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## THE ROLE OF GAMIFIED CUSTOMER BENEFITS IN PURSUING CUSTOMERS' LOYALTY: A MEDIATED ROLE OF CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT

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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
Gamified Customer Benefits, Customer Engagement, Customer loyalty, Epistemic Benefits, Personal Integrative Benefits, Social Integrative Benefits, Hedonic Benefits	The social media platforms have become progressively vital in modern era as a means of interacting with consumers and as a means for marketers to focus on online social networks so as to foster loyalty of brands. Purpose of this study is to analyze the causal relationship among the characteristics of gamified customer benefits (epistemic benefits, social integrative benefits, personal integrative benefits and hedonic benefits), customer engagement and customer loyalty with respect to online brand communities on social media platforms. This study also analyzes the mediating role of customer engagement between gamified customer benefits and customer loyalty. Data is collected from 250 individuals and Smart PLS-4 is used to empirically test the hypothesis. Results reveals that epistemic benefits, social integrative benefits and hedonic benefits has positive & significant impact of customer engagement & customer loyalty while personal integrative benefits shows insignificant impact on customer engagement & loyalty. This study shows mediating role of customer engagement amid gamified customer benefits and customer loyalty. Thus, this study may help brand managers to better understand role of gamified customer benefits with customer engagement and customer loyalty.
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### INTRODUCTION

The online brand communities upon social media platform try to enhance customer loyalty by improving the perception and attitude of brand in the eyes of customers and gain competitive advantage. This will help business to enhance traffic on their websites & increase engagement of customer which will enhance customer loyalty (Wong & Haque, 2022). In business sector, customer involvement on the platforms of social media is equally crucial (Grewal, Roggeveen, Sisodia & Nordfält, 2017). Additionally, social media is utilized by marketers to create online

brand communities that serve as a means of communication and information exchange about products and brands (Dwivedi, Ismagilova, Hughes, Carlson, Filieri, Kumar, Rahman, Raman, Salo, Tran & Wang, 2021). The emerging technique to engage customer in the online brands' communities is gamification. The gamification helps the business to increase the engagement of customers, creating awareness among customers and boost loyalty (Xi & Hamari, 2020a). In addition, gamification is a design approach that seeks to affect the user behaviour and cognitive processes by offering pleasant experiences like to those found in games (Huotari & Hamari, 2017). The gamification is the use of game dynamics to stages and program developers in novel ways as strategy aims to increase engagement of users & contribution in non-gaming contexts by utilizing the interactive and motivating aspects of games (Rodrigues, Oliveira & Rodrigues, 2019).

According to Ciuchita, Heller, Köcher, Köcher, Leclercq, Sidaoui and Stead (2023) the global gamification industry is expected to reach \$32 billion by 2025, having doubled in the value to \$11.94 billion in 2021. To keep the customers interested, marketers have added gamification features to e-commerce systems. Previous research has looked at the function of gamification in a number of settings, such as e-learning, crowdsourcing, networking on social media, health, fitness, and workstation (Zhang, Lu, Torres & Chen, 2018). Designing gamification experiences is becoming a more important component of marketing strategy as gamification has the power to influence customer behaviour and differentiate a company's market offers (Torres, Augusto & Neves, 2022). For instance, gamification has been effectively implemented by a number of global service providers, such as Nike, McDonald's, and Bing, in their business processes (Behl, Pereira, Jayawardena, Nigam & Mangla, 2023). The studies shows that the gamification is vital role in creating customer engagement (Hewapathirana & Caldera, 2023). Nevertheless, not much research has looked at mediating factors that affect how consumers react to gamification. Studies focusing on role of gamification in attracting customers and enhance engagement of customers (Tsou & Putra, 2023). The intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in gamification, helps to motivate customer for interaction with online brand communities (Hewapathirana & Caldera, 2023).

There is need to investigate the engagement of customer due to gamification from perspective of customer (Rasool, Shah & Islam, 2020). Therefore a gap exist in determining the impact of gamified customer benefits upon behavioral aspect of customers such as customer engagement and customer loyalty with respect to online brand communities. The engagement is linked to gamification, and the benefits it brings to consumer engagement usually serve as justifications for its use (Jain, Mishra & Saxena, 2023). Customers' interactions with websites are increased and their participation with marketing campaigns is encouraged by gamification (Noorbehba, Salehi & Zadeh, 2019). Higher levels of happiness, trust, and brand loyalty are displayed by engaged consumers. Customers will get involved in the brand's given information and build a deep relationship with it when they are paying attention to the brand and the attributes that go along with it, they are said to be engaged (Shin & Back, 2020). The gamified customer benefits offer customers interactive and enjoyable experience compared to traditional loyalty programs. Gamified customer benefits help build an emotional connection between customers and the brand by providing memorable and rewarding experiences. Additionally, according to Kumar et al. (2010), people often develop enduring ties with products they find interesting. Therefore, it is worthwhile to talk about gamification as it can increase the consumers' brand loyalty via involvement.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Usage & Gratification Theory

Researchers have identified role that both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation play in creating the connection between social media and online communities. The process from motivation to attitude, intention, and behavior is suggested by [Wolny and Mueller, \(2013\)](#), who accepted the theory of reasoned action. The most widely framework used to determine drivers of motivation is uses & gratification theory ([Willemssen et al., 2013](#)). This approach is utilised by conventional media to appeal to customers and is embraced by marketers and communication experts to identify behaviour of internet consumers ([Katz et al., 1973](#)). According to [Santini et al. \(2020\)](#), the three-dimensional models of the cognitive processing, affection, and activation which were anticipated by [Brodie et al. \(2013\)](#)—are the most commonly used models to measure customer engagement. UGT is used to classify consumer motivations for using social media ([Alnawas & Aburub, 2016](#); [Whiting & Williams, 2013](#)), features related to social networking ([Smock et al., 2011](#)) & actively engaging with various brand communities ([Sicilia & Palazón, 2008](#)). Increased engagement and loyalty lead to higher customer lifetime value, as loyal customers tend to make repeat purchases and are less likely to switch to competitors. It is used to identify reasons why consumers use internet ([Jere & Davis, 2011](#)) & visit websites for marketing purposes ([Ko et al., 2005](#)).

### Customer Engagement (CE)

The degree to which consumer engages and links with a company products or activities beyond making purchase is known as customer engagement. This comprises regularly connecting other members of the social network that has been recognized around the product, service, or activity ([Tsou & Putra, 2023](#)). The customer attitude makes up the customer's community participation ([Algesheimer et al., 2005](#)). According to the number of academics, consumer behavior should be a focus of community involvement ([Wirtz et al., 2013](#)). Customer engagement is comprised of behavioral elements including motivation towards the company and brand, as well as trust, satisfaction, and commitment ([Doorn et al., 2010](#)). The consumer activity includes blogging, scripting evaluations in relation to the online brand communities, word-of-mouth referrals, and helping others ([Wirtz et al., 2013](#)). A company's capacity to attract, keep, and grow a client base gives it a long-term, sustainable competitive edge ([Rego et al., 2009](#)). In order to sustain and cultivate customer needs, an organization should prioritize customer retention, acquisition of product categories, promotion offers, word-of-mouth marketing, customer reaction & customer reviews via online brand communities, in addition to customer repurchases of goods/services ([Doorn et al., 2010](#)). Three features of consumer engagement include cognition, emotion, and conduct that stresses cognitive engagement, emotional devotion & cooperation ([Brodie et al., 2013](#)).

### Gamification

Gamification is an application that use game mechanics to engage with customers ([Hermawan & Tjhin, 2023](#)). According to [Rodrigues et al., \(2019\)](#), gamification is the application of design principles, procedures, and frameworks to effect, engage, and motivate both individuals and communities. The gamification is now associated with rewards, and businesses focuses on these strategies to enhance engagement of customers and motivate precise behaviors. According to [Nobre and Ferreira, \(2017\)](#), gamification is a ground-breaking branding practices that inspire engagement of customer in co-creations of brand- two essential components for dealing brand

-based innovation. Gamification is supportive tactic for supervising brands and could enhance brand engagement (Xi & Hamari, 2020). Gamification might be helpful strategy for enhancing consumer-brand interactions (Torres et al., 2022). Kaur (2023), argues gamification highlights consumers' objectives when they make purchases and shows how it affects their social media activity. They draw attention to the fact that gamification and marketing research are still very much in need of development. It is important to understand role of gamification more precisely customer aids due to gamification that guide organization to increase engagement & loyalty of customers.

### **Customer Loyalty (CL)**

The loyalty of customer is defined as the resilient wish to stick with the favored good or service going forward, despite outside inspirations and advertisements that may influence one to change one's behavior (Oliver, 1997). Regarding online brand community, brand loyalty refers to a particular behavioral significance that emerges from the user's contact with the social media platform and indicates the continued relationships between the customer and the brand (Habachi et al., 2024). The engagement of customer on social media platform plays a vital role in building and enhancing loyalty of customers (Islam & Rahman, 2017). In the past, academics thought that exhibiting similar behavior and making frequent purchases of the same brand or product would increase a customer's loyalty (Kandampully & Suhartanto, 2000). The repeat purchase behavior of customer is important for many industries. Gaining a new client comes at a significantly higher cost than maintaining an existing one. Increased average customer value is another benefit of having periodic occupational as this attracts the implication of patronage loyalty.

### **Relationship of Gamification & Customer Engagement**

The marketers used gamification as a strategy to enhance engagement of customers and also do value addition that ratify and maintained engagement (Hsu, 2023). The return that consumers receive from gamification, which motivates users to engage in the online brand communities (Hassan et al., 2019). The engagement of customers is primary result of gamification in online brand communities (Rodrigues et al., 2019). According to Yang et al., (2017), gamification is built on a system that uses game design to encourage engagement and retention of customers. Businesses use gamification primarily to engage and motivate their customers (Hwang & Choi, 2020). Additionally, they demonstrated that how the company increases customer engagement through gamification of the social interaction, perks, and behavior. The customer engagement is increased when gamification is used in marketing campaigns (Hsu & Chen, 2018). According to Jang et al. (2018), the primary factor influencing customer engagement is now gamification. Positive emotional and cognitive aspects of consumer engagement are demonstrated by way customers interact with gamified features that are demanding and collaborative (Berger et al., 2018).

### **Gamified Benefits, Customer Loyalty & Epistemic Benefits**

Gamification grasps great potential in enlightening loyalty of customers and provides many benefits (Vaitone et al., 2024). Gamified benefits are intended to encourage users to participate in online brand community activities, which will strengthen their bond with the brand and increase their brand loyalty and community support (Hook et al., 2018). Increased interaction with the online brand community and increased brand loyalty are two benefits of providing consumers with creative, interactive, and pleasant features that fulfill their hedonic and social

needs (Chan et al., 2014). Epistemic benefits are defined as perceived benefits that are fueled by product volume and that satisfy inquisitiveness, offer fresh intuitions, and fulfill desire for knowledge (Sheth et al., 1991). Within present framework, cognitive advantages are associated with product-related learning, which entails enhanced comprehension and expertise about the items, the technology that underlie them, and how to use them. Through the ongoing consumer interactions, online brand communities build and exchange significant shared information about the product and its convention (Puneet Kaur, Dhir, Risto Rajala, 2015; Rothaermel & Sugiyama, 2001).

H1a: EB have positive and significant impact on EB

H1b: EB have positive and significant impact on CL.

### **Hedonic Benefits (HB)**

Consumer interactions in online brand communities may yield extremely engaging, enjoyable, and cognitively stimulating experiences. Research on brand communities tells that consumers enjoy talking with one another on features, product & individualities of convention framework (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Optimistic responses and gratification that stem from the setting of product apply to the online brand communities (Jeppesen & Molin, 2003; Morgan & Townsend, 2022).

H2a: HB has positive and significant impact on CE.

H2b: HB has positive and significant impact on CL.

### **Personal Integrative Benefits (PIB)**

According to Blumber and Katz (1974), PIB deliver personal self-efficacy, which in turn affects status and achievement. Online brand communities provide a platform for specific consumers to reveal their expertise about product and abilities to solve problems. Customers can progress their standup and status among other customers and product seller by participating in product support (Harhoff et al., 2003). Kollock (1999) asserts that customer contributions influence the vendor's goals for product enhancement and peers' product consumption patterns. By using this influence, customer may feel more capable of handling their own needs (Hussain & Shabir, 2019).

H3a: PIB have positive and significant impact on CE.

H3b: PIB have positive and significant impact on CL.

### **Social Integrative Benefits (SIB)**

The interpersonal relationships and social bonds that form over the time between community participants are known as social integrative benefits (Nambisan & Baron, 2009). SIB reflects the advantages of long-lasting social and relational links that develop between the contributing objects in online consumer involvement (Nambisan, 2002). According to Kollock and Smith (2002), customers who have these kinds of social ties benefit in several ways, one of which is the strengthening of their feeling of social identity or belonging. The research on online brand communities has shown how much consumers appreciate these kinds of social identities and connections.

H4a: SIB has significant and positive impact on CE.

H4b: SIB has significant and positive impact on CL.

### Customer Engagement Mediating Effect

Organization should realize relationship between customer, customer loyalty and customer are able to make to strong bonding connection with other construct (Hsu, 2023). The qualities that support user commitment and engagement are focus of mediator role of customer engagement (Wirtz et al., 2013). Brodie et al. (2013) also looked at mediating role of consumer engagement, which establishes the effect of mediation between brand participation and usage intention. The engagement of customers arbitrates relationship activity of marketing & loyalty of customers, claim Hollebeek and Macky (2019). Additionally, studies demonstrate that context of services and loyalty behavior impact consumer engagement (Fernandes & Esteves, 2016). Furthermore, recent research has demonstrated that brand equity, which includes the brand recognition and loyalty, as well as gamification attributes are mediated by consumer interaction (Xi & Hamari, 2020a).

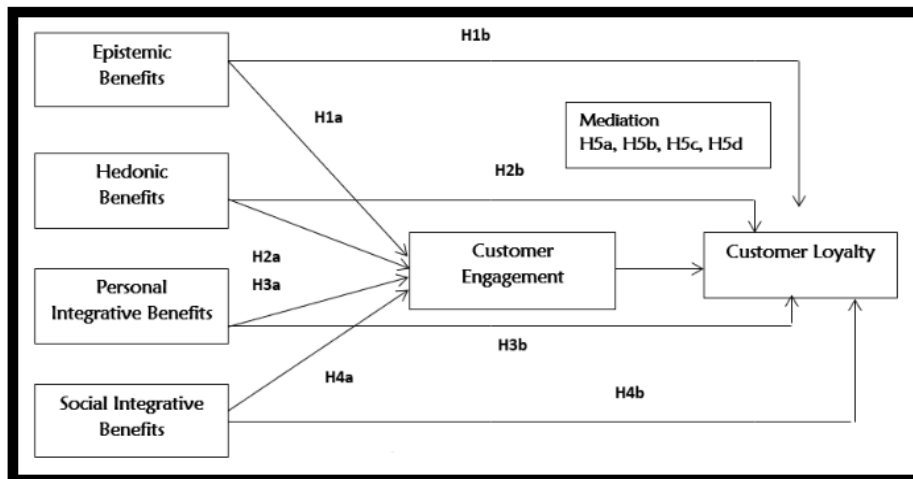
H5a: CE mediates the relationship between SIB and CL.

H5b: CE mediates the relationship between PIB and CL.

H5c: CE mediates the relationship between EB and CL.

H5d: CE mediates the relationship between HB and CL.

**Figure 1**  
*Theoretical Framework*



### Customer Engagement & Customer Loyalty

There is positive and significant relationship between engagement of customer and loyalty of customer (Chou et al., 2023). Over improving social media consumer engagement, businesses influence brand loyalty (Brodie et al., 2013), maximise income (Lee & Kozar, 2012), positively produce word-of-mouth (Libai et al., 2010), and maintain their competitive edge (Dholakia & Herrmann, 2005). The literature show that customer involvement can boost brand loyalty and foster psychological connections with customers that go beyond actual purchases (Wang et al., 2016). Online brand communities that offer clients winning experience foster strong emotional bonds result in devotion (Gummerus et al., 2012). Building emotional networks with customers

over customer involvement is beneficial for fostering loyalty among customers (Gummerus et al., 2012).

H6: CE has positive and significant impact on CL.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study used causal research design to analyze the relationship among different constructs and empirically tested numerous hypotheses to determine relationship amid various construct. This study focuses on statistical analysis because that is essential to determine the accuracy and authenticity of results. The study's target group is individuals who utilize the platforms on social media such as Snapchat, Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp. The target demographic for this study is students since younger people today are more tech-savvy and frequent internet users (Khare & Rakesh, 2011). Millennial generation of Pakistan is prime focus in this study. This study used non probability sampling and focuses upon convenient sampling for collecting data from millennial generation. Convenient sampling is the commonly employed strategy for gathering data on consumer internet activity behaviors (Shah & Tiwari, 2021). Data is collected from 250 participants who uses different social media platform to link with the online brand communities. The Likert scale is used to determine constructs. Smart-PLS is used to analyze the structural equation modeling (SEM) because it's multivariate statistical method that is used to ascertain the direct and indirect link between variables that are dependent and independent (Gefen et al., 2000). This method is helpful to understand the in-depth relationships among variables.

### Data Analysis

Structural equation modeling (SEM) is multivariate statistical method that is used to ascertain the direct and indirect link among the variables which are dependent and independent (Gefen et al., 2000). Thus, when performing multivariate statistical analysis, such as regression, path determination, correlation connection analysis, factorial analysis, and growth-based models, the SEM assists the researcher (Urbach Frederik, 2010). In this linking, researchers can also use the SEM to test the model with all of the variables included in the model and determine the model's fitness (Gefen et al., 2000). The structural equation model (SEM) enables researchers to assess the relationships between hypotheses and to ascertain the relationships among the construct and its specific measures. Smart PLS 4.0 was utilized in the investigation to assess the structural and measurement models (Ringle et al., 2022). This statistical software assesses the structural model estimates as well as the psychometric characteristics of the measurement model.

**Table 1**  
*Internal Consistency*

Variable	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_a)
CE	0.896	0.898
CL	0.952	0.953
EB	0.824	0.824
HB	0.818	0.822
PIB	0.843	0.843
SIB	0.779	0.783

The internal consistency of the outer model can be determined through the two ways; one is to determine the composite reliability and second is the cronbach alpha. Rendering to [Hair et al., \(2011\)](#), the threshold value for Cronbach Alpha and Composite Reliability is higher than 0.7. This method is used to analyze the inter-item relationship. The Cronbach Alpha value in this reading is between the “0.952 to 0.779” that meet the recognized standard. Thus, the range of composite reliability is also between “0.953 to 0.783”. Thus, this results shows that the data is consistent.

### Convergent Validity

Average variance extracted is used in this study to evaluate convergent validity. Convergent constructs are defined as those whose average variance extract value is approximately 0.5 or higher. Thus, the average variance extract values in this study range from "0.657 to 0.739." Consequently, measurement model's satisfactory convergent validity is demonstrated by these values.

**Table 2**  
*Average Variance Extract*

Variable	Average variance extracted (AVE)
CE	0.706
CL	0.657
EB	0.739
HB	0.734
PIB	0.680
SIB	0.694

### Discriminant validity

A multi-item assessment tool that evaluates many constructs is evaluated for the discriminant validity using Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio method. Using this method, one can compare the correlations between items within similar paradigm and correlations between two independent constructs. Value of HTMT ratio is calculated by dividing correlation of average item of construct by average correlation among and constructs. According to [Heseler et al. \(2015\)](#), HTMT ratio has a scale from 0 to 1, with values closer to 0 denoting that discriminant validity is good amid constructs.

**Table 3**  
*Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio*

	CE	CL	EB	HB	PIB	SIB
CE						
CL	0.906					
EB	0.893	0.889				
HB	0.891	0.828	0.881			
PIB	0.835	0.837	0.865	0.908		
SIB	0.893	0.884	0.852	0.874	0.956	



**Fornell & Larcker’s Standards (F-L)**

The requirement is satisfied when correlation coefficient amid statistic and its corresponding measures is less than square power of the extracted average variance (AVE). According to Hair et al. 2014, that F-L criteria is used to conduct comparison among average variance extracted square root & correlation across latent variables. Off diagonal element square root assessment of AVE is larger than its conforming rows and columns. Square derivation of AVE is displayed by bolded numbers & inter-correlation amid construction is displayed by remaining, non-bold values.

**Table 4**  
*F-L Criteria*

	CE	CL	EB	HB	PIB	SIB
CE	0.840					
CL	0.839	0.810				
EB	0.769	0.787	0.860			
HB	0.764	0.731	0.723	0.857		
PIB	0.727	0.750	0.804	0.754	0.825	
SIB	0.746	0.761	0.763	0.699	0.773	0.833

**Hypothesis Testing**

The researcher assesses the structural model as relationship is measured by the structural model evaluation.

**Table 5**  
*Direction of Relationship*

Hypothesis	Relationship	OS	SD	T	PV	Assessment
H1a	EB -> CE	0.305	0.078	3.918	0.000	Supported
H1b	EB -> CL	0.205	0.060	3.410	0.001	Supported
H2a	HB -> CE	0.351	0.069	5.089	0.000	Supported
H2b	HB -> CL	0.060	0.062	2.969	0.003	Supported
H3a	PIB -> CE	0.023	0.073	0.317	0.752	Not Supported
H3b	PIB -> CL	0.092	0.067	1.374	0.170	Not Supported
H4a	SIB -> CE	0.250	0.077	3.251	0.001	Supported
H4b	SIB -> CL	0.209	0.065	3.220	0.001	Supported
H6	CE -> CL	0.455	0.059	7.734	0.000	Supported

**Table 6**  
*Indirect Relationship*

Total Effect			Direct Effect			Indirect Effect				
$\beta$	TV	PV	$\beta$	TV	PV	Hypothesis	$\beta$	TV	PV	Results
0.344	5.505	0.000	0.205	3.410	0.001	H5a:	0.159	3.737	0.000	Supported
						EB>CE>CL				
0.219	3.095	0.002	0.060	2.969	0.003	H5b:	0.139	3.828	0.000	Supported
						HB>CE>CL				

0.103	1.321	0.187	0.092	1.374	0.170	H5c: PIB>CE>CL	0.011	0.315	0.753	Not supported
0.266	4.280	0.000	0.152	2.607	0.009	H5d: SIB>CE>CL	0.114	2.916	0.004	Supported

Results show that EB, HB & SIB show positives and significant impact on customer engagement and customer loyalty whereas the PIB shows insignificant impact on customer engagement and customer loyalty. Results show that customer engagement partially mediate relationship among EB, SIB & loyalty whereas customer engagement shows full mediation amid HB and customer loyalty.

## DISCUSSION

The primary goal of this study is to examine how millennial consumers utilize social media to engage with brands. The present study examined mediating function of engagement of customer in the relationship between loyalty of customer and the customer benefits of gamification. This will help to identify motivation behind engagement and loyalty of customers. Customers can communicate & express their emotions on platforms of social media (Wong & Haque, 2022). The aim of gamification is to engage the customer and persuade the customer to purchase product or services (Hewapathirana & Caldera, 2023). Many scholarly works have been written about the function of platforms on social media in bringing people together so they may communicate and share interests in similar products or brands (Liao & Wang, 2020). According to Hofacker et al. (2016), gamification offers a chance to instill in customers favorable intentions for both monetary and non-monetary incentives. Customers might be encouraged to have favorable intents for both monetary and non-monetary rewards by using gamification (Hofacker et al., 2016). Customers using gamified apps contribute to the creation of pleasant experiences that satisfy fundamental psychological needs and emotions, like those of satisfaction (Deterring, 2019; Pereira et al., 2014). Additionally in line with earlier studies, this study demonstrates a noteworthy and favorable influence on customer loyalty and engagement. People use gamified customer perks to improve their own brand and interact with users on social media networks. Brand managers need to know that gamification is a technique that engages consumers with brands first and then helps to achieve higher recital outcomes like customer loyalty and brand experience.

## CONCLUSION

The study's conclusions aid in accepting of the phenomenon of gamified consumer advantages in customer interaction and how they foster customer loyalty on social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram by academics. The client loyalty is increased by these connections. By classifying the influences between the gamified customer benefits, customer engagement, and customer loyalty—motivational drivers—and by empirically authenticating a model based on the theory of gratification, this work contributes to the body of literature. Thus, the empirical findings of this study are also beneficial in understanding the customer engagement and how psychological demands are met through advantages that are socially and personally integrated. This study helps the marketers to plan their marketing programs according towards desire of customer. This study shows that customer likely to engage with those social media platform that provide knowledge and highlight curiosity. The millennial generation like to engagement with brand communities who provide them opportunity of the participation and platform for the enjoyment.

So the marketers should focus on knowledge driven, fun loving and participative game apps to engage customers and enhance customer loyalty. The marketing managers need to know that gamification is an approach that engages customers with brands first and then helps to achieve higher performance outcomes like customer loyalty and brand experience. The gamification also attracts the customer for engagement and engaged customers are more loyal as compare other representative. The findings of this study cannot be generalized because no specific industry is mentioned while collecting the data. This study focuses on convenient sampling for data collection; other sampling techniques can be incorporate to analyze the customers. Future studies may concentrate on additional behavioral aspects such as the intention to use a brand, electronic word-of-mouth (EWOM), and brand utilization. In this connection, the impact of the theory of social exchange can be ascertained in the future by the researcher through the desired testimony.

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