

Gamification in Online Marketing: A Systematic Review of Current Research

Revin Wildan Baskara¹

¹ Universitas Sarjanawiyata Tamansiswa, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

Abstract

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This study conducts a systematic literature review (SLR) to examine the role of gamification in online marketing and its impact on consumer engagement, brand equity, and behavioral outcomes. By integrating findings from studies published between 2020 and 2022, the review highlights how game elements such as points, badges, leaderboards, and challenges enhance both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. The results demonstrate that gamification is effective in increasing consumer enjoyment, participation, and loyalty, particularly within mobile applications, loyalty programs, and advergames. However, the findings also emphasize that its effectiveness is contingent upon design elements, platform contexts, and individual user characteristics, suggesting that a universal approach may not yield optimal results. Furthermore, issues related to ethics, disclosure, and personalization emerge as critical considerations in the design of gamified marketing strategies. Overall, the review concludes that gamification is a promising yet context-dependent tool for digital marketing, requiring thoughtful, theory-driven implementation to maximize long-term value and consumer trust.

*Corresponding author:
(Revin Wildan Baskara)

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1. Introduction

Gamification has become a prominent strategy in online marketing to stimulate attention, enjoyment, and participation by embedding gameful elements such as points, badges, levels, leaderboards, and challenges into customer journeys. Early conceptualizations linked gamification to motivational affordances in information systems; more recent work in marketing details how these affordances translate into engagement, brand equity, and purchase related outcomes across social, mobile, and web contexts (Koivisto & Hamari, 2019; Hofacker et al., 2016). As firms compete for scarce consumer attention in saturated digital environments, the promise of gameful design lies in its capacity to trigger intrinsic and extrinsic motivations simultaneously, shaping cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses to branded content (Eppmann et al., 2018; Krath et al., 2021).

Empirical evidence in marketing indicates that well designed gamification can heighten brand engagement and, through engagement, strengthen brand equity and downstream intentions. Boundary conditions, however, are notable: effects vary by element mix (e.g., achievement vs. social features), platform affordances, and user characteristics, implying that “one-size-fits-all” designs underperform (Xi & Hamari, 2020; Koivisto & Hamari, 2019). Parallel measurement advances such as validated gameful-experience scales now allow researchers to move beyond proxy metrics (clicks, time on page) toward theoretically grounded constructs that better capture experiential value in branded interactions (Eppmann et al., 2018; Krath et al., 2021).

Despite rapid growth, the literature remains fragmented across contexts (loyalty apps, advergames, social campaigns), with mixed findings about which

mechanics work, why, and for whom. A systematic review focused on online marketing can therefore clarify dominant theories, synthesize effect patterns, and map contingencies related to design, disclosure, and platform dynamics. Building on developments from 2020–2022, this review integrates conceptual, methodological, and empirical insights to identify robust pathways from game design elements to consumer engagement, equity formation, and behavioral outcomes while highlighting gaps for future research on personalization, ethics, and long-term value (Hofacker et al., 2016; Koivisto & Hamari, 2019; Xi & Hamari, 2020; Eppmann et al., 2018; Krath et al., 2021).

2. Literatur Review

Gamification has emerged as a central strategy in online marketing, designed to increase consumer engagement and strengthen brand relationships through the integration of game elements such as points, badges, leaderboards, and challenges. Research shows that gamification leverages both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, which can positively influence attitudes, enjoyment, and behavioral intentions (Sailer et al., 2017). By satisfying basic psychological needs like competence, autonomy, and relatedness, gamified systems enhance consumer interaction and create more meaningful brand experiences.

In digital marketing contexts, gamification has been found to boost user engagement across mobile applications, loyalty programs, and online communities. For example, gamified loyalty systems can enhance customer participation and program effectiveness, leading to greater satisfaction and repeat usage (Hwang &

Choi, 2020). Similarly, studies on mobile apps suggest that gamification drives user enjoyment and sustained engagement, particularly when mechanics are tailored to consumer preferences (Bitrián et al., 2021). These findings indicate that the impact of gamification is not universal but highly dependent on design elements and user characteristics.

At the same time, some studies caution that gamification's effectiveness varies by context and execution. Evidence from advergames, for instance, highlights both positive effects on brand attitudes and potential drawbacks such as reduced brand recall when gameplay dominates brand exposure (van Berlo et al., 2021). Moreover, meta-analytic evidence suggests that while gamification produces generally positive outcomes, the effect sizes are moderate, reinforcing the need for thoughtful design and implementation (Sailer & Homner, 2020).

Overall, the literature suggests that gamification in online marketing is most effective when aligned with consumer motivations, contextually appropriate, and supported by ethical considerations. Future research should further explore personalization, long-term value creation, and the balance between persuasive power and consumer trust.

3. Methods

This study adopts a systematic literature review (SLR) approach to synthesize research on gamification in online marketing. The review method was chosen to ensure a structured, transparent, and replicable process of identifying, selecting, and analyzing relevant studies. The main objective is to integrate existing conceptual,

methodological, and empirical insights published between 2020 and 2022, focusing on the impact of game design elements on consumer engagement, brand equity, and behavioral outcomes.

The data collection process began with a comprehensive search across leading academic databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. Keywords and Boolean operators were used in various combinations, including “gamification”, “online marketing”, “consumer engagement”, “loyalty programs”, “advergaming”, and “brand equity”. To ensure the relevance of the selected studies, the search was limited to peer-reviewed journal articles, conference papers, and systematic reviews published in English.

The inclusion criteria required that articles (1) focus on gamification in marketing, digital platforms, or consumer-related contexts, (2) provide empirical or conceptual contributions to understanding engagement or brand related outcomes, and (3) fall within the publication period of 2020-2022. Exclusion criteria involved studies outside the marketing field (e.g., gamification in education or healthcare), papers not peer-reviewed, and articles lacking sufficient methodological detail.

The screening process followed three stages: title and abstract review, full-text evaluation, and eligibility check based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria. After screening, the final pool of studies was systematically analyzed using thematic coding. The analysis emphasized recurring patterns in game design elements, psychological mechanisms, contextual factors, and consumer responses. Findings were synthesized to highlight both consistencies and discrepancies across contexts, as well as to identify gaps and potential directions for future research.

By applying this method, the review provides a comprehensive overview of the current state of knowledge on gamification in online marketing, mapping the theoretical foundations, practical applications, and emerging challenges.

4. Results and Discussion

The systematic review identified that gamification has been consistently shown to enhance consumer engagement across different digital marketing contexts, particularly mobile applications, loyalty programs, and advergames. A central result is that the integration of game elements such as points, badges, and leaderboards successfully increases user motivation and interaction. For example, gamified mobile applications were found to strengthen user enjoyment and participation, confirming that well designed mechanics can foster long-term engagement (Bitrián et al., 2021). Similarly, loyalty programs supported by gamified structures improved customer satisfaction and retention, demonstrating the strategic value of gamification in building durable consumer-brand relationships (Hwang & Choi, 2020).

At the same time, findings suggest that the impact of gamification is highly contingent on design choices and contextual factors. Studies indicate that achievement-oriented elements (e.g., points and badges) may boost short-term engagement, whereas social elements (e.g., leaderboards and challenges) are more effective in stimulating sustained participation through peer influence and competition (Sailer et al., 2017). However, the “one-size-fits-all” approach often underperforms, since user characteristics and motivational drivers determine how consumers perceive and respond to gameful experiences (Koivisto & Hamari, 2019).

The review also highlighted mixed evidence regarding advergames. While many studies show positive effects on brand attitudes and purchase intentions, others reveal potential drawbacks such as reduced brand recall when gameplay overshadows product exposure (van Berlo et al., 2021). This suggests that while gamification can enhance affective responses, it requires a careful balance between entertainment and brand communication to maximize effectiveness. Furthermore, meta analytical results indicate that gamification produces generally positive but moderate effects on learning and behavioral outcomes, reinforcing the need for thoughtful, theory driven designs rather than over-reliance on superficial mechanics (Sailer & Homner, 2020).

Another important finding is the emergence of ethical and personalization issues. Some studies warn that disclosure of sponsorships or branded content within gamified platforms may improve advertising recognition but simultaneously reduce brand evaluations (Eisend et al., 2020). This reflects the delicate balance between transparency and persuasion in digital marketing. Additionally, the personalization of gamification through user typologies, such as the HEXAD model, has been suggested as a way to align elements with individual motivations and avoid negative experiences (Tondello et al., 2019).

In summary, the results emphasize that gamification is not universally effective but context dependent. It provides significant opportunities for enhancing consumer engagement and brand equity when designed with attention to motivational theory, user diversity, and ethical considerations. Future research

should focus on long-term effects, cross platform applications, and the integration of personalized game mechanics to maximize marketing outcomes.

5. Conclusion

This review concludes that gamification has become an effective strategy in online marketing to enhance consumer engagement, foster brand equity, and influence behavioral intentions. The evidence indicates that when carefully designed, game elements such as points, badges, and leaderboards can create both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, leading to meaningful brand interactions. However, the effectiveness of gamification is not universal; it depends strongly on contextual factors, user characteristics, and the balance between achievement-oriented and social features.

The findings also highlight that while gamification generally produces positive outcomes, its impact is moderate and contingent on thoughtful, theory driven design. Moreover, ethical considerations particularly regarding disclosure and personalization remain central challenges for practitioners and researchers. Overall, gamification represents a promising yet complex tool in digital marketing, offering opportunities for innovation while requiring continuous refinement to address issues of long-term value, personalization, and consumer trust.

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