

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

## TO PLAY OR NOT TO PLAY: THE USE OF GAMIFICATION IN THE FASHION RETAIL INDUSTRY

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## ARTICLE DETAILS

## Article History:

Received 22 May 2022  
Accepted 28 June 2022  
Available online 30 June 2022

## ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has devastated the world economy, affecting many industries. Given the growing inadequacies of traditional marketing communication channels in the digital age, fashion retailers are looking at innovative ways of communicating with consumers. Gamification's efficacy as a marketing communication's tool can be linked to its potential to satisfy users' intrinsic needs, ostensibly through evoking a pleasurable consumer experience via autotelic use reminiscent of videogame engagement. The goal of this study was to investigate the use of gamification in the fashion retail industry. A qualitative approach was followed by means of an exploratory research design. Judgement sampling was used to identify a total of 25 participants from whom data was gathered by means of conducting three focus groups. Data was analysed by means of the Morse and Field approach using Atlas.ti. The results indicate that consumers are aware of gamification and enjoy using it, describing it as a fun and enjoyable experience. Consumers' primary motivation for using gamification applications is to gain financial benefit in the form of discounts, vouchers, points or rewards. The dominant challenges identified with using gamification applications are that they do not provide a user-friendly interface, as well as privacy and security concerns and connection issues.

## KEYWORDS

Fashion Retail, Gamification, Integrated Marketing Communication.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

From the onset of digitalisation, new practices in the marketing communication field are emerging that are perpetually creating a slew of opportunities upon which marketers can capitalise (Pedersen and Ritter, 2020). More recently, gamification has exploded in popularity (Lowry et al., 2018). Crucially, gamification has been touted as a next generation method for the marketing domain aimed at facilitating behavioural change in users, however since gamification is an emerging type of system, there is a dearth of practice-based knowledge that can guide the development of successful gamified systems (Jansen and Lucasse, 2014; Liu et al., 2017). A rich domain is therefore represented in which important contributions can be made through developing theory-driven principles leading to successful outcomes for organisations. Several gaps were identified from a review of previous gamification studies.

So far, gamification research has been dominated by what aptly refers to as an "additive deterministic paradigm", that is, most of the studies show an overemphasis on gaming elements, which is seen as proof of additive-deterministic thought (Deterding, 2014). Helmeffalk laments that overemphasising gaming elements are frequently mentioned in the context of gamification, often to the point of misleading practitioners into thinking that merely implementing these would guarantee results (Helmeffalk, 2019). A group of researchers propose that present research studies should embrace more nuanced and less deterministic theoretical and design approaches (Ahuja et al., 2017).

As a case in point, according to there is a need to focus on how the participant experiences gamification (Bekk et al., 2018). A review of gamification literature supports a lack of emphasis on contextual variables in gamification research. According to the success of gamification is "very

context-dependent, due to the various intrinsic and extrinsic motivators involved with the different activities" (Kasurinen and Knutas, 2018). Fashion is a relevant context to frame given that the fashion industry is becoming a fertile ground for the integration of digital tools within the experience of consumers (Cantoni and Kalbaska, 2019). Moreover, the level of rivalry in the fashion retail environment has increased significantly urging marketers to use new and creative tactics for increasing brand visibility and attracting customers (Nagaraj, 2020; Yao, 2018).

Reflecting on such an intricate landscape, this study explores gamification in the fashion retail industry. This study expands on gamification research by means of literature investigation and rigorous qualitative methods to evaluate the prospective contribution of gamification to the fashion retail industry. The study focuses on customers' awareness and use of gamification applications. In addition, the study explores whether fashion retail gamification applications contribute to brand awareness, customer loyalty, and retention.

### 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

#### 2.1 Integrated Marketing Communication

Previous research confirmed the significant role of integrated marketing communication (IMC) in empowering an organisation's competitive strategies (Ciravegna et al., 2020; Luxton et al., 2017). Specifically, the power of IMC as a marketing capability drives the achievement of superior performance (Alarcón-del-Amo et al., 2021; Luxton et al., 2015). In this regard consider IMC to be a marketing capability that aids in the conversion of the organisation's resources into desirable brand outcomes (Luxton et al., 2015). IMC is defined as a strategic organisational process

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DOI:  
10.26480/mecj.02.2022.59.63

of cross-functional integration of marketing communication within the scope of an organisation's activities with the aim of cultivating a competitive advantage (Kerr and Patti, 2015; Kliatchko and Schultz, 2014).

A group researchers position IMC as an organisation-wide market-related implementation mechanism that optimises communication approaches to achieve superior communication efficacy, whilst practitioners claim that IMC entails the entire business process, not just marketing communications (Kliatchko and Schultz, 2014; Luxton et al., 2017). However, the conceptualisation of IMC as a broader organisational approach is beyond this study's scope. For the purpose of this study, empirical research was solely based upon the narrower promotional approach of IMC in organisations within the fashion industry.

## 2.2 The Fashion Industry

With the emergence of the commercial and industrial revolution towards the end of the 18th century, fashion evolved into an industry. Since then, the industry has grown exponentially and continues to grow as the world's population increases (Arbuckle and Sterlacci, 2017). By definition, the fashion industry refers to activities associated with the different steps in the production and value chain from the transformation of natural or synthetic material into fabrics and yarns to the production of products such as textiles and synthetic yarns to the manufacturing of fashion goods by contractors, designers and manufacturers to e-commerce, retail and wholesale (Tortora and Tortora, 2021). An organisation can complete all the phases itself, or different organisations in the supply chain can complete each phase. The aim of each of the role players in the fashion supply chain is to meet the demands of stakeholders in order to realise a profit (Chavan, 2018).

In 2020, COVID-19 brought the global economy to its knees and the fashion

industry was not spared the ravages wrought by the pandemic (Moloi-Motsepe, 2020). As the pandemic wreaked havoc worldwide, the fashion industry suffered its worst period on record with almost three-quarters of publicly traded organisations losing money (McKinsey, 2020). The global fashion market size reached a value of nearly \$527.1 billion in 2020, after declining at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of -0.6% since 2015 (Intrado GlobeNewsWire, 2021). Fashion retail sales fell by 28% year-over-year, through November 2020, the steepest drop in all of retail. Department stores that rely heavily on fashion, garnered a 17.5% loss in revenue (Danziger, 2020). The global economic slowdown triggered by COVID-19 has resulted in a huge drop in demand for fashion products. Fortunately, the market is projected to recover and grow at a CAGR of 9.8% from 2020 and reach an approximated \$842.7 billion market value by 2025, and a further \$1 138.8 billion by 2030 (Intrado Globe News Wire, 2021).

Despite the fact that the impact of COVID-19 on the fashion retail industry remains uncertain both locally and internationally, there is a significant opportunity in tapping into this industry's potential (Le Guern, 2020). According to a report by the primary driver of growth in the fashion retail industry will continue to be digitisation which is seen as a silver lining that presents the greatest opportunity for fashion retail in the coming years (McKinsey, 2020). Organisations and marketers in the fashion retail industry ought to use this "silver lining approach", capitalising on bright points in the proverbial storm. Optimism towards digital and sustainability is consistent with the commonly held belief that, considering the uncertainty caused by the pandemic, these developments, which were still in motion prior to the crisis, would continue and, as a result, contribute to a reset of the apparel industry (McKinsey, 2020). Figure 1 exhibits the major challenges and opportunities for the fashion industry, brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, indicating that digitisation provides the biggest opportunity for this industry.

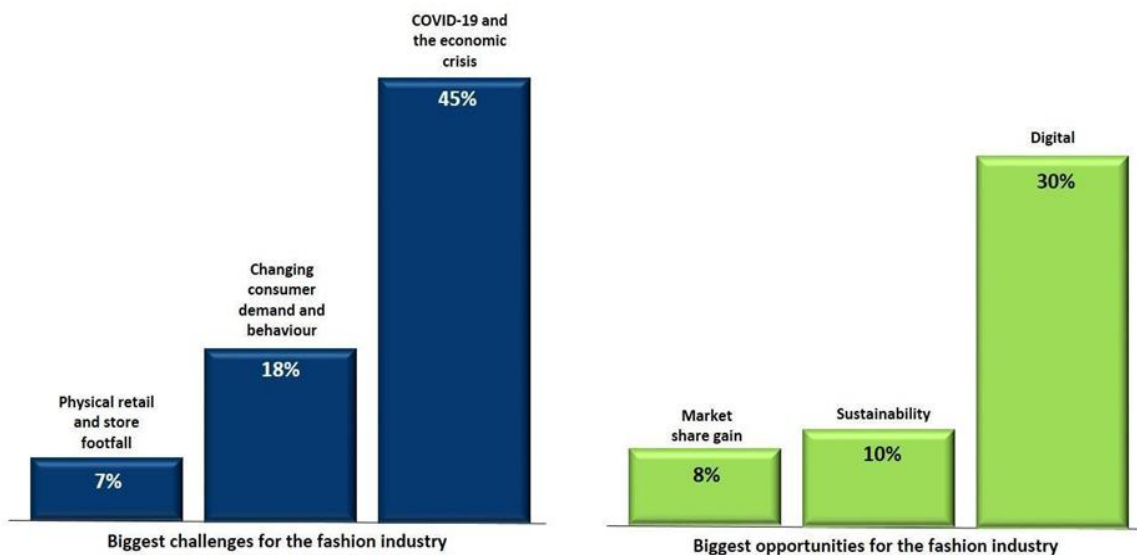


Figure 1: Biggest challenges and opportunities for the fashion industry (Source: Adapted from McKinsey, 2020).

## 2.3 Digital Marketing in The Fashion Industry

Marketing today is very different from marketing in the past, as per the significant growth in the fashion retail industry. With the advent of advertisements in the 1920s, and later other marketing campaigns, as well as the transition from text-based commercials to visual advertisements, accompanied by the use of culturally complex messages, there has been a potential for marketing campaigns to have a very strong cultural resonance with consumers. Marketers globally have had to constantly ponder on creative ways to pique the interest of consumers and affect their decision-making when buying fashion items (Joachim and Oniku, 2021). With the fashion industry likely to remain stagnant for some time, marketers must find new sources of demand and devise innovative tactics for their assortments or product offerings in order to attract more consumers. Indubitably the most often mentioned opportunity is the digitisation of organisational processes and activities (McKinsey, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has increased demand for all things digital, enabling creativity, efficiency, and innovative avenues for companies to scale up. The change is permanent, and it will continue to open up opportunities to develop slicker, smarter operating models and distinct consumer offerings that are more tailored to each customer (McKinsey, 2020).

Organisations with effective marketing communication tools can persuade customers to have a positive perception of their offerings, consequently building a differentiated brand image and awareness (Gao et al., 2011). Marketers today have a plethora of marketing communication tools at their disposal. According to the marketing communication mix consists of eight main approaches (Keller and Kotler, 2016). These are personal selling, sales promotion, events and experiences, advertising, direct and database marketing, online and social media marketing, mobile marketing, and public relations and publicity. Currently, the organisation's ability to use effective marketing tools through the virtual space is particularly important for success in the fashion industry. Organisations are forced to cooperate in order to develop digitised communication tools, as well as diverse channels to reach consumers with useful and attractive content that suits their constantly evolving needs. As a result, increased attention is being paid to digital marketing tools like that of gamification (Fiore et al., 2020).

## 2.4 Gamification as A Fashion Marketing Tool

Over the last several decades, there has been an increasing academic focus on games and gaming's various properties, features, and outcomes (Jansz and Neys, 2019). Among the phenomena that testify how games are seeping into academic research, gamification appears to play a primary

role. Gamification can be defined as the process of enhancing a system with affordances for gameful interactions in order to support users' overall value creation, whereby affordances relate to actionable properties shared by an object and an actor, and gamefulness describes a distinct emotional state experienced while playing games (Hamari and Huotari, 2017; Gibson, 1977). It is this experience, which is determined by the individual player's subjective perception, that, in principle, gamification attempts to capture and embed into contexts that have a more instrumental intent (Liu et al., 2017). Since the core of a gamified experience is deriving entertainment, the concept could be appropriate for shopping experiences that are likely to be more relaxing like that experienced when shopping for clothes (Alles et al., 2020).

The experience not only allows for online interactions but also supplements the offline experience. When researching consumer preferences and recommendations for a gamified application, consumers favoured both an online version and an in-store version (Alles et al., 2020). Consumers may use immersive technologies to navigate the brand's digital environment while remaining absorbed in the physical store's elements (Alexander and Alvarado, 2017; Badot et al., 2017). According to the integration can create exclusive interactions and lead to a new type of relationship between the fashion brand and its buyers, both of which would benefit the brand and its consumers (Badot et al., 2017; Huang and Liu, 2014). Gamification can therefore be experienced by consumers in both the real and digital realms. A group researchers state that fashion retailers use gamification as a competitive marketing strategy as it generates customer insights, improves customer experience and meets marketing goals (Alles et al., 2020).

**3. METHODOLOGY**

This study used a qualitative research approach with an exploratory design. A group researchers state that qualitative research allows for the in-depth examination of consumers' experiences (Hennink et al., 2020). A neo-positivist abductive paradigm was adopted, owing to the fact that the reality of the research may be patterned, local and subject to change over a period of time. The population of the study comprised of participants aged 18 and older who have purchased a fashion item in the past six months. Non-probability judgement sampling was used to select participants. Data was collected by means of conducting focus groups culminating in a total sample size of 25 participants across three focus group sessions. The audio recordings were transcribed and analysed on Atlas.ti 21 by using the four steps of the approach (Morse and Field, 1996). The data was therefore comprehended, synthesised, theorised, and re-contextualised accordingly. Trustworthiness was confirmed by considering the criteria proposed by which is to ensure credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability respectively (Guba, 1981).

**4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

**4.1 Consumer Awareness of Gamification**

The participants were asked to define gamification to determine their awareness of the gamification and to deduce if they understood what the concept entails. The majority of participants were either to a great extent or somewhat familiar with the term. Some of their views aligned with the widely agreed upon conceptualisation of gamification in literature. One participant expanded on the current position by providing a practical perspective thereof. Based on their responses, it was determined that the participants interpreted gamification in terms of a game embedded on a website, in-app purchases, engagement, motivation, communication, application, game elements, non-game environment, various usage contexts, and the dimension of interaction. Most participants stated that they had some previous experience with gamification. Most participants used gamification to motivate health and wellness activities and measure and reward goal achievement. Furthermore, participants were introduced to gamification-based applications by family members, friends, social media, advertisements, financial services advisors or brokers, word-of-mouth, employers, school environments, university classrooms, or google searches.

"...it's using the elements of games to engage and motivate people".

*Participant 2:7*

"The application of game-type mechanics to non-game-type settings".

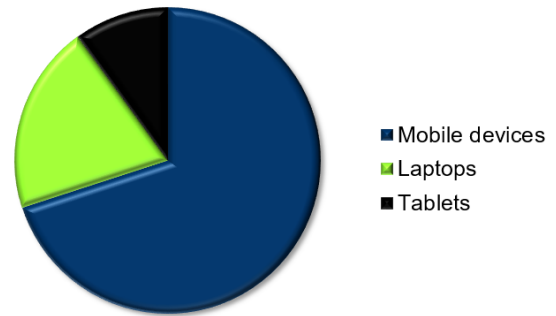
*Participant 3:4*

"The gaming option on a site where you can also purchase things".

*Participant 1:9*

**4.2 Consumer Usage of Gamification**

By looking at the use of gamification, the authors considered the preferred device on which the participants use a gamification application (Figure 1), the reasons for using a gamification application, whether they enjoyed using it, whether they had a neutral feeling toward the enjoyment factor of a gamification application, whether they would be willing to pay to use a gamification application, preferred incentives and challenges experienced with gamification.



**Figure 1:** Preferred Device for Accessing Gamification Applications

The data analyses uncovered different motives for using a gamification application. Many participants used gamification systems due to their interest in financial incentives, learning, rewards, motivating action, self-monitoring, improving employee morale, creating a sense of achievement, interacting with technology, keeping a relationship with a retailer, keeping organised, and wellness initiatives. Financial incentives seem to hold the most value to participants. This means users engage more with the application to earn greater financial benefits as a positive motivational effect. Financial incentives then act as a positive reinforcement for users' regular participation. Learning is another crucial enhancer of users' engagement. Users who enjoy acquiring new knowledge and skills are likely to engage in using gamification systems. Some participants also perceived gamification systems as an important motivational driver to support behavioural change. Users are further engaged by collecting rewards provided by the application. Such rewards can be linked to users' achievement motivations, which then act as positive reinforcement for their regular participation. Figure 2 depicts participants' motives for using gamification applications.



**Figure 2:** Motives for using gamification applications

Results revealed that the participants' overall experience with gamified systems were positive. Many participants mentioned that they enjoyed the use of a gamification application. The participants also experienced a gamified application as fun, engaging, addictive, cool, educative, innovative, interactive, and interesting. Among the most engaging gamification components are the augmented reality function and arcade games, smartphone capability, and interface. The augmented reality feature, which includes creative expression and aesthetic enjoyment, provided strong motivation for engagement. The participants were keen to virtually explore fashion items, which added information and enjoyment during their experiences. The arcade game, which includes sense-making, critical thinking, and problem-solving, provided strong motivation for engagement. Withal, the application kept them engaged and enriched their user experience.

A few participants had either a neutral or negative feeling towards the assigned gamification application. Participants mentioned that enjoyment faded over time and characterised the usage of the application as static and discouraging. They experienced the gamified activities as not challenging enough, perceived the application as too technologically advanced and found the app uninteresting and consequently abandoned their gamified

activities. Participants also associated the gamification application with the idea of repetitive actions. The researcher also asked the participants to express whether they would be willing to pay for these applications. Less than half were willing to pay, since application purchases received acceptance from only four participants. Figure 3 depicts the factors affecting participants' sentiment towards gamification applications.

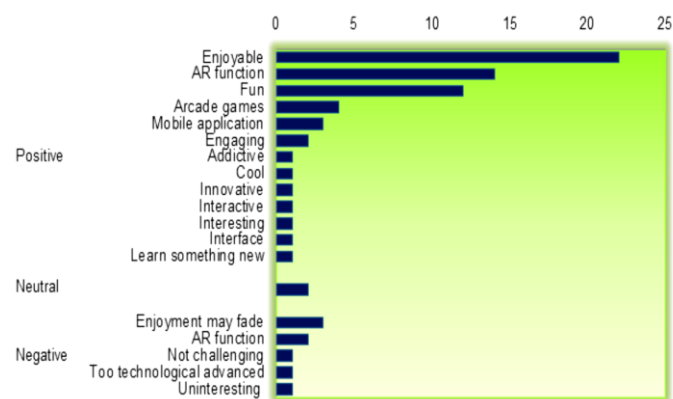


Figure 3: Factors affecting the sentiment towards gamification applications

The results of the study indicate that certain incentives motivate participants to make use of fashion-based gamification applications. These incentives are depicted in Figure 4.

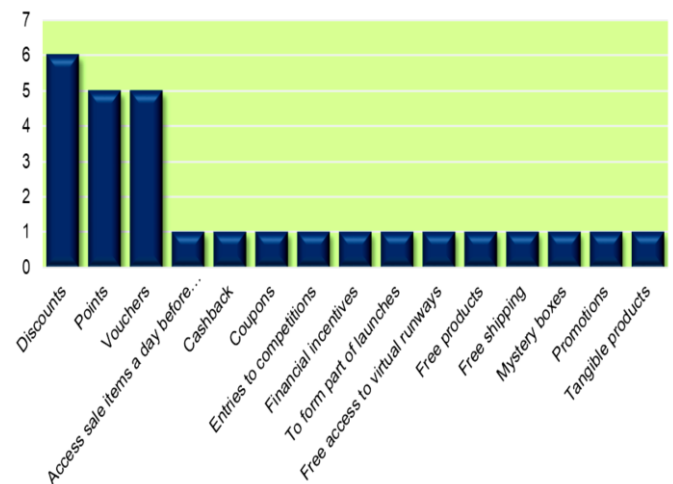


Figure 4: Preferred incentives for using gamification applications

The challenges that participants experienced whilst using the assigned gamification application were categorised into sub-themes of downloading, network connectivity, privacy/security, system crashes, navigation, and usability. Within the download sub-theme, few participants experienced issues whilst downloading the assigned gamification application. One participant experienced slow downloading speed whilst another participant experienced issues after installation. Participants also emphasised connectivity-related problems and system crashes. Among the issues reported, some are technical issues likely associated with device hardware, limitations of the users' internet connection or system programming or setup. Many of the participants encountered privacy/security concerns whereby insecure data storage was a big concern.

Particularly, affordances requiring users to provide location data and sensitive information such as bank details developed less favourable attitudes towards the gamification application. However, some participants had no concerns, with one participant claiming that they normally exercised caution and only downloaded applications from trusted sources. Two participants stated that the application provided the necessary permissions. Moreover, in this study, many participants were unsatisfied and voiced their frustration about navigating the assigned application. Two participants stated that they were unaccustomed to the platform and found the non-linear gamified design somewhat confusing. Nevertheless, the most reported reason why several users could not (continue to) keep up with the platform's activities is because of its poor usability. Two participants factored in the asynchronous and

uncoordinated design. All in all, the results indicated that situational factors or poor gamification design negatively affected participation and hindered participants' user experiences. Figure 5 depicts some of the more prominent challenges faced by participants when using fashion-based gamification applications.

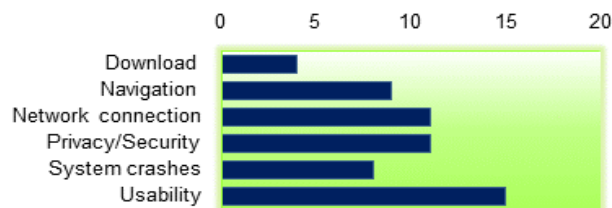


Figure 5: Challenges experienced with gamification applications

By considering the results of the study, the following conclusions can be made:

1. Consumers are aware of the gamification concept and have previously used fashion-based gamification applications.
2. Most consumers access fashion-based gamification applications on their smartphone devices.
3. The primary motivation for consumers to make use of fashion-based gamification applications are financial incentives. This could range from discounts, vouchers, points or rewards.
4. Most consumers enjoy using a fashion-based gamification application and regard their experience as fun, engaging, educational, interactive and interesting.
5. The greatest challenge experienced by consumers when using a fashion-based gamification application is its usability. Most stated that the application does not provide a user-friendly interface, and this causes great confusion as to how the gamification application works. Privacy and security concerns, as well as connection issues were also some of the primary challenges faced by consumers.

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