The paper reviews research into the effectiveness of virtual brand gamification in engaging customers, based on evaluation of Samsung Nation’s\(^1\) website. Findings identify the key processes and outcomes of customer engagement and behaviour with the gamified platform and summarises the implementation flaws identified that may potentially impact customer experience.

Gamification is the use of computer videogame design elements such as a component of challenge (through ‘mechanics’ – points systems, score keeping, levels, leader-boards, badges) in non-game contexts, used ostensibly with a view to motivating customers to engage with the brand ‘beyond purchase’. Although popular with industry (in 2011 Gartner estimated some 70% of Global 2000 businesses would have a gamified customer offer, with a reported $938M being spent on gamification software in 2012), the effectiveness of gamification as a means to engage customers has not been well researched or reported by those adopting the approach. Indeed some have criticised the approach as ‘marketing bullshit, invented by consultants as a means to capture the wild, coveted beast that is videogames’ (Bogost 2011\(^2\)).

Drawing on ‘customer engagement’ and ‘engagement behaviour’ theories, the authors theorize how it may facilitate emotional and physical interaction with firm brands, potentially leading to positive attitudes towards brands. The research evaluated the relationship between a gamified platform, customer engagement (and behaviours) and outcomes by analyzing Samsung’s website and customers participating in the Samsung Nation experience which overlaid the website.

Samsung Nation was launched with the aim 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, website visitors who signed up to the Samsung Nation experience were incentivized to explore and engage with website content. In return, they ‘unlocked’ badges and progressed up a leader-board. The evaluation highlighted two core themes in the data analyzed: customer engagement processes and outcomes. Although incorporating many of the ‘mechanics’ identified in the literature, there was limited evidence of interaction between the customer, the brand and other customers, and increasing frustration with the technical issues that some experienced relating to completing the challenges. Whilst the lack of response by Samsung to customer requests for assistance may have been an attempt to ‘evoke suspense’, the lack of clarity in the execution of the game ultimately led to detrimental responses, yet calls for assistance apparently went unanswered (“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!”). The consequences of this appeared to be an interruption in ‘flow’ – a key component of

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\(^1\) Samsung Nation was a gamified experience incorporated into Samsung’s website, using the Badgeville\(^\text{TM}\) platform. It was offered in the US between 2011-2013 and subsequently Samsung’s website remains an active part of the firm’s customer-facing offer.

\(^2\) Full references available in the published article.
engagement that relates to an emotional state of immersion in an activity. It also appeared to undermine any sense of community that might have been formed through the online product related discussions. Indeed, engagement observed was such that the process of gamification seemed to result in merely skimming behaviour, where posts were made purely for the sake of achieving an award, rather than any kind of informed exchange of product knowledge. At worst, some evidence of subversive behaviour was also observed (cheating). Leader-board positions were largely ignored by others participating in the game. These findings contradicted other published literature that suggests the opinions of high achieving participants are much sought after by others, which in turn motivates further levels of participation. That said, positive findings were identified with a number statements related to brand loyalty, albeit this is likely to have been pre-existing among those customers commenting. In contrast, others suggested their loyalty was under-appreciated by the firm because their advocacy went unrecognized within the game.

In conclusion, although an argument in favour of gamifying brands is to increase the amount and quality of data held about customer engagement (which may usefully inform product and service developments), the findings remind us of the importance of clarity in the design of the game’s content and mechanics and how these are communicated to customers. The lack of corporate involvement in the case analyzed is notable and a clear weakness in the processes adopted by the firm in maintaining the gamified experience. Any ‘flaws’ that undermine the ability of participants to achieve the game outcomes should be addressed promptly, and customers should be kept in the loop on the process – frustration may quickly lead to disengagement and this may ultimately lead to disillusionment with the brand. Finally, the paper highlights that there is a delicate balancing act between encouraging ‘playful’ behaviour using gamification and reinforcing established brand values. Thus, gamification should be undertaken only with due attention to the details that will matter to customers.

The full paper can be found at this link: http://www.emeraldinsight.com/doi/abs/10.1108/JSM-01-2015-0045

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