

Fostering customer engagement behaviour with gamified loyalty programmes: a study from the “value get, value give” perspective

Fomentando os comportamentos de compromiso dos clientes mediante programas de fidelización gamificados: un estudo desde a perspectiva de “obter valor, dar valor”

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Abstract

This study applies the “value get, value give” framework to explain how gamified loyalty programmes create value for firms. This study proposes a model which has been tested and whose aim is to analyse whether the perceived value offered by a gamified loyalty scheme generates enough customer satisfaction and whether this subsequently transforms into customer engagement behaviour that adds value to firms. Data from 134 active users of the gamified loyalty programme ‘Más Renfe’ belonging to Renfe, the Spanish leader in rail transport for passengers and goods, were analysed using partial least squares structural equation modelling. The findings show that hedonic and financial value increase user satisfaction, whereas preferential treatment and personalisation value do not. In addition, greater satisfaction with loyalty schemes facilitate customer engagement behaviour. This study contributes to the existing literature by providing empirical evidence of the effectiveness of real gamified loyalty programmes in promoting engagement behaviour that creates value for companies.

Keywords: Gamified loyalty programme; Value; Satisfaction; Customer engagement behaviour.

Resumo

Este estudo aplica o marco teórico denominado “value get, value give” para explicar como os programas de lealdade gamificados xeran valor para as empresas. Proponse un modelo que foi contrastado e cuxo obxectivo é analizar se o valor percibido ofrecido por un programa de lealdade gamificado xera suficiente satisfacción nos clientes e se, posteriormente, esta satisfacción tradúcese en comportamentos de compromiso que engaden valor ás empresas. Analizáronse datos de 134 usuarios activos do programa de lealdade gamificado “Más Renfe”, pertencente a Renfe, líder español en transporte ferroviario de pasaxeiros e mercadorías, utilizando a metodoloxía de ecuacións estruturais de mínimos cadrados parciais. Os resultados mostran que o valor hedónico e o valor financeiro incrementan a satisfacción do usuario, mentres que o de trato preferente e a personalización non o fan. Ademais, unha maior satisfacción cos programas de lealdade gamificados facilita os comportamentos de compromiso dos clientes. Este estudo contribúe á literatura existente ao proporcionar evidencia empírica sobre a efectividade dos programas de lealdade gamificados para promover comportamentos de compromiso que xeran valor para as empresas.

Palabras clave: Programa de lealdade gamificado; Valor; Satisfacción; Comportamento de compromiso do cliente.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly competitive business world with low switching costs for customers, brands are making it a priority to gain loyal customers who repeatedly choose them. To attract and engage customers, brands use a variety of marketing tools, among which loyalty programmes stand out (Yi & Jeon, 2003). As a result, the loyalty programme market is currently valued at more than US\$5.5 billion and is expected to exceed US\$24 billion by the end of 2029 (Faria, 2023).

Loyalty programmes are defined as a marketing tool ‘*designed to build customer loyalty by providing incentives to profitable customers*’ (Yi & Jeon, 2003, p. 230). Companies use loyalty schemes to increase the customer lifecycle by creating a long-term company-customer bond based on interactivity and individualisation (Meyer-Waarden, 2007). Thus, instead of benefiting consumers in a single purchase with one-time offers (Liu, 2007), loyalty programmes have a long-term orientation, as they allow consumers to accumulate some form of ‘currency’ that they can redeem for rewards in future purchases (Liu & Yang, 2009).

The origin of loyalty programmes dates back to the end of the 18th century, when U.S. retailers started giving customers copper coins after their purchases, which they could redeem on their next purchases (Kim et al., 2021). Although this strategy was popular in terms of customer retention, retailers found that using coins was costly, so in the late 19th century, copper coins were replaced by stamps. To encourage loyalty, consumers received small stamps that were glued to loyalty stamp cards to redeem them for products. This became a mass phenomenon, to the point that, during the 1930s, American retailers issued three times as many stamps as the U.S. Postal Service itself (Kim et al., 2021). During the 20th century, loyalty programmes experienced a new boom, following the launch of an important one for an American airline, leading to the move from stamps to cards (Kim et al., 2021). Card-based loyalty programmes caught the public’s attention and brands began to issue loyalty cards to their customers. Nowadays, while physical loyalty cards are still in use, it is unreasonable to expect consumers to carry so many of them in their wallets. Therefore, the use of physical cards has been replaced by digital ones on mobile apps, which are more convenient and environmentally-friendly, representing the future of loyalty schemes.

Despite their advantages in terms of convenience, the effectiveness of loyalty programmes is decreasing (Hollebeek et al., 2021). In the United States, consumers belong to 16.6 loyalty programmes on average, but actively participate in only 7.6 of them (Bond Brand, 2022). This shows that, although many customers join several loyalty programmes, they often do not engage with them.

Prior research has proposed the use of gamification to potentially increase the effectiveness of loyalty programmes and solve this dilemma (Hwang & Choi, 2020). Gamification is a form of motivational design that applies game elements and mechanics (e.g., points, levels and rewards) to non-game contexts to motivate certain behaviour (Deterding et al., 2011) and promote user’s overall value creation (Huotari and Hamari, 2017). A recent study by Merkle (2023) reported that nearly one-third of participants think there should be games with loyalty programmes. However, ‘*despite this growing trend in marketing practice, academic insight into gamified loyalty programmes’ nature, dynamics, and effectiveness lags behind*’ (Hollebeek et al., 2021; p. 1).

To bridge this knowledge gap, in this study, a model has been designed and tested based on the ‘value get, value give’ framework (Itani et al., 2019) as a means to explaining how gamified loyalty programmes create value for customers and whether and how this value is returned to the firm in the form of customer engagement behaviour.

By taking this approach, this paper contributes to the literature in several ways. Firstly, it provides empirical evidence to support Itani et al.'s 'value get, value give' (2019) theoretical framework for gamified loyalty programmes, analysing how gamification adds value to customers and firms. Secondly, the analysis of the perceived value of a gamified loyalty programme has recently gained the attention of scholars. However, existing academic research has focused solely on the hedonic and utilitarian value of these programmes (e.g., Bravo et al., 2023; Gandasari & Mauritsius, 2023; Kristian & Napitupulu, 2022). Therefore, this study contributes to the literature by empirically analysing additional sources of value for customers, as identified by Meyer-Waarden et al. (2023): hedonic value, financial value, personalisation value, and preferential treatment value. Additionally, this paper responds to recent calls for a deeper analysis of the effectiveness of gamified loyalty programmes and their potential to develop greater engagement (Lim et al., 2022). In particular, following Bravo et al. (2023), this study improves the understanding of gamified loyalty programmes by empirically testing the specific customer engagement behaviour proposed by Pansari & Kumar (2017) that add value to firms, differentiating between transactional and non-transactional engagement behaviour. Finally, this study provides recommendations for practitioners.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

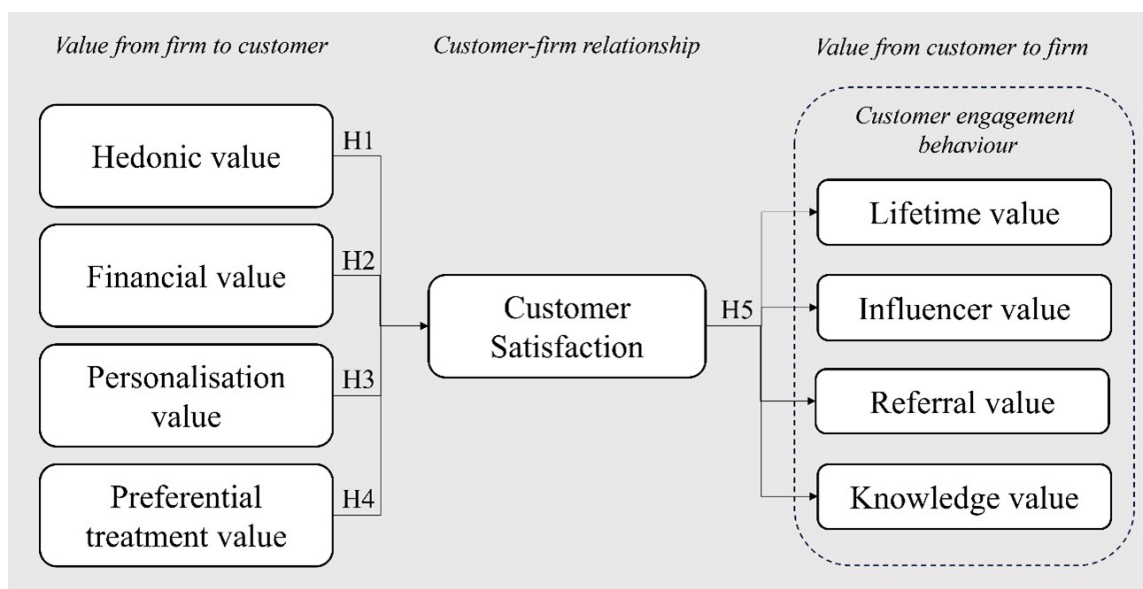
Gamification is a tool increasingly used in various contexts, from education to business, to harness the motivational power of games for the players to act in a certain way. Gamification is defined from a design perspective as *'the use of game elements and game-design techniques in nongame contexts'* (Werbach & Hunter, 2012, p. 26). A similar definition is proposed by Sailer et al. (2017, p. 372): *'the process of making activities in non-game contexts more game-like by using game design elements'*. Meanwhile, Huotari and Hamari (2017, p. 25) defined gamification from a service marketing perspective as *'the process of enhancing a service with elements to create gamified experiences with the goal of supporting user value creation'*.

Compared to conventional loyalty programmes, gamified loyalty programmes are more experiential and effective and engender greater consumer loyalty (Hwang & Choi, 2020). Likewise, gamification improves the attractiveness of loyalty programmes by influencing customers' perceptions of playfulness and reward satisfaction (Bravo et al., 2023). Dreher and Ströbel (2023) have analysed how gamified loyalty programmes facilitate value creation, finding that gamification plays a vital role in them, due to customers being more willing to engage in value co-creation. In particular, recent academic research has demonstrated that if the gamified loyalty programme is entertaining, in fashion and original, it is perceived as having more hedonic and utilitarian value, leading to satisfaction, continuance intention and loyalty (Kristian & Napitupulu, 2022). Gandasari and Mauritsius (2023) have also shown that gamifying a loyalty programme increases customers' perceptions about its hedonic and utilitarian value, which subsequently manifests itself in the form of greater satisfaction and loyalty. Likewise, Hollebeek et al. (2021) have anticipated that gamified loyalty programmes boost customer engagement value from direct contributions (e.g., purchases) and indirect (e.g., advocating).

Drawing on engagement theory and relationship marketing literature, Itani et al. (2019) have developed the conceptual framework 'value get, value give'. From a customer perspective, this tool builds on the norm of reciprocity and proposes that the value customers receive from a firm (or brand) creates a customer-firm relationship that motivates customers to create some kind of value for or benefit to it in the form of engagement; in other words, the more value customers obtain, the more value customers give back. Based on this framework, the proposed

model analyses the effect of four sources of value that customers could receive from gamified loyalty programmes (i.e., hedonic value, financial value, personalisation value and preferential treatment value) on their satisfaction with the programme and their subsequent influence on their customer engagement behaviour towards the programme, which are a source of value for the firm. **Figure 1** shows the proposed model.

Figure 1. Proposed model



The first part of the ‘value get, value give’ conceptual framework states that the value customers receive from a firm will foster a beneficial customer-firm relationship (Itani et al., 2019). According to previous research, customer satisfaction, defined as ‘a pleasurable level of fulfilment related to consumption’ (Oliver, 1997), is an appropriate construct to represent this customer-firm relationship (Gandasari & Mauritsius, 2023).

Previous research has shown that customer-firm relationships and customer behaviour are influenced by their value perceptions (Busalim et al., 2021); that is, when customers perceive value from what a firm is offering, they act accordingly and, hence, create value for it. In gamified loyalty programmes, the perceived value depends on the relationship between the benefits and costs perceived by the user (Meyer-Waarden, 2013), so when the benefits or rewards obtained are perceived as valuable, a customer-firm relationship is generated. Recently, Meyer-Waarden et al. (2023) proposed the aforementioned four sources of value for customers regarding loyalty programmes.

The first abovementioned source, hedonic value, refers to the enjoyment experienced directly from making the purchase (Dedeoglu et al., 2018). Gamified loyalty programmes may provide their users with hedonic value from the entertainment and pleasure obtained from accumulating and redeeming points (Hagtvedt & Patrick, 2009). Previous research has demonstrated that if hedonic value is perceived, customer attitudes and behaviour are positively affected; indeed, since enjoyable playability from a gamified system leads to its users finding the interaction intrinsically interesting (Moon & Kim, 2001), hedonic value results in more positive attitudes and higher participation (Hwang & Choi, 2020) as well as greater engagement with the programme (Meyer-Waarden et al., 2023). Additionally, previous studies have demonstrated that hedonic value is an important predictor of satisfaction (Lee & Kim, 2018; Ryu et al., 2010). In the particular context of loyalty programmes, Kyguoliene et al. (2017) found that hedonic benefits, or specifically exploration and entertainment, which are

encouraged from trying out new products and the accumulation and exchange of points, positively influence customer satisfaction with the loyalty programme. Therefore, the following hypothesis has been proposed:

H1. Perceived hedonic value positively influences customer satisfaction

Perceived financial value refers to the tangible benefits provided by the loyalty scheme that correspond to being motivated by economic incentives such as discounts, reward cards or vouchers (Meyer-Waarden et al., 2023). In a gamified context, this financial value is related to the satisfaction obtained from the rewards, or, to put it another way, the degree to which the customer enjoys the reward received (Högberg et al., 2019). These can positively reinforce behaviour and increase loyalty to the programme (Lee et al., 2015), boost intention to participate in future activities (Högberg et al., 2019) and promote engagement behaviour towards it (Meyer-Waarden et al., 2023). Previous literature has found that financial value influences customer satisfaction (Lee and Kim, 2018; Ryu et al., 2010). Specifically, Kyguoliene et al. (2017) showed that the savings gained from participating in a loyalty programme have a greater influence on customer satisfaction than any other benefit associated with it. In fact, these savings are decisive when signing up for a loyalty programme (Leenheer et al., 2007). Thus, the following hypothesis has been proposed:

H2. Perceived financial value positively influences customer satisfaction

Perceived personalisation value refers to personalised contact and offers that customers receive based on their tastes and previous purchase patterns. Personalisation increases the value perceived by users, fostering customer-firm relationships and increasing engagement with loyalty programmes (Meyer-Waarden et al., 2023). A high level of personalisation can increase customer satisfaction, which is achieved when the perceived benefits exceed their expectations (Ding & Keh, 2016; Wang et al., 2010). In the specific context of loyalty schemes, Aydin (2022) has recently shown that personalisation can provide higher satisfaction when perceptions of intangible value are enhanced. Based on these arguments, the following hypothesis has been proposed:

H3. Perceived personalisation value positively influences customer satisfaction

Finally, participation in a loyalty programme can lead users to perceive value for receiving preferential treatment that satisfies their symbolic and emotional needs, offering a level of status and personal recognition within a privileged group (Meyer-Waarden et al., 2023). Priority access to certain products and services, unique offers and invitations to exclusive events are some examples of preferential treatment received by certain users of loyalty programmes. This provides a sense of belonging and a feeling of importance and integration (Brashear-Alejandro et al., 2016). A favourable result of preferential treatment is the creation of hard-to-imitate bonds that drive customers to maintain the customer-firm relationship (Yi & Jeon, 2003) and increase their engagement with the programme itself (Meyer-Waarden et al., 2023). Applying gamification in certain contexts results in higher perceived user recognition, leading to positive outcomes such as increased satisfaction (Hamari & Koivisto, 2015). In the context of loyalty programmes, Kyguoliene et al. (2017) found that recognition and social benefits, understood as the feeling of belonging to a group or the perception of special attention, influence customer satisfaction with the loyalty programme. Considering this, the following hypothesis has been proposed:

H4. Perceived preferential treatment value positively influences customer satisfaction

The second part of the conceptual model ‘value get, value give’ states that customers tend to give back to a firm (or brand) the value received, with different types of behaviour that show how engaged they are with it (Itani et al., 2019). Pansari and Kumar (2017) defined the concept of engagement with a firm (or brand) as ‘*the creation of value from a customer to the company, either through a direct or indirect contribution*’. The direct (or transactional) contribution consists of customer purchases (Kumar, 2010). In other words, each time a customer makes a purchase, value is created due to the company’s sales increasing (Kumar & Pansari, 2016). In addition to purchases, customers show their engagement with brands with non-transactional behaviour that indirectly provides value and contributes to sales. The first of these forms of behaviour corresponds to customer influencer value, which is the value of social influence that a customer exerts on other potential customers (Kumar et al., 2010). Engaged customers do so in a variety of ways, from engaging in traditional offline word of mouth (WOM), to posting e-WOM on social media (Itani et al., 2020). In addition to obtaining value with organic WOM, brands can also benefit from customer referral value (Kumar et al., 2010); this means that there are referral programmes which give customers incentives if they invite profitable customers to the brand (Kumar & Pansari, 2016). One example is ‘bring a friend’, common in loyalty programmes, where many brands motivate their customers to recommend friends, relatives or social media contacts in exchange for points, discounts or gifts. Finally, customers can also provide value indirectly to firms with customer knowledge value (Kumar et al., 2010), which refers to how valuable the information is to firms when it comes to being provided with innovative ideas and improvements based on customers’ knowledge and experience.

Previous research has shown that customer engagement with firms provides them with greater value (Pansari & Kumar, 2017), as the more engaged customers are, the more loyal they are (Gao and Huang, 2021; Monferrer et al., 2019; So et al., 2015; Wongsansukcharoen, 2022), the more willing they are to pay greater amounts (Kumar and Kaushik, 2022) and the higher their purchase intention and repeated purchase behaviour are (Prentice et al., 2019; So et al., 2015).

For this reason, it is important to analyse how gamified loyalty programmes can generate long-lasting forms of engagement that provide value to a brand (Bitrián et al., 2022). Indeed, previous studies have shown that the perceptions that customers have about a loyalty programme tend to be transferred to perceptions about the brand. Thus, the more loyalty to a programme there is, the greater the loyalty to the brand is (So et al., 2015), in the same way that the more engagement with the scheme there is, the greater the engagement with the brand is (Bitrián et al., 2022; Bruneau et al., 2018; Hollebeek et al., 2021).

Customer satisfaction is probably the most recurrent driver of customer engagement behaviour (Pansari & Kumar, 2017; Van Doorn et al., 2010). Previous studies have shown that the more satisfied customers are, the more likely it is that they can be retained and the more loyal they are as a consequence (Mili & Ferro-Soto, 2023). Furthermore, the more satisfied users are, the more engagement they show (Agyei et al., 2021; Cambra-Fierro et al., 2016) and the more each specific type of engagement behaviour can be seen as well (Bravo et al., 2020). Specifically, satisfaction has been shown to have a positive effect on customers’ purchase and repurchase behaviour (Verhoef et al., 2002), as well as on impulse buying (Thakur, 2019). In addition, satisfied customers are willing to promote more of the products and/or services offered by the brand (Thakur, 2019) and make word-of-mouth recommendations (Bravo et al., 2020; Choi & Kandampully, 2019). Finally, while some researchers have considered that satisfied customers make fewer suggestions for improvement (Choi & Kandampully, 2019), other studies have identified that customer satisfaction motivates the clients to provide

feedback to brands with suggestions or complaints (Bravo et al., 2020). Considering the above, the following hypothesis has been proposed:

H5. Customer satisfaction positively influences a) customer lifetime value, b) influencer value, c) recommendation value and d) knowledge value

3. MATERIAL AND METHODS

3.1. Research context

To test the research model, market research was carried out in the context of the gamified loyalty programme 'Más Renfe', belonging to Renfe, Spain's main rail transport company for both goods and passengers. Historically, Renfe has held a monopoly on passenger rail services in the country, which is still maintained in most long-distance high-speed train connections, such as Madrid-Seville, Madrid-Málaga/Granada, and Madrid-Alicante (CNMC, 2023). However, since December 2020, after the liberalisation of passenger rail transportation in Spain, Renfe has had to face new competition offering aggressive prices (e.g., Ouigo and Iryo) on the busiest and most lucrative long-distance high-speed connection: Madrid-Barcelona. This has led Renfe to make two important decisions: the first one has been the launch of its own low-cost brand (namely AVLO), resulting in a market share split by the beginning of 2023 as follows: 48% Renfe-AVE, 23.9% Ouigo, 17.5% Iryo and 10.6% Renfe-AVLO (CNMC, 2023). The second decision has been the creation of the 'Más Renfe' loyalty programme to generate value among its customers and, thus, obtain greater engagement and loyalty from them.

The design of the 'Más Renfe' programme for frequent travellers is based on gamification, including a series of points, levels and prizes to reward the loyalty of its users and improve their travel experience, who must sign up to access it. After registration, they can earn 'Renfe Points' every time they use their 'Más Renfe' card for purchasing train tickets. The programme offers different levels of 'Más Renfe' cards based on the cardholder's annual expenditure: 'Más Renfe', 'Más Renfe Silver', 'Más Renfe Gold' and 'Más Renfe Platinum'. These cards offer different benefits to customers, from more points per booking to access to Club Lounges in stations. There is also a special card called 'Más Renfe Young' for users between 14 and 25 years old, with special discounts. 'Renfe Points' can alternatively be obtained from partner companies or by using financial cards (e.g., Renfe Mastercard, Renfe American Express) as payment methods. The accumulated points can be redeemed for train tickets, with 10 points equalling €1. These points can also be exchanged for hotel stays, car rentals and donations to charities that collaborate with Renfe.

3.2. Data collection and sample

The data collection took place in Spain in May 2023, using a survey aimed at users of the 'Más Renfe' programme who were over 18 years of age. Due to the difficulty of contacting active members belonging to the gamified programme, the survey was conducted at three Renfe stations included within the Madrid-Barcelona long-distance high-speed connection: Sants (Barcelona), Camp (Tarragona) and Delicias (Zaragoza).

In total, 164 users responded to the survey. The questionnaire included a control question ('Attention check: select number 1' on scale of 1 to 7), so only the correctly answered responses were analysed. After eliminating 30 invalid questionnaires, 134 valid ones were obtained.

To verify the appropriateness of the sample size, the G*Power programme (version 3.1.9.7) was used. For an alpha of 0.05, an estimated effect size of 0.15 and 80% power, a total sample size of 85 responses would be necessary. The final study sample was 134, thus exceeding the minimum recommended sample size.

Table 1 shows the characteristics of the sample.

Table 1. Characteristics of sample

Variable	Category	Percentage
Gender	Men	50.75%
	Women	49.25%
Age	18-25	33.58%
	26-35	27.61%
	36-45	16.42%
	46-55	12.69%
	56-65	6.72%
	> 65	2.99%
Education	Primary	0.75%
	Secondary	11.19%
	Baccalaureate / vocational training	23.88%
	University	64.18%
Occupation	Student	30.60%
	Worker	64.93%
	Inactive or unemployed	2.24%
	Retired	2.24%
Loyalty card	Más Renfe	49.25%
	Más Renfe Silver	20.90%
	Más Renfe Gold	3.73%
	Más Renfe Platinum	1.49%
	Más Renfe Young	24.63%
Travel frequency	Several times a week	1.49%
	Once a week	2.99%
	Once a fortnight	4.48%
	Once a month	12.69%
	Once every 3 months	23.88%
	Once every 6 months	18.66%
	Once a year	10.45%
	Less than once a year	25.37%

3.3. Measurement instrument

The variables included in the study were measured using 7-point Likert-type scales based on previous literature, which were carefully modified to ensure that the items fit the research context (see Table 2). Regarding the perceived value of the gamified loyalty programme, hedonic value was measured based on Hwang and Choi (2020), financial value was measured

using items from Högberg et al. (2019), personalisation value was measured using the scale proposed by Meyer-Waarden (2013) and preferential treatment value was measured combining items from Mimouni-Chaabane and Volle (2010) and Palmatier et al. (2006). Customer satisfaction with the gamified loyalty programme was measured following the scale proposed by Itani et al. (2019). Finally, in relation to customer engagement behaviour, customer lifetime value was measured using the scale of Kim et al. (2009), influencer value was adapted from Bravo et al. (2019) and both recommendation and knowledge value were adapted from Kumar and Pansari (2016).

Table 2. Measurement instrument

CONSTRUCTS, ITEMS AND SOURCES
Hedonic value (Hwang and Choi, 2020) HED1. Más Renfe is playful HED2. Más Renfe is creative HED3. Más Renfe is inventive
Financial value (Högberg et al., 2019) FIN1. The rewards I get obtain at Más Renfe make me feel good FIN2. The rewards I obtain get at Más Renfe give me a good deal FIN3. The rewards I obtain get at Más Renfe make me happy, beyond the money I save
Personalisation value (Meyer-Waarden, 2013) PER1. Más Renfe gives me personalised recommendations based on my preferences and personal interests or my previous browsing and purchase behaviour PER2. Más Renfe provides me with products customised to my personal needs PER3. Más Renfe speeds up the purchasing process with personalised recommendations
Preferential treatment value (Mimouni-Chaabane and Volle, 2010; Palmatier et al., 2006) TRE1. As a member of Más Renfe, I am treated better than other travellers TRE2. As a member of Más Renfe, I feel more respected than other travellers TRE3. As a member of Más Renfe, I am often invited to attend social or entertainment events
Customer satisfaction (Itani et al., 2019). SAT1. In general, I am satisfied with the Más Renfe loyalty programme SAT2. I am satisfied with Más Renfe
Customer lifetime value (Kim et al., 2009) LIF1. When I need to buy a train ticket, Renfe is my first option LIF2. I am likely to buy train tickets from Renfe in the future
Influencer value (Bravo et al., 2019). INF1. I would recommend Renfe to my family and friends INF2. If my friends needed train tickets, I would recommend that they look at Renfe
Referrals value (Kumar and Pansari, 2016). REF1. I would invite others to make purchases at Renfe if I received referral benefits (points, money, discounts) for it REF2. I would like to obtain referral incentives (points, money, discounts) for inviting friends and family to make purchases at Renfe
Knowledge value (Kumar and Pansari, 2016). KNO1. I would provide feedback to Renfe about my experience KNO2. I would provide suggestions to Renfe for the improvement of its services

3.4. Common method bias assessment

As the data was based on self-reported measures and collated from a one-off survey, common method bias was evaluated by both procedural and statistical methods. Firstly, to reduce the bias of participants' answers, participation in the study was voluntary and the responses were anonymous. Secondly, a full collinearity test based on the variance inflation factor values (VIF) was conducted. The results suggested there was no common method bias in the study, as all values ranged from 1.098 to 2.540, lower than the threshold of 3.3 (Kock, 2015).

4. RESULTS

Partial least squares (PLS) structural equation modelling with SmartPLS 3.0 was used to analyse data (Ringle et al., 2015). PLS simultaneously assesses the measurement and structural models, whose two steps are described below.

4.1. Measurement model analysis

To assess the measurement model, the properties of the scales were evaluated (see [Table 3](#)). Individual item reliability for all factor loadings (FL) was confirmed, as they were all above 0.60 and statistically significant at 1% ([Carmines & Zeller, 1979](#)). Internal consistency was confirmed, as the composite reliability (CR) for all constructs was greater than 0.7 ([Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994](#)). The average variance extracted (AVE) values were above 0.5, indicating that the constructs also met the criteria for convergent validity.

Table 3. Measurement model results

CONSTRUCT	Item	FL	CR	AVE
Hedonic value	HED1	0.959	0.965	0.902
	HED2	0.971		
	HED3	0.919		
Financial value	FIN1	0.936	0.939	0.836
	FIN2	0.933		
	FIN3	0.873		
Personalisation value	PER1	0.904	0.939	0.838
	PER2	0.939		
	PER3	0.903		
Preferential treatment value	TRE1	0.892	0.928	0.812
	TRE2	0.943		
	TRE3	0.866		
Satisfaction	SAT1	0.939	0.941	0.889
	SAT2	0.946		
Lifetime value	LIF1	0.913	0.909	0.832
	LIF2	0.912		
Influencer value	INF1	0.975	0.973	0.948
	INF2	0.973		
Referral value	REF1	0.983	0.978	0.957
	REF2	0.973		
Knowledge value	KNO1	0.965	0.943	0.892
	KNO2	0.923		

Note FL: factor loading; CR: composite reliability; AVE: average variance extracte.

Finally, discriminant validity was examined with two tests ([Hair et al., 2017](#)). Following the Fornell-Larcker criterion, it was confirmed that the square roots of the AVEs of each construct were greater than the correlations between the constructs (see [Table 4](#)). After this, the HTMT ratio was calculated, and all values were found to be lower than the threshold of 0.9 (see [Table 5](#)).

Table 4. Fornell-Larcker test

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Hedonic value	0.95								
2. Financial value	0.617	0.91							
3. Personalisation value	0.597	0.474	0.91						
4. Preferential Treatment Value	0.324	0.415	0.461	0.90					
5. Satisfaction	0.588	0.656	0.510	0.377	0.94				
6. Lifetime Value	0.272	0.272	0.191	0.158	0.325	0.91			
7. Influencer value	0.358	0.299	0.337	0.271	0.420	0.650	0.97		
8. Referral value	0.147	0.276	0.238	0.120	0.278	0.483	0.608	0.97	
9. Knowledge value	0.184	0.288	-0.04	0.059	0.179	0.174	0.243	0.179	0.945

Table 5. Heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratios

	Hedonic value	Financial value	Personalisation value	Preferential treatment value	Satisfaction	Lifetime value	Influencer value	Referral value
Financial value	0.671							
Personalisation value	0.642	0.521						
Preferential treatment value	0.357	0.469	0.525					
Satisfaction	0.646	0.737	0.570	0.422				
Lifetime value	0.304	0.320	0.223	0.183	0.386			
Influencer value	0.379	0.328	0.364	0.298	0.462	0.745		
Referral value	0.149	0.295	0.252	0.132	0.298	0.550	0.634	
Knowledge value	0.200	0.319	0.046	0.074	0.197	0.189	0.249	0.189

4.2. Structural model analysis

Once the reliability and validity of the scales were examined, the structural model was tested. Firstly, the explanatory power of the proposed model was examined by means of the R² values. The model explained 50.6% of the variance of customer satisfaction with the gamified loyalty programme, as well as 14.3% of the variance of customer lifetime value, 25.2% of the variance of influencer value, 15.2% of the variance of referral value and 12.1% of the variance of knowledge value. Secondly, the Stone-Geisser test showed positive Q² values for all dependent variables, thereby supporting the predictive relevance of the model. Finally, as the SRMR obtained a value of 0.05, lower than the threshold of 0.08, it can be concluded that the model has a good fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999).

The significance of the relationships proposed was assessed via a bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 subsamples, whose results can be seen in Table 6. These revealed that customer satisfaction with the gamified loyalty programme was positively affected by their perceived hedonic value ($\beta = 0.214$; $p = 0.024$) and financial value ($\beta = 0.427$; $p = 0.000$), supporting H1 and

H2, respectively. However, contrary to our predictions, the influence of both perceived personalisation value ($\beta=0.152$; $p=0.071$) and preferential treatment value ($\beta=0.060$; $p=0.506$) was non-significant; therefore, H3 and H4 were rejected. Furthermore, the results revealed that the more satisfied users were with the gamified loyalty programme, the higher their engagement with the firm was. Specifically, satisfaction with the programme increased customer lifetime value ($\beta=0.335$; $p=0.000$), influencer value ($\beta=0.395$; $p=0.000$), referral value ($\beta=0.255$; $p=0.001$) and knowledge value ($\beta=0.209$; $p=0.024$), thus supporting hypotheses H5a, H5b, H5c and H5d, respectively.

Table 6. Structural model results

HYPOTHESIS	β	t-value	p-value	Supported
H1: Hedonic value → Satisfaction	0.214	2.251	0.024	Yes
H2: Financial value → Satisfaction	0.427	5.068	0.000	Yes
H3: Personalisation value → Satisfaction	0.152	1.808	0.071	No
H4: Preferential treatment value → Satisfaction	0.060	0.665	0.506	No
H5a: Satisfaction → Lifetime value	0.335	3.701	0.000	Yes
H5b: Satisfaction → Influencer value	0.395	5.027	0.000	Yes
H5c: Satisfaction → Referral value	0.255	3.185	0.001	Yes
H5d: Satisfaction → Knowledge value	0.209	2.257	0.024	Yes

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study has proposed and tested a model to explain how the perceived value of a gamified loyalty programme increased customer satisfaction with it and subsequently led to customer engagement behaviour that provided value to the company in question.

The findings revealed that different perceived values of the gamified loyalty programme contributed differently to customer satisfaction. In line with previous studies (e.g., [Lee & Kim, 2018](#); [Ryu et al., 2010](#)), this one has provided empirical evidence of the positive influence of hedonic and financial value, demonstrating that the entertainment and rewards offered by the gamified loyalty programme promoted customer satisfaction. However, contrary to predictions, perceived personalisation and preferential treatment value did not contribute to increasing customer satisfaction. Although unexpected, these results are in line with [Mimouni-Chaabane and Volle \(2010\)](#), who affirmed that preferential treatment does not promote customer satisfaction. The characteristics of the research context may provide an explanation for this; in ‘Más Renfe’, preferential treatment to certain customers corresponds to access to Club Lounges and free parking at stations. However, these perks are exclusively for ‘Más Renfe Gold’ and ‘Más Renfe Platinum’ cardholders. Given that these members represented just a minority of our sample (i.e., slightly over 5% of respondents), the effects of preferential treatment were minimal.

On the other hand, this study has empirically demonstrated that customer satisfaction with the gamified loyalty programme promoted certain types of customer engagement behaviour. Specifically, customer satisfaction was positively related to customer lifetime value, supporting previous research claiming that it influences purchase and repurchase behaviour ([Verhoef et al., 2002](#)). Satisfaction with the programme also positively affected influencer and referral value, which is consistent with previous research showing that a high level of satisfaction leads customers to talk about a brand ([Choi & Kandampully, 2019](#)) and recommend it ([Bravo et al., 2020](#)). This study also backs up the findings of [Bravo et al. \(2020\)](#), in that customer satisfaction

fosters knowledge value, meaning that satisfied customers provide feedback to brands about their own experiences and thus have an opportunity to improve product and service offerings.

5.1. Theoretical implications

This body of work offers several theoretical contributions. The Marketing Science Institute, in its research priorities for 2022-2024 (MSI, 2022), has highlighted the need to address how companies can increase long-term customer engagement and loyalty and how technology can improve the customer experience. With this in mind and in order to achieve these objectives, this study has analysed gamified loyalty programmes. Moreover, while this tool is becoming more and more used by brands, as indicated by Hollebeek et al. (2021), academic understanding of its effectiveness is still very limited. Nevertheless, this study has contributed to the literature by providing empirical evidence of how effective a real gamified loyalty programme is for promoting engagement behaviour that allows value for a company to be created, in terms of purchases, incentivised and non-incentivised recommendations, suggestions for improvement and so on. Furthermore, this study has responded to the call by Hollebeek et al. (2021) to empirically analyse the engagement behaviour proposed by Pansari and Kumar (2017) in the specific context of gamified loyalty programmes.

5.2. Practical implications

This study has implications for managerial practice concerning the relevance of hedonic and financial value for fostering customer satisfaction.

On the one hand, in relation to hedonic value, gamified loyalty programmes should be designed including game elements that provide entertainment to users. While most of these programmes already include points and levels, programme developers could also add other achievement and progression elements, such as goals, progress bars and trophies; social elements, like competitions and cooperative functions; and immersive elements, such as the creation of avatars that represent players.

On the other hand, in relation to financial value, loyalty programmes sometimes use rewards that are difficult for users to obtain, which disincentivises their participation and reduces their engagement. Financial rewards should be designed in such a way that users can perceive a benefit. In addition, they should challenge the customer, implying that they should neither be too easy to obtain nor unachievable.

5.3. Limitations and future research lines

This study also has its limitations, which open the door to wider avenues of research. Firstly, the proposed model was tested using data from a specific gamified loyalty programme (i.e., Más Renfe) and brand (i.e., Renfe), which operate in Spain in a specific sector (i.e., rail transportation). This research context might have a number of characteristics that are not necessarily comparable to other gamified loyalty programmes, brands, countries or sectors. Therefore, future research should replicate the proposed model in a different context. Additionally, as this study relies on cross-sectional data, it was not possible to analyse the evolution of customers' perceptions of programme value or customer engagement behaviour over time. Thus, it would be interesting for future studies to use longitudinal data to analyse the transfer of value between customers and brands in the long term.

Author contributions

Conceptualization, S.C., and J.M.; Methodology, S.C., and J.M.; Software, J.M.; Validation, J.M.; Formal Analysis, J.M.; Data Curation, J.M.; Writing – Original Draft Preparation, J.M.; Writing – Review & Editing, S.C., and J.M. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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