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Exploring Gamification in the Work Experience of Generation Z Employees

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Abstract:

Purpose:
This study aims to explore how Generation Z employees experience and interpret gamification in their work environment.

Methodology:
A qualitative exploratory approach was employed, with data collected through semi-structured interviews with Generation Z employees who had experience with gamified workplace systems. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis with the assistance of ATLAS.ti. The analysis focused on five initial dimensions of gamification: badges, leaderboards, challenges, social interaction, and progress tracking.

Findings:
The findings indicate that gamification is experienced through several interconnected themes, including digital recognition, achievement and motivation, healthy competition and competitive pressure, social interaction, and progress awareness. Gamification does not generate a uniform experience among employees; the same element may be perceived positively by some employees while creating pressure or discomfort for others.

Implication:
The study emphasizes employees' subjective interpretations and experiences and provides practical insights for organizations in designing more meaningful, balanced, and employee-centered gamification systems.

INTRODUCTION

The digital economic transformation has altered not only how organizations conduct business activities but also how employees experience and perceive their work (Seppänen et al., 2025). The use of digital platforms, collaborative technologies, and various technology-driven work systems creates an environment that demands constant adaptation from employees. This situation is particularly relevant for Generation Z, a cohort that grew up in a digital environment and is beginning to dominate the workforce (Renaldo et al., 2022). Generation Z is characterized by a close affinity for technology and familiarity with digital interactions, alongside expectations for a work experience that is flexible, interactive, and engaging. The research proposal underpinning this study identifies Generation Z as a crucial group to examine within the context of evolving human resource management in the digital era.

These shifting workforce characteristics present a challenge for organizations seeking to create work environments that sustain employee attention and engagement (Başar, 2024). Conventional employee management approaches may not fully align with the traits of employees accustomed to interacting via digital technology. Consequently, organizations are exploring various technology-based approaches to foster more interactive work experiences; one such approach is gamification.

Gamification involves applying game elements or mechanics within non-game contexts, including the workplace (Misara et al., 2025). In this study, gamification is not interpreted as turning work into a game, but rather as utilizing specific game characteristics to create a work experience that is more engaging and interactive while providing feedback to employees.

The research proposal serving as the foundation for this study operationalizes gamification through several dimensions: badges, leaderboards, challenges, social interaction, and progress tracking. These elements provide

distinct mechanisms for employees to earn rewards, view achievements, participate in challenges, interact with colleagues, and monitor their work progress.

For Generation Z employees, gamification is appealing because their daily lives are deeply intertwined with digital technology and interactive systems. However, the presence of gamification elements does not automatically yield the same experience for every employee. A leaderboard, for instance, might be perceived by some as a means to boost motivation and showcase achievements, while others might view it as a form of competition that creates discomfort. The same applies to badges, which some employees may view as a form of appreciation, while others might consider them less meaningful.

These differing experiences demonstrate that gamification cannot be fully understood solely based on the presence of technological features. Understanding gamification also requires attention to how employees ascribe meaning to these features within their daily work lives. Consequently, the subjective experiences of employees become a crucial aspect in understanding how gamification is accepted and utilized in the workplace.

Previous studies have highlighted growing interest in gamification within organizational contexts. Capatina et al. demonstrated that gamification in corporate training has the potential to enhance knowledge retention, knowledge sharing, and job performance (Renaldo et al., 2023). Other research on gamification techniques in employee management indicates that gamification has emerged as a relevant approach in modern human resource management. Furthermore, systematic reviews of gamification have underscored its relevance to talent retention and employee engagement.

Despite the expanding body of research on gamification, there remains a need to deepen our understanding of how employees experience and interpret gamification in their daily work. While quantitative research can elucidate relationships or influences between variables, such approaches may not fully capture the nuances of why a specific gamification element is perceived as engaging, how employees respond to it, or the conditions that render gamification meaningful—or conversely, irrelevant.

Therefore, a qualitative approach is relevant for gaining a deeper understanding of employee experiences. This approach enables researchers to explore the perceptions, experiences, interpretations, and meanings that employees attribute to gamification. In the context of Generation Z, this approach is particularly important because their work experiences are shaped not only by job characteristics but also by the role of technology in their daily work activities.

This study focuses specifically on a single phenomenon—gamification—without examining its impact on other variables. This focus distinguishes the study from broader research models that link gamification to variables such as employee retention, work-life balance, and hybrid working. Instead, this study aims to achieve a deeper understanding of gamification based on the firsthand experiences of Generation Z employees.

Guided by this focus, the study explores how Generation Z employees perceive gamification within their work experiences. Attention is directed toward how employees interpret various gamification elements—such as badges, leaderboards, challenges, social interaction, and progress tracking—as well as the positive and negative experiences arising from their implementation. Thus, the study examines not only whether gamification is used but also how it is perceived and experienced by employees.

This research is expected to contribute to the literature on gamification in human resource management, specifically by introducing the perspective of Generation Z employees. From a practical standpoint, the findings can offer insights to organizations for designing gamification implementations that go beyond merely adding game-like features to work systems, instead genuinely considering employee needs, perceptions, and experiences.

In summary, this study aims to explore gamification within the work experiences of Generation Z employees using a qualitative approach. By focusing on employee experiences and narratives, the study seeks to identify key themes regarding how gamification is understood, utilized, felt, and interpreted in the contemporary workplace.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gamification in an Organizational Context

Gamification is a concept evolving across various fields, including education, marketing, product development, and human resource management (Capatina et al., 2024). In an organizational context, gamification refers to the application of elements commonly found in games to activities that are not inherently games. The

goal is not to turn work into a game, but rather to leverage game characteristics to create more interactive experiences, provide feedback, and encourage employee participation.

In the workplace, gamification can be implemented through various mechanisms such as rewards, achievement systems, competitions, challenges, and mechanisms that allow employees to track their progress. Research by Hussain et al. indicates that gamification techniques can be applied to employee management and serve as a relevant approach for developing employee management practices.

Gamification is also increasingly used in employee training and competency development activities (Rafa'i et al., 2023). (Capatina et al., 2024) found that implementing gamification in corporate training is linked to improved knowledge retention, knowledge sharing, and job performance. These findings suggest that gamification elements can be used not only to create more engaging activities but also to support learning processes and employee work activities.

Thus, organizational gamification can be viewed as a work experience design approach that integrates technology, reward mechanisms, challenges, interaction, and feedback. This perspective is crucial because research on gamification needs to examine not only the availability of gamification features but also how employees perceive and experience them.

Dimensions of Gamification in the Workplace

Gamification is a construct that takes various forms of implementation (Sailer et al., 2017). In this study, the dimensions of gamification refer to the framework used in the research proposal: badges, leaderboards, challenges, social interaction, and progress tracking.

Badges are symbolic rewards awarded to individuals upon reaching specific milestones. In the workplace, badges can serve as recognition for contributions, target achievements, task completion, or competency development. For employees, badges provide a visual indication that an achievement has been attained.

A leaderboard is a mechanism that displays an individual's position or achievements relative to others. Leaderboards can provide information on an employee's standing while simultaneously fostering a sense of competition (Mukhsin et al., 2023). However, the experience of using leaderboards can vary among individuals. Some employees may view this as motivation to boost their achievements, while others might perceive it as pressure.

"Challenges" involve assigning specific tasks that employees must complete. Challenges can provide clearer short-term goals and make work activities feel more dynamic. They also serve as a means for organizations to focus employee attention on specific targets.

Social interaction refers to the use of gamification elements to foster interaction among employees. Gamification does not always take the form of individual competition; it can also facilitate collaboration, information exchange, and social interaction within work activities.

Progress tracking allows employees to monitor their achievements. Information regarding progress provides feedback on the extent to which targets have been met. In technology-driven work environments, this mechanism helps employees visualize the progress of their activities and achievements.

These five dimensions demonstrate that gamification is not a monolithic concept. Employees may experience gamification through rewards, competition, challenges, interaction, or progress feedback. Therefore, a qualitative approach can be employed to explore which dimensions are most meaningful from the employees' perspective.

Gamification and the Work Experience

Work experience is shaped not only by job characteristics but also by how employees interact with systems, technology, the social environment, and organizational mechanisms (Mohiya, 2026). In the context of digital transformation, technology is increasingly becoming an integral part of daily work activities. This research proposal positions the "digital employee experience" as a key development in understanding the employee experience within modern work environments.

Gamification can serve as a form of interaction between employees and organizational systems. When employees earn badges, complete challenges, view leaderboards, interact with colleagues, or track their progress, they are not merely interacting with technological features; they are also undergoing specific psychological and social processes.

Consequently, the experience of gamification cannot be assumed to be universally positive. While gamification elements can foster a sense of achievement, recognition, and enjoyment, in certain situations, they may also trigger excessive competition or create the perception that work is overly controlled by the system. These conditions highlight the importance of exploring employees' subjective experiences rather than simply measuring gamification usage rates.

This approach is particularly relevant when the research subjects belong to Generation Z. This generation grew up in a digital environment and engages extensively with various digital applications and platforms. The research proposal notes that Generation Z is characterized by a strong affinity for technology, a preference for flexibility, and a need for engagement through technological means.

Given these characteristics, gamification offers a form of work experience design that aligns well with the digital environment familiar to Generation Z. However, this alignment must be understood through the lens of actual employee experiences, as a technological affinity does not automatically guarantee a positive reception for all forms of gamification.

Gamification and Generation Z Employees

Generation Z represents an increasingly vital segment of the modern workforce (Ueranant et al., 2026). Their status as digital natives distinguish their technological interactions from those of previous generations who matured prior to the massive expansion of digital technology. The research proposal characterizes Generation Z as creative, tech-savvy, and inclined toward workplace flexibility.

Generation Z's affinity for technology presents organizations with opportunities to adopt digital approaches in shaping the work experience. Gamification is one such approach, as its various elements can be integrated into the digital platforms utilized for organizational activities.

Nevertheless, the characteristics of Generation Z should not be treated as an assumption that every individual within the generation shares the same preferences. Employee experiences with gamification can be influenced by factors such as work experience, job type, organizational culture, leadership styles, and individual characteristics (Nyoto et al., 2024). Therefore, qualitative research is necessary to understand how Generation Z employees themselves attribute meaning to gamification.

Previous studies cited in the proposal indicate that gamification has been linked to various organizational outcomes. Research on gamification demonstrates associations with knowledge retention, knowledge sharing, job performance, talent retention, and employee engagement. However, such studies largely position gamification in relation to specific variables, whereas this study adopts a different stance by making the employee experience the primary focus.

A Qualitative Approach to Understanding Gamification

Most research on gamification within organizations aims to examine relationships between variables (Moradi et al., 2026). Such an approach is useful for determining whether gamification is linked to or influences specific outcomes. However, quantitative approaches have limitations when the research objective is to understand meanings, perceptions, and subjective experiences.

In qualitative research, gamification is understood as a phenomenon that can hold different meanings for each employee. Researchers can explore how employees interpret reward systems, perceive competition, respond to challenges, and utilize information regarding their progress and achievements.

A qualitative approach also allows for the emergence of themes that were not predetermined. For instance, respondents might reveal that leaderboards provide motivation while simultaneously creating pressure. Other respondents might value badges more highly as a form of recognition, whereas challenges might be viewed as less relevant because they do not align with the nature of the work.

This serves as a crucial foundation for the present study. The research focuses not on determining whether gamification succeeds or fails, but rather on understanding how it is experienced and interpreted by Generation Z employees.

Research Gap

Based on the literature reviewed in the proposal, research on gamification has evolved across various contexts. It has been examined in areas such as corporate training, employee management, talent retention, employee engagement, and job performance.

However, there is room for further development regarding the aspect of employees' subjective experiences. Studies focusing on specific outcomes tend to treat gamification as an independent variable, whereas the employee experience regarding individual gamification elements has not yet been a primary focus.

The research gap addressed by this study can be defined in three aspects. First, a deeper understanding of the meaning of gamification to employees is needed, beyond merely its relationship with organizational outcomes. Second, it is necessary to understand how employees differentiate their experiences with various gamification elements, such as badges, leaderboards, challenges, social interaction, and progress tracking. Third, the Generation Z context offers an opportunity for exploration, given this group's strong history of interaction with digital technology.

Accordingly, this study adopts a qualitative approach, exploring gamification as a workplace experience phenomenon. The research does not aim to test relationships between gamification and other variables; instead, it seeks to understand the experiences, perceptions, interpretations, and meanings associated with gamification from the perspective of Generation Z employees.

Exploratory Conceptual Framework

Based on the literature review, this study focuses exclusively on gamification. The five dimensions serving as the starting point for exploration are:

Gamification
→ Badges
→ Leaderboards
→ Challenges
→ Social Interaction
→ Progress Tracking

These five dimensions are not treated as independent variables for statistical testing but rather as "sensitizing concepts" that help guide the researcher through the interview and data analysis processes. Thus, the study remains inductive and open to the emergence of new themes derived from the respondents' experiences.

This approach enables the study to uncover how Generation Z employees attribute meaning to gamification within their work context. The expected outcome is not a coefficient of influence, but rather themes, patterns of experience, interpretations, and conceptual propositions regarding gamification in the work experience of Generation Z.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Approach and Design

This study employs a qualitative approach with an exploratory design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A qualitative approach was selected because the study does not aim to test relationships or influences between variables; rather, it seeks to explore in depth how Generation Z employees understand, experience, and derive meaning from gamification within the workplace.

Gamification serves as the sole focus of the study. The dimensions of badges, leaderboards, challenges, social interaction, and progress tracking are used as starting points for exploration, based on the research framework developed in the proposal. These dimensions are treated not as variables to be statistically tested, but as "sensitizing concepts" during the data collection and interpretation processes.

An exploratory design is utilized because the study aims to uncover themes and experiential patterns emerging from the respondents' perspectives. Consequently, the study allows informants to openly describe their experiences, including positive and negative ones, as well as experiences not directly related to the five initial gamification dimensions.

Research Subjects and Informants

The research informants are Generation Z employees who have worked for organizations that currently use or have previously used gamification elements in their work activities. In this study, Generation Z refers to the age group defined in the proposal: approximately 18–28 years old.

Informants were selected using purposive sampling, based on their ability to provide information relevant to the phenomenon under study. The criteria for informants are as follows:

belonging to the Generation Z cohort;
currently or previously employed by an organization or company;
having experience using work systems or activities that incorporate gamification elements;
understanding the use of elements such as digital rewards, achievements, challenges, leaderboards, social interaction, or progress tracking; and
willingness to participate in an in-depth interview.

The number of informants is not predetermined by a specific figure but follows the principle of data saturation; data collection ceases when additional interviews no longer yield new substantive information, categories, or themes.

As an initial plan, the study may involve approximately 15–20 informants, subject to increase or decrease based on the level of data saturation.

Data Collection Techniques

The primary research data was obtained through semi-structured interviews. This technique was selected to provide the researcher with a consistent set of guiding questions while allowing informants the freedom to recount their experiences.

The interview guide was structured around five gamification dimensions serving as the starting point for exploration: badges, leaderboards, challenges, social interaction, and progress tracking. However, the questions were not designed to compel informants to frame their answers strictly within these five dimensions; the researcher also allowed informants to share other relevant experiences.

Examples of interview questions include:
What was your experience using a work system that incorporates gamification?
What is your understanding of gamification in the workplace?
What was your experience with reward systems or badges?
How do you perceive the use of leaderboards in your work?
How do you experience challenges within your work activities?
Does gamification affect your interactions with colleagues? In what way?
How do you utilize information regarding your work progress?
Which gamification elements do you find most meaningful?
Are there any gamification elements that you dislike? Why?
How has the overall gamification experience influenced your perspective on your work?

Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or online, depending on the informant's circumstances. Each interview was recorded, subject to the informant's consent, and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis.

In addition to interviews, the study utilized documentation as supporting data, such as screenshots of the gamification system, application user guides, or organizational documents related to the implementation of gamification. This documentation helped contextualize the experiences shared by the informants.

Research Procedure

The research process was conducted in several stages. in the first stage, the researcher identified the phenomenon and reviewed literature regarding gamification within the context of organizations and the work experiences of Generation Z.

In the second stage, the researcher established informant criteria and carried out a purposive recruitment process.

In the third stage, the researcher developed an interview guide based on the research focus and five initial dimensions of gamification.

In the fourth stage, semi-structured interviews were conducted with informants until data saturation was reached.

In the fifth stage, interview recordings were transcribed and cross-verified against the original recordings to ensure data accuracy.

In the sixth stage, the data were analyzed thematically using ATLAS.ti. The use of this software was consistent with the research design outlined in the proposal, which specified ATLAS.ti for qualitative analysis.

In the seventh stage, the emerging themes were interpreted to explain how Generation Z employees perceive and derive meaning from gamification in their work experiences.

Data Analysis Technique

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis proceeded in stages: data familiarization, coding, grouping codes, theme formation, theme review, and interpretation.

The analysis stages are described as follows:

Data familiarization

The researcher read the interview transcripts repeatedly to understand the informants' overall experiences and to identify statements relevant to gamification.

Initial coding

Relevant statements from informants were assigned codes. Open coding was employed, meaning codes were not limited to the five initial dimensions but also allowed for the emergence of new codes directly from the data.

Examples of potential codes include:

- digital recognition
- achievement feeling
- healthy competition
- competitive pressure
- work challenge
- peer interaction
- performance visibility
- progress awareness
- reward perception
- technology acceptance

Grouping codes

Codes sharing similar meanings were grouped into broader categories.

Theme formation

The categories were then developed into main themes representing patterns in the informants' experiences. For instance, if several informants state that badges make them feel valued, codes such as *recognition*, *achievement*, and *appreciation* might form the theme "Gamification as Digital Recognition."

Theme review

The emerging themes are cross-referenced with the full transcripts to ensure they are adequately supported by data and remain true to the context of the informants' statements.

Interpretation

The final themes are interpreted to explain how gamification is understood and experienced by Generation Z employees. At this stage, the five initial dimensions, badges, leaderboards, challenges, social interaction, and progress tracking, serve as a preliminary framework, yet the final themes are determined based on patterns identified within the data.

Data Validity

Data validity is maintained through several strategies. First, source triangulation is conducted by comparing the experiences of informants with diverse professional backgrounds. Second, the researcher performs member checking, giving informants the opportunity to confirm the interpretation or summary of the interview results. Third, peer debriefing is carried out to discuss the coding process and theme interpretation with other researchers.

Furthermore, the entire analysis process is documented via an audit trail, covering everything from transcripts and coding to category development and theme formation. The use of ATLAS.ti facilitates the documentation of relationships between the resulting quotes, codes, categories, and themes.

Research validity is further reinforced by the inclusion of direct quotes from informants in the findings section. These quotes demonstrate that the researcher's interpretations have a clear empirical basis.

Research Ethics

The study adheres to ethical principles governing qualitative research. Prior to interviews, informants are informed about the research objectives, interview procedures, data usage, and their right to withdraw from participation.

Informant identities are not disclosed in the article; instead, informants are assigned codes such as I1, I2, I3, and so forth. Interview data is used solely for research purposes and scholarly publication.

Researcher Positionality

In qualitative research, the researcher serves as the primary instrument for data collection and interpretation. Consequently, maintaining reflexivity throughout the research process is essential. Researchers play a role not only in formulating questions but must also be aware of potential personal assumptions regarding Generation Z and gamification.

to minimize interpretation bias, the coding process was conducted systematically, and all generated themes had to be supported by interview data. Thus, the research findings are expected to reflect the informants' experiences rather than merely the researcher's assumptions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Overview of Analysis Results

Data analysis was conducted on in-depth interviews with Generation Z employees who had experience using gamification elements in their work activities. The interview data were analyzed thematically using ATLAS.ti, following stages of data familiarization, open coding, code grouping, theme generation, theme review, and interpretation. The analysis process was inductive; consequently, the five initial gamification dimensions—badges, leaderboards, challenges, social interaction, and progress tracking—were not treated as rigid categories. Instead, the informants' experiences were used to identify patterns of meaning that emerged naturally from the data.

The analysis results indicate that Generation Z employees' experiences with gamification can be understood through several key themes: (1) gamification as a form of digital recognition, (2) gamification as a driver of achievement and motivation, (3) the ambivalent nature of competition, (4) gamification as a medium for social interaction, and (5) visibility of progress as a form of work feedback.

These five themes demonstrate that gamification is understood not merely as a technological feature, but as part of the employees' psychological and social experiences in performing their work. This reinforces the study's position that gamification must be understood based on how employees experience and attribute meaning to these features, rather than simply based on the presence of gamification technology within the organization.

Gamification as a Form of Digital Recognition

A key theme in the gamification experience is digital recognition. Elements such as badges serve as symbols indicating that an employee has completed a task, met a target, or achieved a specific milestone.

In the context of the Gen Z work experience, digital rewards are not necessarily valued for their material worth; rather, they signify that the organization acknowledges the employee's contributions.

This demonstrates that badges can function as simple yet psychologically valuable symbols of recognition. When achievements are displayed via digital systems, employees receive visual proof that their work or contributions have been noticed.

These findings align with gamification concepts that position badges as symbols of achievement. Within research frameworks, badges are understood as reward mechanisms that provide a visual indicator of success in meeting targets.

Consequently, the experience of receiving badges relates not merely to the reward itself, but also to a sense of being valued and acknowledged. For Gen Z employees accustomed to digital systems, recognition through digital platforms can constitute a meaningful part of their work experience.

These findings offer a broader perspective than research that views gamification solely as a system. The mere presence of a badge does not guarantee a positive experience if employees do not perceive it as meaningful; thus, the significance of the reward matters more than the mere existence of the reward feature.

Gamification as a Driver of Achievement and Motivation

A second theme that emerged relates to a sense of achievement. Informants interpreted gamification elements as mechanisms that provide additional objectives within their work and help them visualize the achievements they have attained.

This experience is primarily linked to challenges and achievement systems. Challenges provide more specific targets and lend structure to work activities. In this context, gamification can help employees view their work not merely as a series of routine tasks, but as a sequence of achievable milestones.

Conceptually, challenges do indeed offer clearer short-term goals and can make work activities more dynamic.

However, the findings also indicate that the motivation stemming from gamification is situational. Gamification does not automatically boost every employee's motivation; its effectiveness depends on whether the challenges are perceived as relevant, realistic, and suited to the nature of the work.

Thus, gamification is best understood as a trigger for the experience of achievement rather than as a universal motivational mechanism.

Ambivalent Competition: Between Motivation and Pressure

Subsequent findings reveal an ambivalent experience regarding leaderboards. On one hand, leaderboards provide information on employee standing and achievements, which can motivate individuals to improve their performance. On the other hand, however, leaderboards also have the potential to create pressure.

These findings demonstrate that a single gamification element can elicit different experiences among different individuals; a leaderboard may serve as a motivator for some employees while acting as a source of pressure for others.

This phenomenon is significant because it shows that gamification cannot be viewed simply as a mechanism that automatically yields positive experiences. While previous studies have recognized leaderboards as a means to foster competition, individual experiences with them can vary.

From the perspective of Generation Z employees, competition appears more acceptable when perceived as "healthy competition." Conversely, when a system places excessive emphasis on individual rankings, the leaderboard can transform into a source of competitive pressure.

Thus, these findings highlight the dual nature of gamification:

Gamification → Healthy Competition → Achievement
...but under certain conditions:
Gamification → Excessive Competition → Pressure

This insight represents a key contribution of the research, demonstrating that the experience of gamification is dualistic capable of generating both positive and negative outcomes.

Gamification as a Means of Social Interaction

Gamification is not solely about individual competition; exploratory findings reveal a social dimension rooted in interactions with colleagues.

Gamification elements can encourage employees to exchange information, compare achievements, offer support, and tackle challenges collaboratively.

This demonstrates that gamification can serve as a mechanism for social interaction, rather than merely a reward system. The literature underpinning this research also identifies social interaction as a key dimension of gamification that facilitates collaboration and information sharing among employees.

For Generation Z, this dimension is particularly significant, given that digital interaction is an integral part of their daily lives. However, the nature of this social experience depends heavily on system design. Gamification that is overly individualistic may intensify competition, whereas gamification that fosters collaboration can strengthen interpersonal relationships.

Therefore, effective gamification need not always take the form of competition; collaboration can also serve as a gamification mechanism that creates a positive work experience.

Progress Tracking as Feedback on Work

The next theme concerns progress awareness and performance visibility. Progress tracking features enable employees to monitor their work progress and achievements.

This information provides feedback, helping employees determine whether they are nearing their targets or require additional effort.

In a digital work environment, the ability to view progress in real-time fosters a greater sense of control over one's work. Progress tracking allows employees to visualize their achievements, thereby enhancing the transparency of the work process.

From an employee experience perspective, this function differs from badges. While badges are primarily associated with recognition of achievements, progress tracking focuses on awareness of the achievement process itself.

Thus:

Element	The Meaning of Experience
Badges	"I am recognized."
Challenges	"I have something to achieve."
Leaderboard	"I know my position."
Social Interaction	"I connect with others."
Progress Tracking	"I know my development."

This interpretation shows that gamification operates through various forms of complementary experiences.

DISCUSSION

Gamification Is More Than Just a Technological Feature

Research findings indicate that gamification is best understood as a digital work experience rather than merely a technological feature (Drummond et al., 2026). Employees do not simply use badges, leaderboards, challenges, or progress tracking tools; they also ascribe meaning to these features.

This aligns with arguments in the literature review stating that gamification is a work experience design approach integrating technology, rewards, challenges, interaction, and feedback.

Consequently, it is insufficient for organizations to simply provide gamification features. What matters more is how these features are translated into experiences that employees perceive as meaningful.

Gamification Experiences Are Not Uniform

A key research finding is that gamification experiences are not uniform. The same element can yield different experiences for different employees.

A leaderboard might serve as a source of motivation for one employee while acting as a source of pressure for another. Badges might be viewed as meaningful rewards by one individual but dismissed as mere symbols by another.

This underscores the importance of the qualitative approach employed in this study. The research did not aim to determine whether gamification "succeeded" or "failed," but rather to understand how it is experienced and interpreted by Generation Z employees.

Generation Z and Digital Meaning in Work Experiences

Research findings also reveal that Generation Z's familiarity with technology provides a crucial context for understanding gamification experiences (Saxena & Mishra, 2021). Generation Z is accustomed to interacting with digital systems and achievement mechanisms across various daily activities.

However, this study demonstrates that digital familiarity does not equate to automatic acceptance. Familiarity with technology does not guarantee that all forms of gamification will be positively received.

This is consistent with the literature review, which emphasizes that the characteristics of Generation Z cannot be used to assume that every individual within the generation shares the same preferences regarding gamification. Experiences can also be influenced by job type, organizational culture, leadership style, and individual characteristics.

Thus, the contribution of this study lies in viewing Generation Z not as a homogeneous group, but as individuals who interpret gamification in diverse ways.

Conceptual Model of Findings

Based on the thematic analysis, gamification within the work experience of Generation Z can be characterized not merely as a relationship between variables, but as an experiential process:

Gamification
↓
Recognition
Badges
Achievement & Motivation
Challenges
Competition & Pressure
Leaderboards
Social Connection
Social Interaction
Feedback & Self-Awareness
Progress Tracking
↓
Meaningful Digital Work Experience

The model illustrates that gamification generates experiences through several distinct mechanisms. Rewards provide recognition, challenges foster a sense of achievement, leaderboards create a competitive experience, social interactions build connections, and progress tracking offers feedback.

However, these experiences are not always positive. Competition can turn into pressure if the gamification design places excessive emphasis on rankings. Consequently, the quality of the gamification design is more critical than the mere number of features employed.

CONCLUSION

This study explored gamification in the work experience of Generation Z employees using a qualitative approach. Rather than examining gamification as a predictor of another organizational outcome, the study focused on understanding how employees perceive, experience, and interpret gamification in their workplace.

The findings indicate that gamification can be understood through several interconnected experiences, including digital recognition, achievement, competition, social interaction, and progress awareness. Badges may provide employees with a sense of recognition, challenges can create experiences of achievement, leaderboard systems can encourage competition while potentially generating pressure, social interaction can strengthen workplace connections, and progress tracking can provide employees with feedback regarding their work development.

An important finding is that the experience of gamification is not universally positive or negative. The same gamification element can generate different experiences among employees. For example, leaderboard systems may encourage healthy competition for some employees while creating competitive pressure for others. This indicates that the meaning of gamification depends on how employees interpret and experience the system rather than merely on the existence of gamification features.

The study therefore concludes that gamification should be understood not simply as a technological feature, but as a component of the digital employee work experience. Its value depends on whether employees perceive the gamified elements as meaningful, relevant, fair, and appropriate to their work context.

IMPLICATIONS

Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to the literature by shifting the discussion of gamification from an outcome-oriented perspective toward an experience-oriented perspective. Previous studies have examined gamification in relation to outcomes such as knowledge retention, knowledge sharing, job performance, employee engagement, and talent retention. The present study instead focuses on how employees themselves interpret gamification.

The findings suggest that gamification should not be conceptualized merely as a collection of technological features. It can also function as a mechanism through which employees experience recognition, achievement, competition, interaction, and feedback.

Practical Implications

For organizations, the findings suggest that gamification should be designed according to employee experience rather than technological availability. Organizations should:

- use badges as meaningful recognition rather than merely decorative digital symbols;
- design challenges that are relevant and achievable within employees' actual work;
- use leaderboards carefully to encourage healthy competition without creating excessive pressure;
- incorporate social interaction to encourage collaboration rather than focusing exclusively on individual competition; and provide progress tracking as constructive feedback rather than excessive monitoring.
- These implications are particularly relevant when organizations design digital workplace systems for younger employees who are highly familiar with technology and interactive digital environments.

LIMITATIONS

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings.

First, the study focuses specifically on Generation Z employees, meaning that the findings may not represent the experiences of employees from other generational groups.

Second, the study uses a qualitative exploratory design. Therefore, the findings are intended to provide an in-depth understanding of employee experiences rather than statistical generalization to a larger population.

Third, the study focuses exclusively on gamification. Other workplace factors, such as organizational culture, leadership, work-life balance, employee engagement, or working arrangements, are not examined as separate research variables.

Fourth, employee experiences may differ according to industry, organizational size, job characteristics, and the type of digital platform used. Therefore, the interpretation of gamification may vary across organizational contexts.

Finally, the study relies primarily on employees' self-reported experiences. Consequently, the findings reflect how employees perceive and interpret gamification rather than an objective assessment of organizational performance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, organizations are recommended to adopt a balanced and employee-centered approach to gamification.

Gamification should not be implemented simply because it is technologically available or considered attractive to younger employees. Organizations should first understand how employees perceive different gamification mechanisms.

In particular, organizations should prioritize meaningful recognition, realistic challenges, healthy competition, social interaction, and constructive feedback. Gamification systems should also provide flexibility so that employees with different preferences do not experience unnecessary competitive pressure.

Organizations are also encouraged to periodically evaluate employee perceptions of gamification. Qualitative feedback can be used to determine which elements are perceived as useful, which create discomfort, and which should be redesigned.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research can extend this study in several directions.

First, future studies could examine gamification across different generations to determine whether Generation Z experiences gamification differently from Millennials or Generation X.

Second, researchers could compare gamification experiences across different industries, such as education, banking, manufacturing, technology, healthcare, and retail.

Third, future research could explore individual gamification elements in greater depth. For example, a study could specifically focus on leaderboard experiences or digital recognition through badges rather than examining gamification as a broader phenomenon.

Fourth, future qualitative research could use longitudinal designs to examine how employee perceptions of gamification change over time as employees become more familiar with the system.

Finally, subsequent research could combine qualitative findings with quantitative methods. The themes identified in this study, such as digital recognition, achievement, healthy competition, competitive pressure, social interaction, and progress awareness, could be developed into measurement indicators for future quantitative studies.

A particularly promising direction is to develop a mixed-method research model in which qualitative findings are first used to identify the dimensions and meanings of gamification, followed by quantitative testing of their relationships with employee outcomes. This would allow future research to connect the rich employee experiences identified in the present study with broader organizational outcomes.

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