

Gaming the System:
How Top Fast-Food Brands use Gamified Mobile Marketing Strategies

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Abstract

While gamified strategies are widely recognized for their effectiveness in education and learning, their impact on marketing and consumer behavior remains underexplored. One industry that has broadly adopted gamification in marketing is fast-food. This paper examines how gamified elements are integrated into the mobile marketing strategies of major fast-food brands. Using qualitative content analysis, this study analyzed gamified marketing elements—including rewards programs, progress bars, and tier systems—employed by the top ten revenue-earning fast-food brands in the United States. Data were collected through an in-depth review of how these brands utilize these gamified strategies in their mobile apps. Results indicate that all ten brands implement rewards programs on their mobile apps, most incorporate progress bars, and some utilize tier systems. In addition, some brands offer limited-time gamified promotions within their apps. These findings suggest that utilizing gamified elements in mobile apps is a current standard of top fast-food brands' mobile marketing strategies.

Keywords: gamification, digital marketing, fast-food, mobile apps, rewards programs

Introduction

Gamification is the process of incorporating “gameful experiences” into a service to enhance user experience (Huotari & Hamari, 2012, p. 19). This process has emerged as a popular marketing technique as brands seek new ways to foster deeper engagement with their audiences (Yang et al., 2017). By integrating elements of competition, achievement, and rewards into their campaigns, businesses aim to make brand interaction more enjoyable and compelling (Yang et al.). Although researchers have extensively explored gamification’s effectiveness in education and workplace productivity (Oliveira et al., 2022), there is a growing interest in how it influences consumer behavior in relation to marketing.

Gamification features have been proven to impact consumers’ behavioral responses to brands, so furthering the understanding of marketing gamification strategies will benefit marketers seeking innovative tools to improve customer loyalty and engagement (Bettiga et al., 2022). Assessing the effectiveness of gamification strategies in marketing efforts could allow companies to design marketing campaigns that yield higher customer engagement and loyalty. In addition, understanding the psychological impact of gamification—such as its capacity to foster emotional connections and motivate repeat interactions—is critical to advancing the study of consumer engagement.

This paper will seek to answer the question: how do popular fast-food brands incorporate gamified elements into their mobile marketing strategies to drive customer engagement and retention? To better understand the existing knowledge related to gamification, this paper will explore and contextualize key theories and concepts that are relevant to the topic, such as locus of control, self-determination theory, and uses and gratification theory, which may help to

explain the psychological framework for the effectiveness of gamification. Additionally, the paper will examine existing literature regarding the effectiveness of gamification strategies such as rewards programs, progress bars, and tier systems. Also, the paper will identify gaps in the current literature related to mobile marketing gamification and propose future research.

Literature Review

Key Theories and Concepts

Locus of Control

Critical to the understanding of gamification effectiveness is the idea of a user's locus of control, which is individuals' sense that they are personally responsible for the outcomes in their own lives (Inoue, 2013). This concept is rooted in the capacity for personal choices to lead to positive or negative consequences that lead to increased feelings of personal accountability and motivation (Inoue, 2013). In the gaming context, players can often perceive a higher locus control as their in-game success is directly tied to their skill and decision-making, contrasting real-world environments that can often feel relatively random (Goodman et al., 2015).

Consumers, like game players, seek a high locus of control that can be offered through marketing gamification that provides feelings of autonomy, creativity, and a sense of power (Goodman et al., 2015).

Self-determination Theory

Similarly, self-determination theory provides an understanding of audience motivations that can explain the effectiveness of marketing gamification (Gajanova & Radišić, 2020). Self-determination theory is the psychological theory that suggests that motivation is driven by the need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Shi & Cristea, 2016). Gamification can fulfill individuals' need for autonomy by providing multiple paths toward achievement, interactivity,

and/or immediate feedback (Shi & Cristea, 2016). In addition, the need for competence can be met by offering users manageable goals or measures of success that can increase in difficulty, which can build individuals' sense of skill or achievement (Shi & Cristea, 2016). Lastly, Gamification can fulfill individuals' need for relatedness to peers, communities or greater causes by offering tools or platforms that connect interests and goals (Shi & Cristea, 2016). In practice, these communities can be social platforms that encourage and showcase participation through interactions, such as tagging, rating, commenting, and sharing (Shi & Cristea, 2016).

Uses and Gratifications Theory

Another theory that can help provide an understanding of the psychological effectiveness of gamification is the uses and gratification theory. This theory states that audiences “actively select and employ media to fulfill specific needs,” such as information-seeking, entertainment, and achievement (Gupta et al., 2024; Sichach, 2023). Uses and gratification theory is rooted in the idea that audiences play an active role in shaping their media choices, which differs from the traditional view that the media itself determines what audiences are interested in (Sichach, 2023).

In the gamification context, users are information-seeking in the sense that they actively seek knowledge in a gamified setting to perform better and achieve goals (Gupta et al., 2024). Gamified experiences can also meet consumers' need for entertainment by providing a sense of enjoyment, pleasure, and satisfaction that goes beyond education or utility (Gupta et al., 2024). In addition, gamification can also address users' need for achievement by offering benchmarks or milestones that encourage a sense of progress and advancement through goal setting, progress tracking, and rewards (Gupta et al., 2024).

Gamification Strategies

Rewards programs are a common gamification element that offer consumers benefits for brand loyalty and engagement, which serve to incentivize customer retention (Huotari & Hamari, 2012). Another common gamification feature is progress bars, which visually track users' completion of tasks and objectives, usually on a digital interface (Huotari & Hamari, 2012). This feature incentivizes users to further engage with the platform by catering to the psychological need for achievement that is met when the progress bar is completed (Huotari & Hamari, 2012; Gupta et al., 2024). In addition, tier systems serve to grant consumers different designations that are often increasingly exclusive and rewarding (Tanford, 2013). Some studies have shown that individuals in higher levels of tier systems exhibit greater attitudinal and behavioral loyalty (Tanford, 2013).

One key distinction among gamification strategies is whether rewards are certain or chance-based (Adam et al., 2023). Certain rewards offer upfront details about exactly what benefits a user will receive upon completing a designated task (Adam et al., 2023). On the other hand, chance-based rewards leave users at least partially unsure about what outcome they stand to receive upon finishing a task (Adam et al., 2023). Some studies have shown that chance-based rewards are more effective at motivating individuals who are working toward a task (Shen et al., 2015).

Gaps in Literature

While existing research provides valuable insights into gamification's psychological foundations and effectiveness in various contexts, several gaps remain. Much of the literature focuses on gamification in educational and workplace settings (Oliveira et al., 2022), with relatively fewer studies examining its applications in marketing. Among marketing studies, there is room to explore gamification trends specific to the fast-food industry.

Additionally, while rewards programs, progress bars, and tier systems have been widely studied as gamification strategies (Huotari & Hamari, 2012; Tanford, 2013), there is limited exploration of how these elements are integrated into mobile marketing platforms.

Understanding how gamified features are optimized for mobile users represents a critical area for further investigation.

This paper addresses these gaps by focusing on the fast-food industry's use of gamification in mobile marketing. Specifically, it seeks to answer the question: how do popular fast-food brands incorporate gamified elements into their mobile marketing strategies to drive customer engagement and retention?

By exploring this question, the study aims to provide insights into the design and implementation of gamified marketing features, evaluate their effectiveness in enhancing customer loyalty, and contribute to the broader understanding of how gamification can be leveraged in mobile platforms to achieve strategic marketing goals.

Method

This research employed qualitative content analysis to examine how gamified elements are integrated into the mobile marketing strategies of major fast-food brands. This approach allows for an in-depth exploration of the themes, patterns, and contexts surrounding gamification in brands' mobile apps.

Sample and Sampling Strategy

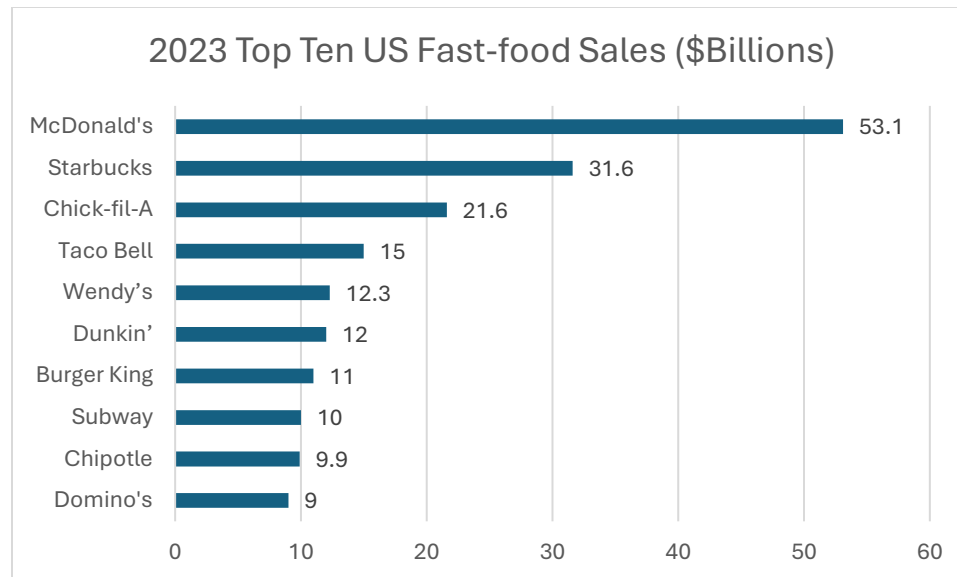
A purposive sampling method was used to focus on the brands with the most sales in the last calendar year. These brands were included in the study regardless of their current mobile app presence. The sample for this research consists of the top ten fast-food brands in the United States based on 2023 sales data. The top ten in order included McDonald's, Starbucks, Chick-fil-

A, Taco Bell, Wendy's, Dunkin', Burger King, Subway, Chipotle, and Domino's (Shure, 2024).

Figure 1 depicts the brands' 2023 revenue. The sampling timeframe was from November 11, 2024, to November 22, 2024.

Figure 1

Bar Chart of US Fast-food Brand Revenue in 2023



Data Collection

The data collection focused on digital marketing examples sourced from the brands' official mobile apps and Instagram profiles. Data was collected and documented through screenshots and visual analysis of relevant content. The unit of analysis was individual marketing content that included gamified elements. A coding scheme was employed to categorize gamified strategies into the following categories:

- Rewards Programs: Systems that provide customers with points, discounts, or other incentives for purchases or interactions (Huotari & Hamari, 2012).
- Progress Bars: Visual indicators that display user advancement in a task, such as points accumulation or milestone achievement (Huotari & Hamari, 2012).

- Tier Systems: Hierarchical reward structures that offer increasing benefits as users engage more deeply with the brand (Tanford, 2013).
- Other Gamified Elements: Miscellaneous features not mentioned in the other coding categories, such as badges, challenges, or leaderboards.

Procedure

The research utilized the following procedure to perform the content analysis:

1. Identification of Content: Content is collected from the official digital platforms of each brand during the specified timeframe. Gamified marketing materials are identified based on the inclusion criteria.
2. Data Organization: Collected content is organized by brand.
3. Coding: The coding scheme is applied to categorize the gamified elements. This involves reviewing each piece of content to identify and classify the gamification strategies used.
4. Analysis: Patterns and themes are analyzed within and across brands, focusing on how gamification is utilized to enhance customer engagement and retention.

Results

Analyzing the mobile apps of fast-food brands revealed that all ten featured some form of rewards program that users could sign up for. All of these programs rewarded members with some form of store currency—usually referred to as “points”—after making a purchase or completing some sort of task. In addition, eight of the ten brands incorporated progress bars into their mobile apps, serving to track the accumulated store currency. Four of the ten brands utilized a tier system to offer users increased rewards at different levels of purchasing history and loyalty. A visualization of the breakdown of rewards programs, progress bars, and tier systems across the ten brands’ mobile apps is presented in Table 1.

Table 1*Mobile App Features by Brand*

Company	Rewards Program	Progress Bar	Tier System
McDonald's	✓	✓	✗
Starbucks	✓	✓	✗
Chick-fil-A	✓	✓	✓
Taco Bell	✓	✓	✓
Wendy's	✓	✗	✗
Dunkin'	✓	✓	✓
Burger King	✓	✓	✗
Subway	✓	✓	✓
Chipotle	✓	✗	✗
Domino's	✓	✓	✗
Total	10	8	4

Key: ✓ Feature was present. ✗ Feature was not present.

McDonald's

The “MyMcDonald's Rewards” program allows users to earn 100 points for every dollar spent at the store. Users can redeem 1,500 points for a small reward, such as a single cheeseburger or vanilla ice cream cone. The rewards are worth increasingly more value corresponding to earned points and max out at 6,000, which entitles customers to a large menu item such as the Big Mac or a Happy Meal. Within the app display, users can track how many points they have earned through a progress bar that ranges from zero to 6,000. An additional feature of the program is an opportunity for “bonuses” that change each week. For example, one bonus offered users double points on any breakfast purchase made in a week.

Starbucks

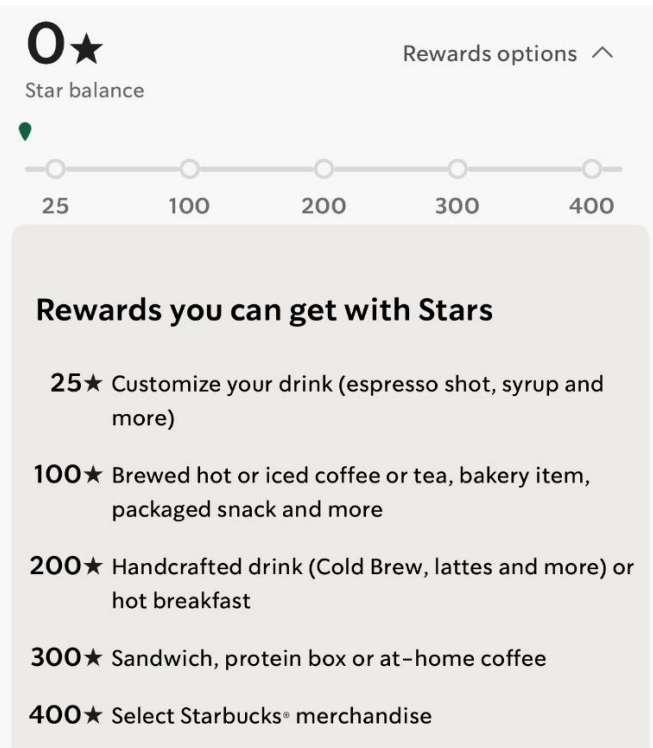
The Starbucks rewards program offers customers one “star” per dollar spent in-store and a progress bar to track them. With 25 stars, customers can get beverage add-ons, such as espresso shots or syrups, and they can buy small menu items like brewed coffee for 100 stars. The largest

rewards are offered at 400 stars, which offer a choice of select Starbucks merchandise. The company also grants customers who use the Starbucks debit card two stars per dollar spent.

Figure 2 depicts a screenshot of the in-app progress bar and rewards offerings.

Figure 2

Screenshot of Starbucks Progress Bar and Rewards



Chick-fil-A

The “Chick-fil-A One” rewards program grants users ten points for every dollar spent at their restaurants. Reward options range from an ice cream cone, which can be bought for 200 points, to a Chick-fil-A meal deal that costs 2,500 points. However, the app also offers a tier system where users can earn more points and rewards. Customers start at the basic “Member” tier, then move up to “Silver” after acquiring 1,000 points, “Red” after 4,000, and “Signature” after 10,000. At the “Signature” status, members earn 13 points for every dollar spent, gain access to backstage tours at the Chick-fil-A center, and unlock exclusive rewards. In addition, the



app includes a progress bar that tracks how many points a user has obtained and how close they are to the next membership tier.

Taco Bell

The Taco Bell rewards program offers users 10 points for every dollar spent in-store, with a selection of rewards after every 250 points. This program incorporates a tier system where members start at “Hot” tier and unlock “Fire” tier after accumulating 2,000 points. At the “Hot” tier, members can choose between a small menu item, such as a crunchy taco or medium fountain drink, while the “Fire” tier rewards include a selection of larger items, such as a chicken enchilada burrito or “Cheesy Gordita Crunch.” The app also features a progress bar that tracks how close a user is to the next 250-point reward. Figure 3 depicts Taco Bell’s tier rewards.

Figure 3

Screenshot of Taco Bell Tiers

 UNLOCKED	 UNLOCKED AT 2000 POINTS
\$1 = 10 POINTS	\$1 = 11 POINTS
A REWARD EVERY 250 POINTS	A REWARD EVERY 250 POINTS
Cheesy Fiesta Potatoes	All 11 Hot Tier Rewards
Chips & Nacho Cheese Sauce	FIRE EXCLUSIVES
Cinnamon Twists	Nacho Cheese Doritos®
Cheesy Roll Up	Locos Taco
Cheesy Bean & Rice Burrito	Seasoned Beef Chalupa Supreme®
Bean Burrito	Cheesy Gordita Crunch
Crunchy Taco	Double Stacked Taco
Soft Taco	3-Cheese Chicken Flatbread Melt
Spicy Potato Soft Taco	Chicken Enchilada Burrito
Cheesy Toasted Breakfast Burrito (Sausage)	Breakfast Quesadilla (Sausage)
Medium Fountain Drink	Mtn Dew® Baja Blast® Freeze (Regular)

The app also featured a promotion called “Relive the Decades,” which prompted users to take a quiz related to decades, including the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s. For the 1980s quiz, users are asked questions related to menu items and pop culture that serve as a basis to predict which 80s car a user is most alike. After completing these decade quizzes, users are offered the opportunity to enroll in a sweepstake for a chance to win Taco Bell merchandise and other prizes. Figures 4 and 5 depict examples of the decades quiz questions and results.

Figure 4

Screenshot of Taco Bell Decades Quiz Question



Figure 5

Screenshot of Taco Bell Decades Quiz Result

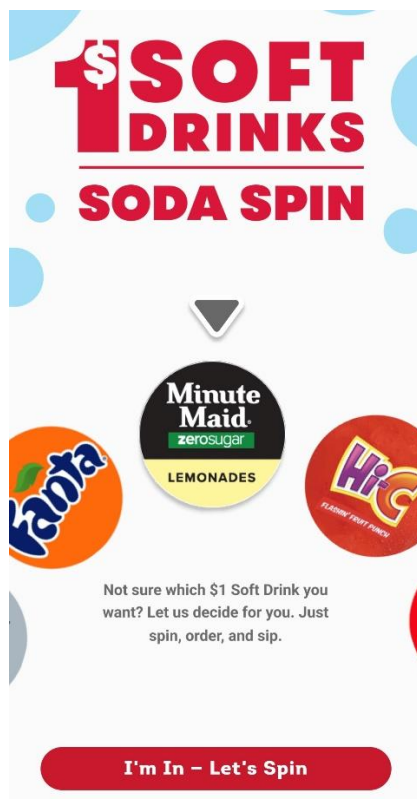


Wendy's

The Wendy's Rewards program allows users to earn ten points for every dollar spent, offering rewards that range from a 200-point small chicken nugget order to an 800-point "Baconator." After logging in, the app prompted a "Soda Spin" promotion where a digital wheel randomly picked a drink option that customers could then buy for a discounted price of one dollar. Figure 6 depicts the in-app promotion.

Figure 6

Screenshot of Wendy's Soda Spin Promotion



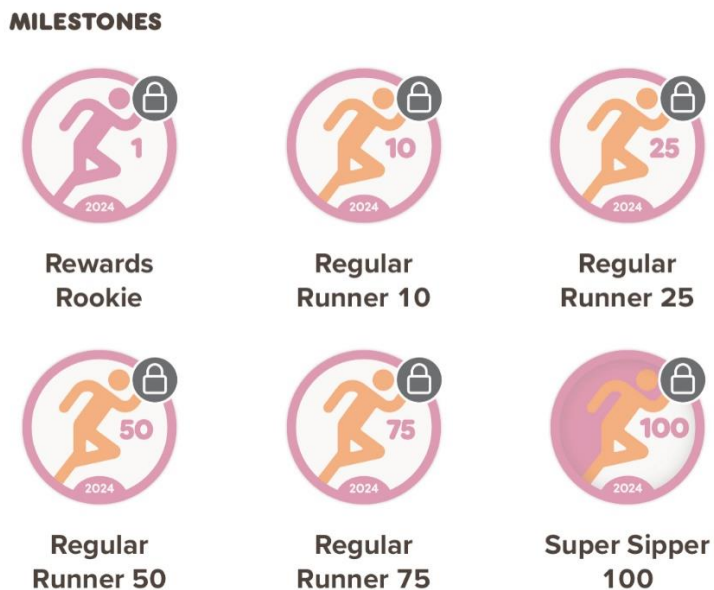
Dunkin'

Dunkin' Rewards offers 10 points per dollar spent, redeemable for rewards that range from a 150-point hash brown order to a 900-point frozen drink or espresso. The app features a progress bar, tracking points from zero to 1,000. Dunkin' Rewards also incorporates a tier system

where users can unlock “Boosted Status” after making 12 purchases in a calendar year, which earns them 13 points per dollar spent for a three-month period. In addition, the app offers “Milestone Badges” for customer actions. For example, the “Rewards Rookie” badge is unlocked after making the first purchase in 2024 as a rewards member. Figure 7 depicts some of the Dunkin’ Rewards badges.

Figure 7

Screenshot of Dunkin’ Rewards badges



Burger King

Burger King’s “Royal Perks” rewards program allows users to earn ten “crowns” for every dollar spent. 250 crowns earn a small menu item, such as a soft drink or small chicken nugget order, while 1400 crowns can purchase a large menu item like a “Double Whopper” cheeseburger. The app also features a progress bar that tracks how many crowns a user has. In addition, the app features a limited-time promotion called the “Million Dollar Whopper Challenge,” where fans can create custom burger combinations for a chance to win a grand prize.

Subway

Subway’s “MVP Rewards” program offers users points for in-store purchases that can be redeemed for store credit. The program utilizes a tier system where users start at “Pro” and can spend money to reach “Captain” and “All-Star.” The app also uses a progress bar to track how much money has been spent; users reach “Captain” after \$200 and “All-Star” after \$400. Figure 8 depicts the specific reward offerings of the different tiers.

Figure 8

Screenshot of Subway Tier Rewards

BENEFITS	PRO	CAPTAIN	ALL-STAR
Spend \$1 and earn	10pts	11pts	12pts
Earn 5% more for digital orders	✓	✓	✓
Member-only deals, exclusives, and challenges*	✓	✓	✓
Birthday and member anniversary freebies*	✓	✓	✓
Extra Bonus Earn Days*		✓	✓
Access to Subway® Swag		✓	✓
Free Chips Fridays (with purchase)			✓

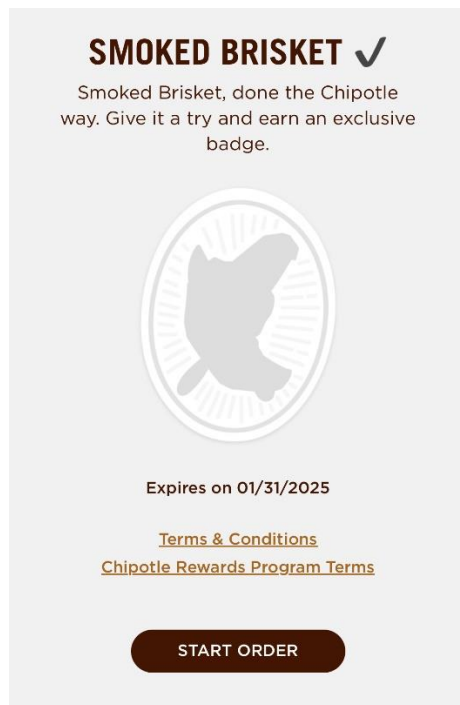
Chipotle

Chipotle Rewards offers users 10 points per dollar spent. Rewards range from a side tortilla for 85 points to a quesadilla for 1,650 points. The Chipotle app did not feature a progress bar or tier system; however, it does offer achievement badges for certain customer actions. At the

time of recording, the “Smoked Brisket” badge was the only available badge. Figure 9 depicts the badge’s in-app details.

Figure 9

Screenshot of Chipotle “Smoked Brisket” Badge



Domino's

The Domino’s Rewards program grants customers ten points for every order greater than five dollars. The points are tracked on a progress bar and can be redeemed for different levels of rewards. For 20 points, users can get an order of parmesan bread bites or a 20-ounce drink. 40 points can buy side orders like stuffed cheesy bread, and 60 points can buy larger menu items like a medium pizza or pasta order.

Discussion

The results show that gamified marketing strategies are deeply embedded in the mobile apps of leading fast-food brands. Rewards programs were universally adopted across the ten

brands, while eight incorporated progress bars, and four used tier systems. Some brands went beyond these core elements by integrating unique features. For example, Dunkin's "Milestone Badges" and Wendy's "Soda Spin" demonstrate how gamification can diversify engagement tactics to appeal to different consumer motivations, such as competition or novelty. Limited-time promotions like Taco Bell's "Relive the Decades" quiz also highlight how gamified elements can intersect with nostalgia and entertainment to increase app engagement. Collectively, these findings illustrate how gamification is used to drive repeat purchases and enhance brand identity and emotional connection with consumers.

The findings align with prior research that highlights gamification as a means to increase consumer engagement and loyalty. The use of rewards programs and progress highlights the role of gratification and incremental achievement in motivating behavior (Hamari et al., 2014). Similarly, tier systems build on the principles of aspiration and exclusivity, which have been shown to deepen consumer commitment (Tanford, 2013). Furthermore, the results highlight the different uses of gamified features with certain rewards, such as progress bars, and uncertain rewards like the "Soda Spin" game (Adam et al., 2023).

The study also offers actionable insights for marketing practitioners. Brands looking to adopt or enhance gamified strategies can prioritize foundational elements like rewards programs and progress bars while exploring more creative features, such as limited-time challenges or gamified quizzes. Furthermore, tier systems and milestone-based rewards may provide additional pathways to foster long-term loyalty and differentiation in a crowded market.

This study is not without limitations. First off, the study identified gamified strategies that were used by brands, but it cannot provide any insight into how or why those strategies were effective. Also, the focus on the top ten revenue-generating brands may exclude insights from

smaller or emerging fast-food brands that may use gamification differently. Additionally, the data collection period was only 11 days long, so some seasonal or limited-time features that could have provided greater insight were missed.

Future research could expand the sample and sampling period to include a more diverse range of fast-food brands, including international chains, to provide a more comprehensive view of gamification in the industry. Studies could also examine the long-term impact of these gamified strategies on consumer behavior and brand loyalty. Lastly, exploring customer perceptions and engagement metrics, such as app usage data, would provide a more nuanced understanding of the effectiveness of gamification.

Disclosure of AI Use

This project was aided by AI tools, including ChatGPT and Grammarly, to refine research topic ideas, summarize reference material, and edit spelling and grammar mistakes.

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