in the early days of video game advertising only consoles were promoted, where a first-person, egocentric and unidirectional message prevailed (I say that MY product is the BEST, and there is no possibility of replication by users), this primordial discourse evolved over time, this original discourse evolved to channel a more specific communication, with small signs of directionality, focused on consumers who felt more attracted by the videogame story, focusing on exploiting a more emotional message and loyalty with the company through the evolution of the game. This is the time when companies compete to have the exclusivity of a game for their console (Hervás, 2015). As this study shows, the immediate



future of persuasive video game communication is the channeling of a fluid and constant bidirectional communication system with the prosumer 2.0, who is at the epicenter of the campaigns: This key issue implies a growing need to know the target in order to speak directly to them. And this has been Electronics Arts' greatest success:

- Knowing that their target audience was in Fortnite's niche market.
- Determine what their preferred streaming platforms and gamers were in order to customize this dialogic online communication system, completely dispensing, and for the first time in the history of video games, with traditional advertising discourse.

With all this, it is undeniable to consider that the new forms of communication, derived from the interaction made possible by social networks and necessarily framed in the strategic approaches of SMM, lie in the following:

- The credibility and trust generated by influencers (García, Miquel-Segarra & Navarro-Beltrá, 2018).
- The management of effective two-way communication spaces (Kane, Fichman, Gallagher & Glaser, 2009; Taylor & Kent, 2009) that is achieved with gamified events.

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