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An investigation into gamification as a customer engagement experience environment

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to provide empirically generated insights into a gamification approach to online customer engagement and behavior (CE and CEB). There is a substantive discrepancy between popular coverage and empirically based research as to the effectiveness of virtual brand gamification in engaging customers.

Design/methodology/approach – Using Samsung Nation as a unit of analysis, a mixed-methods research design using netnography and participant observation is adopted to address the research aim.

Findings – Taken holistically, the findings identify key processes and outcomes of CE and CEB within virtual gamified platforms. Additionally, insights are provided into implementation flaws deriving from gamification that may potentially impact the CE experience.

Originality/value – The contribution of this paper is twofold. First and from a theoretical perspective, it offers both a conceptual foundation and empirical-based evaluation of CE and CEB through a gamified brand platform. Second and from a pragmatic perspective, the conceptual model derived from this research may aid practitioners in developing more robust gamified CE strategies.

Keywords Brand community, Customer engagement, Netnography, Gamification, Customer engagement behavior, Customer engagement emotion

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Contemporary marketing thinking increasingly recognizes that through non-transactional customer engagement (CE), customers are able to contribute a broad range of resources (e.g. time, knowledge, actions) that directly or indirectly affect the firm and other customers (Jaakkola and Alexander, 2014; Brodie *et al.*, 2013; Baron and Warnaby, 2011; Vivek *et al.*, 2012). While a number of authors tangentially indicate that firms can positively facilitate customers' psychological engagement (CE) by providing effective "engagement platforms" (Ramaswamy, 2009; Payne *et al.*, 2008; Breidbach *et al.*, 2014), the extent that firms are able to manage or influence CE through such platforms is an area consistently identified within the literature as requiring further investigation (Brodie *et al.*, 2013; Jaakkola and Alexander, 2014; Breidbach *et al.*, 2014). Hailed as a "new industrial revolution driven by play" (Dibbell, 2007), game-based incentivized approaches or "gamification" is a potential mechanism exhorted by some as a panacea for CE, particularly within virtual brand contexts (Silverman, 2011).

As a result, gamification has seen substantial adoption by firms in recent years, with an estimated 70 per cent of Global 2000 firms having at least one gamified application (Gartner, 2011). Current organizational adopters include Microsoft, Samsung, Nike, Alfa Romeo and Foursquare. Gamification is driven by the premise that contemporary ubiquitous technologies will converge with "informed, connected, empowered and active consumers" (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004, p. 6) resulting in experientially based CE and consequential positive relational outcomes (Soonkwan and Wang, 2011). However, gamification has not been without its critics and despite an estimated total expenditure of \$938 million on gamification software, consulting and related marketing activities per year (Palmer *et al.*, 2012), there is a substantive and troubling discrepancy between popular coverage and empirically based research as to its effectiveness in eliciting manifestations of engagement, i.e. desired customer engagement behaviors (CEB) and CE.

This study aims to offer empirically generated understandings of CEB and CE within the context of a gamified engagement experience environment. To this end, the contribution of this research is twofold. First and from a theoretical perspective, it offers a conceptual foundation of CEB, emotions and outcomes in a gamified brand experience environment through empirical evaluation. Second and from a

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pragmatic perspective, the conceptual model derived from this research may aid practitioners in developing more robust gamified brand strategies that elicit interaction insofar as it can be used as the basis for identifying and assessing relevant and contextually specific CEB.

The paper is structured as follows. First we examine the CE, CEB and gamesplay literature. Subsequently, we explain the mixed-methods research methodology adopted to address the research aims. We also outline the context of the research, namely, the Samsung Nation gamified experience environment. Findings are presented in two key areas: mechanisms that elicit CEB and emotions and CE outcomes within a gamified brand environment. Our discussion of the findings elaborates on a proposed model for gamified brand experience environments before conclusions are drawn and directions for future research are suggested.

Literature review

CE and CEB

The conceptual roots of CE are widely accepted as lying within the expanded domain of relational marketing (RM) theory (e.g. Vivek *et al.*, 2012; Ashley *et al.*, 2010). However, much of the literature in the RM arena concentrates on existing customer behaviors considered to be reflective of positive experiences and, ultimately, of customer loyalty (Dick and Basu, 1994; Pritchard *et al.*, 1999). To this end, an exchange-centric focus (Vivek *et al.*, 2012, p. 129) encompassing mechanisms such as confirmation/disconfirmation theory (Bitner, 1990) is frequently used to explain the nexus of variables identified within the RM literature that encapsulates positive ongoing relationships (Hong and Wang, 2011). Crucially, however, such approaches do not consider engagement “beyond the purchase”. As such, Vivek *et al.* (2012) propose there is a need for research that addresses:

[. . .] individuals who interact with the brand without necessarily purchasing it or are planning on purchasing it, or on events and activities engaged in by the consumer that are not directly related to alternative evaluation, and decision making involving brand choice (p.127).

As such, CE is increasingly being recognized as a desirable state, with firms using various mechanisms to shape consumer attitudes in the absence of actually experiencing the firm’s service or product offering (Hong and Wang, 2011). This in turn may manifest itself in a positive pre-disposition to the firm’s offering, where CE reflects the cognitive, emotional and behavioral outcomes related to an interactive experience (Brodie *et al.*, 2011). Van Doorn *et al.*’s (2010) concept of CEB, resulting from an engagement experience, highlights that the behavioral manifestations of CE may take place “beyond purchase, resulting from motivational drivers” (p. 254). From the firm’s perspective, mechanisms that facilitate interactions that lead to engagement resulting in emotional (Patterson *et al.*, 2006) and physical actions such as word-of-mouth activities, recommendations and supporting other customers become imperative (Van Doorn *et al.*, 2010; Verhoef *et al.*, 2010). Consequentially, a non-customer as well as existing customer may “attach themselves emotionally to a firm” with relational consequences (Brakus *et al.*, 2009). Indeed, given the absence of any monetary investment, non-customers may be potentially more susceptible to positive attitudinal development through such interaction.

CE and CEB within virtual contexts

The CE concept is considered particularly useful in generating understanding of interactions between firms and customers within virtual contexts (Breidbach *et al.*, 2014). Kuo and Feng’s (2013) meta-analysis of the literature on virtual interactive consumer experiences identifies four principal categories of benefits of such engagement. First, utilitarian benefits encompassing cognitive, functional and problem-solving benefits (Dholakia *et al.*, 2004; Nambisan and Baron, 2009). Second, hedonic benefits encompassing entertainment value (Dholakia *et al.*, 2004; Tynan *et al.*, 2014). Third, benefits to self-esteem such as self-enhancement (Yen *et al.*, 2011). Finally, social benefits (Muñiz and O’Guinn, 2001; Verhoef *et al.*, 2010). Hence, it is possible for customers to contribute a broad range of resources (time, knowledge, actions, etc.) that directly or indirectly benefit themselves, the firm and other customers (Jaakkola and Alexander, 2014). Reflective of this, there is an emerging consensus among academics (Brodie *et al.*, 2011; Ramaswamy, 2009) that CE embodies the “spirit” of Vargo and Lusch (2006) co-creation paradigm through “spontaneous, discretionary behaviors that uniquely customize the customer-to-brand experience” (Van Doorn *et al.*, 2010, p. 254; Breidbach *et al.*, 2014).

However, there is a lack of sufficient understanding on how CE and CEB contribute to the processes of value co-creation (Jaakkola and Alexander, 2014; Breidbach *et al.*, 2014). In particular, the synergistic and iterative effects of firm mechanisms and processes in value co-creation by multiple market actors within a networked context such as brand communities are highlighted as an area that warrants particular research consideration (Jaakkola and Alexander, 2014; Brodie *et al.*, 2013). A myriad of brand community studies have focused on how a collective and “structured sets of social relations” (Muñiz and O’Guinn, 2001, p. 412) generates value through interactions such as reciprocity of problem solving (Mathwick *et al.*, 2008), perpetuation of brand myth and culture (Ouwensloot and Oderkerken-Schröder, 2008) and creating brand symbolism (Muñiz and Schau, 2005). Reflecting such interactions, Brodie *et al.*’s (2013) empirical research suggests a number of sub-processes and consequences relevant to engagement. Sub-processes include “learning”, “sharing”, “advocating”, “socialising” and “co-developing”. Consequences of such engagement encompass “loyalty and satisfaction”, “empowerment”, “connection and emotional bonds” and “trust and commitment”. However, further evidence suggests varying effects resulting from the different dimensions of such engagement, particularly those manifesting online, such as verbal communication and observational learning (i.e. imitation), dyadic and group flow and organic and amplified exchanges (Verhoef *et al.*, 2010; Libai *et al.*, 2010).

There is a growing consensus within the literature (Ramaswamy, 2009; Payne *et al.*, 2008; Brodie *et al.*, 2013) that recognizes the imperative of providing effective engagement platforms that facilitate customer experience through information exchange and interaction (Baron and Warnaby, 2011) or indeed through “engagement ecosystems” that cross multiple platforms (Breidbach *et al.*, 2014). The challenge for firms seeking to directly engage customers via non-transactional mechanisms is to develop platforms that

manage or influence CEB (Brodie *et al.*, 2013; Jaakkola and Alexander, 2014).

Non-transactional mechanisms identified previously include referral rewards, new product and service development platforms and communities. These may elicit different types of behavioral response both from a customer-to-firm and customer-to-customer perspective. Examples include feedback to the firm, compliance with the firm/service procedures, assisting other customers and word-of-mouth activity (Verleye *et al.*, 2014). However, an emergent engagement mechanism is posited as gamification.

Hailed as a “new industrial revolution driven by play” (Dibbell, 2007), game-based incentivized mechanisms, or “gamification”, has seen substantial growth in its application across industry sectors in recent years, with an estimated 70 per cent of Global 2000 organizations having at least one gamified application (Gartner, 2011). Current organizational adopters include Microsoft, Samsung, Nike, Alfa Romeo and Foursquare. The primary driver of gamification is to incentivize customers in the gamified experience environment to exhibit behaviors and feel emotions similar to gameplay. Hence, to fully appreciate brand gamification, it is important to the review broader gameplay literature from which the phenomenon has emerged.

Gamesplay and gamification

Raessens (2006) proposes that there has been a “ludification of contemporary culture”, with some estimates suggesting that up to 44 per cent of 1.6 billion global Internet users play online games regularly (Spil Games, 2013). Deterding *et al.* (2011) advocate gaming now makes a significant socio-cultural contribution by evoking “formative experiences on par with literature, movies or television in earlier generations” (p. 2). As such, gameplay transcends traditional demographic and socio-cultural boundaries and is “no longer associated with lone teenagers hunched over consoles while locked in their bedrooms” (Spil Games, 2013). Industry reports appear to reflect this. For example, 50 per cent, 46 per cent and 43 per cent of Americans, British and Germans, respectively, participate in online games regularly (Spil Games, 2013). The gender split for gaming is 46 per cent female and 54 per cent male, with the average “gamer” being 30 years of age (ESA, 2013).

In considering the success of massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs), insights provided by social cognitive theory (Ryan and Deci, 2000; Bandura, 1986) and flow theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975) may contribute to our understanding of what drives CE. Many MMORPGs have developed their own distinctive communities where members meet in both virtual and non-virtual contexts to discuss in-game issues. For example, *World of Warcraft*® has an active customer base exceeding 7.3 million, registered in 244 countries (Cifaldi, 2011). Key elements of many games include game mechanics such as achievement badges, levels and leaderboards which only have meaning and recognition within the social structures of the games they pertain to (Koorevaar, 2012). Reminiscent of Kozinet's (2007) “*egoboo*”, there may be a resulting:

[. . .] sense of ephemeral pleasure that comes from the public recognition of one's own efforts [. . .] the joy of seeing one's own name as author, or in the

credits, spoken by others, celebrated as a creator, a maker, a player (Kozinets, 2007, p. 203).

While this highlights the intrinsic nature of motivation, it has also been suggested (Verleye, 2014) that engagement may be motivated by internalized extrinsic or purely extrinsic factors with cognitive, social, personal, pragmatic and economic benefits for participants. Within a games context, factors such as social interaction (Vygotsky, 1967), self-expression and curiosity (Witt *et al.*, 2011), recognition of technical prowess (Liu *et al.*, 2011a), emotional engagement (Man, 2011), in-game social prestige (Koster, 2005) and the evocation of “flow” (Vandenberg, 1980) have been found to motivate engagement.

Defined as “the use of game design elements in non-game contexts” (Deterding *et al.*, 2011), gamification integrates game mechanics with the selected functionalities of an organization's Web site, downloadable content or application so as “to better engage end-users” (Liu *et al.*, 2011a, p. 1). Within a branding context, there is an imposition of game mechanics on to brand content (Chorney, 2012). Brand gamification mechanics typically include points systems, score keeping, levels, leaderboards and badges to indicate the progress of an individual participant through particular tasks and report their status to other participants with the intention of creating a “gamification loop” that intimates an iterative behavioral pattern (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004; Liu *et al.*, 2011a). As such, mechanics are design principles applied by the brand in the development of the customer experience environment that remain constant as customers interact with the experience. Robson *et al.* (2015) identify two other principles in their theoretical framework of gamification that link experience and engagement: dynamics and emotions. Dynamics are the types of behaviors that unfold as customers experience the game, which may include both those desired by the firm (e.g. cooperation through information exchange) and unintended responses (e.g. subversive behaviors intended to “break” the game) (Elverdam and Aarseth, 2007). Emotions are the affective psychological states resulting from gameplay, with desired states primarily being a sense of fun and enjoyment (Sweetser and Wyeth, 2005), although negative emotions may also be experienced (Robson *et al.*, 2015).

Frequently culminating in “flow” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975), such sensations manifest themselves in total absorption with an activity such that all other distractions are pushed to the periphery of consciousness. Flow evocation is usually associated with a challenge requiring some level of technical skill and necessitating a merging of action and awareness, a loss of self-consciousness, a distortion of time and a sense of overarching control (Nah *et al.*, 2011). Crucially, “the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 4). This is therefore a key component of gamification, which arises out of comprehension and experiential mastery of the challenges within a particular environment and the accompanying emotional, i.e. positive sensation of competence, through endeavor and labor that this engenders.

Gamification differs from other online or virtual engagement strategies because it introduces a component of competition as a challenge motivator for encouraging behavioral and emotional responses. The iterative engagement

strategy begins with an explicit challenge. Every time the participant achieves a small goal related to this challenge, the mechanism rewards the customer with points, virtual currency or similar. Based on this achievement system (Liu *et al.*, 2011a), a leaderboard is constructed and badges may be provided for further motivating the customer's competitive behavior. This may ultimately result in indirectly associated behaviors such as changes to the participant's personal status within a particular social network (e.g. Facebook or Twitter).

Initially restricted to virtual worlds, the arrival of ubiquitous technologies such as mobile "smart" devices has resulted in a convergence of offline worlds with online environments, computerized gameplay and social networking activities in a complex ecology of engagement platforms (Breidbach *et al.*, 2014). Consumers are increasingly viewed as emergent content creators and task performers motivated and captivated into participating within the gamified brand environment (Liu *et al.*, 2011a) through the inherent human tendencies to compete, challenge and socially interact (Zichermann and Cunningham, 2011). Indeed, advocates of gamified experiences suggest it enables deep insights into player preferences and consequential CEB resulting in the optimization of the engagement experience for all parties concerned. This reflects the types of responses found in the CE literature (Verleye *et al.*, 2014).

However, gamification has not been without its critics. Bogost (2011) describes the phenomenon as "marketing bullshit, invented by consultants as a means to capture the wild, coveted beast that is videogames and to domesticate it for big business" (p. 1). Such comments highlight the substantive and troubling discrepancy between popular coverage and empirically based research. To this end, the current study aims to empirically explore the mechanisms and customer interactions with gamification and to propose a model of gamified CE experience environments.

Methodology

Given the nature of the exploratory research aim, a mixed qualitative methodology was deemed to be appropriate so as to enable an examination of behavioral and emotional responses (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Our research domain encompassed Web-based postings and rankings of branded Web site customers, reflecting that the gamified context unfolded over different social media platforms (primarily Twitter and Facebook) as well as the Web site from which interaction was driven by the firm. Hence a netnographic approach was adopted (Kozinets, 2002) with participant observation of the experience environment. Previous investigations into virtual-based communities suggest netnography is pertinent in "confirming, contrasting and contributing to" academic literature (Garver, 2003) in capturing contextual richness embodied within such environments (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Netnography may be defined as a qualitative method that adapts ethnographic research techniques "to study cultures and communities that are emerging through computer-mediated communications" (Kozinets, 2002, p. 62). As online communities organized around market-related themes are increasingly being recognized as research arenas, so too is netnography as an appropriate approach to their investigation (Kozinets, 2002; Catterall and Maclaran, 2002;

De Valck *et al.*, 2009). Furthermore, online communities offer the potential to study the social behavior of large numbers of participants (Yuan *et al.*, 2007). Drawing on previous Web-based studies (Kozinets, 2002; 2010; Rokka, 2010), a five-stage process was adopted for this research comprising entrée, data collection, analysis and interpretation, research ethics and membership.

Samsung Nation was selected as a unit of analysis for the study (Yin, 2003; Miles and Huberman, 1994), and data were collected simultaneously using multiple techniques (Cova and Pace, 2006). The techniques comprised repeated online browsing of the Samsung Nation Web site and related fora, participant observation of the Samsung Nation Web site-based interactive experience, offline and online compilation of information on Samsung and Samsung Nation and online compilation of social network and fora postings (all postings were in English). Participant observation was an instrumental necessity to gain access to the community to understand and evaluate the gamified mechanism and observe the behaviors of participants within the environment. Entrée was achieved by one of the researchers joining the gamified experience community. This involved registering as a Web site user and participating in challenges at various levels during a three-month data collection period. Participation in the game was achieved by registering products (previously purchased), searching online for relevant information, "liking" and "tweeting" using key words to earn reward points and posting comments in relation to products on the Web site forum. Data collection was undertaken systematically through the three-month period the researcher remained active in the gamified environment, including screen grabs of leaderboards and participant observer achievements. In addition, some 300 posted contributions to the gamified Web site forum were identified accounting for 70 printed pages of text. The authors' progressively analyzed data collected during the study. Themes in the data were identified and coded relating to mechanisms, behaviors and emotions. Data were coded by two researchers independently with differences of opinion discussed and agreed upon to determine the final outputs of analysis. The analytical process adhered to the constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), whereby new data were compared with previous interpretations. This process was continued until data saturation was reached.

Participant observation enabled screen captures to be collected and analyzed for the study, including details of badges, awards and rewards; number and types of activities involved; points achievement; leaderboard rankings; and follow-up activities. Some activities related directly to Web site postings, while others merely required following online links embedded within the gamification environment. Examples of these included "likes" or "shares", while others were "hidden" and related merely to clicking on a page link a number of times during a visit or period, or being a member for a number of hours or days. The data (postings) were extracted from the Web site across the breadth of product categories supported and, where possible, were attributed to leaderboard members observed during the period of study.

Findings

Gamified engagement mechanism

Initially we present findings based on an analysis of the gamified mechanism drawing on secondary data gathered about the brand experience environment and participant observation of gameplay. Developed using the Badgeville gamification platform, Samsung Nation is the first gamified experience established on an organizationally moderated consumer electronics Web site. With more than 1.2 million customers in its community and four million visitors each month, it is considered to be the most well-known and large-scale example of gamification by a firm. In contrast to other such applications, Samsung has integrated the concept throughout its Web site rather than concentrating on a single product category or marketing campaign (e.g. NikeGrid). Content on its Web site suggests Samsung Nation is a “social loyalty program” that attempts to “recognize and empower our most passionate fans” (Contreras, 2011a). Described as a “fusion of social media and gamification” (Lopez, 2011), Samsung Nation was launched with the objective of “tying together the already bubbling Samsung community with game mechanics and social leader boards” through the delivery of “relevant, real-time social experiences” (Lopez, 2011). Targeted at early adopters, socializers and collectors, visitors who sign up to the Samsung Nation experience are incentivized to explore and engage with Web site content. In return, they “unlock” badges and progress up a leaderboard.

Contreras, Samsung’s social media manager, suggests Samsung’s goal “is to increase engagement and advocacy by enhancing the overall experience of our customers and fans on Samsung.com” (Contreras, 2012). Contreras (2012) proposes the objectives of Samsung Nation are to reward interaction, facilitate discovery and “create a sense of interconnectedness among passionate advocates”. In essence, it is an attempt to reward consumer-seeking behavior that may lead to “increased brand loyalty, not to mention increased profits” (Singer, 2012).

Samsung defines the success of its gamified environment in terms of increasing engagement behavior throughout the entire Web site. Engagement behavior is defined by the firm as the posting of “user generated content like comments, [product] reviews, as well as interactions with Samsung content and increased sharing to social networks” (Contreras, 2011b). Competition between customers is actively encouraged with the incentive that leading customers will earn both peer and organizational recognition: “For those of you who crave a little competition and want those bragging rights, rack up more points than other fans, and you’ll be highlighted on our Samsung Nation leader board” (Samsung Nation Web site). An added incentive suggests that point and badge accumulation enables customers to qualify for a monthly sweepstake and the “chance to win great Samsung products” (Samsung Nation Web site).

Many of the characteristics and features of gameplay have been integrated into the Samsung Nation mechanism as drivers of customer interaction primarily through task performance and content creation. This has been incentivized through a process of point accumulation. This encompasses activities such as registering products (500 points), reading and commenting on articles (300 points), watching videos

(200 points), providing a Facebook “Like” (200 points), implementing a Twitter “share” (100 points), providing a question in a Q&A forum (100 points) and providing an answer in a Q&A forum (300 points). Contreras (2012) advocates that Samsung Nation is “sentiment agnostic” and Samsung will award badges to “our biggest critics”. Participants are urged to “have fun [. . .] earn points, level up and unlock badges” as they navigate the Samsung Web site. Beyond point acquisition and accumulation, however, the ultimate challenge or goal of the game is somewhat unclear, and as a consequence, there is no threshold for the “win condition” beyond relative position on the leaderboard.

Customer engagement behaviors

Task performance and completion

As customers navigate through the Web site engaging in normal search behavior related to Samsung products (information needs, search for peripheral add-ons, etc.), so the tasks are completed. The process of earning badges and rewards is a combination of “serendipity and clear pathways” (Contreras, 2011b). However, there are no clear guidelines or indication of task opportunities being presented to customers. Task performance and completion is indicated primarily through the awards being added to the customer profile page, intimating progress through the game.

As customers become more familiar and savvy with the Web site, there appears to be a number of issues related to the design and operationalization of Samsung Nation that emerge as they attempt to perform tasks. In some instances, these appear to be related to technical issues. A recurring and specific example of this that has prompted a number of posts is related to the interface between Samsung Nation and Facebook. Implying that this is an ongoing issue, a customer states:

This month the Facebook integration really needs to work since that is what the giveaway [this month’s prize] depends on. I have “liked” Samsung on Facebook through samsung.com many times now. I have logged into samsung.com with my Facebook login and it still doesn’t work [. . .]. It is a great idea but the bugs need to be worked out or you will have a lot of people complaining (blog, February 5).

And another comments:

I know I’ve done enough FB [Facebook] “Likes” to be done with that part, and I have some QandA questions that are showing up on the site, but no badge goodness [. . .]. (cue Cheech and Chong) (blog, July 14).

The lack of distinction between task completion, achievement and reward also highlights a further disconnect insofar as the specific winning conditions that are required to attain a particular award are neither explicit nor transparent. The Web site suggests points, levels, trophies, badges and other game mechanics are used to recognize and reward enthusiastic customers for their general engagement behavior. In addition, “rare rewards” are reserved for “advanced” or “rare behavior” (Contreras, 2011b). Examples of advanced behaviors include visiting the site between midnight and 4:00 am and visiting and interacting with the site on national holidays or Samsung specified dates. However, beyond this, there is a lack of clarity as to what the clear goals of any particular challenge are. One participant states:

Samsung Nation seems like a fun way to get people to interact with the company. problem is, there is little to no direction on how to interact. Your

general blurb and little pop-ups do not direct a person as to exactly what to do to earn badges and get involved in the community :((blog, March 9).

Thus, customers become frustrated in their attempts to complete tasks, culminating in a call for assistance to other customers and the Samsung game moderator.

Achievement and reward systems

There is evidence that while dialogical content of value to the brand community is limited, there are a number of singular or monosyllabic word postings such as “like” and “favourite” posted by site “skimmers” who are clearly motivated by rewards for achievements.

The lack of clarity already highlighted, results in a persistent theme in posts on the Web site with increasing amounts of frustration evident among customers: “Some of these badges just wont unlock, i have been visiting several times late [at night] and it still does not give me the owl badge. Hmmoh”. (blog, May 1). Reflective of the serendipitous nature of accumulating rewards highlighted by Contreras (2011b), this appears to be part of a deliberate strategy by Samsung to “evoke suspense” in terms of earning badges: “We don’t want to give too much away, but let’s just say that there will be surprises along the way” (Samsung Web site). However, the apparent lack of causality between achievement and reward, particularly related to inconsistency in application of the reward system, has triggered a detrimental response among many customers:

I’ve had a lot of fun participating in Samsung Nation but some of the badges’ “missions” are not showing that they have been completed, even when they are. For example, the “Special” badge does not show that the 10 min and 30 min missions have been completed nor the “Like” button on Facebook. Help! (blog, January 2).

Leaderboards are a common attribute of many gamified experience environments where customers are able to assess their progress relative to other customers. This in turn results in many becoming community celebrities where their technical prowess and achievements may be appreciated by like-minded customers. However, within the context of Samsung Nation, a number of customers have posted negative comments linked to their pursuit of a higher rank on the leaderboard:

I am unable to see my SAMSUNG NATION results [. . .]. Where did they go? I haven’t been able to see it in almost a month? You got me addicted and took it away! I can see when I earn new badges (it comes on the bottom of the screen) but can’t see which badges and points I’ve earned overall [. . .]. I’d love to know where I rank [. . .] [. . .]. PLEASE HELP!!!!!!!!!!!! (blog, February 21).

The leaderboard may be viewed from four temporal perspectives: daily, monthly, weekly and “all-time”. Taking a snapshot during the data collection period of 20 August, the leader is the same customer for all of these with a score of 64,525 (daily), 84,025 (weekly), 364,600 (monthly) and 17,187,150 (all time) points, respectively. These scores are somewhat stupefying when considering the scope of activities undertaken to accumulate points and their relative point value. By way of reminder, points may be earned through registering products (500 points), reading and commenting on articles (300 points), watching videos (200 points), providing a Facebook “Like” (200 points), implementing a Twitter “share” (100 points), providing a question in a Q&A forum (100 points) and providing an answer in a Q&A forum (300 points). Interestingly, the call signs of high scoring customers

do not appear to be prevalent on the Web site in terms of their contributions to point accumulating activities. Also noticeable is the absence of comments by other customers on how such tallies may be achieved or indeed the feasibility of accumulating such scores.

Firm and social interaction

While it is implied that customers within Samsung Nation experience environment have the ability to connect synchronistically in real time with each other, there is little evidence of any type of direct information exchange between participants, be that product- or game-related. Within the Samsung Nation context, any such interaction is effectively between the individual and the organization’s Web site. Samsung merely exhibits the leaderboard, where customers effectively display their Samsung “essence” through participation in the tasks.

The frequent requests for assistance from both Samsung and other customers appear to generally go unanswered: “how do I unlock the 3D badge?? I was able to unlock the android badge by ‘liking’ an android phone??” (blog, March 14). And: “Getting hints while on the web pages would be nice, at least that way it doesn’t just feel like a hunt for links” (blog, May 31). Therefore, interaction is asynchronous and unfocussed and inferred through behavioral representations within the gamified experience environment, and evidenced primarily through the leaderboard itself, page likes and Web postings. Moreover, there is no evidence that the game has been improved or technical issues addressed as a consequence of customer feedback across the gamified Samsung Nation ecosystem, comprising the Samsung Web site and various social media platforms.

CE emotions

While this study did not directly seek to investigate the evocation of emotions *per se*, the observable manifestation of emotions evoked is apparent both in the nature and content of postings made.

Evocation of low-level positive primary affect

Evidence of the evocation of low-level positive primary affect (Oliver, 1997) is evident with terms such as “liking”, “joy” and “fun” being used in posts in relation to the Samsung Nation experience, albeit in a generalized sense: “Samsung Nation is fun and it is exciting watching your points add up” (blog, April 16). Another comments: “this is such a fun game because of the fun and the thrill behind it and i just love having to compete against others to win a prize!!!” (blog, February 19).

Furthermore, the number of customers participating in the tasks and generating rewards for their achievements (badges, etc.) is evidenced on the leaderboard which includes hundreds of individual customer handles during the period of data collection for this study. The continuous running tally of all customers’ latest achievements appears as a real-time rolling data stream (much like a Twitter or RSS feed) alongside an individual customer’s achievement record on the computer screen. This is designed to provide a clear sense of presence and persistence within the gamified environment, intimating its continuance even when customers are logged out. This is a typical mechanism used by many virtual environments that

encourages ongoing participation. Our research did not identify any specific comments about this aspect of mechanism design, or the extent to which it motivated customers to continue to interact with the gamified environment, beyond the movement of customers up and down the leaderboard. Based on this observation, it can be deduced that those continuing to interact with the gamified environment without breaking their pattern of engagement to complain did so because they found a level of positive emotional engagement from the experience, e.g. fun, enjoyment and satisfaction. The strength of this emotion is, however, unclear.

Evocation of low-level negative primary affect

Evidence of the evocation of low-level negative primary affect (Oliver, 1997) is also evident with terminology such as “I am getting tired of this”, “Bored” and “:(” [the symbol for sad] also being posted. Such posts emanate from the ambiguity between the challenge and win condition resulting in inconsistency in the way achievements are rewarded with badges and points. Implicit within a number of posts is evidence of the evocation of higher-level negative affect such as “frustration”:

It would be a good thing if Samsung recognized the 3D TV, Blu-ray and receiver I registered earlier this year toward my various badges. You have both my loyalty and my money; a little quid pro quo? (blog, December 30).

Interestingly, a number of customers inform Samsung of the consequential action tendencies related to this:

I actually made a purchase from this Web site and I still didn't get a badge. It is a great idea but the bugs need to be worked out or you will have a lot of people complaining (blog, February 5).

What is unclear from the data is the extent such appraisals and resultant action tendencies are directed toward the branded products or the Samsung Nation gamification experience *per se*.

CE outcomes

Community

Much of the rhetoric contained within the Web site focuses on the theme of a “social loyalty program” that “ties together the already bubbling Samsung community with game mechanics” so as to generate “relevant, real-time social experiences” (Lopez, 2011). Indeed, Contreras (2011a) indicates that Samsung's intention is to evolve “Samsung Nation over time based on how our customers interact in the [Samsung Nation] community”. Analysis of the Samsung Nation offer does provide some identifiable evidence frequently associated with virtual communities. There is a discernible aggregation of customers present throughout the Web site. However, there is an absence of any profound manifestations of community kinship, fellowship or indeed deep-rooted commonality among posting customers. By way of example, even customer achievement through the acquisition of points and badges and relative positions on the leaderboard went unrecognized by other customers. There was a distinct lack of congratulatory messages or exchange that shows appreciation for others' prowess and achievements, as might be anticipated within gameplay.

In part, this might be expected given the winning condition is not zero-sum, i.e. one customer achieves rewards at the expense of others. Social exchange might therefore have been formed in more competitive circumstances, as it does with

gameplay which often results in customers forming “clans” to support one another to achieve rewards and share resultant benefits. The incentive to develop community through game mechanics is limited in this instance: the mechanics within Samsung Nation instead focuses on reward for repeat interaction with the game environment (Web site). This suggests that community in this experience environment is merely an aggregation of customers who have a clear rationale for being involved as individuals. Such rationales include previous engagement experience with the brand, say through prior purchase, or becoming a purchasing customer at some future point. Incentives were related to tangential and small item electronics and did not, for example, offer financial discounts or support in such ways that may constitute a direct extrinsic reward related to customer-led product purchase decisions.

Loyalty

While there is no direct evidence that the game mechanics triggers behavioral loyalty to the brand (in the form of repeat purchase), there were numerous expressions of loyalty via content creation in the form of word-of-mouth recommendations related to the gamified experience environment: “this is pretty fun i would recommend others to try it, just go register on samsung nation to try it out, so gogogo” (blog, March 14). Another customer comments: “I'm new to Samsung Nation. Heard about it from a friend. Looking forward to unlocking the badges!” (blog, February 28). Customers also affirmed their intention to revisit the Web site: “I hadn't been on this site very much previously but I'll definitely be visiting more often now. If only I knew how to unlock all the badges [. . .]” (blog, November 29). Thus, loyalty to the gamified experience environment is intimated through repeat interactions.

There is also some evidence of reinforcement of pre-existing brand loyalty among Samsung customers in general, alongside praise for the Samsung Nation initiative in particular:

Being a big fan of Samsung, my collection of Samsung products range from every TV in the house, almost all home appliances, PC components and monitors, and among many more products. Samsung is doing like no other company has done before by launching this Samsung Nation. Thank you, Samsung (blog, October 30).

Customers even provided compliments to the development team of Samsung Nation gamified experience for driving exploration of the Samsung product range, albeit with one customer including a plea regarding the attainment of a particular badge:

Kudos to social media and web/marketing development team for implementing this feature. I for one have been exploring areas of the website that I normally would not have checked out [. . .]. Anybody have an idea as to how to unlock any of the Teams badges/achievements? (blog, December 17).

Relationship consequences

A number of customers made insightful comments about the sustainability of the experience based purely on extrinsic rewards: “Depending on what they decide to give away based on one's points will determine if it lasts longer than 6 months.” (blog, November 16). Paradoxically, in some instances, there was evidence that customer experiences of Samsung Nation had led to a detrimental effect on individual customer perceptions of their relationship with Samsung. This may have resulted in an erosion of the very brand persona that Samsung

Nation developed to infuse within its customers. Customers voiced frustration at how their brand loyalty was being treated:

I am getting tired of this! I keep searching but I do not know how to unlock the Android Badge or the 3D! Am i supposed to buy those and register!? It's a game or you want more money! (blog, July 22).

This appears to implicitly compromise positive relationship consequences such as trust and commitment, potentially influencing the evocation of negative affect in other customers and potential customers who are yet to purchase Samsung products.

Discussion

The aim of this paper was to explore the role of gamification as a CE experience environment. A synthesis of findings and the extant literature on CE and gameplay provide valuable insights into the mechanisms, behaviors, emotions and outcomes related to a gamified engagement experience environment. From these insights we propose a conceptual model of a gamified CE environment (Figure 1). We now discuss each component of this model, and set out a research agenda in relation to the model.

CE gamified mechanism

The literature on games development highlights a number of mechanistic components that collectively lead to a ludic experience. Gamification is an attempt to distil such dynamic interactive components with a non-game environment, such as Samsung Nation (Liu *et al.*, 2011a). From the analysis of empirical data, the gamified experience environment has used a mechanism that includes tasks, rewards, badges and a leadership board across multiple Web-based platforms (Web site, social media) to realize an engagement ecosystem (Breidbach *et al.*, 2014). However, the overarching challenge and win condition is ambiguous (Liu *et al.*, 2011a; Zichermann and Cunningham, 2011). While there are a number of sub-challenges related to

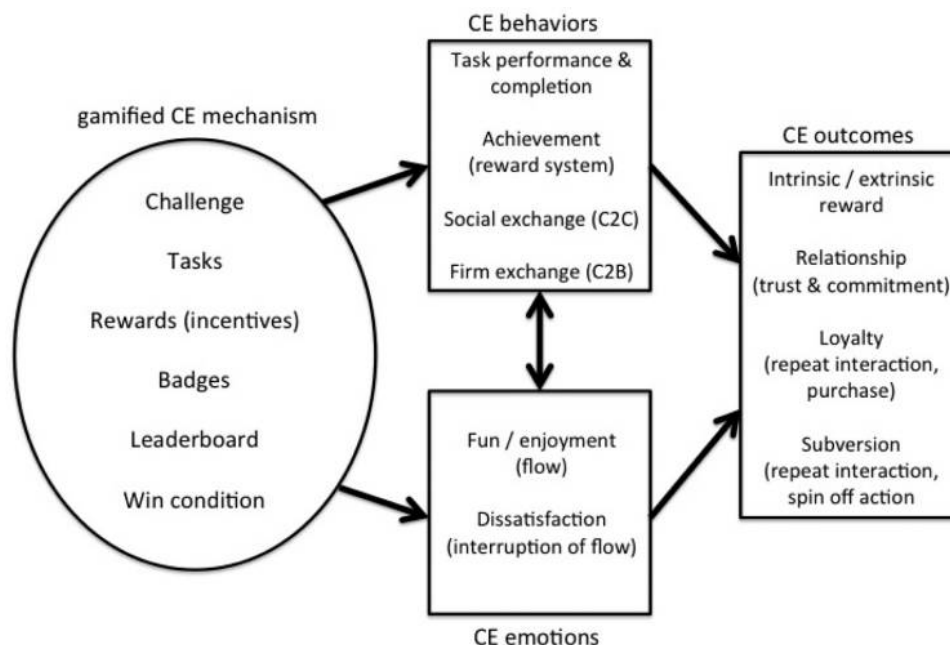
achievements and rewards, there is no direct motivation for point accumulation beyond the intrinsic reward associated with participation in the game, and extrinsic reward associated with recognition of achievement via the leaderboard and badges. This appears to be an important omission in the design of the gamified experience environment, which is detrimental to continued interaction with the environment. Consequently, it appears that customer interest and engagement behavior diminishes before a clear goal for their continued interaction has emerged. Moreover, there is little evidence to suggest that the tasks reviewed here generate and reinforce the type of high-quality engagement behaviors that potentially realize ongoing relational outcomes within our proposed model. Hence, these findings provide valuable insights into why potential gamified CE outcomes remain unrealized within many gamified contexts.

From an organizational perspective, the nature of the relationship between the firm and its customers created by gamification is interesting. Having successfully triggered interactions, there is a subsequent lack of firm response designed into the game(-ification) development processes. Such processes should facilitate incorporation of customer feedback beyond the game mechanics and its provision of an online proposition of content and space for task completion and content creation. Future research needs to consider how the design of gamified experience environments may be enhanced, with particular focus on the roles of an overall game challenge and winning condition. Moreover, it will be valuable to explore how repeat customers' interactions with the different components of a gamification mechanism influence customers directly leading to purchase and non-purchase outcomes.

Customer behaviors

There is evidence from our analysis to suggest that engagement is achieved at a behavioral level, manifesting in the performance and completion of tasks, collection of points

Figure 1 Model of a gamified customer engagement experience environment



and badges and some attainment of rewards. Indeed, where the game tasks are tied to existing modes of interaction with the brand through its Web site (viewing reviews, etc.), then this may result in increased traffic through the experience environment. However, within the gamified experience environment explored here, there appear to be fundamental flaws insofar as the link between task completion, achievement and reward is neither transparent nor explicit. Additionally, the lack of positive social and firm interaction in relation to the game mechanics is problematic insofar as the length of time customers are prepared to spend within the experience environment is limited and, we posit, may be a contributory factor as to why negative outcomes such as subversion of the game mechanics have emerged as outcomes. Interestingly, such aspects are underexplored in the literature in relation to games and require further research to better understand how social and firm exchanges manifest in positive and negative outcomes.

While there may be a case for increasing serendipitous brand interaction and knowledge among customers through the exploration of the Web site in a quest to accumulate points, such interactions may result in only cursory behaviors. There is no incentive to spend time reading articles or view products beyond a “click on a page”. Previous research suggests the more superficial posts that there are on the Web site, the less likely customers are to engage in deeper or more detailed behavior (Becker *et al.*, 2010). The conscious process of attempting to maximize point accumulation may detract from any bona fide interaction within a community context (Ouwensloot and Oderkerken-Schröder, 2008). While there is a discernible “aggregation of individuals who are interacting around a shared interest” (Porter, 2006, p. 1) implying that at a basic level, a *raison d’être* and “consciousness of kind” (Muñiz and O’Guinn, 2001) is omnipresent throughout the Web site, there is a key distinction between Samsung Nation and other brand communities. This appears to be an absence of any profound behavioral manifestations of community kinship, fellowship or indeed deep-rooted commonality (Carey, 1989, p. 18). Such manifestations will normally encompass the sub-processes identified by Brodie *et al.* (2013) and discussed above. For example, the opinions of “achievers” are sought and respected by other customers. Importantly, being “at home in the company of kindred spirits” can generate a powerful emotional resonance and a sense of loyalty manifesting in the cultivation and nurturing of norms, values and, ultimately, collective identities within brand related Web sites (Widdicombe and Wooffitt, 1990). There is no evidence of this construction and/or reinforcement of sub-cultural identity and authenticity emerging within Samsung Nation. Reminiscent of Cova and Pace’s (2006) research into “My Nutella: The Community”, Samsung merely exhibits lists of fans who display their Samsung “essence” through participation.

Customer emotions

The number of customers participating in ongoing tasks and attempting to generate cumulative rewards is evidenced on the leaderboard, suggesting an “appetitive” stimulus is omnipresent (Roseman, 1991), intensified by a continuous running tally of customers’ latest achievements appearing as a

real-time rolling data stream (similar to a Twitter “fall” or RSS feed) together with an individual’s achievement record. Flow results in the apparent absorption with the endeavor at hand and the behavior this generates (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). In contrast to Brodie *et al.*’s (2013) findings of customer empowerment, within this context, the apparently random nature of how badges are unlocked undermines the premise that the *locus* of causality is self-determined. Drawing on psychological and more specifically coping mechanisms literature (Roseman, 1991; Bagozzi *et al.*, 1999), it may be inferred that resultant “action tendencies to engage or disengage from interaction with some object” (Frijda *et al.*, 1989, p. 213) as a consequence of emotional evocation are occurring within Samsung Nation. The psychological immersion and enjoyment evoked to achieve flow appears, however, to be continually interrupted through the evocation of negative affect and resultant behaviors, which in this case constitutes posted complaints and subversive actions. Yet flow is associated with challenge requiring technical skill embedded within dynamic actions (Nah *et al.*, 2011). It is possible therefore that a certain level of dissatisfaction is an essential part of the engagement experience, culminating in an inner directed challenge to “solve” the problem and complete the task.

Based on these observations, it can be deduced that those continuing to interact with the gamified environment without breaking their pattern of engagement to post a complaint did so because they found a level of positive emotional engagement from the experience, e.g. fun, enjoyment, satisfaction and even some low-level dissatisfaction. The relationship between flow and dissatisfaction resulting in complaint behavior, however, is somewhat less clear. Further exploration of these aspects, such as tolerance to challenge difficulties and *locus* of causality in relation to gamification, would be useful directions for future study.

Customer outcomes

Within the environment explored, the disconnect in the iterative nature of Liu *et al.*’s (2011b) gamified loop (challenge, task completion, reward, engagement) negates the intrinsic motivators frequently evoked by gamification (Man, 2011; Witt *et al.*, 2011) and, consequently, any associated intrinsic and extrinsic rewards (Zichermann and Linder, 2011; Verleye, 2014). Previous research in the area of brand communities and gameplay suggests a primary motivator of social exchange within such environments is social through online dynamic exchange (Brodie *et al.*, 2011), but in general, the dialogic community aspect is missing in the environment. Paradoxically, therefore, the introduction of gamification to the experience environment may be eroding the very essence of trust and commitment that already exists around the incumbent brand Web site (Muñiz and O’Guinn, 2001), which in turn may impact outcomes such as loyalty and repeat purchase of the brand.

At another level, a number of customers are increasingly aware that such engagement has an opportunity cost in terms of time and recognize the intrinsic nature of the reward scheme offered by the game proposition may be of little personal value. Arguably, customers are “put to work” by Samsung (Terranova, 2000; Lazzarato, 1996), as the

boundaries between play and content provision are subtly dissolved and the outputs of customers' immaterial labor produced through engagement experience environment becomes commercially advantageous to Samsung. Samsung is effectively facilitating its customers' desires for recognition and self-fulfillment through interaction with its gamified environment while carefully appropriating their behavior: "with every click [. . .] every comment or status [. . .] a user contributes toward co-creating value" (Man, 2011, p. 6). Labor is effectively given free of charge and willingly provided in exchange for "the pleasures of communication and interaction" (Terranova, 2004, p. 91). However, firms such as Samsung face a delicate balancing act between what some may interpret as exploitation of their loyal co-creators with that of providing a positive and engaging interactive experience through gamification (Jenkins, 2006; Becker *et al.*, 2010). There is already evidence to suggest some customers are recognizing the exploitative element of Samsung Nation. The formation of negative emotions and subversive behavior is frequently associated with Web 2.0 technologies (Cova *et al.*, 2008; Cova and White, 2010). Such CE experience environments may have negative consequences and result in customers participating in deviant behaviors (Robson *et al.*, 2015). Indeed, some customers appear to have accumulated an unfeasible large points tally that indicates interaction with the experience environment is other than that which the firm originally intended through the gamification mechanism.

Furthermore, findings suggest engagement behaviors and emotions are modified when a gamified element is introduced to the Web site. Comment posting patterns have become a conglomeration of those containing superficial content of little value to the brand community and those consisting of singular or monosyllabic word postings evidently motivated by point accumulation. Such uni-directional "exchange" is inconsistent with the interactions that already exist within the experience environment, and as a consequence, the gamified experience may diminish and erode the contributions of gamification. Ultimately, this may negatively impact community identity developed by more committed members, leading to brand disillusionment (Thom *et al.*, 2012) and negative emotions in others. In this environment, positive relational outcomes are unlikely to be developed through the gamified experience.

That said, the nature of outcomes in response to rewards; the impact on brand community development, including trust in and commitment to the brand; and impact on purchase behavior are matters for future study. Similarly, subversion of the gamified environment as an outcome of the experience needs to be further explored in terms of its impact on the brand.

Managerial implications

Using the proposed conceptual model, this study raises important questions for firms as to how gamification may be best utilized to add value to a core proposition while simultaneously nurturing and/or strengthening customer interaction within a virtual engagement experience environment. While undoubtedly driving Web site traffic and supporting corporate analytics through initial "cognitive lock in" (Mollen and Hugh, 2010), there is little evidence to

suggest the gamified experience reviewed here generates and reinforces the type of high-quality CE that may potentially be achieved. This contradicts much of the rhetoric surrounding gamification that advocates increased CE. However, our findings suggest there are key components of the gamification mechanism that firms need to be incorporate into a game design, including challenge, task and completion, achievements and rewards and win condition. Thus, firms need to recognize that it is game content and not just game mechanics that contributes to successful customer experience environments and, ultimately, CE. The issue with such content is that it is both expensive to produce and to maintain (Curtis and Hoggins, 2014; Plunkett, 2008). The challenge for firms is to take existing brand content and develop game mechanics that integrate seamlessly with the main functionalities and structure of the existing brand experience ecosystem (Breibach *et al.*, 2014) to create the gamified environment. Merely transposing points systems, badges and leaderboards may lead to superficial engagement behavior and emotions, undermining desirable brand-related outcomes, such as is evidenced in this study. Successful implementation appears to require a thorough consideration of the ways in which gamification may contribute to outcomes such as loyalty, relationship development, repeat interaction and the role of intrinsic and extrinsic rewards.

Conclusion

The paper presents a synthesis of extant literature on CE and gameplay and findings from an empirical investigation into the mechanisms, behaviors, emotions and outcomes related to a gamified engagement experience environment, culminating in development of a conceptual model (Figure 1).

Gamified experience environments have been described as the "digital tavern of the modern world" in terms of the role they may potentially fulfill in hosting "playfulness and conversation" (Rao, 2011). Such interactive environments should ostensibly evoke a pleasurable customer experience through an amalgamation of "content, community and commerce" reminiscent of brand communities and gameplay (Zichermann and Linder, 2011). From an organizational perspective, the primary driver of gamification is to trigger and incentivize responses such that customers exhibit behaviors and experience emotions similar to gameplay engagement culminating in positive relational outcomes, including loyalty and relationship development. However, there is little evidence to suggest that the gamified experience environment reviewed here generates and reinforces the type of high-quality engagement outcomes potentially achievable within our proposed model, or at least the negative outcomes identified in our study need further investigation. Key to this is a number of mechanistic implementation flaws that potentially indicate why gamified engagement outcomes remain unfulfilled.

Limitations and summary of future research

The research reported in this paper has a number of limitations. First, findings need to be interpreted within the context of the gamified experience environment that was the focus of the investigation, while development of the conceptual model highlights those areas that are apparent within the current context. Other brand environments and their associated social

dynamics, for example, may have unique peculiarities and these need to be considered alongside the aspects identified in our model. Second, the research design of this study does not afford the same kind of generalizability that other methodologies do. Related to this, further refinement and development of our conceptual model is required – while we have attempted to highlight the gaps in research in our discussion, there is further need to develop specific research questions related to each area.

Our analysis highlights a number of areas ripe for future investigation, including how the design of gamified experience environments incorporates game challenge and winning condition, how the different components of a gamification mechanism influence customers directly leading to purchase and non-purchase outcomes, the roles of social and firm interaction, why and how negative outcomes such as subversion of the game mechanics occur, the relationship between flow and dissatisfaction resulting in complaint behavior and the nature of outcomes in response to rewards.

Thereafter, hypotheses relating to our model could be developed and tested using a quantitative study that examines the associations within the model. This would establish the generalizability of findings within a broader range of gamified experience environments. Finally, a longitudinal study encompassing the consequences of the pre- and post-implementation phases of a gamification mechanism within a brand experience environment would be an interesting direction to take future research.

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