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Utilizing Gamification to Enhance Customer Engagement and Loyalty in the Hospitality Industry

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UTILIZING GAMIFICATION TO ENHANCE CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT
AND LOYALTY IN THE HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY

by

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Abstract

Gamification involves the engagement of game elements and designs in non-game contexts. There is a need to increase the effectiveness of the conventional loyalty program, and implementing gamification has become a popular concept. Gamified hotel loyalty programs differentiate hotels from their rivals by increasing customer engagement and, ultimately, customer loyalty. Despite prior research on the effectiveness and functions of gamification, under what conditions gamification can enhance engagement lacks further investigation. This study draws on the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) to develop a framework linking gamification elements with users' psychological needs, where customer engagement is enhanced when the game elements successfully satisfy the three fundamental psychological needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness. This paper seeks to provide practical recommendations to support the incorporation of gamification in the hospitality industry, offering insights into the development of engaging and innovative hotel loyalty programs.

Keywords: gamification, customer engagement, customer loyalty, hotel loyalty program

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Chapter One

Introduction

Nowadays, many of our daily activities have started incorporating game elements, from fun classroom games to earning free drinks at Starbucks; accordingly, our feelings and behaviors towards these activities have changed. The powerful concept that leads the way is gamification. Common game design elements range from points, badges, avatars to mechanics like competition and time constraints (Goethe, 2019; Rutledge et al., 2018). Their application can be found in multiple sectors such as education, travel, and retail (Joy & Chiramel, 2017; Kim et al., 2017; Negrusa et al., 2015). In 2019, the global gamification market generated \$7.8 billion in revenue and is continuing its rapid development at an annual growth rate of 24.2%, predicted to reach a value of \$76.3 billion by 2030 (Prescient & Strategic Intelligence, 2020). The most significant driver of the market advance is the continuous need of businesses to enhance customer engagement; A primary way this is accomplished is by employing gamification in loyalty programs (PSI, 2020; Robson et al., 2016).

Loyalty programs have been a common marketing tool in the business setting to attract new customers and induce loyalty from existing customers by rewarding recurring engagement with a brand (Kumar & Shah, 2004). Influenced by the prosperity of airline rewards programs, a significant number of hotel chains have developed their loyalty programs, and many have seen big successes (Koo et al., 2020). However, as the idea becomes popular, the competition gets fierce. A typical hotel guest is now a member of multiple hotel chains' rewards programs (Hu et al., 2010). Besides, more than half of these members in the U.S travel sector are not active (Karantzavelou, 2020). As a result, hotels are eagerly looking for ways to modify the program to differentiate themselves from their rivals and better engage the guests. Many have resorted to

gamification as an innovative strategy. Research has shown that gamified loyalty programs are more attractive and better in enhancing customer engagement than traditional loyalty programs (Hwang & Choi, 2020).

Customer engagement has emerged as an important business concept due to its direct relationship with customer loyalty - a higher level of customer engagement would induce loyal behavioral intentions such as revisit and recommendation intentions (Petzer & Estelle, 2019; Sharma & Raouf, 2016). Therefore, attracting customer engagement is vital for establishing a competitive advantage in the hospitality business. As a valuable tool, gamification adds excitement to the loyalty program and has the potential to provide a more engaging experience for the guests (Hollebeek et al., 2021). However, it should not be employed as a golden ticket to guest engagement and loyalty. Gamification is an emerging concept that is still in its infancy. It was reported in the literature that potential risks exist associated with the inappropriate use of game mechanics, which could result in undesirable consequences like demotivation (Leclercq et al., 2018). Besides, different game designs may vary in effectiveness and trigger different outcomes (Sailer et al., 2017). Therefore, implementing gamification requires a good understanding of the discipline.

Purpose of Study

This study aims to gather existing knowledge on gamification by reviewing significant studies and examining its application in different rewards programs, then linking theories with the applications to provide practical recommendations to support the incorporation of gamification in the hospitality industry. These recommendations will offer insight into the development of engaging and innovative hotel loyalty programs. Specifically, the paper explores the following research questions:

RQ1. How can hospitality operators employ gamification effectively to enhance customer engagement?

RQ2. What are the game elements hospitality operators can adopt to gamify hotel loyalty programs?

A gap exists between theory and practice for gamification. Previous gamification studies have largely focused on investigating the effects of gamification; There is limited literature on best practices for adopting it, while practical industry applications lack reference to theories (Leclercq et al. 2018; Seaborn & Fels, 2015). This paper hopes to move gamification research forward from examining whether game elements lead to better user-related outcomes to exploring how the implementation of gamification can be effective.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

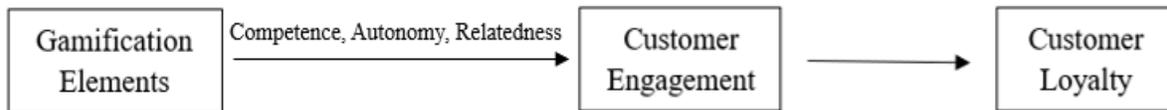
This study draws on the Self-Determination Theory to develop a framework linking gamification elements available for hotel loyalty programs with users' psychological needs, where customer engagement is enhanced when the game elements successfully satisfy customers' psychological needs. Given the direct relationship between customer engagement and loyalty (Petzer & Estelle, 2019; Sharma & Raouf, 2016), gamification could eventually increase customer loyalty.

A great number of existing studies in gamification have adopted the Self-Determination Theory to explain gamification's influences on consumer engagement (Hollebeek et al., 2021; Reiners & Wood, 2015; Tobon et al., 2020). According to the theory, people are more likely to be engaged in a task when they are intrinsically motivated, and there are three fundamental psychological needs (competence, autonomy, and relatedness) needed for intrinsic human motivation (Deci, 1975; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Therefore, in line with previous research, the paper

proposes that various gamification elements can foster customer engagement by enhancing their feelings of competence, autonomy, and relatedness.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework



Problem Statement

Many hotels face a significant problem today: members of their loyalty programs lack the motivation to engage with the program and the brand due to the evolving competitive landscape (Karantzavelou, 2020; Skift, 2020). The effectiveness of conventional rewards programs decreases because they fail to respond to the change in market dynamics (Wollan et al., 2017). The industry needs a tool that boosts the hotel loyalty program to reclaim its value.

Multiple studies have identified gamification as the strategy to address the problem, a solution to customer disengagement (Hollebeek et al., 2021; Hwang & Choi, 2020; Robson et al., 2016). This paper will provide practical guidance on the development of gamified loyalty programs in hotel businesses by reviewing important gamification literature and drawing insights from industrial applications.

Summary

Gamification has evolved into a popular business concept that has the potential to increase customer engagement and, ultimately, customer loyalty (Hollebeek et al., 2021; Paharia, 2013). Despite prior research on the effectiveness and functions of gamification, under what conditions gamification can enhance engagement lacks further investigation, specifically, in the

hospitality context. This research was conducted to probe practical considerations for applying game mechanics to the hotel industry through loyalty programs.

A review of the literature shows that the Self-Determination Theory is the most often used theoretical explanation for why people find a gamified system engaging (Tobon et al. 2020). The theory gives insight into the motivational functions underlying successful gamification, that customer engagement is provoked by the fulfillment of three basic human psychological needs – competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Hollebeek et al., 2021; Reiners & Wood, 2015; Tobon et al., 2020). In accordance with SDT, this paper seeks to explore how purposeful and selective game elements can be implemented in hotel loyalty programs to respond to the basic self-determined needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness. This is achieved by exploring the available gamification elements hoteliers can employ and examining how they can satisfy the SDT psychological motivators that drive customer engagement.

Limitations

This research is subject to several limitations. Regarding the research context, prior academic research on the use of gamification in hospitality is very limited (Xu et al., 2017). Gamification research is primarily conducted in the health and education domains (Bravo et al., 2021). Thus, there is a possibility that the literature review might present an unbalanced view of how gamification operates. Future studies may fill this gap by focusing on gamification's influences and function in the hospitality industry context.

Additionally, gamification research is inconsistent in theoretical foundations. Despite SDT being the most commonly used theoretical framework, several other theories have been brought up in the discussion of gamification (e.g., Theory of Planned Behavior, Flow Theory,

Technology Acceptance Model) (Tobon et al., 2020). SDT represents just one particular psychology perspective; adopting alternative theories may lead to different analyses and insights.

Delimitations

Certain variables could moderate gamification's relationship with engagement, which will not be addressed in this study. For example, user characteristics such as demographic, personality, and cultural background play a role in moderating the relationship between gamification and psychological needs satisfaction (Bittner & Schipper, 2014; Xi & Hamari, 2019). Therefore, one must interpret the results of this research with caution; the recommendations offered in the paper should not be followed as a one-size-fits-all solution, which may not effectively address important factors like customer characteristics.

Definition of Terms

Gamification: The engagement of game elements and designs in non-game contexts (Deterding et al., 2011).

Customer Engagement: A customer's motivational, brand-related psychological state of mind characterized by specific cognitive, emotional, and behavioral activities in interactions with a brand (Brodie et al., 2011).

Customer Loyalty: "A deeply held commitment to rebuy or repatronize a preferred product/service consistently in the future, thereby causing repetitive same-brand or same brand-set purchasing" (Oliver, 1999).

Loyalty Program: A marketing plan designed to induce customer loyalty by delivering incentives to customers through added benefits (Yi & Jeon, 2003).

Competence: The feelings of mastery and efficiency when performing an action and attaining outcomes (Deci et al., 1991).

Autonomy: A sense of willingness and ownership of own behaviors (Deci et al., 1991).

Relatedness: The state and feeling of being connected with others in a social environment (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Chapter Two

Introduction

Both academic scholars and industry practitioners have found out that the effectiveness of conventional loyalty programs is decreasing (e.g., Hwang & Choi, 2020; Karantzavelou, 2020). Gamification deserves attention as a solution to the problem, potentially boosting customers' interest and engagement (Hollebeek et al., 2021; Robson et al., 2016). Overall, implementing gamification elements and mechanics to achieve the desired engaging outcomes remains under-discussed in literature, considering the projected continuing growth of the gamification market (PSI, 2020). To address the gap between practice and theory, this paper aims to combine the knowledge gained from the literature review into a comprehensive guide that supports the design of gamified hospitality loyalty programs. The following research questions will be examined:

RQ1. How can hospitality operators employ gamification effectively to enhance customer engagement?

RQ2. What are the game elements hospitality operators can adopt to gamify hotel loyalty programs?

This literature review will be conducted in topical order. First, a review of related literature on gamification's impact on customers/users is conducted, confirming engagement as one of the main outcomes. Next, the relationship between gamification and customer engagement is examined through the lens of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) by taking a detailed look at the psychological needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Because engaged customers are approved to be more loyal (Petzer & Estelle, 2019; Sharma & Raouf, 2016), gamification could eventually contribute to customer loyalty. Then, the paper identifies the common gamification elements that have been used to gamify loyalty programs and other

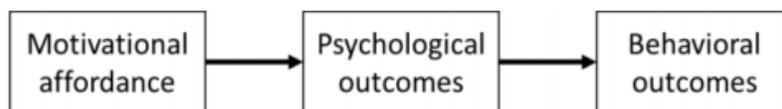
business practices. Meanwhile, examples are provided from a review of trade magazines and industry pages to illustrate the application of gamification in the hospitality context.

Gamification

The most commonly adopted definition for gamification is the engagement of game elements and designs in non-game contexts (Deterding et al., 2011). With its first documented use dating back to 2008, the term gamification can be interpreted as a strategy to develop a gameful experience for users; Achieving this requires the adoption of game design elements such as points, badges, and levels (Deterding et al., 2011). In a service context, the definition of gamification often highlights its goal rather than the method – to enhance an experience in order to promote end users’ value creation (Huotari & Hamari, 2012). It is a purposeful design different from traditional games, which only seek to create enjoyment (Joy & Chiramel, 2017). Hamari et al. (2014) conceptualized gamification, breaking the process into three parts: motivational affordances used in a system, the resulting psychological effects, and the consequent behavioral outcomes (Figure 1).

Figure 2

Conceptualization of Gamification



Note. Sourced from Hamari et al. (2014).

Accordingly, there exists a considerable body of literature on gamification’s effectiveness in various contexts; some provided evidence for psychological outcomes like motivation and enjoyment (e.g., Domínguez et al., 2013; Ortega-Arranz et al., 2019), others observed behavioral changes (e.g., Hamari, 2013; Hamari & Koivisto, 2015; Patricio et al., 2020). The majority of the

existing literature found these user outcomes to be positive (Hamari et al., 2014). Table 1 provides a summary of selected peer-reviewed studies on gamification's effectiveness across different contexts. The review explores the positive impacts gamification has on users' perceptions and behaviors, the core activity or experience that has been gamified, the game elements adopted, and the theories frequently used to explain why gamification works.

This summary purposefully included more gamification research conducted in the service domain to serve the goal of the study. In fact, the search process found education and learning to be the most prolific area for the topic; in contrast, gamified hospitality services/products have been previously assessed only to a minimal extent. These findings are consistent with a more systematic literature review conducted by Hamari et al. (2014) which shows that little gamification research exists in business and consumer contexts despite the increasing awareness of its potential marketing benefits. Nevertheless, as Table 1 shows, the limited service-related research confirms gamification's psychological and behavioral benefits, recognizing it as a successful marketing tool if implemented carefully.

Table 1
Summary of Selected Peer-reviewed Studies on Gamification

Context	Specific Context	Game Elements/Mechanics	User Outcomes	Theory	References
Education/ Learning	E-learning platform	Challenges, Leaderboard, Badges	Attitude, Engagement, Motivation, Learning behaviors	-	Domínguez et al. (2013)
	Massive open online course	Badges, Leaderboard	Motivation, Engagement	FT	Ortega-Arranz et al. (2019)
	Employee training	Story, Milestones	Enjoyment, Satisfaction, Learning improvements	-	Baxter et al. (2016)
Health	Fitness app	Points, Levels, Social interaction	Usage, Motivation to exercise, Intention to recommend	SDT SI	Hamari and Koivisto (2015)
	Web-based intervention	Points, Badges, Social interaction	Physical activity, Health outcomes, Empowerment	-	Allam et al. (2015)
Innovation	Online product co-creation platform	Competition, Social network	Engagement, Excitement, Cooperation, Productive Experience	-	Leclercq et al. (2017)
	Co-design project	Challenges, Competition, Team, Points, Achievements	Contributions, Creativity, Quality of work	-	Patricio et al. (2020)
Service/ Brand	Peer-to-peer trading service	Badges	Usage, Transactions, Social interaction	FT TPB	Hamari (2013)
	Tourism	Challenges, fantasy, narrative, tasks, points, rewards	Engagement, Brand awareness, Loyalty, Entertainment	SDT	Xu et al. (2017)
	Online brand communities	Points, Badges, Avatars, Narrative, Levels, Leaderboards, Social network	Intrinsic motivation, Enjoyment, Engagement	SDT	Xi and Hamari (2019)
	Starbucks loyalty program	Challenges, Rewards (nonsalient, autonomy-supportive)	Motivation, Attitude	SDT	Kim and Ahn (2017)
	Online travel platform	Points, Badges, Levels, Social network, Leaderboard	Enjoyment, Engagement, Trip planning behaviors	SDT	Sigala (2015)

Note. FT, Flow Theory; SDT, Self-Determination Theory; SI, Social Influence Theory; TPB, Theory of Planned Behavior.

Customer Engagement and Customer Loyalty

Customer Engagement through Self-Determination Theory

Notably, although the selected list of empirical studies in Table 1 was performed in different contexts, many of them appear consistent in finding gamification's effectiveness in facilitating user engagement and have identified engagement as the main reason behind the positive marketing outcomes (e.g., Xi & Hamari, 2019; Xu et al., 2017). Besides, several theories have become relevant in the discussions of gamification. Among them, SDT is the most commonly used theoretical framework, especially in the service sector (Table 1), and is often associated with gamification efforts' effectiveness in engaging customers (Tobon et al. 2020).

We will now apply an SDT framework to further investigate how managers can employ gamification effectively to enhance customer engagement. Customer engagement is defined as a customer's motivational, brand-related psychological state of mind characterized by specific cognitive, emotional, and behavioral activities in interactions with a brand (Brodie et al., 2011). As shown by this definition and previous studies (e.g., Alsawaier, 2018), motivation is closely related to engagement and can be interpreted as an essential antecedent of customer engagement. According to SDT, there exist two types of motivation: intrinsic and extrinsic; Intrinsic motivation stems from the inherent satisfaction of doing the activity and triggers most self-determined behaviors, while extrinsic motivation relates to performing an activity solely for the obtainable outcomes (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Although both types of motivation influence people's attitudes and behaviors, more emphasis should be put on intrinsic motivation when employing gamification because it makes the gamified activity self-rewarding, generating greater interest from the individual (Alsawaier, 2018; Deci & Ryan, 1991). Specifically, in a gamified loyalty program context, game elements that stimulate higher intrinsic motivation inspire customers to

be more aware of the program's benefits and thereby willing to engage more and be more loyal in the long term (Hwang & Choi, 2020). In contrast, the positive effects of extrinsic motivation like tangible rewards are usually temporary; extrinsic rewards could even possibly diminish intrinsic motivation (Nicholson, 2015). Therefore, hospitality operators should focus gamification efforts on the facilitation of intrinsic motivation. SDT identified three basic psychological needs of people: competence, autonomy, and relatedness - the satisfaction of these innate needs yield higher intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Thus, to foster customer engagement through intrinsic motivations, gamification elements need to contribute to the feelings of competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Hollebeek et al., 2021; Tobon et al., 2020).

The Psychological Need of Competence

The need for competence involves the feelings of mastery and efficiency when performing an action and attaining outcomes (Deci et al., 1991). People perceive a greater level of competence when completing optimal tasks and getting feedbacks, gaining a sense of accomplishment (Deci et al., 1991). Games commonly support the feeling of competence as challenges are often a core component (Koivisto & Hamari, 2019). In gamification contexts, elements that can clearly showcase users' achievements help them experience competence (Xi & Hamari, 2019). Some of the most popular game elements, like points and badges, satisfy this criterion because of their feedback function that directly communicates the completion of the tasks to the users (Sailer et al., 2017). Competition is also found to influence competence as it results in efforts to achieve better performance; generally, elements like leaderboard promote friendly competition, increasing overall performance and thus satisfying the need for competence (Suh et al. 2016).

The Psychological Need of Autonomy

The need for autonomy refers to the desire for a sense of willingness and ownership of own behaviors (Deci et al., 1991). Rather than applying pressure to control and push specific actions, the need for autonomy can be addressed by encouraging people to decide and act for themselves based on their values and interests (Deci & Ryan, 2004). SDT specifies that, without the presence of autonomy, the feeling of competence is not sufficient on its own to increase intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Thus, for people to be intrinsically motivated, autonomy's presence is necessary. Contextual factors that can influence the feeling of autonomy include choices, time limits, imposed goals, and requirements (Ryan & Deci, 2000). A previous study exploring the effects of rewards on customers' intrinsic motivation to engage in a loyalty program suggests that autonomy-supportive rewards with no deadline, loose requirements, and choice options trigger higher intrinsic motivation than controlling rewards with deadlines and no options (Kim & Ahn, 2017). Therefore, the provision of choices and independence helps address autonomy, in addition to aligning tasks with users' goals and interests, whereas time limits and explicit requirements could hinder the fulfillment of the need for autonomy (Sailer et al., 2017).

The Psychological Need of Relatedness

Relatedness is based upon developing connections with others in a social environment (Deci et al., 1991; Ryan & Deci, 2000). It reflects people's innate need to interact with and feel a sense of belongingness with other individuals (Deci & Ryan, 2004). Contextual factors that involve social interactions - for example, teams, messages, social networks - support the feeling of connectedness and thus relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Xi & Hamari, 2019). Moreover, the game mechanics of cooperation and competition both satisfy the need for relatedness due to their ability to strengthen interpersonal relationships (Xi & Hamari, 2019). Although cooperation has

been a challenge for social activities, game-like, fun, and attractive environments promote collaboration organically (Koivisto & Hamari, 2019). Therefore, the satisfaction of the three psychological needs can be mutually reinforcing; To better enhance customer engagement through intrinsic motivation, hospitality operators need to leverage different game elements to cover all three needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2004).

Customer Loyalty

Customer loyalty is essentially a deeply held commitment of customers to rebuy or repatronize a chosen product/service consistently in the future, therefore causing repetitive same-brand or same brand-set purchasing (Oliver, 1999). Due to this willingness to repurchase and many other benefits such as positive attitude and recommendation intentions, customer loyalty has been regarded as an ultimate goal when developing business strategies, especially in the highly competitive hospitality business (Sharma & Raouf, 2016). Extensive literature has shown that there is a significant direct relationship between customer engagement and customer loyalty - engaged customers are more loyal (e.g., Petzer & Estelle, 2019; Sharma & Raouf, 2016). Notably, some highlight the importance of customer engagement as an intermediary between marketing elements and customer loyalty (Petzer & Estelle, 2019). One marketing tool that can be improved to better engage customers is the loyalty program, which is defined as a business strategy to induce customer loyalty by delivering incentives through added benefits (Yi & Jeon, 2003). Specifically, since customers' engagement with a loyalty program positively influences their general engagement with the brand, higher loyalty program engagement induces greater customer loyalty (Hollebeek et al., 2021). Thus, given gamification's ability to enhance customer engagement, adopting it in a loyalty program could ultimately contribute to a loyal customer relationship (Hwang & Choi, 2020).

Gamification Elements

Deterding et al. (2011) defined game elements as building blocks of a game setting, which appear in most games and are significant to the gameplay. One problem with existing research is that although gamification can combine game elements in countless ways, it has been largely studied as a uniform concept; To truly understand how gamification can enhance customer engagement, the motivational effect of different game elements should be examined separately (Sailer et al., 2017). This leads to the question of what elements belong to the group of game elements and how they can act as motivational affordances to satisfy the psychological needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness. A series of studies have tried to fully identify and organize a list of game elements (e.g., Buckley et al., 2018; Weiser et al., 2015; Werbach & Hunter, 2012). While they overlap on the most common elements like points and badges, some significant differences exist, to the extent that it is challenging to compile a consolidated list from them. This inconsistency in literature implies that the identification of game elements is often subject to individual discretion (Sailer et al., 2017). Therefore, for the purpose of this paper, instead of putting together an exhaustive list, a selection of most commonly occurring gamification elements in the service context is investigated to better understand their roles in psychological needs satisfaction and how they can be adopted.

Points and Levels

Points are the virtual rewards for the successful accomplishment of desired activities, with an underlying assumption that players will participate more in the gamified service in exchange for points (Werbach & Hunter, 2012). The main functions of points include keeping scores to showcase users' progress in the game and linking the progression with extrinsic rewards (Werbach & Hunter, 2012). This ability to measure performance and provide feedback

gives points importance in terms of competence (Xi & Hamari, 2019); however, it does not empower them to influence autonomy or relatedness (Buckley et al., 2018). Levels are sums of points – earning more points moves players to higher levels (Weiser et al., 2015). Levels have the strongest relation with competence among all elements (Buckley et al., 2018). However, when it is too easy or too hard to reach levels, the feeling of competence would be negatively affected (Weiser et al., 2015).

Resorts World Las Vegas's loyalty program Genting Rewards allows guests to earn points through nearly all their activities across the resort, including dining, retail, gaming, nightlife, and spa. The program also lets guests choose the way they are rewarded - they have the flexibility to decide whether to redeem the points for comps, resort credit, or free play. Unlike many other loyalty programs, Genting Rewards has only one advertised card level. However, it introduced digital Milestones, which come with a group of benefits and perks, similar to traditional tier programs with levels. They are earned through points or by qualified hotel room nights (Resorts World Las Vegas, 2021).

Badges

Similar to points, badges are virtual rewards and can be seen as representations of achievements (Werbach & Hunter, 2012). What differentiates them is that the fulfillment of badges is often outside the scope of the gamified service's core activities (Hamari, 2013), and badges showcase the accomplishments more visually (Werbach & Hunter, 2012). The collection of badges set clear goals for customers, enhancing their self-efficacy and resulting in greater satisfaction when completing specific tasks (Hamari, 2013). However, imposed goals could negatively influence autonomy if not aligned with users' interests (Ryan & Deci, 2000). One way to avoid this is to award badges for previously undisclosed activities, encouraging explorative

actions from the customers (Weiser et al., 2015). Badges also serve as social indicators and virtual status symbols when users' profiles are public (Hamari, 2013); players feel a sense of inner satisfaction when their successes are displayed publicly (Nicholson, 2015).

Guests at Resorts World Las Vegas can unlock badges from completing various tasks throughout the resort. For example, playing five different slot machines unlocks the "High Five" badge. Some badges unlock Genting Games, which are fun reward games that can be played on the hotel app or Kiosks. Besides, not all badges are advertised; members are encouraged to explore the resort and unlock surprise badges and perks. The status of points, badges, and current milestones can be conveniently viewed in the resort App (Genting Rewards, 2021; Joingo LLC, 2021).

Quests, Tasks, and Challenges

Quests are specific missions or challenges designed for players in a gamified experience (Werbach & Hunter, 2012). Generally, elements like quests, tasks, and challenges set clear goals for customers, addressing competence (Xi & Hamari, 2019). However, tasks that are more concrete and forced may inhibit autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In contrast, optional quests that provide various activities or rewards options are better suited for a gamified service that supports autonomy (Weiser et al., 2015).

Starbucks has been very proactive in perfecting its loyalty program using gamification and has received positive feedback from customers (Hwang & Choi, 2020). Its loyalty program, My Starbucks Reward, allows customers to earn free drinks by accumulating points through purchases (Starbucks, 2021). One gamified feature it uses regularly is Bonus Star Challenges: Three particular food or drink items will be presented to the customer as a challenge to buy them within a given time limit; when finished, customers will earn bonus points. Starbucks chooses

these products carefully for each individual member - two items are something the customer buys frequently, and the third one introduces them to a new item (Boudet et al., 2017). This ensures the challenge aligns with members' interests but at the same time serves a business purpose.

Leaderboard

Leaderboard enables social comparison, allowing users to see where they stand relative to other participants (Werbach & Hunter, 2012). Its ability to promote friendly competition and provide cumulative feedback satisfy the needs of competence and relatedness (Suh et al. 2016; Xi & Hamari, 2019). However, sometimes, for users to see how far they are falling behind others can be demotivating (Werbach & Hunter, 2012). This is consistent with the finding that too much competition can sabotage competence and relatedness (Rutledge et al., 2018). Ways to minimize the adverse effects include anonymizing and maximizing collaborative opportunities during competition, such as team-based competition (Rutledge et al., 2018). Nike has done a great job of creating a leaderboard experience. Its Nike Run Club App tracks users' run time and distance, compares the results to previous records, and ranks them in leaderboards. The leaderboards are arranged by weekly, monthly, or yearly results and are updated in real-time to move runners up and down the ranks, giving everyone a chance to be on the list (Nike, 2021).

Avatars

Avatars are visual representations of users' characters and are often chosen or created by the player in the game (Werbach & Hunter, 2012). Avatars and other customization opportunities offer customers freedom of choice, therefore, producing a feeling of autonomy (Peng et al., 2012). Besides, adopting or creating a virtual identity makes customers feel belonged to a community; thus, avatars can also satisfy the need for relatedness to an extent (Sailer et al.,

2017). An example is the once-popular avatar My Nike Mini, a fully customizable character as a user's mini-self. The avatar does what the user does, meaning its mood and conversations change daily to match the user's exercising activities. The runners could also share their avatars with Facebook friends or set them as personal screensavers (Nike, 2009).

Narrative/Storytelling

Narrative or storytelling contextualizes activities and tasks in the game setting, providing customers with a more meaningful experience (Sailer et al., 2017). The goal is to make the gamified service fun and interactive for customers to engage in (Xu et al., 2017). When the story aligns with users' personal interests, it has an even higher motivational power (Nicholson, 2015). Research has found that meaningful stories strongly affect relatedness when combined with the adoption of avatars and teams because they foster a feeling of relevance (Sailer et al., 2017).

Chipotle once launched an online matching game via its mobile app following its award-winning animated short film 'A Love Story.' The film tells an emotional story between two restaurant owners and delivers the message of staying true to fresh ingredients. The matching game is designed in the context of the story and furthers the theme in the film. Customers who play the game can receive a buy-one-get-one-free coupon. Both the game and the story reinforced the brand message and received positive marketing feedbacks (Duran, 2016).

Teams, Messages, and Social Networks

As previously mentioned, game elements that involve social interactions such as teams, messages, and social networks support the feeling of relatedness quite straightforwardly (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Xi & Hamari, 2019). Relatedness has particular importance in the hospitality industry as socialization is one of the main goals and motivations of tourists (Xu et al., 2017). However, research has shown that current gamification applications in hotels rarely use these

elements to support collective behavior. Instead, the emphasis has been on affordances that promote individual development, for example, points and badges (Koivisto & Hamari, 2019).

Although not in a hotel loyalty program, one adoption of social networks in the hospitality industry is TripAdvisor. The company incorporates gamification by converting desired website tasks into ‘play’ tasks. For example, travelers gain points each time they leave a review and get badges based on the total number of reviews they have. Other website users can rate the quality of the reviews and have the option to message or send virtual gifts to the reviewer. Besides, the website also launched a leaderboard component that shows and compares travelers’ achievements (e.g., countries visited, photos uploaded, badges earned) in relation to the performance of their network of Facebook friends. It also provides an opportunity for users to connect with strangers who have similar Travel Maps as them. Individual users design travel Maps by selecting destinations they have visited or wish to visit, serving as an element that helps build up an online personality (Sigala, 2015; TripAdvisor, 2021).

Summary

The above literature review suggests that gamification can improve customer engagement when game elements successfully fulfill customers’ psychological needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Given the direct relationship between customer engagement and loyalty, gamification could eventually contribute to customer loyalty. Notably, different game elements support needs satisfaction in different ways. Therefore, there is a need to clearly understand the function of each element and take a cautious approach when incorporating game elements. The final chapter will draw on the insights gained from the literature review to provide practical recommendations for hotel operators to implement gamification in loyalty programs.

Chapter Three

Introduction

Due to the evolving competitive landscape in the hospitality industry, hotels trying to build a loyal customer base through rewards programs are facing the problem of customer disengagement. There is a need to increase the effectiveness of the conventional loyalty program and implementing gamification has become an inevitable trend. The following research questions were investigated to create a better understanding of the discipline of gamification and how to use its power to induce customer engagement and loyalty:

RQ1. How can hospitality operators employ gamification effectively to enhance customer engagement?

RQ2. What are the game elements hospitality operators can adopt to gamify hotel loyalty programs?

This final chapter will first look at the conclusions that can be drawn from the literature review, specifically, the different importance of the three psychological needs and which game elements serve to satisfy which needs. Then, based on the findings, practical recommendations will be provided to support the development of gamified hotel loyalty programs.

Summary of Literature Results

Although there are many gamification studies, most of them exist in the domain of education and learning, gamification-related research in business and consumer contexts remains limited. Nevertheless, the literature review confirms gamification's effectiveness in facilitating customer engagement if implemented carefully and signifies the vital role of intrinsic motivation in this process. To trigger higher intrinsic motivation, game elements should satisfy the three basic psychological needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Tangible rewards that do not address these psychological needs may only induce extrinsic motivation, causing the positive results to be temporary (Nicholson, 2015). This means that when the rewards stop, customers' encouraged behaviors will likely stop too because their actions are only to achieve certain outcomes. Nevertheless, providing rewards for the completion of desired actions is the main focus of many loyalty programs. Besides tangible rewards like free drinks and free plays, points and badges are also forms of rewards. For stable and long-term customer engagement and loyalty, the loyalty program must be inherently enjoyable, and the design of rewards and other game elements must serve to fulfill the three innate needs. Additionally, the satisfaction of these needs can be mutually reinforcing. Thus, game elements serving different results might work better when integrated together.

Table 2 provides a summary of how specific game elements address different psychological needs. Notably, the effectiveness of certain game elements in facilitating autonomy and relatedness is not guaranteed. Unless they are purposefully designed in an autonomy-supportive or relatedness-supportive way, they generally do not produce the desired results. For example, badges and tasks only support autonomy when they provide choice options and loose requirements; avatars serve as social indicators and support relatedness only when user profiles are made public.

A review of the literature and industry applications has shown that the hospitality industry broadly adopts points and badges and rarely uses elements like teams and avatars to support collective behaviors and autonomy. However, relatedness has special importance in the hospitality industry, and autonomy appears to have the highest importance of the three psychological needs. The sense of being in control of own behaviors plays an essential role in supporting the feeling of self-determination. As a result, for customers to be intrinsically

motivated, the presence of all three feelings is necessary.

Table 2

Game Elements' Linkage with the Three Psychological Needs of Self-Determination Theory

Game Elements	Competence	Autonomy	Relatedness
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Achievements ✓ Accomplishments ✓ Feedbacks ✓ Performance measures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Freedom of choices ✓ Independence ✓ Goals aligning with personal interests ✓ Loose requirements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Interpersonal interactions ✓ Sense of relevance ✓ Belongingness ✓ Social comparison
Points & Levels	X		
Badges	X	<u>X</u>	
Quests, Tasks, & Challenges	X	<u>X</u>	
Leaderboard	X		X
Avatars		X	<u>X</u>
Narrative/Storytelling			X
Teams & Social Networks			X

Note. 'X' indicates that the element is capable of satisfying the matching need. 'X' indicates that the element addresses the need only when it is designed in certain ways.

Recommendations

Table 2 can serve as an entry-level guide for hospitality managers to choose the appropriate game elements as building blocks to design an effective hotel loyalty program. There are a couple of important considerations when using this tool to select motivational affordances: First, the combination of the game elements must cover all three SDT needs. Second, the elements should relate to each other in a meaningful way. Lastly, the elements should be designed to have high motivational power in addressing SDT needs.

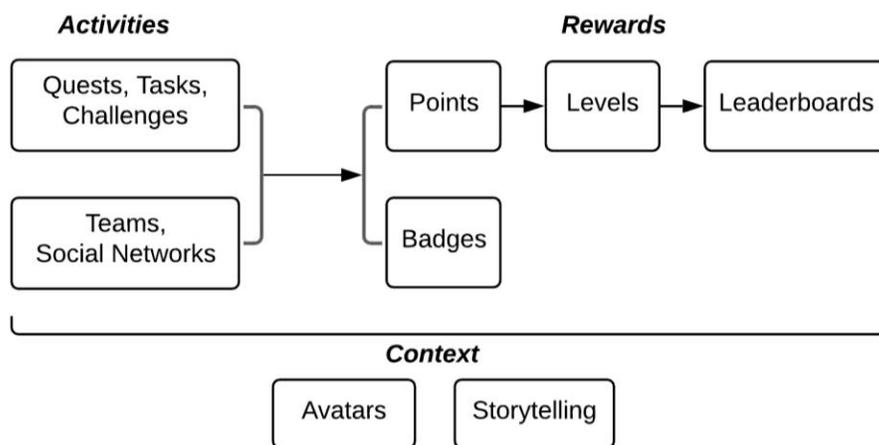
Selection of Game Elements

Designers must understand that selecting a group of elements only serves as a first step in designing a gamified hotel loyalty program; knowing how they work together is also important. Figure 3 displays the relationships between game elements, categorizing them into three groups. Activities are actions designed to be performed by the customers. Completion of these desired

actions leads to rewards like points and badges. Points accumulate and move customers up to different levels, which may affect their positions on leaderboards. Avatars and storytelling are in the backdrop of this activity-reward system, creating an engaging context for users. It is important to note that this suggested interrelationship is developed based on limited gamification literature and industry cases. It only represents the most common design of a gamified system. It is recommended that hotel operators use this systematic design as a reference but do not be obsessed with following it a hundred percent. Designers should also keep in mind that the feasibility and effectiveness of certain game elements need to be tested, monitored, and modified for best performance.

Figure 3

Relationships of Game Elements



Using both Table 2 and Figure 3, hotel managers will be able to look at the adoption of game elements in an integrated way. For example, social network functions would fulfill relatedness but do not support competence. However, commenting on posts or inviting friends to join the loyalty program can be designed to unlock badges or accumulate points, which fulfill competence. At the same time, the program can also adopt avatars to support the feeling of autonomy. Together, the elements would achieve a wide span of coverage of SDT needs.

Depending on the scope of the business and budget flexibility, more game elements can be included to enhance the effectiveness of the loyalty program.

Design of Game Elements

Activities

A gamified loyalty program with forced quests, tasks, and challenges might suffer from no autonomy (Weiser et al., 2015). The recommendation is to let customers decide which challenge to take based on their values and interests. Therefore, activities should be designed to include different choice options and be linked to various rewards options if possible. Besides, the tasks should be feasible with loose requirements and little time limits.

The design of team-based activities and social network features can take advantage of the online environment and mobile apps. For example, the program can encourage sharing badges on social media or motivate guests to send invitations or gifts to their friends. It is also possible to combine competition and cooperation by introducing team-based competitions occasionally. Special rewards can be given to motivate travelers to collaborate and interact, no matter with friends or strangers. Compared to teams, a gifting feature is much easier to implement. Gifts can be designed as points, coupons, or other rewards, to encourage future business from the guest's social network.

Rewards

Hotel loyalty program designers can consider adopting points and levels as a simple and effective way to address competence. In fact, a point-level system is the most common and fundamental design of rewards programs. The design of the point-level system must clearly link customers' efforts in finishing activities with points and points with a variety of tangible rewards. It is recommended that for every challenge and task, share the number of points people can earn

from it. Similarly, display how many points the guest needs to reach the next level whenever there is an opportunity. To further enhance competence, designers can assign a monetary value to their points so guests can visualize their gain from the activities.

Leaderboards are commonly seen in gamified learning environments, but their implementation in a hotel loyalty program needs to be handled with caution due to guest confidentiality issues. If ranked by points and levels, anonymizing might be necessary. Besides, to encourage competition, rankings should be attainable. The program can offer various competition metrics and reset the scores regularly. For example, instead of ranking lifetime visits, rank by monthly check-ins. The goal is to make customers feel the list is not out of reach and prevent disengagement.

When it comes to badges, it is important to allow hotel guests to display the badges to showcase their accomplishments; This can be done by offering the choice to make personal profiles public. Additionally, designers can personalize badges with target activities aligned with guests' interests and create surprise badges to encourage explorative activities. No matter which types of rewards, designers must be mindful of the situational factors and make sure they would not make the system seem controlling to avoid damaging guests' intrinsic motivation.

Avatars

Avatars are not widely adopted in the hospitality industry; however, it is very effective in addressing the feeling of autonomy (Peng et al., 2012). This suggests certain customization opportunities like avatars from the start of the hotel loyalty program design. The program can encourage customers to create their unique virtual identities to express individuality or, based on guests' information, create a series of avatars for them to choose from. Learning from Nike's popular avatar, My Nike Mini, guests' avatars can also be designed to provide real-time

feedback. For example, if the guest finishes a challenge, the avatar's image and stats could reflect and award the efforts.

Storytelling

Storytelling should not be implemented simply because it is fashionable. For high motivational power, the story/narrative needs to be meaningful; the goal is to give meaning to the real-world activities by applying a narrative overlay (Sailer et al., 2017). One possible way is to match the storytelling with the hotel's theme, history, or culture to attract the users and build an emotional connection with them.

Limitations

Despite the industry-wide application, available scholarly research on the adoption of gamification in the hospitality industry is very limited (Xu et al., 2017). The study partly draws on research conducted in other fields such as education and health. The generalizability of research in these contexts varies due to the differences between these fields and the hospitality industry. Another limitation is that the conclusions are mainly theoretical in nature. Although the study looked at industry applications, no information on the effectiveness of these real-life applications can be found. Additionally, the study only covered the most common game elements, and the summarized interrelationships between elements only represent the most common system design. Lastly, many variables could moderate gamification's relationship with customer engagement and were not addressed in this study, for example, user characteristics and the frequency of program usage. These limitations suggest how the literature can be extended in the future.

Recommendations for Future Research

More research in the hospitality context is recommended to further investigate how gamification efforts can facilitate customer engagement and loyalty. Specifically, besides basing on literature review and using results from simulations and experiments, examining game elements' effectiveness in real-life hospitality environments would be a reasonable next step. Furthermore, this study has shown that it is logical to study gamification's impact on users' perceptions and behaviors from psychological need satisfaction. Future studies may explore how hotels could use different game elements to achieve positive outcomes other than customer engagement and loyalty using SDT. Additionally, instead of obtaining a single system design that is most common, research proposing recommendations on a hierarchical organization of the game elements to be used in the hospitality context would be beneficial for hotel operators.

Conclusion

The conventional type of earn and spend loyalty programs are less relevant. A gamified loyalty program can help hotels differentiate themselves from other traditional rewards programs and create a more engaging experience for the guests. This study offers hoteliers recommendations on the adoption of gamification in hotel loyalty programs to induce customer engagement and, therefore, customer loyalty. It clearly understands the relationships between commonly used game elements and three psychological needs known to motivate customer engagement. Solely relying on a basic point-level gamification system is not sufficient to sustain long-term customer engagement; instead, hotel operators need to implement a combination of game elements to satisfy all innate needs of customers. By using game elements as motivational affordances, guests will be intrinsically motivated to engage more and be more loyal in the long term.

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