



# The Last of Us and Converse: An Analysis of Product Placement and Its Effect on Player Recall

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**Abstract.** The video game industry has witnessed substantial growth in recent years, resulting in increased brand presence within games due to high consumer engagement. While product placement in games is commonly used for marketing purposes, there are instances where game developers incorporate it to enhance storytelling realism or as a reference. An example of this can be observed in The Last of Us saga, where one of the main characters consistently wears Converse sneakers throughout both game installments. It is important to note that no official statement has confirmed a marketing agreement between Sony Playstation and Converse. This qualitative study aims to investigate the impact of the apparent product placement of the Converse brand in The Last of Us saga on brand recall among users aged 20 to 30 in Arándana's Discord channel through semi-structured interviews .

**Keywords:** Product placement · trade dress · recall · video games · marketing · advertising

## 1 Introduction

Among the entertainment media consumed nowadays, one of the newest and fastest-growing industries is that of video games, which offers a varied collection of options for every type of player. In fact, according to Games Industry [1], this industry grew by 19.6% in revenue compared to 2019. Due to the potential of product placement in video games as a marketing tool, even in cases where it may not necessarily be presented for advertising purposes, this research aims to analyze the impact of Converse product placement in The Last of Us series on the recall level among users between 20 and 30 years old on the Discord platform of the Peruvian YouTuber Arándana.

This research project contributes to understanding the effects of product placement in a medium that has been little explored until now and whose development is ongoing. Moreover, unlike most documentation on the subject, this project investigates a product placement that emerged as a need of the video game developer Naughty Dog to give a characteristic factor to one of its flagship characters. This will help the advertising

research landscape to reveal how Converse may have been affected by appearing in The Last of Us series.

To further delve into the investigation, the following specific objectives are proposed:

- Determine if players of The Last of Us series noticed the presence of the Converse brand in the video game's narrative.
- Define if players of The Last of Us series associate Ellie's character with any brand of sneakers.

Therefore, this research project will answer the following research question:

RQ: *What was the impact on the recall level of Converse product placement in The Last of Us series among users between 20 and 30 years old on the Discord platform of the Peruvian YouTuber Arándana?*

## 2 Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 Context

In recent years, the video game industry has experienced a high growth worldwide, to the point where currently 40% of people worldwide play video games [2]. The impact of this industry has also reached national territory because, according to [3], due to the pandemic and people's need to stay entertained, the Peruvian gamer community has increased drastically. The Gaming study by Havas Group indicated that 69% of the population consumed video games this year and it was noted that the preference for this medium is sustained and exponential. Regarding this, for the Research and Strategy Analyst of Havas Argentina Carla Degastaldi, this industry represents a new environment of challenges and opportunities for brands [4].

### 2.2 In-Game Advertising

In-game advertising (IGA) is a type of product placement in video games that has gained relevance over the years, due to changes in the digital environment and consumption patterns [5]. This type of product placement has advantages such as the fact that, due to the interactive nature of the medium, the user is no longer a passive agent. Additionally, IGA offers the possibility to segment the audience by gender or specific game and video games typically have a longer lifespan compared to other media [6, 7]. In terms of recall, [8] point out that there is greater brand recall and recognition when video games are used instead of presenting the brand in a television program. Lee and Faber (2007) suggest that product placement in video games can indeed impact the memory of those who have been exposed to the brand [9]. One advantage of advertising in video games is that it cannot be avoided, which means that players are unavoidably exposed to it. According to research by [10] that evaluated performance between children who played video games and those who did not, it was found that the brains of the former group showed greater activity in regions associated with attention and memory; the researchers believe that this is because video games, having more cognitively demanding tasks, improved brain performance in these areas (as cited in National Institute on Drug Abuse).

IGA has become an important advertising tool due to its ability to effectively reach the younger audience that is hard to reach with traditional advertising. Furthermore, it has been suggested that IGA could be used to reach a wider audience in emerging markets. For instance, Kim and Kim (2008) found that IGA was more effective than traditional advertising in promoting cell phone services in South Korea [7].

In conclusion, IGA has become an effective advertising tool that offers advantages such as audience engagement, segmentation, and recall. The ability to reach younger audiences, wider markets, and the unavoidability of in-game advertising makes it a valuable component of any marketing strategy.

### 2.3 Converse in the Last of Us Saga

The Last of Us is an exclusive PlayStation video game series that was first released on June 13th, 2013, for PlayStation 3. It was later remastered for the next generation of Sony consoles in 2014, and the latest addition to the series is The Last of Us Part II, which was released on June 19th, 2020, for PlayStation 4 [12]. On September 2nd, 2022, a remake of the first game, titled The Last of Us Part I, was released for PlayStation 5 [13]. Although the game has been remade with a new graphics engine, the storyline remains the same.

Throughout the series, the main character Ellie is consistently portrayed wearing Converse sneakers, although the color and style change in different scenes. In the first game, she wore red Converse sneakers, while in the 2020 release, she wore black Converse sneakers. The Last of Us series has been highly regarded for its emotional storytelling, complex characters, and immersive gameplay. The inclusion of a consistent fashion element such as the Converse sneakers serves as a notable aspect of character development and brand recognition within the game's community.

The brand placement is small; regarding this, [13] argue that brands that take up a significant portion of the screen are usually better remembered. On the other hand, an important aspect to consider for the study of this case is what [14] suggest, as in their opinion, product placement in violent video games, such as the case of The Last of Us saga, tends to be less remembered by players as they shift their attention to the violent content present in the video game.

## 3 Methodology

This research was conducted within an interpretive paradigm, which aims to acquire knowledge through dialogue with research subjects and reflection to uncover true insights [15]. This paradigm is well-suited for this study as it facilitates a profound understanding of the participants' experiences and perspectives. The study employed a qualitative approach, gathering data based on the participants' lived experiences and viewpoints for interpretive analysis of their words and actions. This approach was chosen as it is particularly suitable for exploring the complex and nuanced experiences of video game players. To address the research question and specific objectives, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 participants who met predetermined criteria. The interviews provided flexibility in the questions and allowed for the adaptation of the interview as it progressed, enabling a deeper exploration of issues that arose in the moment [16].

The participants were men and women between 20 and 30 years old who had played or watched gameplay of *The Last of Us*. They were recruited from the Discord community of the Peruvian youtuber Arándana. The youtuber had played the game three times and her active community on Discord facilitated the recruitment of subjects exposed to the video game being studied.

In this approach, it is possible to work with relatively small numbers of observation units, as long as each unit is carefully and intentionally selected for its potential to provide detailed and in-depth information on the research subject. Such decisions, which would be considered sources of bias in a probabilistic sampling design, serve as a means to ensure the rigor of the approach in qualitative inquiries.

Likewise, the number of participants has also depended on the acceptability of the informants in this study, a conceptually essential and ethically intrinsic factor. The logic that underlies this type of sampling, and what determines its strength, lies in achieving that the selected cases provide the highest richness of information possible to delve into the research question.

**Table 1.** Topics and Questions.

Category	Semi structured questions
Brand recall	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What's been your playstyle? Do you prefer attacking enemies or going unnoticed?</li> <li>2. Have you ever seen advertising or a real brand in a video game?</li> <li>3. Can you identify the brand of these sneakers? (Insert photo of Converse without showing the logo)</li> <li>4. What color were Ellie's sneakers in at least one of the games?</li> <li>5. What makes you identify those sneakers as Converse? (design, color, materials).</li> </ol>
Association between Converse and TLOU	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>6. Do you remember seeing real brands in <i>The Last of Us</i> games? Which ones?</li> <li>7. Have you noticed which type of sneakers Ellie wears most frequently in the game?</li> <li>8. Do you remember seeing the logo of the sneakers in <i>The Last of Us</i> games?</li> </ol>
Opinions about product placement in TLOU	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>9. Do you think Converse has paid to appear in the games?</li> <li>10. Do you think the video game developers paid Converse to include their brand?</li> <li>11. Do you think the shoes appeared simply because the developers thought it was appropriate to include them in Ellie's design and that there was no agreement between them and the brand?</li> </ol>

## 4 Results

After conducting interviews with eighteen individuals who made up the sample of the audience that was chosen for investigation, the following results were obtained.

### 4.1 Brand Recall

When asked those who had played any of the installments of this saga about their playing style, the vast majority indicated having a combination of stealth and direct attack against enemies on screen; in a higher percentage, they went inadvertently.

“Stealth, hiding, was the basic strategy and if you couldn’t do that” (#D.H., 22).

But there were those who opted for an opposite option to that of the rest of the interviewees.

“I prefer to attack enemies (...) because I like the different animations that each elimination has and I think there is more adrenaline playing this way and I believe the game is made for that especially” (#P.M., 22).

When asked if they had seen advertising or real brands within video games in general, most mentioned Sony’s references to their own products, cases of sports games like FIFA, PES, or racing games, as well as the case of Monster in Dead Stranding or even possible brand parodies.

“In video games... yes, there are different brands, I understand that in GTA or at least imitations” (#E.F., 22).

When shown the first image and asked if they recognized the sneakers, the vast majority associated them with Converse, and even some referred directly to the video game by mentioning that they were Ellie’s footwear.

“Well, if I’m not mistaken, it looks like Converse” (#M.F.C., 22).

“Yes, it reminds me of, uh, Ellie... it reminds me of Cole, another protagonist from a Sony video game saga that is Infamous, and... for some strange reason, I think of vintage and youth when I see this image” (#J.A.B., 22).

Regarding the color, a question asked with the second image, the top three choices were 1, with eight mentions: 4, with seven mentions, and 2, with five mentions. It should be noted that these three (1, 2, and 4) are the correct options.

“Well... I think 1 is real, from the first video game, and then the... the 4 and... and the 2 too” (#J. S., 22).

When asked for the reason why the displayed sneakers were recognized as Converse, most responses were associated with the product’s shape and materials.

“The style, especially the front part, right? Like the tip of the sneakers, it’s quite characteristic of that brand or those brands. I’ve never used any of those, that’s why because I don’t specifically like them, but it’s like; I mean, you can recognize it even without the logo. I think so; it’s like being monochromatic, right? Most of them are a single color with white, right? White on the tip or the other way around, I’m not sure exactly, but they’re always the same, right? I think you don’t even need the logo to recognize that it’s a specific brand” (#C.L., 22).

## 4.2 Association Between Converse and TLOU

Participants were asked if they had seen real brands featured in *The Last of Us* games, to which the majority responded with references to Sony products within the games, and even mentioned Converse as the shoes worn by the character Ellie. One participant responded:

“Yeah, well... in the first game, there’s a PlayStation when you enter a house and want to loot, or I’m not sure if it’s Joel’s house, I can’t remember, but you see the console. Also, I think there’s a part where you find the video games, an *Uncharted* game I believe, in a toy store, and well, I haven’t played it, but in *The Last of Us 2* streams, of course, Converse are Ellie’s shoes (laughs). Yes, and well, another brand I’ve seen in these games, well (thinking)... those are the ones I remember the most, I don’t know about others... it would be the same PlayStation and, well, *Naughty Dog* itself is a brand, right? They put both games, *Uncharted* and the fox one, on the PlayStation console, and Converse (#M.F.C., 22).”

However, there was also some doubt as to whether they actually remembered these shoes as belonging to Ellie or if it was a predisposition due to having seen the image of Converse prior to this question. One participant stated:

“I don’t really pay attention to that, because now that you’ve given me this example, Ellie wears Converse, but I hadn’t thought about clothing or other things. It’s more that, let’s say, what catches your eye is that they put the brand as such. Something as generic as footwear or pants, or I don’t know, something more common, is more difficult to recognize at first glance (#P.Z., 22).”

For those who were asked if they remembered the type of footwear the character Ellie wore (which was a minority question compared to the first image, as respondents had already answered that question as noted), the majority said they did not remember or did not notice.

“No, but now that you showed me the Converse, I think she wore something similar (#J. H., 22).”

Similarly, when asked if they had seen the logo of the shoes, the majority indicated they had not seen it.

“Oh, no, I don’t remember the logo of those two brands we’re talking about, no (#V.S., 22).”

However, there were exceptions to this as well.

“In the game? I think... on the way to Seattle, did they make a cameo of them with the logo on one of the abandoned stores? I have lapses, but I think I could tell you yes (#J.A.B., 22).”

### 4.3 Opinions About Product Placement in TLOU

When asked about who they believed paid for the appearance of Converse shoes in video games, the opinions tended to lean towards the idea that the developer paid to use the shoes in the game. Six of the interviewees believed that Converse paid to appear in the games, ten believed that the developer Naughty Dog made the payment, while two of the respondents stated that there was no transaction at all.

“I believe it was the latter, that there was some kind of agreement, right? Maybe they didn’t put the brand, but since the design is already recognizable as such, there may have been some kind of agreement there” (#J.H., 22).

To conclude the main questions, when asked about the nature of the appearance of this footwear, beyond whether they agreed that they were Converse or just a reference or similar footwear, the vast majority said that there were reasons behind the creation of the character and the choice of her footwear. Only two of the participants disagreed.

“Well, as you mention it, I could say yes. In fact, to a certain extent, it may sound exaggerated, but I believe that Ellie is not Ellie without her Converse, you know what I mean?” (#J.V., 22).

“Personally, I think it’s... I believe it’s random, really. Even if she had worn a Puma shoe, or a shoe from Adidas... of course, Ellie’s development is Ellie’s development, and the shoes have nothing to do with the development of a character” (#P.L., 22).

Extra questions were asked of the participants, one of which was about their opinions on brands appearing in a more subtle way in their video games. Most of them agreed with this kind of implementation; however, one of the interviewees did not show the same acceptance.

“In my opinion, if they do it well, I may even think it’s good that they do it, because companies benefit from it to a certain extent because they make money. I mean, in other media, advertising is present, and in video games, it lends itself to advertising, for example, in GTA, imagine that it’s a Coca-Cola ad, I don’t know... it can be more realistic to a certain extent” (#L.L., 22).

“I don’t think it’s good to include brands because...obviously, they dress the character as they see fit, but to have a brand like that fixed, I don’t know, I personally don’t like it because it conditions a lot the way one wants to dress or has to dress, and maybe there are people who want to buy Converse, I don’t know, because Ellie wears them and they don’t have money, and I don’t think it’s good” (#G.O., 22).

The second extra question from the interviews was about whether they saw the presentation of brands in a small proportion in relation to their size on the screen or integration into the game world as appropriate. Their stance on this was favorable regarding the appearance of brands.

“Excellent, I like it when it looks like that, you know? That it’s not so obvious, that they don’t put up a big Coca-Cola sign and that they play with the structure they already have or with what they already have formed, like in the case of Converse” (#J.H., 22).

The third and final extra question from the interviews sought to find out how the participants would be bothered by the inclusion of brands, to which they provided input on what they believe should not be done, as they feel it would break the immersive experience they are having in the game.

“I don’t know, imagine that in one of these... in the first game, right? Suddenly they enter one of these shopping centers, right? That are already looted and suddenly, you know, there’s like a shot of a Converse store, right? And then Ellie says, “Oh, I want my Converse,” you know? And then they mention the brand, you know? I think that kind of thing would break the narrative as well” (#C.L., 22).

## 5 Discussion

Aliagas, et. al (2021) indicate that product placement in video games should be tailored to the context of the game to avoid being intrusive. Regarding the results, some responses touched on the issue of immersion and pointed out that including real brands can add realism to the narrative of the game, especially since *The Last of Us* is set in a world quite close to reality.

The size of the product on screen was also considered. According to Chaney, et. al (2018), brands with a more prominent size on screen are usually better remembered. However, despite the small proportion of the Converse shoes and their location in the frame, most participants remembered them.

Finally, Bushman, et. al (2018) suggest that product placement in violent video games, which is in line with the plot of *The Last of Us*, tends to be less remembered as players are distracted by the violence of the game. However, 13 out of 18 interviewees remembered Converse in *The Last of Us*, contradicting this theory. Only five who played in a less violent manner did not remember the presence of the shoes. Therefore, the effectiveness of this theory could be questioned, at least for games that offer different styles of gameplay.

## 6 Conclusions

The present study investigated the impact of Converse product placement on brand recall among 20- to 30-year-old users of Peru. The results of the interviews showed that a vast majority of the consulted players did indeed remember the presence of Converse in *The Last of Us* games. This demonstrates the ability of product placement in video games

to leave a brand imprint in people's memory, even when the product is presented subtly and may initially seem disadvantageous for commercial purposes.

The case of Converse in TLOU is a compelling example of how product placement can be used effectively in video games. The sneakers worn by the main character, Ellie, are prominently featured throughout the game, and they are integrated into the narrative in a natural way. This has resulted in high levels of brand recall among players, and it has also helped to boost the sales of Converse shoes.

The success of Converse in TLOU is due in part to the fact that the product placement is respectful of the narrative of the medium. The sneakers are not simply used to sell products; they are also used to help develop Ellie's character and to create a sense of immersion for the player. As a result, players are more likely to notice and remember the Converse sneakers, and they are also more likely to be influenced by them.

This suggests that brands should carefully consider the context in which they place their products in video games. Product placement should not be seen to simply sell products; it should also be seen as a way to enhance the player experience and to build brand awareness. When done correctly, product placement can be a powerful tool for marketing and advertising.

However, it is important to note that product placement can also be done poorly. If the product placement is not integrated into the narrative in a natural way, it can backfire and alienate players. For example, if the Converse sneakers in TLOU had been simply placed in the game without any context, they would likely have been seen as out of place and forced. This would have resulted in lower levels of brand recall and sales. The case of Converse in TLOU provides valuable insights for brands that are considering using product placement in video games. By following the example of Converse, brands can increase their chances of success and avoid the potential pitfalls of product placement.

In addition to the points made above, I would also add that product placement in video games can be a particularly effective way to reach young people. This is because video games are a popular form of entertainment among young people, and they are often more receptive to product placement than other demographics. As a result, product placement in video games can be a valuable tool for reaching this important target audience.

In conclusion, the case of Converse in TLOU demonstrates the power of product placement when done correctly. Brands that are considering using product placement in video games should carefully consider the context in which they place their products, and they should avoid product placements that seem out of place or forced. By following these guidelines, brands can increase their chances of success and reach a valuable target audience.

The study was limited by the fact that it only involved a small sample of players. Additionally, the study only focused on one brand, so it is not clear whether the findings would be generalizable to other brands. Future research should aim to address these limitations.

Future research could investigate the importance of character development and the elements that compose their physical appearance. In this study, many of the interviewed participants noted that clothing was an aspect that helped define the character's personality, so it would be beneficial for brands to know this information and place their products in future games where their products and characters converge. Additionally, it would be

interesting to further investigate brand recall by making comparisons between violent and non-violent games, as well as considering the importance of each player's individual playing style when interacting with these virtual worlds. Finally, it is suggested to explore the benefits that product placement provides not only to the brand but also to the game or other medium in which it is located. As seen in various comments from the interviewees, the inclusion of real-world brands could be beneficial for the immersion of these interactive stories.

In conclusion, the findings of this study provide evidence that product placement in video games can be an effective way to increase brand recall. However, it is important to carefully consider the context in which the product is placed, and to make sure that it is integrated into the game in a natural way. Future research should further investigate the factors that influence the effectiveness of product placement in video games.

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