



Article

Exploring the Role of Gamification in the Online Shopping Experience in Retail Stores: An Exploratory Study

João M. Lopes ^{1,2,*}, Sofia Gomes ³, Pedro Lopes ¹, Adriana Silva ¹, Daniel Lourenço ¹, Duarte Esteves ¹, Mafalda Cardoso ¹ and Valter Redondo ¹

¹ Miguel Torga Institute of Higher Education, NECE—Research Center for Business Sciences, University of Beira Interior, 6201-001 Covilhã, Portugal

² NECE-UBI—Research Unit in Business Sciences, University of Beira Interior, 6201-001 Covilhã, Portugal

³ REMIT—Research on Economics, Management and Information Technologies, Portucalense University, 4200-072 Porto, Portugal

* Correspondence: joao.lopes.1987@hotmail.com

Abstract: Online retail shops increasingly implement gamified marketing strategies to enrich consumers' online experience and increase engagement. This study aims to evaluate the ludic experience of consumers in online retail stores and the role of gamification and game mechanics in changing the online shopping experience. It seeks to assess, through a qualitative methodology, based on an exploratory study approach obtained through 30 interviews with Portuguese consumers, whether consumers have playful experiences when shopping in online retail shops and whether the introduction of game mechanics changes this experience by generating co-creation. The results show that online shopping can be playful and generate positive emotional benefits. However, gamification in online retail shops is not guided by a co-creation process, nor do game mechanics create greater online consumer engagement. There is a need to review how gamification is introduced in online retail shops, and strategies should be designed to co-create experience value and brand co-creation. This study is original, as it contributes to developing knowledge about gamification in the context of the online retail experience. Studies on this topic are scarce, and this study contributes to filling that gap.

Keywords: online shopping; gamification; co-creation; online retail experience; ecommerce; marketing

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1. Introduction

Researchers and managers have recently highlighted the importance of including customers in promoting and developing services and products (Leclercq et al. 2018; Nishikawa et al. 2013; Russo-Spena and Mele 2012). This is a premise for companies to increase their relationship management practices to meet market demands (Hoyer et al. 2010; Norton et al. 2012; Piller and Walcher 2006; Roberts and Candi 2014). Incorporating customers in the company's activities, and not only in the outputs, enables company managers to develop communities aimed at the interests of their customers (Leclercq et al. 2018). Consequently, it reinforces the customers' commitment to the companies' new offers and positively stimulates their attitudes and perceptions (Healy and McDonagh 2013; Nishikawa et al. 2013). This customer engagement increases the usage rates of services or products and guarantees continuous use, minimising the failure to introduce an innovation. (Hamari and Koivisto 2015; Leclercq et al. 2018; Nambisan and Baron 2007).

Technological innovation has changed how companies attract customers and how services or products are marketed (Al-Zyoud 2021). Currently, the consumer has more means and equipment, thus being better positioned to collaborate more often in the co-

creation processes in business operations, thus intervening directly in the company's production process (Kennedy and Guzmán 2016; Rodrigues et al. 2021b). In this way, companies can acquire a competitive advantage because a greater engagement with customers makes the consumers more loyal to the brand. This relationship results in a win-win scenario in which customers are satisfied, and the company obtains its competitive advantage. (Al-Zyoud 2021). Therefore, it is fundamental to understand the specific marketing content to attract customers or adapt the marketing to consumer behaviour, improving the relationship with the customer. (Sen et al. 2015).

Gamification uses game elements in non-game contexts (Merhabi et al. 2021; Yang et al. 2017). Gamification comprises game mechanics, i.e., functional game components, such as points or leaderboards, to activate players' desires, which can translate into more competition and rewards (Rodrigues et al. 2021a). The gamification introduced in online retail stores can be a strategy companies use to retain customers and develop marketing activity (Al-Zyoud 2021; Park and Bae 2014). We have witnessed the progress and rapid development of social software and online games that, when well applied in e-business, generate new experiences for the online consumer.

In this context, although there are studies regarding the application of gamification in e-business, there is still a gap in how gamification can influence the consumer experience when shopping in online retail stores (Hsu and Chen 2018). Furthermore, little is known about the effectiveness of gamification and its contributions to companies (Hofacker et al. 2016; Huotari and Hamari 2017; Leclercq et al. 2020).

On the other hand, shopping in online retail shops generates emotional benefits for consumers resulting from the playful experience they obtain, and the other players are not perceived as competitors, where one consumer wins, and the other loses. A co-creation process does not drive gamification, nor do game mechanics create greater consumer engagement online. Therefore, how gamification is introduced in online retail shops should be reviewed, and strategies should be created to co-create experience value and brand co-creation.

Thus, this study aims to evaluate the ludic experience of consumers in online retail stores and the role of gamification and game mechanics in changing the online shopping experience. Given the objective, two research questions are posed: (1) How do consumers have playful experiences when shopping online? and (2) How does the consumer experience of online shopping change when gamification and game mechanics are introduced?

This study uses a qualitative methodology. Through a semi-structured questionnaire, 30 interviews were conducted with Portuguese consumers. The results show that gamification and co-creation concepts are not yet familiar to the interviewees. Online shopping is motivated by convenience, speed, and comfort, and the search for the best quality/price product can be entertaining. However, it is no substitute for other entertainment with friends and family.

This study is unique in that it expands the understanding of the online customer experience through an empirical exploration of the playful experience that consumers can obtain when shopping online. In addition, it evaluates how the introduction of game elements can change the experience of consumers in online shopping. This study contributes to the literature on the consumer experience in online shopping and the introduction of gamification and co-creation elements in online retail shopping. We intend to clarify how game elements can influence consumer behaviour and the online shopping experience. This study also explores how consumers' online experiences can be changed by introducing gamification techniques used by retailers, making recommendations for companies regarding implementing or improving these techniques to increase company performance.

2. State of the Art

2.1. *Playful Consumer Experience in Online Shopping*

Playfulness has been identified in previous studies as an essential element in studying the online consumer experience in the retail sector (Alatalo et al. 2018; Lambillotte et al. 2022; Mimoun and Poncin 2015). Playfulness can be considered a characteristic or a state, with many methods in which consumers can experience online shopping as a playful encounter (Hwang and Choi 2020). Thus, we can define lucidity as a predisposition of consumers to interact creatively and spontaneously with technology (Webster and Martocchio 1992). Consumers with higher levels of lucidity tend to have a more positive relationship with websites of online retail stores (Ahn et al. 2007). Thus, consumer experiences will be consumers' responses when interacting with retailers throughout the purchase process (Gao et al. 2021; Holmlund et al. 2020). In this way, playfulness causes customers to be absorbed by the interaction, leading to positive emotions, such as pleasure (Han et al. 2020) and even the filling of time (Mathwick et al. 2001).

In this study, playfulness is considered a situational state of the consumer, as considered by Mimoun et al. (2017), since the level of playfulness in consumers' online shopping experience can be more or less intense. When retailers offer a ludic experience to the consumer, they are promoting positive behaviours in the use of their website (Oh et al. 2009) and positive feedback on the use of the site (Ahn et al. 2007), improving the perception of ease of use and pleasure and satisfaction (Zolkepli and Kamarulzaman 2015).

In this way, providing a good experience to the online customer of retail stores has been a major challenge, with content personalisation being one of the strategies retailers use to improve the consumer experience (Hänninen et al. 2019; Jain et al. 2021).

2.2. *The Consumer Experience in Online Retail When Gaming Mechanics Are Introduced*

The gamification concept can be defined as using game elements in a non-game context. (Deterring et al. 2011). Gamification is intended to help companies solve problems, obtain better results in employee engagement through challenges related to their performance, and attract new users or customers. (Dymek and Zackariasson 2016; Zichermann and Cunningham 2011). This concept includes techniques for motivation and involvement of users through game elements, using gamification for much more than just games and entertainment. (Huotari and Hamari 2017).

With companies began implementing gaming mechanics in online stores, consumers' motivation and willingness to buy products online increased (Insley and Nunan 2014). Thus, retailers are required to start more keenly caring about their customers' experiences in their online shops and the overall shopping experience (Lopes et al. 2021a). The customer experience is similar to a psychological construction, in which it incorporates a subjective response which follows the customer interaction with the company/store, its brands, services, and/or products (Rose et al. 2012).

From this perspective, retailers seek to improve the customers' online shopping process and increase their perception of value, which can be implemented by introducing game mechanics in online retail stores. Although companies cannot control the customer experience, they can influence it to some extent with the help of stimuli (Kranzbühler et al. 2018; Pecorari and Lima 2021). Thus, companies understand that consumer demand will be constantly stimulated by the injection of "meaning" into their products and services, while improving the customer experience (Kornberger 2010). In addition, customer participation or organisation involvement can be important for the consumer in the production and development processes of products or services in today's market (Büttgen et al. 2012; Chathoth et al. 2013; Dong et al. 2015; Wu et al. 2013).

2.3. The Co-Creation in Online Retail

Co-creation consists of offerings to create added value through interactions with the customer (Rodrigues et al. 2021a; Yao and Miao 2021). Co-creation has also been the subject of studies in several academic areas, in which it is concluded that the consumer is indispensable in the creation process (Chen 2020). Therefore, it can be said that the customer is partly a co-creator of value (Yao and Miao 2021).

In this context, with the increasing demand for consumers to be part of the production and decision-making process, companies have begun to include consumers in the creation of new consumption experiences (Fuat Firat et al. 1995). With the emergence of the co-creation process, companies realised that consumers can play five key roles in co-creation: (1) product marketer; (2) product support specialist; (3) product tester; (4) product designer; and (5) product conceptualiser (Nambisan and Nambisan 2008).

The value of co-creation has a complex management nature, as it is a collaborative tool for boosting markets (Kleber and Juusola 2021). In this way, advantages can be obtained from information and knowledge sharing with external stakeholders (the external approach to open innovation), which will give them a supporting role in helping the brand to achieve a superior position in the market. Thus, the value of co-creation is seen as a paradigm which explains how customers can be part of product design and development (Yao and Miao 2021). It can also be seen as a process of exchange between individuals involved in creating mutually beneficial value (Grönroos 2011; Vargo and Lusch 2008, 2014). Some studies also show the importance of the value concept as an approach to implementing value in co-creation activities or improvements in innovation perspectives and the product or service development processes with customers. (Agrawal and Rahman 2015; Buhalis and Foerste 2015; Eggert et al. 2018; Frow et al. 2015; Hsu 2016; Lenka et al. 2017; McColl-Kennedy et al. 2017; Merrilees 2016; Neghina et al. 2015; Ramaswamy and Ozcan 2016; Tian and Jiang 2018; Yu and Sangiorgi 2018).

Market research should be targeted to achieve the full potential value of co-creation, and questionnaires, statistical models, ethnographic videos, segments, and group assessments should be conducted. Thus, it is possible to better understand the consumers by improving their relationship experience with the company. Therefore, companies should invest in implementing co-creation in their business strategies (Chen 2020). As co-creation is an emerging and growing trend for companies to involve their customers in their business processes (Merhabi et al. 2021), it must be increasingly studied in different contexts.

On the other hand, gamification and co-creation have been interpreted differently. The first method is the co-creation of experience, and the second is the value of brand co-creation. The co-creation of experience is considered the contribution of customers as a form of brand loyalty. The value of brand co-creation aims to grow the brand by promoting relationships with and between companies (Berger et al. 2018; Högberg et al. 2019; Nobre and Ferreira 2017). However, co-creation can be boosted through gamification or the introduction of game mechanics (Leclercq et al. 2017).

3. Methodology

3.1. Type of Study and Cases Selection

In recent decades, interest in qualitative research has grown, as it is essential to delve deeper into organisational processes and how they evolve (Bluhm et al. 2011). Normally associated with the qualitative methodology, we find studies of cases that intend to study a given case in greater detail (Yin 2018). Thus, in this study, we use a quantitative methodology applying the case study method based on consumer experiences in shopping at online retail stores to evaluate consumers' ludic experience and the impact of introducing game mechanics on the consumer experience. Thus, the unit of analysis is the consumer.

This approach is the most suitable for this study, as it allows for the in-depth study and understanding of a specific phenomenon in a particular context (Johnson and Duxbury 2010; Lopes et al. 2021b; Yin 2018). The application of the exploratory qualitative method enables the broadening of the research objective and makes it possible to identify emerging patterns in specific contexts (Lopes et al. 2022; Patton 2015), which is the case of the present study. We used multiple case studies to support the results (Yin 2018). The cases were carefully selected to produce similar results. For the selection of cases, it was considered relevant that the interviewee had made online purchases in retail stores in the last six months. All interviewees had made at least one purchase from an online retail store in the clothing sector in the last six months.

3.2. Data Collection and Analysis

According to Yin (2018), one of the pieces of evidence used in the preparation of case studies is interviews, which are the most commonly used method of collecting qualitative data. The interview consists of a personal conversation between individuals, which can be structured or semi-structured. Structured interviews start with standardised questions; in semi-structured interviews, if there is a script with the questions to be addressed, other pertinent questions can also be asked (Mattar et al. 2014).

Regarding data collection, a combination of interviews was carried out in this study through a semi-structured questionnaire, which made it possible to analyse the themes more profoundly. Data was collected through direct face-to-face observation of consumers who shop online in the retail market. The semi-structured questionnaire consisted entirely of open-ended questions adapted from Insley and Nunan (2014). The semi-structured questionnaire used in this study is divided into two general themes: (1) Consumers' playful experience with online shopping; and (2) the role of game mechanics in altering the online shopping experience. Regarding the first theme, the questionnaire had two sub-themes: (1) online shopping as recreation (8 questions) and (2) affective aspects of online shopping (6 questions). Regarding the second theme, the questionnaire included three subthemes: (1) competing against other shoppers (5 questions); (2) competing against other retailers' policies (8 questions); and (3) pricing games (5 questions).

Regarding the data analysis process, the interviews were transcribed and coded in Microsoft Excel by sub-themes. Finally, we created the following results section by analysing the sub-themes under study.

The synthesis of methodological aspects adopted in our study is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Methodological aspects of the investigation.

| | |
|-----------------------------|--|
| Research procedures | |
| Geographical area | Portugal |
| Investigative approach | Qualitative investigation |
| Case selection | Intentional/convenience |
| Units of analysis | Consumers shopping at online retail stores |
| Data-collecting instruments | |
| Case studies | 30 interviews |
| Data analysis | |
| Content analysis | |

3.3. Sample

First, a pre-test was conducted to check whether the questions were clear to the respondent, or whether it was necessary to adjust any question to make it clearer. In this pre-test, the interview guide was tested using a previous sample of 5 participants (with

different qualifications, professions, and ages) to verify and analyse the general degree of understanding and response variability.

Thirty interviews were conducted with consumers in Portugal who had made purchases in the online retail market in the last six months. Regarding the selection of the interviewees, the same process was carried out through an intentional/convenient process. The interviews were conducted in November 2021 and had an average duration of about 45 min. The sample characterisation can be seen in Table 2. On average, the Portuguese consumers interviewed were 21.9 years old. The online shops of large retailers, such as Inditex Group, Shein, and About You, were mainly accessed via mobile phone, and most payments were made through ATM and Mbway.

Table 2. Characterisation of the sample.

| Letter | Age | Professional Situation | Shops You Usually Buy from | Shopping Location | Day and Time | Equipment | Payment Method |
|----------|-----|-----------------------------|--|-------------------|--------------|-----------------------|-------------------|
| A | 22 | Children's Auxiliary | Lacoste, Zara, Pull&Bear | house | 08/11—21:15 | Mobile phone | ATM or MBWay |
| B | 22 | Student | Shein | house | 7/11—17:30 | Computer/Mobile Phone | ATM |
| C | 20 | Barmaid | Pull&Bear, Shein, Zara | home/cafe | 17/11—14:25 | Mobile phone | ATM |
| D | 22 | Student | Zara, Mango | house | 04/11—14:00 | Computer/Mobile Phone | ATM |
| E | 22 | Student | Pull&Bear, H&M | house | 15/11—17:00 | Computer | ATM/PayPal |
| F | 20 | Student | Stradivarius, Zara, H&M, Mango | house/bakery | 04/11—15:50 | Computer/Mobile Phone | ATM |
| G | 20 | Student | Stradivarius, Zara | house | 19/11—9:30 | Computer | ATM |
| H | 18 | Student | Pull&Bear, Zara | house | 11/11—20:30 | Computer/Mobile Phone | ATM |
| I | 28 | Psychologist | Zara, Stradivarius | house | 14/11—18:41 | Mobile phone | ATM |
| J | 21 | Student | About You | house | 16/11—10:20 | Computer | MBWay |
| K | 30 | Financial Director | Zara, Stradivarius | house | 14/11—11:00 | Computer | Paypal |
| L | 20 | Student | Shein, Zara, Pull&Bear | house | 13/11—12:04 | Mobile phone | MBWay |
| M | 19 | Student | Shein, Zara, Mango | house | 12/11—16:03 | Computer/Mobile Phone | MBWay/Credit Card |
| N | 19 | Student | Shein | house | 10/11—14:54 | Mobile phone | Paypal |
| O | 20 | Student | Shein, Zara, Bershka | house | 18/11—18:34 | Mobile phone/iPad | Paypal/ATM |
| P | 19 | Student | Shein, H&M, Pull&Bear, Zara | house | 19/11—14:13 | Mobile phone | Credit Card |
| Q | 22 | Student | Shein, Zara, H&M | house | 18/11—13:46 | Computer | Paypal/MBWay |
| R | 19 | Student | Mango, Zara, Stradivarius, Rarus | house | 16/11—22:40 | Computer/Mobile Phone | ATM |
| S | 19 | Student | Zara, Stradivarius, Shein, Pull&Bear | house | 19/11—23:00 | Computer/Mobile Phone | ATM |
| T | 19 | Student | Zara, H&M, Stradivarius | house | 10/11—15:40 | Computer | Paypal |
| U | 20 | Student | Stradivarius, Pull&Bear, Springfield | house | 18/11—23:30 | Computer/Tablet | ATM |
| V | 21 | Student | Zara, Bershka, Nike, Nixon, Guess, Pull&Bear, Lacoste, Tommy | house | 4/11—18:00 | Mobile phone | ATM / PayPal |
| W | 21 | Student | Mango | house | 14/11—22:30 | Mobile phone | ATM |
| X | 20 | Student | Bershka, Zara, Pull&Bear, Mango | house | 3/11—16:00 | Computer/Mobile Phone | ATM |
| Y | 49 | Telecommunications Operator | Seaside, Zara, Sport Zone, Decathlon | house | 11/11—20:05 | Computer/Mobile Phone | Paypal |
| Z | 19 | Student | Pull&Bear, Pimkie | house | 12/11—21:10 | Computer | ATM |
| α | 20 | Student | Zara, H&M, Mango | house | 17/11—17:30 | Mobile phone | MBWay |

| | | | | | | | |
|----------|----|--------------------|-----------------------------|-----------|---------------|-----------------------|--------------|
| β | 19 | Student | Mango, Zara, Shein, Lacoste | house | 11/11 – 12:50 | Computer/Mobile Phone | ATM |
| γ | 20 | Student | Mango, Zara, Shein, Lefties | house | 18/11 – 13:20 | Mobile phone | MBWay/Postal |
| δ | 26 | Hospital Auxiliary | Shein, Pimkie, H&M | home/work | 28/11 – 21:07 | Computer/Mobile Phone | ATM |

4. Results

4.1. Playful Consumer Experience in Online Shopping

Concerning online shopping being an entertainment activity, the respondents' opinion was evaluated in two themes: (1) online shopping as a substitute for other entertainment activities and (2) the emotional aspects that influence consumers when shopping online.

4.1.1. Online Shopping as Recreation

The recreation shopper is typically a consumer who enjoys shopping as a leisure activity, spends more time shopping, takes pleasure in the process and the shopping experience, and is more impulsive in making unplanned purchases (Bellenger and Korgaonkar 1980; Rohm and Swaminathan 2004). Concerning online shopping as a substitute for other entertainment activities, we found that the 30 interviewees mostly shop online for convenience (avoiding travel), speed, and access to promotions and exclusive online products. There is a greater tendency to do their online shopping in the late afternoon and evening, related to work availability, and they do it on average twice a month. Emotional benefits such as comfort, relaxation and satisfaction are associated with online shopping. Despite the positive emotional aspects of the online shopping experience, most respondents do not consider online shopping as a substitute for other entertainment activities. Spending time with friends, going to the cinema, and going for a walk are activities they consider entertainment, whereas online shopping can be done at any other time.

4.1.2. Affective Aspects of Online Shopping

Most respondents feel happy or sad, satisfied, or anxious about the emotional aspects that influence consumers when shopping online. Online shopping is not done because they feel “down”, but because they associate this activity with the search for happiness and satisfaction, i.e., more positive emotions, and therefore, consider that it improves their mood when they do it. In the case of online clothes shopping, interviewees revealed that when they are shopping, they imagine themselves wearing the products, namely combining them with others they have already bought. This way, they are concerned with researching opinions from influencers and not specifically with those on the site from which they are buying. Moreover, most of them do not value the availability of tools by online retail shops to create their product, showing that they already have an opinion about their intended purchase.

4.2. Changing the Consumer Experience of Online Shopping When Gaming Mechanics Are Introduced

The second group of questions aims to understand how consumers respond to the introduction of game mechanics in online purchases. The questions are divided into three themes to check whether there are differences between opinions before and after the introduction of game mechanics in online stores. The first theme aims to analyse whether consumers see shopping as a competition involving “playing against each other”. The second theme essentially addresses competition between the policies of each online shop, i.e., competition between strategies that retailers adapt to persuade or encourage consumers to make purchases in their shops. Finally, the last theme concerns self-control and research to prevent a poorly planned/studied and impulsive purchase.

4.2.1. Competing against Other Shoppers

Regarding the perception that online shopping can be a competition similar to a game, the interviewees revealed that, for the most part, they are not concerned about shopping better than other shoppers (e.g., friends, family, etc.), and the shopping process is carried out in a self-centred way, focused on their tastes. Thus, they consider that when shopping online, they are not competing and, as such, they do not generally understand the shopping experience as a game. There are no winners or losers. Even in situations where there are, for example, limited units available, the dispute with other buyers of these units is mostly not seen by respondents as a game. Online shopping is mostly done out of necessity, ease, and comfort. Searching online for the best deal (value for money) is a form of entertainment for respondents. It motivates frequent online shopping activity, even though they do not consider that they have any different skills from other buyers in the online environment. Many respondents reported that the skills needed for online shopping are standardised.

4.2.2. Competing against Other Retailers' Policies

This group of questions assessed the competition between strategies retailers adopt to persuade or encourage consumers to shop in their stores. Most respondents reported doing research in online shops even if they did not intend to buy items. This research is motivated by entertainment and curiosity. Consumers do not use any specific strategy to make online purchases. Still, they consider that online shops use strategies to encourage their purchase, such as discounts and promotions, free deliveries, and accumulating points. However, they usually filter the products they want with the maximum price they are willing to pay, and/or they search only for the items they like. Respondents also revealed that most of them do not return items bought online. They mainly look for cheaper products online instead of more unusual or difficult-to-access products. The social approval of online shopping is unimportant to the interviewees, reinforcing that shopping is done through personal taste or necessity. The introduction of gaming elements does not influence online shopping for most respondents, and they did not suggest implementing gamification strategies in online shops.

4.2.3. Pricing Games

According to the answers obtained, we can conclude that most of the interviewees feel more pressured to buy in physical shops, since there is greater pressure from the employees and also by the issue of social approval, because, as a general rule, people feel obliged to buy something when they enter the physical shop. The pressure they feel in physical shops makes them buy more on impulse compared to their attitude in online shops. Even if they have more time to evaluate their purchases, reading blogs or comments does not interfere with the impulse buying decision regarding a certain product. Respondents value the "shopping cart" available in online shops. It allows them to accumulate selected items and review products before payment, helping them decide according to product prices and the items they like the most. Most respondents revealed that they do not shop at auction sites due to a lack of knowledge.

5. Discussion of Results

The increase in online shopping and competition between online retail shops has increased academic interest in analysing online marketing strategies to capture and retain consumers. In this context, attention arises regarding how the introduction of game mechanics elements can change the consumer experience in the online context (Hsu and Chen 2018). However, the relationship between consumers and games is complex and criticised, with gamification being recognised as a form of psychological manipulation to drive purchases and obtain customer data for use by competitors, therefore generating ethical concerns (Insley and Nunan 2014). On the other hand, gamification is not a way to

save bad businesses, but to boost well-structured businesses (Zichermann and Cunningham 2011).

The results of this study demonstrate that a co-creation process, i.e., consumer-driven, does not drive gamification, nor do game mechanics create greater consumer engagement online, as concluded by Xi and Hamari (2019). The consumers involved in this study satisfy their online shopping needs through improvised and formally unstructured games. They are motivated by convenience, speed, and access to promotions and exclusive products online. These factors suggest that online shopping is an attractive option for respondents, as it offers a more convenient and advantageous experience than shopping in physical shops. Thus, it is unclear whether gamification increases customer engagement (Koivisto and Hamari 2019). Therefore, online retail shops have difficulties understanding how to engage consumers in game dynamics, basing their strategies on promotions and special offers, something valued by the respondents of this study (Andrews and Currim 2004). Moreover, when consumers look for different prices in online shops for the products they want, they seek this information based on entertainment (Chung et al. 2018). They value, for example, the existence of a shopping cart, not only to store the selected products, but also to be able to review the items and compare them with those in other online shops, with implications for the competitiveness of online retail shops (Close and Kukar-Kinney 2010).

Although the search for the products with the best value for the money is understood as recreational, driven by curiosity and the search for information (Füller 2010), this task is not a substitute for other types of social entertainment with friends and family, nor do consumers consider competing with other consumers when shopping online as if it were a game. This result aligns with that of Kavaliova et al. (2016), which concluded that consumers are driven to online shopping by fun and pleasure and for tangible returns, but not by competition. What is more, online shopping is not done because people feel “down”, but because they associate this activity with the search for happiness and satisfaction, which is in line with what is indicated by Mofokeng (2021) and Rita et al. (2019). Product delivery, perceived safety, information quality and variety can influence customer happiness and satisfaction (Mofokeng 2021; Rita et al. 2019).

On the other hand, the interviewed consumers mentioned that they do not need social acceptance for their online shopping, which is self-centred and focused on their needs and wants. However the Kavaliova et al. (2016) result is antagonistic to ours. Bearden and Etzel (1982) indicate that the opinion of people close to them can greatly impact consumers’ purchasing decisions. However, Bearden and Etzel (1982) result aligns with the present study’s. However, this study’s finding aligns with those of Brown and Reingen (1987). This result reinforces those of Kakar and Kakar (2020), who concluded that social value does not influence online purchasing behaviour. This reduces the possibility that the co-creating experience involves sharing insights and word-of-mouth (Merhabi et al. 2021).

This study verified that interviewees conducted research at online shops, even without the intention of buying, motivated by entertainment and curiosity. This finding aligns with that indicated by Kim and Forsythe (2008) and Childers et al. (2001). The authors state that the research in online shops may be motivated by different factors such as the search for information about products, price comparison, and the search for entertainment or pleasure. Furthermore, it was verified that interviewees do not use specific strategies to purchase online, but they believe that shops use incentives such as discounts and promotions. They filter products with a maximum price and/or search for items of interest. Most do not return products purchased online and prefer cheaper products over rare or hard-to-find ones. These results are aligned with those of Geraldo and Mainardes (2017). In addition, Rintamäki et al. (2021) also highlight that the return process is seen as an inconvenience and has monetary costs; the feeling of guilt and stress of consumers may explain the low rate of returns. The results also reveal that consumers feel more pressured to buy in physical shops than they do online. This can be explained by several factors,

such as the physical presence of salespeople, the ability to touch and try products before buying, and the sense of urgency created by a physical shop environment.

6. Conclusions

This study aims to evaluate the ludic experience of consumers in online retail stores and the role of gamification and game mechanics in changing the online shopping experience. The results show that online shopping is not a substitute for other types of entertainment but has positive emotional benefits such as happiness, comfort, relaxation and satisfaction, resembling a playful experience, as it positively improves mood. Respondents search online shops for entertainment and out of curiosity, even if they do not want to buy. Most purchases are made online for convenience, speed, and access to discounts, promotions, and exclusive products. The search for the best quality-price in online retail shops is considered entertainment, motivating a more regular activity. The tools made available by online retail shops to create one's product are not valued. Most respondents do not consider online shopping as a competition, even when a few product units are available. Although consumers do not use search strategies or have specific skills in the online context, they consider that online retail shops offering discounts, free shipping, and accumulating points are encouraging their consumption. However, the introduction of game mechanics does not influence online shopping. Consumers do not need social approval for their purchases in online shops and feel more relaxed when shopping online than when shopping in physical shops, avoiding impulse purchases. In addition, they feel that online shops with shopping carts also prevent impulse buying and allow them to adjust their purchases. A surprising finding is that consumers feel more compelled to shop in brick-and-mortar stores than online stores. Several factors can explain this, such as the physical presence of salespeople, the ability to touch and try products before buying, and the sense of urgency created by the physical store environment.

Um achado supreendente é que os consumidores se sentem mais compelidos a fazer compras em lojas físicas em comparação com as lojas online. Vários fatores podem explicar isso, como a presença de vendedores fisicamente presentes, a capacidade de tocar e experimentar os produtos antes de comprar, e o senso de urgência criado pelo ambiente de uma loja física.

In terms of practical implications, this study suggests that consumers shopping in online shops are unfamiliar with gamification. Thus, online retail shops can maximise the benefits of implementing a gamified strategy if gamification is optional rather than imposed. Its implementation depends on adherence to the consumer profile, preventing consumers less adept at gaming from leaving the online shop (Karać and Stabauer 2017). On the other hand, gamification can correct undesirable consumer behaviour, such as returns. For example, a game mechanic allows free shipping for purchases and pays for return shipping. The use of gamified elements, such as a shopping cart, can be optimised if they allow that same shopping cart to compare the product with other online shops, showing that they have the lowest price in the market (Insley and Nunan 2014). Finally, co-creation is a growing trend for companies to involve their customers in business processes (Merhabi et al. 2021). Gamification should enhance the co-creation of value in terms of experience and brand.

This paper is original because it contributes to increasing the knowledge about the online customer experience through an exploratory empirical study about the use of elements present in games in e-commerce. This paper contributes to the literature on gamification and the co-creation of purchases in online retail shops. It intends to clarify how game elements can influence consumer behaviour and the online shopping experience. This study brings new findings regarding gamification techniques used by retailers. Suggestions are made for companies concerning implementing gamification techniques, or improving them, to increase customer engagement and performance.

This study has some limitations. First, this study used a quantitative methodology, and it would be useful to reinforce the complementarity of results with quantitative data,

making the investigation more robust, accurate, and comprehensive. The selection of respondents was carried out through an intentional/convenient process, and using a random sample of respondents could increase the sample's representativeness in this study. Despite the high number of interviews conducted, the interviewees were unfamiliar with the concept of gamification and co-creation, and some of the answers may have been less informative due to unfamiliarity with the context. On the other hand, the average age of the interviewees was low (21.9 years), most of them were students (financially dependent on third parties), and only Portuguese consumers were interviewed. The consumption behaviour of shopping in online shops cannot be generalised to other age groups and other geographical contexts. The study used Microsoft Excel to code and analyse the data. We consider that the use of software of a qualitative nature, such as NVivo or Atlas, could increase the rigour and transparency of the data analysis process in our study.

In future research, it would be important to diversify the sample in terms of age and professional occupation and apply this interview guide to consumption in physical shops to assess the differences in purchasing behaviours compared to those in online retail shops. Furthermore, this study only took into account the Portuguese cultural context, and in future research, it would be interesting to explore the influence of gamification and game mechanics on the consumer experience in different cultural settings to better understand the cultural variations in these phenomena. Finally, the complementarity of qualitative and quantitative data will reinforce the scientific rigour of the results and make the study more robust.

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