Gamification in Tourism Advertising: Game Mechanics and Practices

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Abstract

Gamification has received much attention from both industry and academia in recent years. Several studies have discussed that gamification can encourage customer engagement and improve brand awareness since it can create fun, excitement, and pleasure. To better understand gamification in tourism advertising, this study reviewed literature on gamification and its practices. This paper justifies its definition and proposes three categories of game mechanics: challenges and competition; progression and rewards; and recognition. The theoretical foundations of the effects of these game mechanics are discussed to explain the mechanism of gamification. Additionally, this paper illustrates gamification cases in advertising to give insights into its application.

1 Introduction

Gamification has received much attention from both industry and academia in recent years. It has been treated as a marketing innovation in the tourism and hospitality sector because it can create fun, excitement, arousal, pleasure, and a sense of achievement (Negruşa, Toader, Sofică, Tutunea, & Rus, 2015). Several destinations and service providers have launched gamified advertisements and mobile games (Wang & Tsai, 2014). These destination campaigns attracted much more attention than previous ones. Even though researchers have discussed the effects of gamification, they have not reached consensus on the definition of either gamification or game mechanics. Specifically, how game mechanics increase engagement has not been explored adequately. Therefore, this paper reviewed literature on gamification, discussed game mechanics and their theoretical foundations, and illustrated its practices in advertising to give insights into its application and future studies.

2 Gamification

The term 'gamification' was coined in 2002 by Nick Pelling. The most frequently cited definition of gamification was proposed by Deterding, Dixon, Khaled, and Nacke in 2011 (p.10) as "the use of game design elements in non-game contexts", although it has been defined differently depending on context (Deterding et al.,

2011). In the service context, it is defined as "a process of enhancing a service with affordances for gameful experiences in order to support [a] user's overall value creation" (Huotari & Hamari, 2012, p. 19). This definition emphasizes that the purpose of using gamification is to encourage value creation by offering gameful experiences. However, this definition is ambiguous in explaining what is meant by the process and how to gamify a service. In the organisation management context, gamification is used to motivate participation and engagement. For example, Burke (2014, p. 6) mentions that a gamification company defines it as "the use of game mechanics and experience design to digitally engage and motivate people to achieve their goals." This definition indicates that gamification requires digital devices, although the term should not be limited to the digital context (Deterding et al., 2011) even if most examples of gamification rely on these. Another important word in this definition is "engage," Burke (2014) mentions that gamification creates entirely new engagement models.

Overall, gamification is a relatively new trend and researchers have not reached a consensus on its definition. Even though the one proposed by Deterding et al. (2011) has received many citations, their definition does not specify the purpose of applying game design elements. Thus, this research suggests that gamification refers to "the use of game mechanics in non-game contexts to amplify the attractiveness of existing products or services in order to offer gameful experiences, enhance engagement, and motivate people to change behaviors."

3 Game Mechanics

Game mechanics are an important concept in the definition of gamification. They refer to "the various actions, behaviors and control mechanisms afforded to the player within a game context" (Hunicke, Leblanc, & Zubek, 2004, p. 3). They are the key elements that are common to many games (Burke, 2014) and can be defined from a narrow or a boundless perspective (Deterding et al., 2011). The former identifies game mechanics as the features shared by games while the latter refers to any elements that can be found in any game.

The three categories of mechanics frequently mentioned in previous studies are challenges and competition, progression and rewards, and recognition (Robson, Plangger, Kietzmann, McCarthy, & Pitt, 2014; Wang & Tsai, 2014; Xu, Buhalis, & Weber, 2017). Challenges and competition refer to the different tasks that players are facing or the goals that they are trying to accomplish. For example, goals, competition, time pressure, and loss aversion. Progression and rewards refer to various bonuses or benefits including badges and points. Recognition means that a player's status is recognized by other people. Leaderboards, reputations, and ranks are representative of status in games. Sayeed and Faheem (2014) conclude that if competition, progression and rewards, and recognition are applied properly by businesses, the efficiency of services will be fostered and the consumer experience may be improved.

4 Theoretical Foundations of Gamification

The effects of these game mechanics on engagement are rooted in the theories of the computer, education, and psychology fields of study. Malone (1981) explored the elements that made a computer-based learning environment engaging and proposed a theory of intrinsically motivating instruction. Challenge is important in game design because the uncertainty of the game outcomes keeps the player curious and engaged. Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) flow theory also emphasizes the role of challenge. People have full involvement and feel enjoyment when they have a good balance between the perceived challenges of the task and their perceived skills. This theory indicates that applying the game mechanic of challenge and competition needs to consider the capability of the targeted group. If audiences perceive their skills cannot solve the problems, they may not participate not to say engagement. The effects of rewards could be interpreted from Vroom's (1964) expectancy theory. People would put more efforts in completing a task if desirable rewards are provided. Rewards are especially effective in generating engagement when people have low interest (Marinak & Gambrell, 2008). Vroom (1964) also emphasized that rewards should be deserved and wanted by the recipients. The success of a gamification campaign is closely linked to the attractiveness of the rewards. The Mini Getaway Stockholm 2010 attracted 11,413 participants in 7 days because people wanted to gain the reward, a real MINI. In terms of recognition, it is associated with self-esteem, which has a direct impact on people's cognitive and emotional engagement (Pellas, 2014).

5 Gamification in advertising

The game mechanics of challenges and rewards have been widely used in advertising (Table 1). Gamification successfully attracted audiences and increased advertising engagements. Additionally, the gamified advertisement could help service providers to better understand which products or services are more attractive to audiences. For example, through the gamified advertisement, Ontario Colourful Spring Tour, the Destination Ontario knew that the Ottawa Tulip Festival and Toronto Sakura Blossoms were more favoured by tourists.

Table 1. Gamification in advertising

Organisation or companies	Gamification examples	Game mechanics
Destination Ontario	Where Am I: Tourists were invited to play a riddle game and guess which destination Where Am I is describing. They could write their answers on www.whereami.com and browse travel information.	Challenges
Destination Ontario	Ontario Colourful Spring Tour: Tourists were invited to answer online questions to create customized 50-day family vacation itineraries and predict the parenting style of users.	Rewards

Destination Ontario	Fantastic Ontario Family Trip: This advertisement offered a story narrative. Tourists could explore four Ontario spring experiences (i.e. Ottawa Tulip Festival, Toronto Sakura Blossoms, Niagara Fall Butterfly Museum, and Blue Mountain Village) and share their favourite destinations on social media to win printed game gifts.	Challenges
Tourism Australia	Best Jobs in the World Campaign: Tourism Australia, along with state and territory tourism organisations and partners launched this campaign. The participants could win free trips to Australian destinations by sharing images or videos related to Australia on social networks. Winners were determined through a public voting process.	Challenges and competition, rewards
McDonald	Pick N' Play: Participants were invited to play an interactive outdoor campaign. They played games on a large interactive billboard by using their mobile phones. The winners received their favourite McDonald's treat.	Challenges, rewards
Burger King	Halloween Let's Play: Participants were offered a mixed-reality game experience. The Halloween game was designed to promote Burger King's products. The winners got discount coupons and other rewards.	Challenges, rewards
Mini	Mini Getaway Stockholm 2010: People were challenged to chase and catch a virtual MINI in Stockholm using an app, and then needed to run and protect this virtual MINI from being stolen by other players. The player who did so successfully over 7 days won a real MINI.	Challenges and competition, rewards
Starbucks	QR codes: Participants could get new product promotions by sharing QR codes.	Rewards

6 Discussion and Conclusions

Since gamification has attracted intensive attention, more studies need to be done to better understand its application and effects. Based on the literature review, three suggestions on future research were proposed: First, investigating the different roles of game mechanics and their effectiveness in engaging consumers. Second, most of the previous research was theoretical in nature and to date, very few empirical studies have been conducted. There is a need to conduct case studies and empirical research to examine the effectiveness of gamification in the tourism context. Third, as motivation is a central topic in gamification, understanding why tourists would like to engage in gamified advertisements or destinations can help game designers create valuable games and offer better experiences for tourists.

This study reviewed literature on gamification and documented its practices in tourism advertising. It justified the definitions of gamification and proposed three categories of game mechanics: challenges and competition; progression and rewards; and recognition. The effects of these game mechanics on engagement are explained through Malone's (1981) theory of intrinsically motivating instruction, flow theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), expectancy theory (Vroom, 1964), and self-esteem theory (Pellas, 2014). These theories provide valuable insights in the design of favorable gamified advertising campaigns.

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