



Role of gamification in engaging customers by building brand loyalty: A Comprehensive Review

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Abstract

Gamification can be defined as the strategic infusion of the game design principle to the non-game areas. It has emerged as an instrument for increasing the customer's engagement whilst establishing customer loyalty for the brand. Our research paper survey past literature and dissect how gamification shape consumer behavior, attitude, equity and engagement. The study explores theoretical framework in the area and reveals that psychology frameworks such as Self-Determination and Flow Theory plays critical role in engagement level. This study uses narrative and exploratory review method for surveying scholarly peer reviewed articles from Scopus database. Result shows that gamification enhances the customer engagement, equity, attitude and beliefs. The study highlights that through social engagement, rewards and personalized experience the business can use the gamification tool effectively. The study highlights that most of the literature focuses on education and retail sector while other sector garnished relatively less academic development. The research paper also probes challenges like market saturation and ethical questions and defines pathways for future exploration.

Keywords: Gamification, brand equity, brand loyalty, brand engagement

Introduction

Gamification is the utilization of the concepts of game in areas where it was not used earlier. This has been game changing for marketers today (Deterding *et al.*, 2011) [10]. Huotari & Hamari, (2017) [18, 25] provides inclusive definition of gamification as combination of gameful experience and value creation of core service provided by the business. Business can aim to expand the engagement level and foster loyalty for brand by using gaming tools such as leaderboards and points (Hamari, 2017) [18]. Gamification also has psychological aspects to it such as those found in Theory of Flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Hu Xing & Xin, 2024) [8, 24] and Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Gilal, Zhang, Paul & Gilal, 2019) [14]. This is to create an experience that motivate customer participation.

Companies in different and diverse industries have introduced gamification to obtain their end game goals. Starbucks', shoppers stop, pantaloons rewards program uses point-based system to encourage repeat purchases (Hofacker *et al.*, 2016). Nike's fitness apps utilise leaderboards and sets challenges to engage customers deeply (Hamari, 2017) [18]. IKEA and Stanford University are exploring virtual and augmented reality (VR & AR) to better the customer's experience (Spinify, 2023). These have increased customer participation and retention for these brands.

For this purpose, our research paper aims at to provide comprehensive review of role of gamification in engagement and goodwill. The questions we ponder upon includes theoretical concepts emerged over the period after reviewing the past literature related to gamification and marketing, the kind of gamification strategy and practices company incorporate for enhanced engagement and to trace the advancement in literature through a comparison among various sectors.

1. Methodology

The current study uses exploratory research with narrative review methodology to understand the gamification in the context of marketing and building a lucrative customer base. It synthesizes peer-reviewed academic publication published between 1999 and 2024 to maintain the quality of the review. The study collects the data from various databases including Scopus, google scholar and the Web of Science through keywords including "gamification and marketing," "gamification and customer engagement," "gamification and brand loyalty," and "gamification and retail industry", "gamification and education sector", "gamification and health sector", "gamification and manufacturing sector", "gamification and industry" marketing". "gamification strategy and marketers. The observed research questions of the study are as follows:

- How does gamification impact customer engagement?
- What is the impact of Gamification on customer goodwill?
- What are factors influencing successful implementation of gamification?
- What are gamification strategies adopted by companies for marketing products?
- What is future scope for research?

2. Theoretical Framework

The trifecta of Self Determination Theory, Flow Theory and the Operant Conditioning are a sophisticated lens within which we are decoding the mechanics of the gamification with modern marketing. Psychological frameworks woven together provides comprehensive blueprint for gamification captivates customer and cement their loyalty to brand. SDT is for an intrinsic motivation, for example, autonomy, competence and related nesses and is fueling for engagement, whilst Flow Theory immerse individuals for seamless and rewarding experiences which then in turn keep them hooked. Operant Conditioning with focus on

reinforcement shapes behaviour through those extrinsic rewards. This more often than not ensures customer return time and again for the experience. They strike this brilliant balance between what drive people from within the external nudges that keep engaged. It's not just about grabbing attention; it's about building something that lasts, a connection between customers and brands that is almost architectural in its strength. For marketers this is the kind of breakthrough thinking which can define loyalty. An art, science game-changer we can measure and scale.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT): When we discuss about the Self Determination Theory, brought to life by Ryan and Deci back in 2000, people are driven by three simple, elegant needs, namely the independence, capability and the connection. Independence is fire to control one's own path. Capability it is about mastering challenges feeling that rush from abilities and connection it is the human pull to belong and to attach with the other. Now, gamification it's the perfect canvas for this. Its hands customer reins to pick some or the other challenges, shape your journey. With leaderboards or team quests there is that sense of the community within which work is done (Hamari *et al.*, 2015)^[19]. If you introduce extrinsic reward that feel like a leash instead of a boost, you risk violating inner spark. (Deci *et al.*, 1999)^[9]. It's a difficult task wherein the magic lies in designing appropriately.

Flow Theory: Flow is this phenomenon where someone involves themselves into what they're doing so much that they lose track of everything else, even themselves, and for good measure. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990)^[8] You get there when the challenge matches their skill level perfectly and clear goals and instant feedback are given. (Sweetser & Wyeth, 2005). With gamification we would harness to build experience that will balance provide users real-time cues like progress trackers or rewards. Just like Duolingo where streaks and timed challenges are clever to lock users into flow. The user are kept on app longer to boost engagement. When you use flow in this way, gamification isn't just fun and creates experiences which tie customer to brand in a way that is powerful and lasting. (Liu *et al.*, 2017)^[34].

Operant Conditioning: Operant Conditioning is this straightforward powerful idea to shape behaviour with rewards as well as the punishment. Within gamification we are referring to points, badges, discounts, all simple tools to get customers to buy more or engage (Skinner, 1953). Look at Starbucks' Rewards program; it is a prime example of how mobile marketing can use rewards to lock in repeat purchases and build loyalty which reaffirms. The data shoes that people keep coming back. But there is a real question about how long that lasts. (Hofacker *et al.*, 2016). Overdoing of the external rewards might accidentally dim that internal drive of the motivation that comes from within. People start chasing the prize instead of the purpose. That is why we have to be obsessives about aligning rewards with customers' values at their core. If not interactions drop off the moment the rewards stop flowing. (Deci *et al.*, 1999)^[9]. Together these theories describe how gamification can be multifaceted tool in the marketing:

- SDT explains how gamification meets intrinsic needs leading to engagement.
- Flow Theory explains gamified experiences can captivate customers and encourage ong term interaction.
- Operant Conditioning explains how rewards can reinforce specific behaviors.

Gamification is thus a fuel for customer engagement. It taps into the brain's wiring to boost interest and goodwill to brand. The trick is mastering that perfection between inner drives and outer rewards. Keeping customers hooked without letting them crash into boredom and this frustration. It is about injecting game like mechanics into places where these ideas were total aliens before. When done proper it makes interactions spike it is not just building a customer base it is forging rock solid foundation where repeat sales are a given. That is how you push the boundaries of what a brand can be.

3. Gamification and customer goodwill

Gamification benefits organisation by enhancing customer goodwill through intrinsic motivator approach that generates a sense of competitiveness, social interaction and goal-oriented activities (Malik, Saha & Srivastava, 2024)^[38]. The marketers can adopt gamification principles including progress tracking and reward-based system for the customers (Eisingerich *et al.*, 2019)^[13]. Baranidharan, Sophia & Mohan (2023)^[3] advocates the critical role played by the gamification tools in enhancing customer engagement by establishing emotional connect and encouraging active participation. Katyal, Lal & Rena, 2024 who studies toy industry (primarily hamley and first cry) profess that gamification must have characteristics such as setting challenges and rewards for the customers, aligning the ideology of customer with brand and introducing virtual currency in games. Finding of Tsou & Putra, (2023) suggest two more elements of gamification such as point system and enjoyable experience to the customers that entices the engagement level of customer and provides them with dynamic experiences altogether. To survive in the competitive industry the organization need to not only add new customers but to retain the present customers as well. Zhang *et al.*, (2023) studies gamification strategy of mobile payment-based platforms and suggest four feature that helps in retaining the customers including reward system, competitive spirit in customers, interactive and speedy feedback mechanism and cooperative attitude of employee with the customers.

These game-like mechanics not only make interactions more enjoyable but also drive customers to engage repeatedly. Gamification stimulates the spirit of competitiveness in human beings and impacts the need to be seen and get recognition (Baranidharan, Sophia & Mohan, 2023)^[3]. This leads on to continuous interactions which the customer has with the brand and pointing at brand occupying mind space with the target audience for a sustained period of time to affect a sale. Social features, multiplayer challenges, community-driven goals and shared achievements lead to the achievement of the desired business goals. (Malik, Saha & Srivastava, 2024)^[38]

Table 1: Brand and gamification elements for organization

Brand Element	Definition	Impact of Gamification	Literature
Customer Goodwill	The motivations the consumer shows with respect to the business in question.	Active participation, emotional connection, dynamic interaction	Malik, Saha & Srivastava (2024) ^[38] ; Baranidharan, Sophia & Mohan, (2023) ^[3] ; Katyal, Lal & Rena (2024); Tsou & Putra (2023)
Brand Loyalty	The inclination of a potential customer to stick to a particular brand.	Increased loyalty, Brand love, advocacy, willingness to pay higher	Malik, Saha & Srivastava (2024) ^[38] ; Arcas, Gil & Moreno (2022); Halim <i>et al.</i> , (2024) ^[17]
Brand Equity	The perceived value and strength of a brand based on customer perceptions and experiences.	Enhanced brand perception, value co-creation, desirable consumer behaviour	Baranidharan, Sophia & Mohan (2023) ^[3] ; Ebrahimi <i>et al.</i> , (2024) ^[12] ; Xi & Hamari (2020)

source: author's analysis

Gamification and Brand Loyalty

Table 1 showcases that gamification and loyalty towards a particular brand walk hand in hand when it comes to customers' preferences if done effectively. The marketers must be able to make the customer identify with their brand as it draws the loyalty towards the brand (Rather, Tehseen & Parrey, 2018)^[44]. Bravo, Catalán & Pina, (2023)^[5] suggests that loyalty programmes can be made appealing for the customer by introducing element of reward system and playfulness in customers through gamification. Halim *et al.*, 2024^[17] studied gamification impact of SMEs by employing PLS-SEM methodology and found that intrinsic motivator builds loyalty for the brand which can be introduced through badges and leaderboard. Malik, Saha & Srivastava, (2024)^[38] incorporated survey and interview method and finds a positive impact of gamification on brand loyalty for online tourism sector. Brands can uphold long-term relationship with customer by drawing their loyalty whilst surpass the cut-throat competition of companies in the same industry.

Gamification and Brand Equity

The organisation that profess brand engagement through gamification can also increase brand equity (Xi & Hamari, 2020). When brands toss in games like fun challenges, points you can rack up, and leaderboards you can climb, they are building these setups that tighten up that bond which is between customers and the brand itself. It rakes in engagement and people become more aware of the brand, sticking with it longer, talking it up to their friends and acquaintances and even ignore bad news all of which keeps the goodwill strong. (Ebrahimi *et al.*, 2024; Xi & Hamari, 2020)^[12]. Tanouri, Mulcahy & Russell-Bennett (2019) demonstrates that gamification moderates the relationship between brand equity and social behavior. Alibakhshi *et al.*, (2024)^[2] uses smart PLS- 3 to test whether gamification improves CSR promoted through gamification improves brand equity or not for shared economy (SE) platform. They noted a positive impact on brand equity of CSR induced gamification activities.

There is another big aspect of gamification which is teaming up with customers to establish value together. When brands get people into the mix with things like making their own content, dropping reviews or tackling innovation challenges, they are in a sense handing customer the reins to help shape things and spread the word (Baranidharan, Sophia & Mohan, 2023)^[3]. Gamification starts this lively, back and forth where customers are not just buying, they steer what the brand stands for and how people see it out there. With all this in play, it is a strategy for building and hanging onto heavy brand strength, especially in this cutthroat digital race.

4. Key Factors for Successful Gamification Implementation

Meaningful Rewards: A well-executed gamification strategy should incorporate rewards that hold real value for customers while reinforcing the brand's identity. Simply offering generic incentives may not be effective; instead, brands should align rewards with customer preferences and motivations. Whether through exclusive discounts, early access to products, or personalized recognition, meaningful rewards create a sense of achievement and deepen customer-brand relationships (Katyal, Lal & Rena, 2024). This, in turn, enhances engagement, loyalty, and long-term brand advocacy.

Game Mechanics and Aesthetics: The success of gamification relies heavily on its design, including the mechanics that drive participation and the aesthetics that create an immersive experience. Elements like progress tracking, interactive storytelling, and visually appealing interfaces play a crucial role in sustaining user engagement. A well-structured gamification system ensures that customers feel challenged, entertained, and motivated to continue interacting with the brand, ultimately contributing to brand value co-creation (Baranidharan, Sophia & Mohan, 2023)^[3].

Personalized Experiences: Customization is essential for maximizing the impact of gamification. By leveraging customer data and behavioral insights, brands can tailor game mechanics, challenges, and rewards to align with individual preferences. Personalized experiences make gamification more relevant and engaging, strengthening emotional connections and encouraging long-term customer loyalty (Halim *et al.*, 2024)^[17].

Social satisfaction to customers: In education sector gamification brings an element of influencing psychological aspects of human. Gamification introduces either competitiveness or cooperation among the users which further enhances their learning ability or associating with the brand (Zhang *et al.*, 2023). Gamification allows the marketer to understand the cultural aspect of customers thereby providing personalised experience to them (Lopes, Schreurs, Licour & Soares, 2024)^[35].

Continuous Optimization: To ensure long-term success, gamification should not be a static strategy. Brands must continuously monitor user engagement metrics, gather feedback, and refine their gamified elements accordingly. A/B testing, regular updates, and evolving challenges help keep customers interested and prevent gamification fatigue. Adaptability ensures that the strategy remains effective in driving engagement, loyalty, and brand equity.

5. Classification of gamification strategies

The prevalence of gamification is evident across various industries, with companies tailoring strategies to their specific contexts. Retail giants like Starbucks utilize points-based reward programs, where customers earn stars for purchases, redeemable for free items, encouraging repeat engagement. Fitness brands like Nike employ leaderboards and challenges in their Nike+ app, motivating users to achieve fitness goals and deepening their connection with the brand. In energy industries, the organizations have used

gamification for ensuring outstanding management of human resource which are key pillars to success and growth (Polyanska *et al.*, 2022) [41]. The highest advancement has been seen by education sector and retail sector while tourism sector and health sector are still up and coming in this regard (Johnson, 2016; Behl *et al.*, 2024; Insley & Nunan, 2014) [4, 26, 28]. In the table below the classification has been in respect to education sector as the advancement in the literature has been highest for education sector.

Table 2: Gamification Elements in Education with Citations

Gamification Element	Description	Citation
Points-based Systems	Users earn points for completing tasks or achieving goals, motivating and tracking progress.	Dicheva <i>et al.</i> (2015) [11]
Badges and Achievements	Visual rewards (e.g., badges, trophies) given for accomplishments to recognize and encourage learners.	Hakulinen, Auvinen & Korhonen (2015) [16]
Leaderboards and Competitions	Rankings or competitive elements that display performance, fostering motivation through competition.	Landers, Bauer & Callan (2017) [31]
Games and Challenges	Interactive activities or serious games designed to engage learners and develop skills through play.	Connolly <i>et al.</i> (2012) [7]
Interactive Quizzes and Surveys	Gamified tools offering immediate feedback and engagement through quizzes or surveys.	Wang & Tahir (2020)
Virtual Reality and Augmented Reality	Immersive technologies simulating real-world environments or adding digital layers to enhance learning.	Radianti <i>et al.</i> (2020) [42]
Simulation and Training Games	Games replicating real-world scenarios for practicing skills in a safe environment.	Sitzmann (2011)
Social and Community Features	Features encouraging interaction, collaboration, and community among learners.	Hamari & Koivisto (2015) [19]
Personalization and Customization	Tailoring experiences to individual preferences or need, such as personalized learning paths.	Codish & Ravid (2014) [6]
Storytelling and Narrative	Narrative elements providing context and engagement to make learning more meaningful.	Squire (2011)

Source: author’s analysis

6. Discussion and analysis

Research suggests gamification, using game elements like points and challenges, boosts customer engagement and brand loyalty for many companies. It seems likely that companies like Starbucks and Nike use points systems and leaderboards, while others like KFC and Duolingo employ games and quizzes. The evidence leans toward effectiveness, but challenges like over-saturation and ethical concerns exist, with varying success across industries.

Many companies use gamification in different ways. For instance, Starbucks lets you earn stars for coffee purchases, while Nike’s app has fitness challenges with leaderboards. Even IKEA uses virtual reality to make shopping fun, showing how diverse these strategies can be.

Figure 1 shows that games are the most widely used gamification element, with nine companies incorporating

them to engage and entertain users. This highlights their effectiveness in capturing attention and driving interaction. Points (7) and badges (6) are also quite popular, often working together as reward mechanisms to encourage progress and sustained participation. On the other hand, social features and quizzes are the least commonly used, each appearing in just one company. This suggests they may serve more niche purposes or be effective only in specific contexts. Meanwhile, elements like VR/AR, personalization, and various other strategies are used by two companies each, indicating that while they have potential, they might still be emerging or applied in more targeted ways. Overall, companies seem to gravitate toward tried-and-tested gamification methods, while newer or more specialized approaches are gradually finding their place in the landscape.

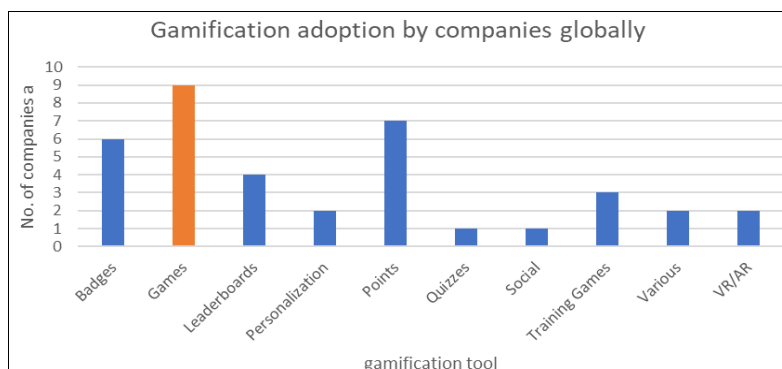


Fig 1

Emerging themes and future direction

The application of gamification across various sectors is expected to continue its growth, with several emerging themes suggesting significant avenues for future research. In the realm of “e-wallets and mobile payments”, gamified elements are gaining prominence for their ability to enhance user engagement, retention, and satisfaction. Integrating reward mechanisms and mission-based engagement strategies has the potential to drive recurring usage, thereby improving the overall user experience. Research could explore how game-focused features in e-wallet apps lead to higher transaction frequencies and increased customer loyalty. In the field of “customer brand engagement”, gamification strategies remain a critical focus due to their effectiveness in fostering stronger consumer-brand relationships. The academician can examine the relationship between gamified B2C and customer engagement by particularly focusing on education and advertising industry and observe whether gamification enhances the students learning and create larger customer pool respectively (Hakak *et al.*, 2019; Terlutter & Capella, 2013)^[15].

After the pandemic cashless transactions have vastly expanded, Lim *et al.*, (2022)^[33] examines whether e-wallet gift continues the customer to keep using the application or not. In this light the future studies can discuss role of reward based gamification on customer retention. Our finding suggest that the relationship between gamification and consumer engagement is a persistent theme in the field (Eisingerich *et al.*, 2019; Abou-Shouk & Soliman, 2021; Hsu, 2023; Malik, Pradhan & Rup, 2025; Jami Pour, Rafiei, Khani & Sabirrazm, 2021; Rasool, Shah & Islam, 2020)^[1, 13, 23, 27, 37, 43]. Researcher can extend the theme by making a comparative analysis of engagement between various industries. From the industry perspective, education sector and gamification has been a consistent theme observed in the past literature (Dicheva *et al.*, 2015; Oliveira *et al.*, 2023; Van Roy & Zaman, 2018; Zeybek & Saygi, 2024; Ofosu-Ampong, 2020; Luo, 2022)^[11, 36, 39, 40]. The study recognizes that the research should shift their attention towards industries which have been least explored such as manufacturing and health sector

Conclusion

Gamification provides competitive edge to the businesses by engaging the customer at a higher rate. The business adapts to these gamification techniques to have leverage above their competitors. With the advantages, gamification tools bring challenges as well for the business. The current study reveals these challenges and successful strategy to implement the gamification based on a narrative review-based methodology. The finding suggests that gamification has the power to bring brand equity, loyalty and engagement of customer to the business. For better implementation business can introduce personalisation, reward strategy, gaming, social satisfaction and continuous optimization. Secondly the study notes the research in education sector, retail, hospital industry to be extensive compared to other industry and therefore suggest the researcher to focus their attention towards the industry towards manufacturing and health sector. The study being insight for scholars and marketers. Although the future review studies can incorporate Bibliometric analysis tool to get better results.

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