

MANAGING RELATIONS WITH CUSTOMERS IN THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

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Purpose: The main goal of the paper is to analyze customers relation between video game developers and the gaming community and their impact on the corporate image creation as well as gaining trust and good reputation by the company.

Design/methodology/approach: The approach applied in the paper is of descriptive-empirical nature. The research methods involved in this paper are: induction, deduction, literature studies, as well survey and data analysis. The method of critical and comparative analysis was used in relation to the views presented in the literature.

Findings: The paper ends with a brief presentation of research findings which correspond to the formulated research questions on building the relations with a client.

Research implications: Future research directions should focus on further, expanded research exploration in the area, taking into account various industries. Additional work is needed to disseminate research findings among managers and to implement them in public relations policies of the companies.

Practical implications: The results of the research discussed in the paper have a number of practical implications mainly for the managers in terms of use of customers relations tools and improvement of communication strategies.

Social implications: Building awareness of customer to business communication.

Originality/value The paper has a cognitive value for managers. Results have theoretical as well as practical implications in search of solutions to customers relations management.

Keywords: relations management, corporate identity, brand image.

Category of the paper: research paper.

1. Introduction

The paper constitutes theoretical and empirical study relating to selected aspects of customers relations in organizations on the example of selected companies. The paper was divided into two major parts: theoretical and empirical. The theoretical part completed the theoretical goal which was the review of the literature on corporate identity and brand image.

The second part of the paper is of empirical nature. In this part, the author performed the cognitive goal which was the identification and analysis of major factors which influence the customer to business communication and its impact on the perception of the company. For this goal the survey method was involved. It was carried out in two selected companies. The first company was CD Project Red and the other was Blizzard Entertainment.

The following research questions were formulated in the paper:

- How video game companies shape their public image and what are the results of that?
- What are the main differences between CD Projekt RED and Blizzard Entertainment and how their marketing decisions influence the relationships with fans?
- How PR crisis can change the perception of the firm?
- How consumers express their own opinion on video game companies using the internet and social media?
- How can video game developers improve their image and regain lost trust?

The paper attempts to find responses to the above questions.

2. Justifying the topic

The essential topic of the paper focuses on marketing and public relations in the video game industry which support shaping and maintaining complex relationship between a company and consumers and more specifically between a video game developer and the gaming community. Communication plays significant role for both parties and allows for constant growth of the brand as well as improvement of offered products. However the quality of communication depends on the public's perception of the company (Clavio, Kraft, Pedersen, 2009). The consumers often require an assurance that they can trust the developer and that their opinions matter. If they obtain that assurance they are more likely to actively engage with the fan community and become loyal customers (Costa-Sánchez, Fontela Baró, 2019). The corporate image of a video game developer is constructed through previous experiences with the company, released games, the firm's behaviour and actions as well as the controversies that took place in the past. These elements are very important for the average player and based on them. He or she decides if it is good to interact with the company, buy its games and participate in its community. For this reason the developers should be able to effectively manage marketing in order to create a certain image that is attractive for the consumers as well as public relations to maintain it.

The video game industry is very rapidly becoming one of the most important parts of the mainstream entertainment. At the moment it is bigger than the movie and sports industries combined (Williams, 2020). It is important to analyse it further and define its characteristics in order to properly navigate the environment and detect opportunities. Ability to create a strong

communication link with the gaming community is exceptionally important for new companies which want to stand out on the market. The developers have to be aware of the influence of social media and the internet on how they are perceived by the public. It can be particularly useful in case of a PR crisis.

In order to properly discuss and analyse the topic the author chose two video game developers namely CD Projekt RED and Blizzard Entertainment. The public image of both entities and their relationships with consumers are quite specific and worth observing. The conducted research allows to find certain similarities and differences between them as well as better explains the video game industry and indicates what should be taken into account when building a relationship with the customer.

3. Remarks on customers relations management

Maintaining a positive relationship with the client is exceedingly important for modern marketing. For this reason the customer relationship management is quickly becoming a business philosophy which is desirable or even essential in every company (Ehling, White, Grunig, 2013). It can be defined in many ways however Kotler and Armstrong characterize it as a comprehensive process of building and maintaining mutually beneficial relationship with the client (Kotler, Armstrong, 2013). The key to building lasting relationships with consumers is to generate for them value that is higher than others and ensure their satisfaction. If customers are satisfied it is more likely that they will be loyal and that they will want to make most of their purchases from the same company (Lambert, 2010). In modern times it can be objectively difficult to stand out from the competition because of the large selection of products. The customer buys from the company that offers the highest perceived value (i.e. the difference between all the benefits and the costs of the offer, compared to the offer of the competition). Most of the time clients also do not assess value and costs precisely. Their opinion is usually subjective. Additionally, people perceive value differently and can have different priorities when buying a product. An important element is also client satisfaction. It depends on how the customer perceives the usefulness or performance of the product in relation to his/her expectations. If the product does not meet the expectations in terms of usability the customer will be dissatisfied. If the expectations are met the customer will be satisfied. If the usefulness of the purchased product (or service) exceeds the customer's expectations, he/she will be delighted (Kumar, Reinartz, 2018).

Modern technologies allow for better communication with consumers and help create a platform for building closer relationships. They also provide customers with a power to find necessary information and control the situation themselves. This results in a “customer-managed relationship” which can be defined as a marketing relationship in which customers,

using modern digital technologies, interact with companies and other customers in order to shape a relationship with the brand (Mazurek, Tkaczyk, 2016). Marketing by intrusion no longer seems to work. Instead marketers need to find the way to attract the consumers and encourage them to interact of their own volition (Lin, 2010). A dialog with consumers through social media becomes a common practice (Burger-Helmchen, 2014). However it is not a simple task because of different factors such as cultural differences or an existence of internet culture (Ek, Sörhammar, 2022). A person who is responsible for social media in the company must be well informed in order to not offend anyone or be publicly ridiculed (Burger-Helmchen, 2014).

Kotler and Armstrong paid attention to the existence of consumer-generated marketing (CGM). They define it as a discussion on a given brand that is conducted by the consumers themselves. It takes place at the invitation of the company or on the initiative of the clients themselves (Kotler, Armstrong, 2013). Thus, they play an increasingly important role in creating their own brand experience and the experiences of other customers. Authors reach the conclusion that consumer-generated marketing has become a vital marketing power. Consumers now have the opportunity to influence the company and help in development of the brands. Their opinions also matter more and are more informed (Kotler, Armstrong, 2013).

Another concept which deserves some remarks here refers to corporate identity and brand image. In order to properly discuss and analyze the topic of corporate identity and brand image, it is vital to define an “image”, “identity”, and “reputation”. (Figure 1). Davis describes an ‘image’ as a complex intellectual or sensory interpretation, the way a person perceives someone or something; the product of the mind resulting from deduction based on available premises, both real and imagined, conditioned by impressions, beliefs, ideas and emotions (Davis, Dąbkowski, 2007). An image of the company differs from its identity because identity is a set of attributes and values presented by the firm. In other words, corporate identity depends on internal decisions of the company and corporate image is the way other people perceive the firm. Image and reputation are often confused with each other, however, the foundation of corporate reputation are experiences with the firm, whereas corporate image does not require them. These experiences can be direct (during the process of buying a product or service) and indirect (when others are sharing their own direct experiences).

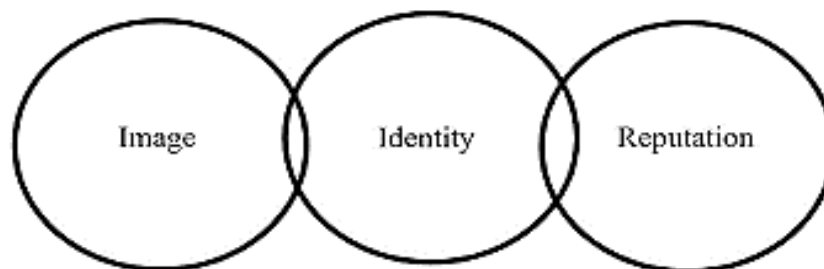


Figure 1. Image, identity and reputation relation.

Adapted from: Own study based on Davis A.E, Dąbkowski G. (2007). Public relations, Polskie Wydawnictwo Ekonomiczne, Warszawa, p. 52.

Corporate identity consists of three artifacts which build the system: linguistic (slogans, abbreviations, expressions understood only by members of the organization), behavioral (corporate celebrations, rituals, superstitions, etc.), and physical (logo, slogan, colors, vehicle markings, work clothes, etc.). These elements build the corporate identity and present some kind of vision to the consumers (Wood, Somerville, 2013). In the public relations process, the identity of the company is an element that connects internal and external PR. Its main purpose is to define the mission of a given institution, i.e. the goals and principles of its operation, the function it wants to perform in its environment, and the values on which it is based. For comparison, the reputation of any enterprise will always depend primarily on the quality of its operations and the products and services provided. A powerful brand with positive reputation, image, and strong identity is associated with high brand value (Black, 2013).

Cooperating with media is another aspect of the topic which is worth mentioning here. By cooperating with media, companies gain a powerful ally that can help in many situations and improve their image (Meech, 2006). As an example, they can be serviceable during a time of crisis when there is a need for an outlet to tell the firm's side of the story. Building a strong relationship with journalists can be essential, especially in some industries. The ability to provide information and commentary to a larger group of people is very important for companies and media can help with it. The development of digital media also opened many doors for public relations specialists (Wesley, Barczak, 2016). In modern times, they are able to build relationships not only with traditional journalists but also with bloggers, YouTubers, and other types of influencers and consequently, reach a younger audience and encourage them to take an interest in their products (Raab, Ajami, Goddard, 2016). Positive or neutral mentions about the company placed in popular and at the same time specialized blogs give the company's website a strong position in the search engine. They also expand the brand's audience with the community gathered around a given person (Goltz, Franks, Goltz, 2015). Social media also helps build personal relationships and allows to stay in touch – journalists keep their blogs or post on Twitter. Engaging in a conversation on these channels, as well as knowing about current texts or broadcasts produced by a given journalist helps to keep the relationship going (Mathews, Wearn, 2016).

Black argues that the trust of media representatives should be earned whenever possible (Black, 2013). Public relations should never create a barrier between the media and the institution; rather it should always try to be a bridge over which news and information can move freely in both directions. Working with media should be based on mutual respect as to not provide false information or slander anyone. Otherwise the reputation of the company and the journalist may deteriorate rapidly (Ruggill, McAllister, Nichols, Kaufman, 2016). The main requirement when working with media is to provide them with what they need in a convenient form and at the right time (Spaulding, 2016). The primary methods are still face-to-face contact, press releases, press conferences and the use of press agencies however it becomes increasingly popular that journalists directly address company representatives by e-mail or via social media. It all depends on how important and influential the information is (Theaker, 2020).

4. Marketing versus public relations

Despite the fact that many companies integrate public relations into marketing those two concepts are very different from each other and must be approached separately. The Chartered Institute of Marketing (CIM) defines marketing in the following way: “The management process responsible for identifying, anticipating and satisfying customer requirements profitably” (Chartered Institute of Public Relations, 2022). It is a discipline that focuses on discovering what are the customers’ wants and needs and properly advertising the products. This includes: following and analyzing the current trends, providing the right value to customers, promoting products, services, and company’s actions, maintaining a stable relationship with clients, as well as attracting new ones. The four main pillars of marketing (“Four Ps”) are product, price, place, and promotion (Wang, 2022). Strictly speaking, they cover what is sold, for how much, where and in what way, together with different means of promotion. These four elements must all be taken into account when formulating and implementing the company’s marketing strategies (Zackariasson, Wilson, 2012).

On the other hand Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) defines public relations as “the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organization and its publics.” It manages the ways in which the information about the company is presented to the public and attempts to portray the firm in a certain way in order to improve its image. Public relations also means a close communication with customers which builds a lasting relationship (Zhang, 2011). In case of crisis public relations is responsible for informing the press and the public about the situation, as well as the damage control (Davis, Dąbkowski, 2007).

These two concepts indeed have certain common characteristics however they operate in a different way and have a different goal. In Public relations, Sam Black draws a clear distinction between the marketing and public relations and claims that the scope of public relations activities is much wider than the one of marketing as it includes parliamentary lobbying, internal relations with employees, contacts with local communities, crisis management, corporate social responsibility, dealing with environmental issues, and overall involvement in corporate strategy and planning (Vong, Wong, 2013). There is a fundamental difference between marketing and PR: marketing works only in the line function and public relations is irreplaceable in the staff function (advising), in other words: in a thriving enterprise marketing is a tactic, public relations is a strategy (Seitel, 2017). The basic difference between PR and marketing lies in the scope of responsibility and the possibilities of both specializations: marketing is sometimes identified with or relates primarily to human economic activity, while public relations has an impact and concerns all forms of his social life (Ehling, White, Grunig, 2013).

Despite the clear differences between the two concepts, there are also certain similarities. Black lists four steps in the process of exchange between institutions and customers. Both marketing and public relations play an important role in these processes (Black, 2013):

1. Attempting to understand the other party participating in the exchange.
2. Creating value as an element received by other parties.
3. Exchanging views on the value of products or services so that both sides agree on the value.
4. Provision of goods or services through an actual, physical transaction between parties.

Public relations also has been found to be the source of marketing benefits according to many entrepreneurs. There are certain arguments that confirm this claim (Theaker, 2020):

- the battle on the market is for perception, not for products,
- a good, clear image is conducive to recognizability and individualization of enterprises,
- image transfer and the halo effect are transferred to opinions about products and the entire company's offer,
- the indicative function is a quality criterion,
- better opinion about the company means trust in new products,
- PR can participate in the implementation of product marketing strategies,
- PR answers buyers' questions about who is behind the offered products,
- PR responds to the growing demands of consumers for in-depth information about goods,
- the behavior and attitude of consumers towards the enterprises and their products is largely influenced by the environment and the audience.

5. Selected survey results

5.1. Introduction

The survey was carried out on a research sample of 157 participants and its goal was to determine the intricacies of a relationship between video game companies and consumers. The presented survey is primarily focused on the complex relationship between video game developers and their fans, as well as the gaming community in general. Companies that are able to establish a strong connection between them and their customers and ensure favorable conditions for the creation of a large, productive fan community, often gain a powerful tool which can be used in marketing, advertising, public relations, etc. However the video game industry which is inextricably linked with entertainment is characterized by an exceptional importance and at the same time, fragility of public image. Most video game companies, especially those of considerable size and influence, had multiple experiences with

controversies, scandals, and other types of PR crisis. This, in turn, harms the relationship between the company and its community often irreversibly damaging its public image. The survey aims to discover in detail how this interdependence of a company and consumer in the video game industry operates and how gaming community perceives video game developers, in particular CD Projekt RED and Blizzard Entertainment. The set of questions regarding this topic was sent to different groups of people, most of which are interested in video games. It can be inferred from the following question: Indicate how much games are part of your life from 1 (I play rarely) – 5 (I play every day), which was presented in Figure 2.

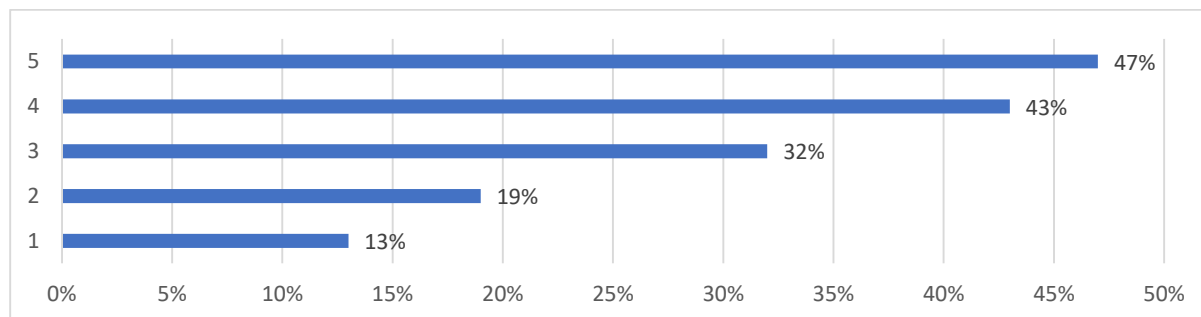


Figure 2. Importance of games in respondent's life.

Source: own study.

According to the demographic questions included in the survey, 57,8% of the respondents are male and 42,2% are female. The majority of people answering the questions (79%) were also in the age range 18-26.

The level of education among respondents varied with 57,1% of people with secondary education and 38,3% with higher education. It can be concluded from this data that a large part of respondents is quite young but mostly of age, probably before or in the process of obtaining an academic degree.

This unit has been divided into four sections. Section one includes the description and analysis of the relationship between video game developers and the gaming community. Section two examines the consumers' approach to PR crisis and responses of companies. The last two sections study the answers to the questions regarding the developers CD Projekt RED and Blizzard Entertainment and how people perceive them.

5.2. The relationship with the gaming community

The gaming community is characterized by the ability to create strong bonds between its members. Players are connected with each other through common hobby and become emotionally invested in their own fan groups. They create content which is tied to the certain video games. Eventually, they gain the ability to influence the smaller and bigger decisions made by video game developers and become important advisers and reviewers who constantly aim to ensure the best possible functioning of their favorite games. Usually, one of the most important goals for companies is to keep the community strong and engaged which can bring

many long-term benefits. The individual members can participate in different ways and bring their own worth. The conducted survey aimed to discover where people usually place themselves in the gaming community and if they are usually more active or passive. Respondents were asked a following question: To what extent are you involved in the gaming community? The responses are presented in Figure 3.



Figure 3. Involvement in gaming community.

Source: own study.

Despite the significant number of people not taking an active part in the community, there is a smaller group who speaks up and creates content. This percentage is the most influential as it is the most visible. The entire community is also judged based on their actions. Therefore, video game developers should maintain the closest relationship with this group and keep them as content as possible. However, the part of the community, the so-called silent majority, should not be ignored as they are the ones who can provide high sales.

Social media are a very important tool in marketing and public relations. They provide new ways to connect with consumers, build a fan/customer community, and attract more attention to the product. The public image of the company is also often dependent on their activity on the internet. According to the carried out survey, over than half of respondents (54%) follow the official social media of video game developers. Therefore, it can be concluded that a significant percentage of consumers wants to see the activity of companies on social media. Moreover, 32,9% of respondents declared that they pay attention to the individual/personal social media accounts of people working in the company. It means that not only main social media accounts of video game developers are important for their public image but also individual accounts of

employees. Improper behavior of one of the workers can negatively influence the perception of the entire firm as it is the company that is blamed for enabling and tolerating his or her actions.

There are multiple reasons for consumers following social media accounts of video game developers (Figure 4). The next question was: “For what purpose do you follow the social media of video game developers?” and respondents were able to choose multiple answers, answering in the following way:

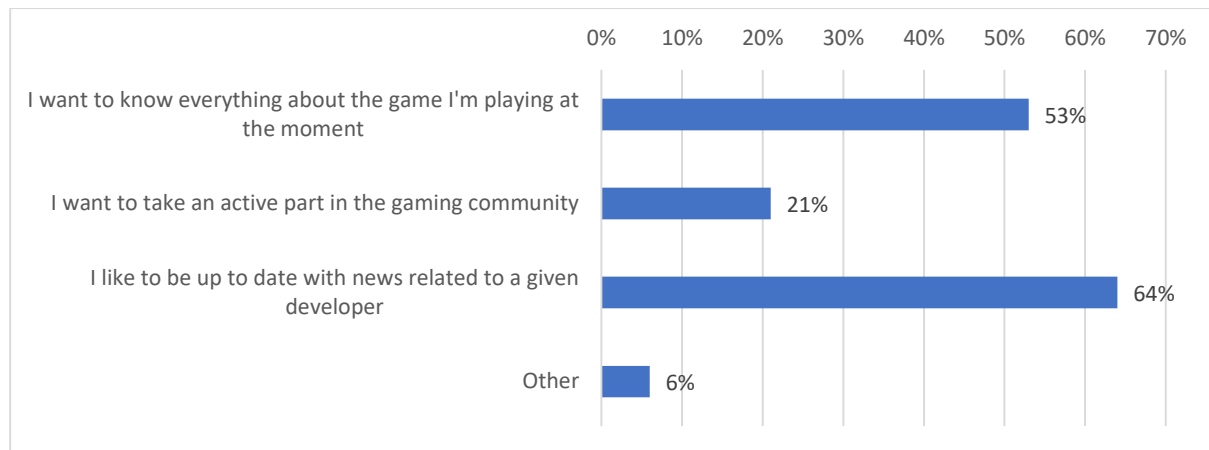


Figure 4. Purposes to follow social media of game developers.

Source: own study.

The respondents were also allowed to write their own answers for the question. Other reasons for following video game developers were: curiosity about how the creators' work looks outside the video game itself, waiting for continuation of a given video game series, general interest in the subject of games, and being a part of the team creating video games.

Because the video game developers aim to maintain a close relationship with their communities, they are often engaged on social issues that are starting to interest more and more people. Making the consumers feel like they are fighting together for the same cause creates a sense of solidarity. It also helps them feel welcome in the community where they can find like-minded people. The corporate social responsibility is becoming very popular and in certain industries such as video gaming and entertainment in general, it even seems to be obligatory. People often expect companies to be socially responsible and adjust to the new norms. According to the survey, the majority of respondents think the same way and answered the question: “Do you think video game developers should be socially responsible?” as follows (Figure 5).

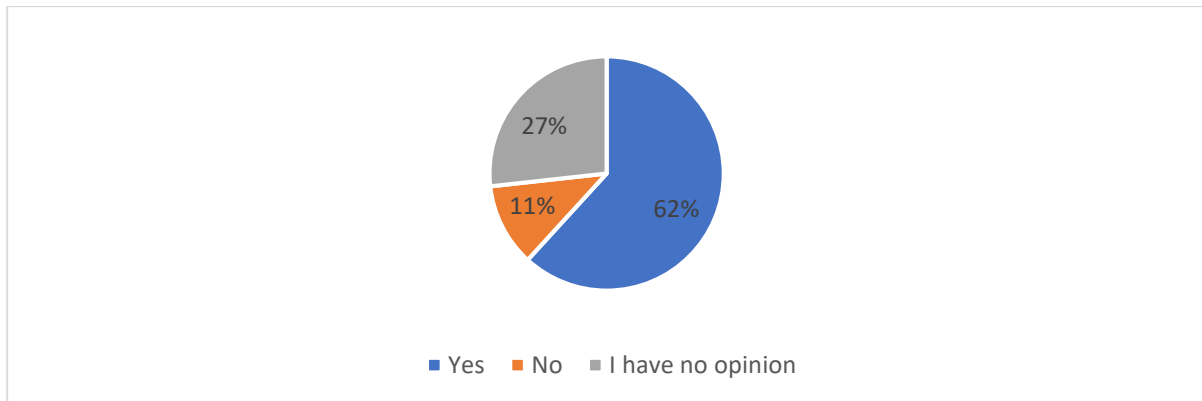


Figure 5. Expectations on social responsibility of game developers.

Source: own study.

The most popular topics that are brought up by video game companies right now are LGBT+ issues, racism, and women's rights such as developers Blizzard Entertainment and CD Projekt RED have already made statements on these matters in the past and publicly promoted inclusion and tolerance. Certain groups also advocate for further support of women and minorities through adding them more in video games as characters. However it can be a controversial topic as some people claim that they do not want to see forcefully included, shallow characters that only serve a purpose of supporting diversity. The respondents also seem to be unsure about this topic and only 22% supported the idea. The question was: "Do you think there should be more LGBT+ people of different races in computer games?" (Figure 6).

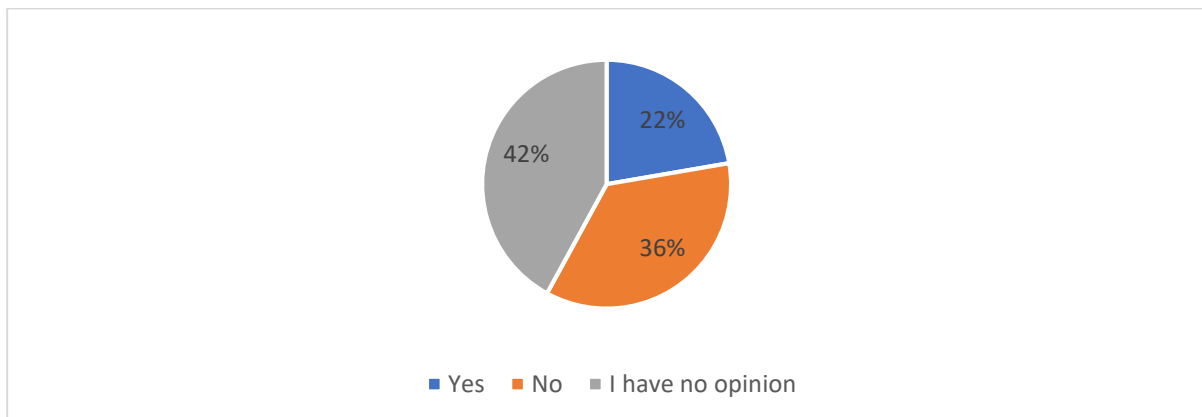


Figure 6. Supporting diversity in computer games.

Source: own study.

The reputation of the company is continuously formed through various consumer experiences. It is exceptionally important for the overall perception of the firm and further ability to form strong relationships with customers. The constant positive experiences allow to create a feeling of trust. However, building trust can be very difficult for a video game developer as people will have different expectations towards their products and towards services that they provide. The video game industry also has its unique characteristics and problems that result from them. According to the survey 52% of respondents declared that they were disappointed by a video game developer before. The prevailing opinion is that many companies lie or evade

the truth about their games which are still in development. Through promises and depictions, they create an image of the product that is highly idealized or even deceitful in order to create a feeling of “hype” and make more people interested in the purchase. Most video games can be preordered, that is paid for even before the premiere. The action of preordering is usually a clear sign of trust in the company and a way of showing support. However, in such situations, if the video game does not meet expectations, the disappointment can be much bigger than normal, especially if the developer promised certain features that are not present in the final product. Other consumer complaints include: misunderstanding of players' expectations, favoring certain groups of players, numerous bugs, unnecessary and intrusive micro transactions, exploitation of employees, lack of transparent and regular contact with the community, slow acting or rude technical support, launch delays, ignoring customers' requests and suggestions regarding the game, releasing unfinished games, unpleasant treatment of fans, offensive public comments, decrease in the quality of games, poor game optimization, and lack of regular updates. Such actions heavily influence the consumer's perception of a video game developer and can irreversibly damage its reputation. Numerous negative experiences with video game companies can even result in lack of trust in all developers in general and eventually harm the entire industry.

5.3. Reactions to controversies

When the company is faced with a PR crisis, it must act quickly and decisively as any errors can inflict serious damage on public image and, as a result, lower profits and the number of overall customers. In certain situations, however, the immediate reaction is not enough and a video game developer must take long-term actions aimed at repairing the relationships with fans. The most important factors that help in analyzing the problematic situation at hand and constructing a reaction plan are the circumstances of the case, as well as reasons for the occurrence of the crisis. Controversy can be created as a result of the company's actions or for reasons not related to the company's direct decisions. The former puts a bigger pressure as people tend to put the blame on the firm. When video game developers face a PR crisis they can approach it in many ways, usually via social media, or through video game journalists. Quick and direct communication link with consumers is extremely important in such cases as it provides unaltered, precise message to all interested persons. According to the survey, the majority of respondents are, to some extent, interested in controversies surrounding video game developers (Figure 7). The question was: "Do you pay attention to controversies in video game developers?"

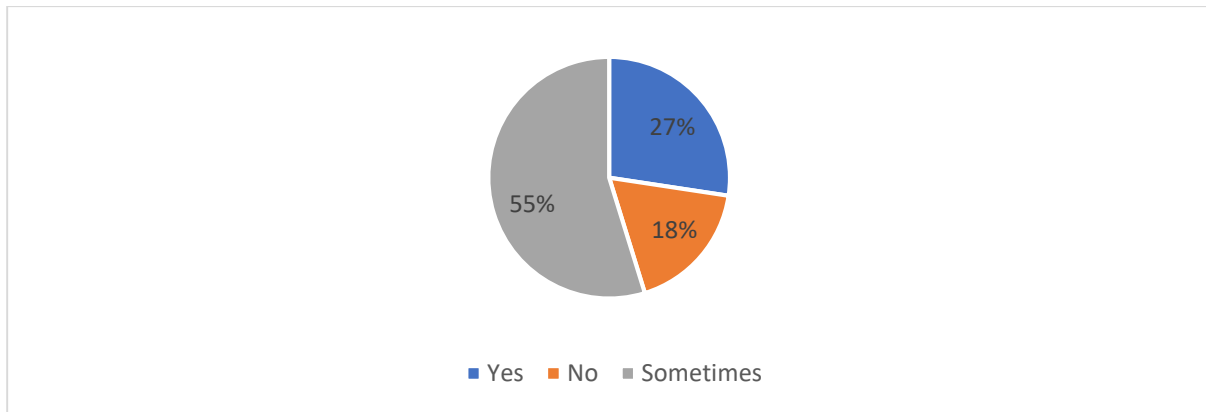


Figure 7. Reaction to controversies.

Source: own study.

At the same time, the respondents seemed divided whether they would allow the controversies surrounding video game developers affect their purchase of games. 55% of people who answered the question would not base their buying decision on past controversies. However, a high percentage of respondents (45%) claimed that they would take certain controversies under consideration when buying a video game. These controversies include: unfair or harmful treatment of employees (40 respondents out of 71), offensive comments on social media (34 respondents), lying to the fans (63 respondents), as well as implementing micro transactions, unfair business tactics, releasing unfinished products, buying reviews, openly propagating the developer's ideology/political views, violations of human rights, introducing pay-to-win elements in games, and improper treatment of fans.

One of the methods used by consumers to try to change companies' behavior and way of functioning is boycott. Usually, it requires a considerable amount of people participating in order to make a bigger impact and have a greater influence. Therefore, the consumers should be able to communicate with each other to efficiently carry it out. However, in modern times, it is becoming increasingly easy because of social media. This also results in a much bigger number of possible participants due to the fast spreading of information. The survey respondents were asked what do they think about boycotting companies and there was no dominant answer. A similar number of people chose options "I believe that boycotts are effective and necessary" and "I believe boycotts do not work". Therefore, it can be concluded that people are divided whether boycotts are a useful tool for interacting with video game developers or not (Figure 8). The answers to the question: "What do you think about boycotting companies?" are as follows:

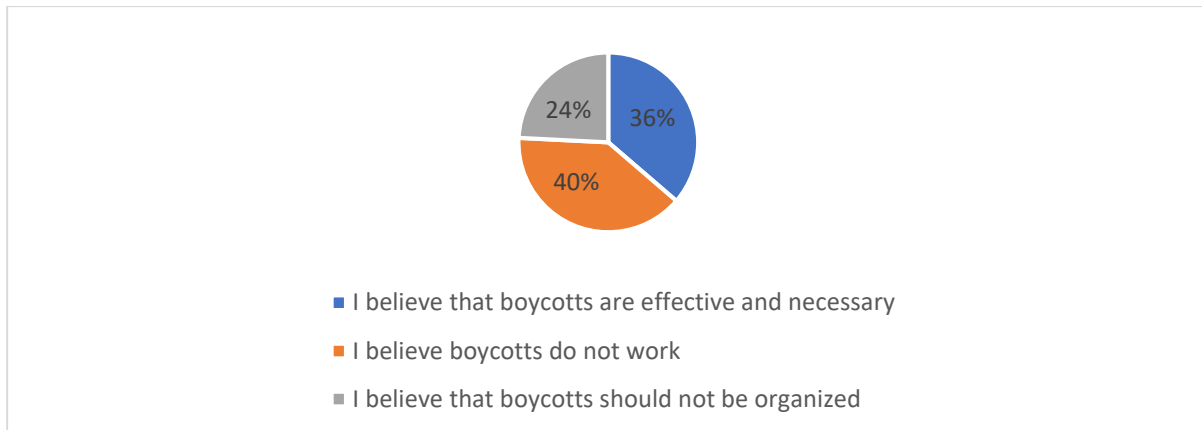


Figure 8. Boycotting companies.

Source: own study.

In order to fix the image of the company and appease the angry consumers, video game developers often publish apologies soon after a controversy takes place. The existence of social media makes this task easier and allows to monitor the direct responses of fans. However, the reactions can be different depending on the type of offence and how the apologies were expressed. Some people will even question the sincerity in the message. The respondents were asked what do they think about companies' official apologies to their fans in response to the controversy. Out of 157 answers, 72 people chose "It's just a marketing strategy and a way to avoid the consequences" and 3 answers were "It's a bad decision because most fans won't accept it anyway." Contrastingly, 67 people chose "It's a good decision that shows respect for the fans". Other respondents claimed that the situation depends on the developer's public image and previous behavior, as well as the way the apologies were expressed. For some, the apologies are necessary out of respect for the players. Multiple answers supported public apologies only if they are paired with real improvement and they introduce significant changes in the company. In conclusion, consumers will usually approach the apologies with skepticism, especially if the company had problems with public image even before the controversy took place. Apologies are often a good idea if expressed properly, however what fans expect the most are the real and direct changes which are able to repair previously caused damage.

5.4. Image of CD Projekt RED

Positive public image is very crucial in forming a strong, long-term relationship between a company and its customers. People who believe that a certain video game developer is honest, respectable, and principled are more likely to trust in the high quality of their games, recommend their products to others, or participate in fan communities. CD Projekt RED is a well-known studio, however, it became popular globally quite recently. Its breakthrough moment took place after the announcement of a new franchise and game *Cyberpunk 2077*. The general public was introduced to CD Projekt and its development studio through their previous video games, especially *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*. The high quality of the product,

attention to detail, good gameplay, praised soundtrack, and unique humor gave players a very good impression of the entire company. CD Projekt also took action to confirm and reinforce this positive, quite idealized image by continuously interacting with customers, forming relationships with numerous gaming journalists, establishing company's mission that puts video games first, and actively taking part in the gaming community. As a result, the public image of the firm was, at some point, immensely positive. A part of the survey was intended for discovering what is the current general opinion about CD Projekt RED and what are the positive and negative aspects of the studio. The question was: "What do you think about CD Projekt RED (The Witcher series, Cyberpunk 2077)?" (Figure 9).

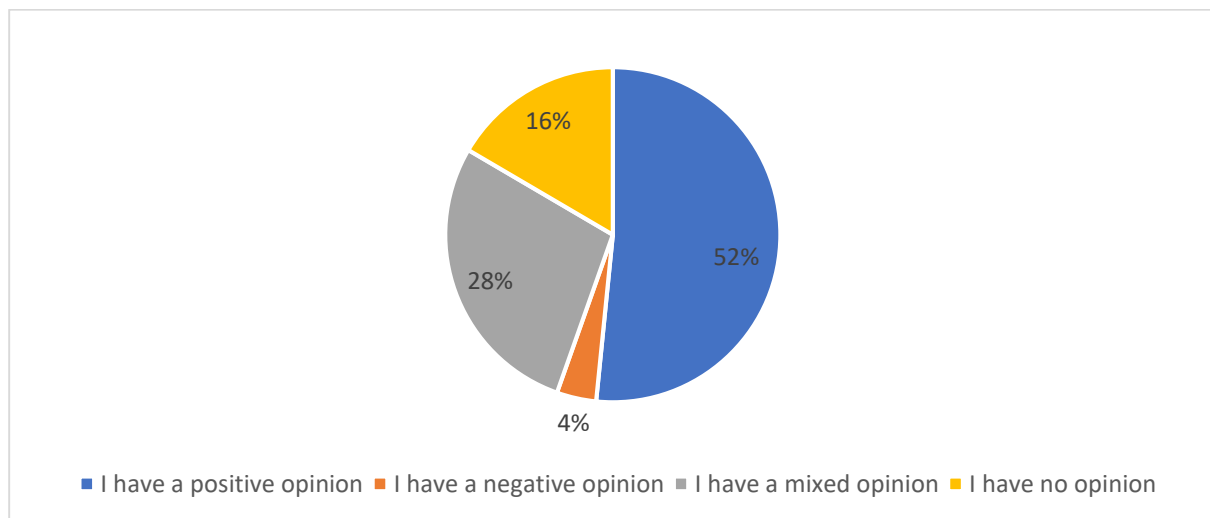


Figure 9. Opinions on CR Projekt Red.

Source: own study.

Over half of those surveyed reported that they have a positive opinion about the studio. However, it must be taken under consideration that all respondents are Polish speakers and/or are of Polish descent. The support for CD Projekt RED, therefore can be higher in their country of origin and the results may vary in other countries.

A great number of people who had something positive to say about the studio, commented on *The Witcher* video game series. Based on their own experiences, they unanimously praised the franchise for the very high quality of games, great storytelling, impressive length, good graphics, solid gameplay, interesting side quests, and attention to details. One respondent noticed that the studio seemed to greatly improve with each game from the series and other called the games innovative and advanced. The developers also later decided to come back to the first two productions, focus on them again, and release their "Enhanced Editions" that improved the graphics, fixed many bugs, and offered new content. Other people pointed out that CD Projekt RED released numerous DLCs and expansions to their games that not only were of high quality but were also offered for a reasonable price, some of them even for free. As a result, the developers were able to present an expanded, unique world with interesting, new characters that were shown in depth throughout the game. The studio did not introduce any micro transactions which earned the respect of the consumers.

Respondents also praised studio's open communication with fans and its ability to listen to criticism and advice. For example, this can be noticed in multiple surveys carried out by the company asking people for suggestions regarding the games and the overall functioning of the firm, as well as the almost instant changes and improvements after consumers express their dissatisfaction about certain actions made by the studio. Its respect towards customers is noticeable and appreciated by many players in the gaming community. In their view, CD Projekt RED does its best to satisfy as many fans as possible and admit the mistakes if something goes wrong. Others commended the studio's high standards and constant development. Certain fans expressed their pride in the success of a Polish company that is able to distinguish itself from others in the video game industry. One person wrote that she is not interested in what is happening with the firm and only focuses on the games which are very good in her opinion.

Negative opinions that are widely repeated by the general public can be especially harmful for the company and its public image. People who never heard of the firm before or are not particularly familiar with it can quickly form negative judgement about it if they hear this type of information first. It is also difficult to stop those opinions from spreading even if the firm was able to eliminate the problem. Video game companies are notably more vulnerable to them compared to most industries as the gaming community: utilizes social media more often, is more emotionally invested in products (video games) offered, communicates with one another to a greater extent, and considers itself more as a fan group of certain video game developers rather than customers. As a result, the companies in this industry should be more aware of their own public image and heavily invest in public relations in order to maintain the positive relationship with consumers.

When asked about the perception of CD Projekt RED, some respondents had negative opinions about the studio and criticized their certain behavior and actions. In response to the question, nearly all of those surveyed indicated that they see them in a different, more negative light after the premiere of *Cyberpunk 2077*. In their view, as well as the majority of the gaming community, the game was released too early and contained many bugs, especially on older generation consoles. Some people disapproved of the dishonest approach to consumers because the studio promised things that were not included or different in the final product. CD Projekt RED also seemed to present untrue state of the game in development. In reality, their project needed more time to be entirely completed. According to one respondent, their behavior results from the greed because they decided to release the game for older generation consoles despite them knowing that the game had too high system requirements to run properly. Multiple answers pointed out that the company started to behave "like a typical corporation" which in their view is a negative thing because right now they care more about earning money than creating video games.

Few respondents had negative opinions about the studio even before the premiere of *Cyberpunk 2077*, especially how they regularly postponed the game release and behaved in a way that could be considered transphobic on social media, as well as included offensive elements in their most recent game. Some also expressed concern about the reports commenting on their mistreatment of employees. Crunch has been found by them to be a harmful practice that exploits people and therefore is unacceptable.

A noticeable part of the respondents (28%) stated that they have mixed opinions about CD Projekt RED. These people have many positive things to say about the studio but cannot forget about its controversies and negative characteristics. However, they are still a very important group for the company as their trust can be rebuilt so that their opinion can be more and more positive. Firms must be able to convince consumers that their good features are much stronger and much more prevalent than the bad ones.

Few respondents pointed out the studio's mistakes such as the imperfect premiere of *Cyberpunk 2077*, however they also defended the developers and management claiming that their decision to release the game too early was made because they were under a pressure from impatient fans and shareholders. Eventually, they became overwhelmed due to too high expectations. Others criticized certain decisions made by the studio such as practicing political activism and implementing crunch, however the positive elements such as keeping promises, creating good games for affordable prices, and open communication with fans were enough for them to continue supporting the studio. Few people who took part in the survey chose different approach and declared that they do not like certain decisions made by CD Projekt RED but they also think that it does not deserve as much criticism as it got. In their view, the studio is working hard to repair the damage made and rebuild the trust of fans and it deserves the recognition for that.

Some claimed that they had a very positive opinion about CD Projekt RED but changed their mind after the premiere of *Cyberpunk 2077*. Regaining their trust can be particularly difficult for the studio as, in their mind, they were betrayed and lied to. By regularly updating and fixing the game as well as releasing other games of high quality, this trust is possible to be slowly rebuilt. However, some people will never support the developer again and this fact must also be accepted.

Certain respondents stated that CD Projekt RED undermined their trust but they are hopeful that the studio will be able to fix its mistakes. Working with people who think this way can be easier as they want to believe in improvement of the studio and still want to support it. Improving certain elements and continuing to release high quality products should be enough to gain their trust again.

The majority of those who responded felt that CD Projekt RED is a studio which is perfectly capable of developing high quality games as it proved this fact before. However, it is not without flaws which can and must be fixed in order for the entire company to grow and improve. Almost all answers had some positive comments but most of them also included a thoughtful

criticism about certain actions of the studio. In response to the question, most of those surveyed indicated that their main grievance is connected with the premiere of *Cyberpunk 2077* and, in some cases, with poor treatment of employees. It is important to notice that, before the announcement and release of the newest video game, CD Projekt RED had a very positive public image and a well-known, successful franchise. This fact heavily influenced the public's reaction after the controversy took place. For example, a great number of people tried to justify or explain studio's actions because before they had with it only positive experiences, and others criticized comments that were too harsh on the developers. The fondness for games from *The Witcher* series are the main reason that players still support CD Projekt RED and want to see it succeed and improve. However, this fondness that people had for the company also resulted in some of them feeling betrayed and cheated after *Cyberpunk 2077* release. The studio's priority at the moment should be regaining lost trust as fast as possible in order to maintain the high number of customers. This can be achieved through repairing caused damage (refunds, game updates), as well as constant and visible improvements within the entire studio.

5.5. Image of Blizzard Entertainment

Similarly to the questions regarding the studio CD Projekt RED, another part of the survey was intended for discovering what is the general opinion about the second analyzed company, Blizzard Entertainment. Based on the given answers, it can be said that more people than in the case of a Polish studio decided to choose the option "I have no opinion". The reason for this may be the possibility that the higher number of people that were surveyed was not familiar enough with the company to form an opinion. The question was: "What do you think of Blizzard Entertainment (World of Warcraft, StarCraft, Diablo, Overwatch)?" (Figure 10).

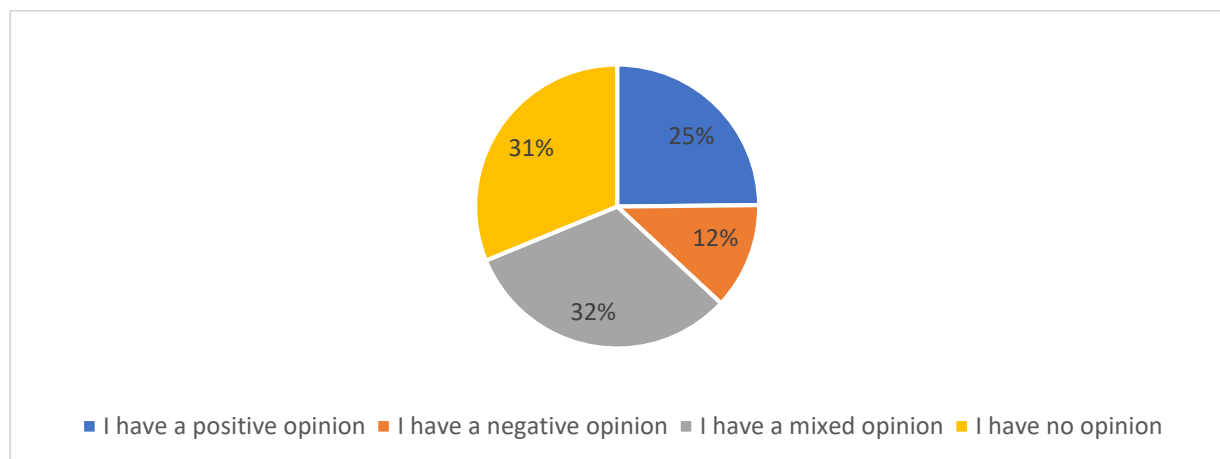


Figure 10. Opinions on Blizzard Entertainment.

Source: own study.

The positive comments praised Blizzard's "solid" and high quality games which are said to have an interesting design and well developed virtual worlds. Respondents also claimed that the company's creations are well known around the world and can be classified as classics in the gaming industry. They can be even sometimes considered as one of the best of their genre

and distinguish themselves from others with a high level of refinement. The mere ideas for these games are creative and unique as well. One answer emphasized that Blizzard has an unique approach to the announcements of new video games and prefers not to provide a set date in order to not put a pressure on employees, letting them finish the product without considerable rush. People claimed that the promises made by developers are also usually kept. The company's platform, Blizzard Battle.net was praised by the respondents as well. A high number of those surveyed focused in their answer on Blizzard Entertainment's many years of experience on the market which gives its certain kind of respect in the gaming industry.

Despite having a strong reputation as a creator of iconic games, Blizzard Entertainment is criticized for its certain actions and decisions, especially those that have been made in recent times. The survey respondents pointed out that the lack of regular updates to the games and lack of care towards certain franchises leads to deterioration in quality of products. Some new releases such as *Warcraft III: Reforged* (2020) have ended in failure after Blizzard broke its promises which resulted in the majority of customers very negatively reviewing the game. Respondents also mentioned in their answers the bigger controversies of the company: the BlizzCon 2018 *Diablo Immortal* fiasco, and Blitzchung controversy. Some were angry about the company getting involved in political affairs which, in their view, is negatively influencing the Blizzard's actions. The implementation of microtransactions and high price of games were highly criticized as well. Overall, people often complained about the lack of understanding and respect for the fans. The poor treatment of employees and mass layoffs were also mentioned and condemned by some of the respondents.

After the analysis of the survey results it can be said that many respondents seemed to have a mixed opinion about Blizzard Entertainment. Usually, the answers emphasized and appreciated the legacy of the company as well as its iconic games, however they were critical of the recent decisions and actions that have been made. One respondent tried to explain this change for worse by blaming the merger with Activision. The prevailing opinion is that Blizzard's games started to decline in quality, and that the franchises are no longer supported by the firm as much as they were before. Some people rated the company as average in terms of customer approach: not bad but not excellent either. Certain controversies have gradually changed the perception of the company for the worse and resulted in players losing trust in Blizzard. However, according to few survey answers, there are consumers that want to see the company return to its previous state and become universally loved by the gaming community again.

In case of Blizzard Entertainment, it is impossible to state precisely which controversy or misjudged decision was the main reason of the customers' loss of trust in the company. The deterioration of corporate image in this situation was rather a result of multiple different missteps that eventually accumulated in the consumers' minds. Few of the recent released games being lower quality than the usual standard also contributed to the changes in how Blizzard was perceived by the public. One of the most important problems that the company

has to face at present is the damaged relationship with fans. Inferring from the survey responses, many people who were answering the question felt like Blizzard did not respect their opinion or even pay attention to the gaming community in general. If customers do not feel appreciated it can be very difficult to earn their trust. The company must, in a sense, prove its worth again and show that it is able to change for the better, starting from its approach to consumers. Blizzard Entertainment's task, however, is much more problematic as it operates multiple franchises at the same time which all have different fan communities. As a result, creating strong communication links with all of them can be quite demanding and time-consuming.

6. Conclusions

Summarizing the above deliberations the following conclusions can be reached. Firstly, both analyzed developers exist in the same market, however, they differ in terms of their marketing decisions which shape their public image. The widespread access to the internet and social media as well as global cultural changes result in a situation where it is more difficult for firms to maintain a positive corporate image. Even small controversies can be dangerous and cause many problems. The company must therefore be constantly ready to react and take an appropriate action. Secondly, video game companies are especially vulnerable to negative changes in firm's public image because they heavily rely on creating a close community of devoted fans. They are also tightly connected with the internet culture which has both positive and negative consequences. Displeased consumers can voice their disappointment with games or company's decisions through different means such as boycott that aims to lower developer's income and number of fans and force the change. Thirdly, in the video game industry, consumers often wait for the desired product for years and develop very high expectations, however, too high expectations can distort the company's image in the long run.

These conclusions can be used practically in the video game industry as well as in the entertainment industry in general. Most of all, it is important to look at the company from different perspectives to determine how its public image will change over the years. As an example, employees are a very important element that can be vital in this process. All employees who interact with fans should be properly trained and educated on the internet culture. This step helps to avoid many mistakes and better introduce the company's philosophy to employees. However not all PR crises can be prevented. A good developer must be able to react accordingly to the situation at hand. The extensive knowledge about the gaming community is crucial and allows to create a strong relationship with customers. The consumers' trust in the company is exceedingly important and should be preserved. The process of regaining this trust can be very difficult, sometimes even impossible. For this reason, video game developers should approach their fans with as much respect and sincerity as possible in order to build a strong, faithful community that will support them in every situation.

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