

REVIEW ARTICLE

GAMIFICATION IN FASHION RETAIL: ASSESSING CONTRIBUTIONS TO CUSTOMER LOYALTY, RETENTION AND BRAND RECALL IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN MARKET

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the influence of gamification on customer loyalty, retention, and brand recall in the South African fashion retail industry, tackling the increasing challenge of customer disengagement in a fiercely competitive digital retail environment. The research underscores a major concern: the imperative for fashion retailers to encourage customer engagement and improve differentiation amid a multitude of customer choices and transient loyalty. An abductive qualitative research design was utilised, implementing the Morse and Field approach to thematic analysis using ATLAS.ti of data gathered from three diverse focus groups with a total sample size of 25 participants. The outcomes indicate that gamification-driven initiatives substantially enhance customer loyalty by creating emotional bonds, promote customer retention through the establishment of habitual behaviours, and bolster brand recall through engaging, memorable interactions. These insights provide practical guidance for South African fashion retailers to develop successful gamification strategies that resonate with their target market, thereby ensuring enduring business achievement in a challenging commercial landscape.

KEYWORDS

Gamification, Fashion Retail, Customer Loyalty, Customer Retention, Brand Recall, South Africa.

1. INTRODUCTION

The retail sector has undergone significant changes over the past ten years mainly due to advancements in technology and evolving consumer habits. The fashion retail industry, specifically, has experienced transformations as an increasing number of customers are opting to purchase goods and services from online retail platforms. This shift has heightened competition among retailers with customers having a plethora of options available online (Hagberg et al., 2016). In order to differentiate themselves and to improve their competitive position in this challenging landscape, fashion retailers are turning to tactics like gamification to engage customers and improve levels of retention and customer loyalty (Mora et al., 2017).

Gamification, which involves incorporating gaming elements into non-gaming environments, is being used to boost customer engagement and influence purchasing behaviour (Hamari et al., 2014). In the realm of fashion retail, gamification entails offering rewarding experiences throughout the shopping process via mobile applications, loyalty programs and social media channels (Hofacker et al., 2016). These gamified interventions aim to enhance the shopping experience by making it fun and engaging, ultimately fostering customer loyalty, retention and brand recall.

Whilst the use of gamification tactics is gaining traction in various markets, very little research has been conducted on its implementation in the South African fashion retail industry. South Africa offers a shopping landscape with a mix of modern practices, diverse consumer groups and an ever-evolving digital landscape (Chigada and Hirschfelder, 2017). It's important for fashion retailers in South Africa to understand how gamification influences consumer behaviour like loyalty, retention and brand recall to remain competitive and relevant in an increasingly digitised market.

This study aims to address this gap in research by exploring how gamification influences customer loyalty, retention and brand recall in the South African fashion retail sector. By implementing a qualitative research approach, the study investigates how customers interact with gamification applications to show how these tactics can bolster customer engagement and ultimately lead to long term business success. The results of this study provide practical insights for fashion retailers in South Africa on implementing gamification tactics that appeal to their target audience in a competitive retail environment.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Gamification

The fashion industry has increasingly become aware of improving brand awareness and customer experience by using various modes of multimedia. Consequently, the subtle implication of a well-tailored clothing item is no longer adequate (Sanders, 2019). Some researchers assert that the competitive landscape within fashion retail has significantly intensified, necessitating marketers to adopt new and creative approaches to enhance brand visibility and attract customers (Nagaraj, 2020; Yao, 2018). The incorporation of gamified components into strategic retail plans improves marketing performance by emphasising customer relationship goals and objectives (Bauer et al., 2020).

At present, video games are recognised as the most rapidly expanding sector within the leisure industry and have emerged as significant icons of modern popular culture (Chatfield, 2011; Takahashi, 2018). The increasing significance of using gamified tactics in marketing is mainly due to their unique features that facilitate a sense of competition amongst customers, especially if games allow multiple players to compete, as it

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creates more enjoyment and motivates participation (Kim and Shute, 2015). Insley and Nunan affirm that the term "gamification" has been introduced to describe the integration of gaming elements into non-gaming activities (Insley and Nunan, 2013).

Hamari and Koivisto is of the opinion that gamification is recognised as a tool that holds significant potential for influencing various sectors including retail (Hamari and Koivisto, 2019). Gamification can be used by fashion retailers to enhance their brand's visibility and to promote product and service offerings, thereby broadening their audience reach

and strengthening their competitive position (De Ruyter et al., 2016). Within the diverse landscape of digital services, gamification fosters enjoyment, leading to outcomes that are pertinent to business (Bauer et al., 2020). It has been demonstrated that gamification effectively alters consumer behaviour by employing mechanisms of reinforcement and emotion, which are primarily studied within the field of psychology. Figure 1 presents a flow diagram that indicates how the implementation of gamification in the retail environment can improve customer satisfaction and engagement.

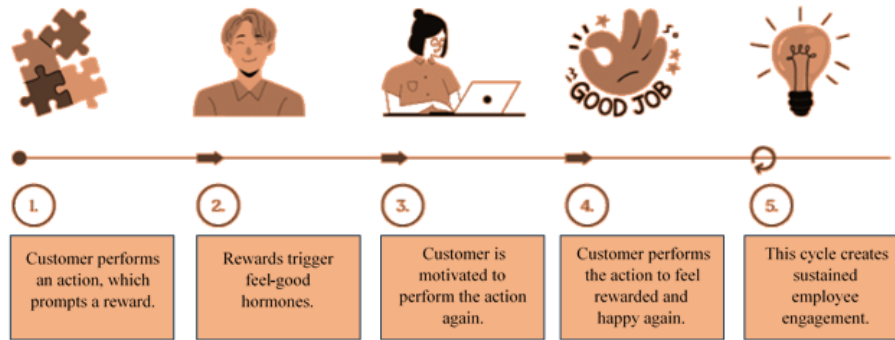


Figure 1: How Gamification Increases Engagement (Source: Kaikhosroshvili, 2024).

In recent years, the use of gamification in marketing strategies have been on the rise, and as such, has gained increasing interest from marketing practitioners and academics alike, swiftly transitioning from a novel concept to a flourishing multidisciplinary domain (Deterding and Nacke, 2017). According to a study, gamification has consequently evolved beyond a mere trend; it is now a crucial consideration for organisations engaging with both internal and external customers, as it has the potential to improve profitability levels and long-term business success (Larivière et al., 2017). In the wider scope of retail marketing, participation in games is often incentivised with financial rewards.

Some researchers contend that this prevalent strategy underscores marketers' belief that the integration of games with monetary incentives achieves business objectives more effectively than either approach independently (Bauer et al., 2020). A study conducted by Goldberg and Nel found that financial incentives were the primary reason for customers to use fashion-based gamification applications (Nel, 2022). In essence, studies have shown that the implementation and use of gamification tactics offer three primary benefits to retailers, namely to generate customer insights, to enhance customer experience and to achieve marketing key performance indicator (KPI) targets (Abou-Shouk and Soliman, 2021; Aebli, 2019; Eisingerich et al., 2019; García-Madariaga et al., 2020; Pandowo et al., 2020; Choi and Hwang, 2020; Fels and Seaborn, 2015).

The proliferation of smartphones has provided motivation for marketers to adopt mobile technologies increasingly as a key means of reaching consumers (Smith et al., 2023). Increased mobile technology brought the surge in the creation of software applications that fully utilised the pervasiveness of mobile gadgets with gamification (Davis et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2023). For instance, the Italian luxury fashion brand Gucci launched the 'Gucci Arcade' within the Gucci App in its retro-styled games that users play and are inspired by their collections. These games drive interaction and allow users to unlock special content and exclusive rewards. Similarly, Nike released gamified features on its *Nike Run Club* app to allow its users to gain badges and rewards via virtual challenges, rewarding both running and brand loyalty. In the retail stores' brick-and-mortar version, Burberry has integrated game play in its flagships—customers can participate in games inspired by designs from the brand and win digital rewards (Johnson, 2024).

2.2 Customer Loyalty

Customer loyalty refers to the prolonged commitment to continue purchasing or using a preferred brand or product, despite situational and marketing influences leading to switching behaviours (Babin and Harris, 2016). Retailers benefit significantly from loyal customers, as they represent one of the most valuable assets, contributing to a stable revenue stream and reduced costs associated with acquiring new customers. According to a group researcher the rise in profitability levels derives from increased customer retention and lifetime value, continued patronage over time, and an increase share of the customer's wallet (Backhaus et al., 2012).

Moreover, loyal customers tend to stick with a brand and are less likely to search for alternative options from competitors (Beck et al., 2015). It is apparent that fashion retailers consider building customer loyalty to be a critical strategic goal (Bellini et al., 2011; Evanschitzky et al., 2012). Thus, in order to improve consumer loyalty and retention, fashion retailers need to implement creative engagement strategies like gamification together with effective marketing strategies. Additionally, by implementing these tactics, brand awareness will be enhanced in areas like overall profitability, brand equity, and recall (Aaker, 2012; Bianchi et al., 2014; Kotler and Keller, 2012).

2.3 Customer Retention

Customer retention refers to the ongoing relationship between a customer and a business (Alkurdi et al., 2012). Sustaining these relationships often yields numerous advantages for organisations. The importance of customer retention in the context of relationship marketing arises from the understanding that loyal customers are significantly less expensive to retain and more profitable to serve over time compared to the costs associated with acquiring new customers, which necessitates the allocation of limited resources and time (Bitner et al., 2018).

Customer retention denotes a brand's capacity to maintain its clientele over an extended period, which is essential for fostering business growth and ensuring profitability. In the fashion retail industry, where trends evolve swiftly, the challenge of retaining customers becomes pronounced. Gamification has emerged as a potent strategy for enhancing customer retention by fostering ongoing engagement and delivering consistent value (Robson et al., 2016).

The Hook Model introduced elucidates how gamification can cultivate habit-forming experiences that promote repeated interactions with a brand (Eyal, 2014). By providing incentives, tailored content, and opportunities for social engagement, gamified systems can effectively sustain customer interest and encourage return visits. Research conducted by Xi and Hamari corroborates this perspective, indicating that gamification has a favourable impact on customer retention in e-commerce environments by improving the overall user experience and satisfaction (Hamari, 2019).



Figure 2: The Hook Model Applied to Customer Retention in Fashion Retail (Source: Eyal, 2014).

2.4 Brand Recall

Brand recall, a significant component in the study of consumer behaviour, refers to the ability for customers to remember a brand when exposed to certain cues. In the fashion retail industry, where customers are inundated with numerous brand messages, having strong brand recall is deemed essential for staying ahead of the competition (Chandon et al., 2009). With a multitude of products and marketing efforts vying for customers' attention, the ability of a brand to differentiate itself and become memorable for customers can have a considerable impact on purchasing decisions and long-term customer loyalty.

Incorporating elements of gamification has proven to be an effective method for enhancing brand recall by creating engaging experiences that customers are more likely to remember (Babin et al., 2021). By integrating gaming elements such as rewards, challenges and social sharing into their marketing strategies, brands can establish impressions that reinforce their identity and make it more prominent in customers' minds.

Research conducted by few researchers, has indicates that gamification significantly boosts brand recall by increasing the frequency and depth of interactions with the brand (Hsu and Chen, 2018). The research indicated that when customers interact with content featuring brand elements, like logos, slogans or specific product details they tend to remember the brand and connect it with positive feelings and experiences. This discovery holds significance in the fashion retail environment, where visual and experiential aspects play a role in shaping how brands are perceived and remembered.

Furthermore, a group researcher emphasised that within the fashion retail industry, gamification can effectively utilise the appeal of products and the shopping experience to boost brand recall (Rodrigues et al., 2016). The fashion industry's focus on aesthetics and trends makes it an ideal environment for implementing gamification techniques that capitalise on stimuli. For example, fashion labels that integrate features such as try-ons, style challenges or rewards for social media sharing can create a more engaging and memorable brand experience ultimately enhancing brand recall.

Moreover, the importance of engagement in strengthening brand recall should not be underestimated. Research conducted by some researchers revealed that gamified experiences eliciting reactions, such as excitement, competition or accomplishment, can further solidify brand recall (Smink et al., 2019). When customers feel emotionally connected, they tend to create lasting memories linked to the brand, making it easier to recall the brand when deciding on purchases.

Using gamification also provides opportunities for customers to interact with brand elements in a fun and novel way, which is crucial for reinforcing brand recognition. As mentioned in a study, repeated exposure to content helps strengthen the connection between customers and the brand in their memory, increasing the likelihood of the brand being recalled when they make buying decisions (Taufique and Shahriar, 2021). This ongoing involvement, supported by the rewards and challenges component, can transform a simple interaction into a lasting relationship with the brand.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative methodology characterised by an exploratory design. According to a study, qualitative research facilitates a thorough exploration of customer experiences (Hennink et al., 2020). The study was framed within a neo-positivist abductive paradigm, acknowledging that the research reality may be recognised as patterned, localised, and subject to temporal variations. The participant population consisted of individuals aged 18 and older who had purchased a fashion item within the last six months. For participant selection, a non-probability purposive sampling method was utilised. Data collection was executed through focus group discussions, resulting in a total of 25 participants across three sessions during which participants discussed their experiences with gamified retail applications and the impact of these interactions on their shopping habits.

The focus groups were composed of individuals from diverse demographic backgrounds in South Africa, including regular patrons of fashion retail outlets. The audio recordings from these discussions were transcribed and subsequently analysed using ATLAS.ti, following the four-step process outlined (Morse and Field, 1996). This process involved comprehending, synthesising, theorising, and recontextualising the data as appropriate. This analysis aimed to elucidate the influence of gamification on customer loyalty, retention, and brand recall and its implications for fashion

retailers operating in South Africa. The study's trustworthiness was established by adhering to Guba's criteria, which encompass credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Guba's, 1981). This methodological framework is consistent with previous research on gamification in retail, including studies by which employed qualitative techniques to investigate customer responses to gamified experiences (Rodrigues et al., 2016; Xi and Hamari, 2019).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The thematic analysis of data gathered during the focus group sessions derived three distinct themes that address the objectives of this study, namely gamification's impact on customer loyalty, impact on customer retention, and impact on brand recall.

4.1 Impact on Customer Loyalty

Participants were more inclined to interact with the brand and continue deepening their relationship by engaging in gamified experiences. Participants stated that gamified experiences allowed them to interact with the brand, finding it a very innovative, fun, engaging, interactive, personalised, and enjoyable experience. Many of the participants not only showed eagerness to participate in experiences that were gamified but were also enthusiastic about recommending and advocating for them. The primary drivers of word-of-mouth communication were a positive brand image, continued enjoyment, information richness, needs fulfilment, positive brand attitudes, perceived benefits, ease of use, and the overall value of experience.

It was also found that gamification increased word-of-mouth brand recommendations significantly, and in some cases, where there were the options of online reviews, open-source platforms, and just an overall pleasant user experience, it was said to be an even better experience. Sharing the gamification experience with friends, family and fellow shoppers was based on whether the participants viewed the brand's performance on the product and service quality as positive or negative. Thus, a positive brand and product perception would be related to improved customer behaviour and repurchase intentions.

"The engagement – obviously it's high and it's fun and enjoyable at the same time."

Participant 1:5

"I think if I do see that there is value in the app, I would definitely recommend it."

Participant 2:2

"Obviously if it is a pleasant experience, then I will recommend the brand to my friend and family."

Participant 2:6

"...you get the opportunity to create a profile about yourself and it's a little bit more interactive and personal."

Participant 3:8

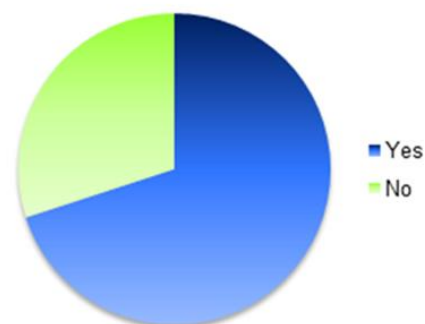


Figure 3: Brand Recommendation Based on its Gamification Application

A study conducted by Kim and Ahn support the findings of this study, indicating that gamification creates engaging and meaningful interactions with customers, hence their loyalty (Kim and Ahn, 2017). At the same time, some challenges could be demonstrated: for instance, the potential of gamification to become repetitive and lose its appeal over time, thus not holding long-term loyalty.

4.2 Impact on Customer Retention

Participants showed a strong interest in interacting with gamified platforms when specific criteria were satisfied. These requirements included attractive rewards, perceived advantages, meeting their needs and overall perceived value. A positive user experience, effective issue resolution, easy acquisition of in game rewards and the attainability of game objectives were also key considerations. Enjoyment, having access to captivating games, favourable brand perceptions, word of mouth recommendations, reduced user effort and regularly updated incentives all played a role in influencing their willingness to partake.

The novelty of the gamified experience piqued curiosity among many participants, prompting them to want to engage with similar systems offered by different brands. However, not all participants stayed engaged. Some lost interest due to preferring other platforms or experiencing periods of inactivity. Additionally, disengagement occurred when the app failed to offer adequate incentives promptly or when enjoyment waned gradually over time. These factors led to a decline in sustained engagement for certain users.

"Yes, of course I would return, especially if there's rewards as you progress in the game."

Participant 1:3

"Many of the gamification apps gets kind of repetitive after a while and the enjoyment factor kind of fades away."

Participant 3:4

"I will reinstall an app if I have a use for it in the time being. So it needs to be beneficial in the time being, otherwise I will just delete it."

Participant 3:7

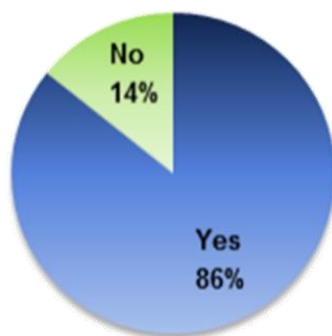


Figure 4: Willingness to Continue Engagement via a Gamification Application

These findings are supported by the Hook Model, which suggests that gamified experiences may create habit-forming behaviour that leads to customer retention (Eyal, 2014). However, the Hook Model also underlines the potential pitfalls when gamification elements are not designed carefully and with correct targeting, risking information overload and disengagement.

4.3 Impact on Brand Recall

The study proves that gamification increases brand recall by turning brand elements into engaging, memorable experiences. It was reportedly found that participants in the study showed a very high recall of the brand after going through gamified applications, especially when a brand was featured front and centre in the game. Visuals like logos and brand colours, other than interactive features, had a huge effect on memory retention. These findings are also supported by who found that gamification can enhance brand recall in terms of frequency and intensity of brand engagements (Hsu and Chen, 2018). Nevertheless, the success of gamification at boosting brand recall may be mediated by the demographic characteristics of the target audience.

5. IMPLICATIONS FOR RETAILERS

The findings of this research carry considerable significance for fashion retailers operating in South Africa. By incorporating gamification into their marketing approaches, these retailers can improve customer loyalty, retention, and brand recall, ultimately contributing to sustained business success. It is advisable for retailers to prioritise the development of

personalised and interactive gamified experiences that appeal to their target demographics, utilising components such as rewards, challenges, and social engagement. These results align with earlier research conducted by which emphasise the advantages of gamification in enhancing customer engagement and loyalty (Hofacker et al., 2016; Rodrigues et al., 2016). Nevertheless, the study also highlights the necessity of meticulously designing gamified systems to mitigate potential challenges, including information overload and customer disengagement.

6. CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

The research underscores the beneficial effects of gamification on consumer behaviour, yet it also points out several obstacles. A significant challenge is the risk of gamification becoming monotonous and diminishing in attractiveness over time. This observation is corroborated by the work of a group researchers which indicates that the initial excitement of gamification can fade if it is not regularly updated and revitalised (Robson et al., 2016). Additionally, the study reveals that the effectiveness of gamification varies among different demographic segments. It was noted that younger customers tend to engage more with gamified experiences, whereas older customers exhibit less enthusiasm for such features. This conclusion is consistent with findings from which suggest that the impact of gamification may be shaped by variables such as age, gender, and cultural context (Xi and Hamari, 2019).

7. CONCLUSION

This research demonstrates that the implementation of gamification in the fashion retail sector significantly enhances customer loyalty, retention, and brand recall within the South African market. By integrating gamification techniques that emphasise personalisation, incentives, and competitive elements, retailers can foster engaging experiences for customers, ultimately contributing to sustained business growth. Nevertheless, the findings also underscore the importance of meticulously designing and targeting gamified systems to maximise their effectiveness across various consumer demographics. Future investigations should examine the influence of gamification on additional facets of consumer behaviour, including purchase intentions and word-of-mouth referrals, as well as assess the long-term implications of gamification on brand loyalty and customer retention.

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