

Article

# Exploring Sustainable Retail Experiences: Shall We Make It Fashionable?

Mian Wang <sup>1</sup>, Jamie Marsden <sup>1,\*</sup>, Ezgi Oguz <sup>1</sup>  and Briony Thomas <sup>2</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> School of Design, Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Cultures, University of Leeds, Leeds LS2 9JT, UK; sdmwa@leeds.ac.uk (M.W.); ml18eo@leeds.ac.uk (E.O.)

<sup>2</sup> School of Mechanical Engineering, Faculty of Engineering and Physical Sciences, University of Leeds, Leeds LS2 9JT, UK; b.g.thomas@leeds.ac.uk

\* Correspondence: j.l.marsden@leeds.ac.uk

**Abstract:** The physical retail sector is facing significant challenges, exacerbated by the disruptions caused by the pandemic. Amidst these circumstances, it becomes imperative for brands to reimagine the role of physical retail stores and counter the negative trends in the industry. Gamification has emerged as a promising strategy to enhance customer engagement and elevate brand experiences. This study explores how brands can create engaging experiences through gamification within the physical retail environments to revitalize stores and foster sustainable brand experiences. In this context, ‘sustainable’ refers to the creation and maintenance of long-lasting relationships between consumers and physical retail stores through ongoing engagement. Drawing on data collected from 17 semi-structured interviews, our findings demonstrate that gamification effectively shifts customers from passive observers to active participants, strengthens emotional connections through co-creation, prolongs footfall and engagement duration through immersive encounters, and integrates physical and online platforms for sustainable practices. This research contributes valuable insights into the transformative potential of gamification, offering practical implications for brands seeking to rejuvenate customer experiences in the realm of physical retail.

**Keywords:** sustainable brand experience; gamification; brand love; customer brand engagement; fashion brand



**Citation:** Wang, M.; Marsden, J.; Oguz, E.; Thomas, B. Exploring Sustainable Retail Experiences: Shall We Make It Fashionable?

*Sustainability* **2023**, *15*, 16478.

<https://doi.org/10.3390/su152316478>

Academic Editor: Arminda Paço

Received: 31 October 2023

Revised: 21 November 2023

Accepted: 27 November 2023

Published: 1 December 2023



**Copyright:** © 2023 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

## 1. Introduction

In recent times, the retail sector has been confronted with various challenges, from the impact of the financial crisis in 2008 to the disruption created by the pandemic and, more recently, the increases in UK business rates [1,2]. In addition to these economic challenges, the rise of online retailers has intensified the competition in the retail industry, resulting in a decline in customer visits [3,4]. Figures show that over the previous five years, 6000 retail stores throughout the UK have closed, highlighting the challenging landscape facing physical retailers [1]. The closure of retail outlets diminishes a merchant’s physical footprint within a particular geographical locale, which can lead to a very obvious decline in market share for retailers operating in segments that depend on having a physical presence [5].

Facing such headwinds, it is crucial for traditional brick-and-mortar stores to revisit their retail offering by considering more customer-centric initiatives in an attempt to re-establish connections with their customers [4]. Recent studies have indicated that customers desire more augmented retail experiences that go beyond mere product transactional offerings and are willing to pay more for experiences [6,7]. However, the exclusive emphasis on the identification and fulfilment of customer needs may not suffice. The indications are that there is a growing preference for retail environments that offer a sense of community and serve as recreational destination spaces [8].

Building on this point, scholars have urged retailers to recognise the significance of cultivating enduring customer relationships by considering the cultural values and operational aspects that facilitate such relationships [4] and find ways for customers to fall in love with their brands [6,7]. As highlighted by Park et al. [9], brands offer the most value to customers when they combine the benefits of enabling, enticing, and enriching. When brands can empower, gratify, and inspire customers, a long-term and enduring relationship with customers can be established. Brand benefits such as these are believed to generate customers' trust, love, and respect for the brand, ultimately resulting in brand admiration [9]. Related studies have showed that this approach effectively elicits active involvement and participation from the audience [10], while also fostering brand resonance, community building, and loyalty [11].

Retail brands with physical stores need to rethink their in-store offering to remain competitive and relevant, and it seems that technology has a role to play. Previous studies related to this area have explored how some integrated technologies might rejuvenate their physical stores [12,13] or allow customers to actively participate in the product development phase of products and customize their own items [14]. These studies have reported a reimagined retail environment that has used technology to craft captivating narratives to transform the sales space into an immersive and sociable destination [7]. This suggests there could be considerable merit in understanding how interactive technology could introduce gamified activities in-store.

The previous literature has established a connection between brand love and engagement [15], with brand love being a key aspect of the irreplaceable bond between brands and customers [16]. Given this connection, it is likely that gamified in-store activities might enhance engagement, evoke brand love, and serve as a potent strategy for brands to strengthen their relationship with customers and cultivate loyalty [17]. Gamification in physical stores offers tactile and immersive experiences that online platforms cannot replicate. For instance, in-store games can leverage sensory elements—such as touch, smell, and spatial interaction—to create memorable and emotionally resonant experiences. This sensory engagement can elevate the perceived value of products and enhance the overall shopping experience, thereby providing physical stores with a competitive edge over online alternatives. However, previous studies have primarily explored gamification in online retail [18–20], while overlooking its application in physical stores.

Pursuing this line of enquiry, the aim of this study was to explore how brands might create engaging experiences using gamification to revitalize stores and sustain their position in an evolving retail sector. Our research highlights how gamification transforms customer–brand interactions in physical fashion stores. It shows that gamification fosters active participation, self-expression, enhanced customer engagement, and sustainability, making it a potent tool for crafting impactful and enduring brand experiences. In this paper, we begin with a comprehensive review of the existing literature, followed by the description of the methodology employed in our study. After that, a detailed analysis of the data gathered with key findings is employed. The final part concludes by summarizing our main findings, their limitations, and suggesting avenues for future research in this dynamic field of study.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. In-Store Gamification Experience

In the ever-evolving realm of gamification, researchers and practitioners have increasingly recognized its significance as a powerful tool to enhance user experiences and promote positive behaviours across various domains [21]. The integration of game design elements in non-game contexts has been advocated a systemic approach that emphasizes the crucial role of experiential and psychological aspects of service consumption [22]. This perspective underpins the idea that the effective use of gamification can lead to heightened user engagement and motivation, resulting in improved service experiences [17].

From a designer's standpoint, a broader perspective on gamification is offered by highlighting its dynamic nature as a process of infusing game-like characteristics into activ-

ities [21]. By strategically incorporating elements such as challenges, feedback mechanisms, and progress indicators, designers can create compelling experiences that stimulate users' curiosity and sense of achievement [23]. This aligns with the view that well-designed gamified experiences are more likely to foster positive emotions, leading to increased user satisfaction and sustained engagement [17].

In the context of service marketing, Huotari and Hamari [24] propose gamification as a transformative process that enriches services with affordances for gameful encounters. This aligns with the notion that gamification's success is contingent upon its ability to provide users with meaningful experiences that cater to their individual preferences and goals [17,25]. As such, businesses can leverage gamification to enhance customer experiences within physical retail environments by incorporating game-like elements into in-store touchpoints [26].

The concept of the gameful experience, as defined by Eppmann, Bekk et al. [27], encompasses the positive emotional and engaging qualities users experience when interacting with gamified applications. This multi-dimensional construct involves a collaborative effort between users and gamified services, wherein users actively co-create their experiences through meaningful interactions [24]. Such gameful experiences are pivotal in driving value creation during gamification endeavours [24], making them a key determinant of the overall effectiveness of gamified touchpoints within the retail context.

A gameful experience's foundation lies in the incorporation of game elements, as suggested by Deterding, Dixon et al. [25]. These elements, such as rewards, levels, narratives, and challenges, serve as fundamental building blocks that contribute to the engaging and motivating nature of gamification [17]. When skilfully integrated, these game elements can elevate the customer's purchase journey, leading to enhanced satisfaction, enjoyment, brand loyalty, and brand love [28].

## 2.2. Brand Love

Brand love stems from one or more enticing benefits that stimulate the mind and warm the heart, making customers feel gratified, engaged, entertained, and warm-hearted, collectively inducing brand love [9]. Brand love is defined as "the degree of passionate emotional attachment a satisfied consumer has for a particular trade name" [29] (p. 81). Brand love plays a pivotal role in establishing and nurturing the connection between customers and brands, given its unique nature that encompasses profound, long-lasting, and irreplaceable sentiments not easily replicated by other brands [16,30].

Previous studies have indicated a positive correlation between brand love and brand loyalty [31–33]. Brand loyalty is a term that refers to the enduring desire of consumers to maintain a valued relationship with a brand [34]. Brand love, on the other hand, is believed to influence brand loyalty through enhanced consumer attitudes, leading to increased loyalty and willingness to pay a premium price [35]. When consumers have reached the stage of having brand love, they become passionate advocates, engaging in positive word-of-mouth and willingly promoting the brand [36,37]. This level of brand advocacy involves speaking favourably about the brand, being open to trying new products of the brand, and being resilient in the face of negative information [38]. Brand love therefore creates a positively inflated perception, fostering brand advocacy and mitigating potential negative implications [39].

Moreover, brand love leads to higher engagement, as consumers who develop deep emotional connections with a brand are more likely to invest their resources, time, and energy into actively engaging with the brand [15]. In some cases, consumers exhibit a fondness for brands due to the underlying motive of self-image [40], wherein consumer affection stems from the considerable temporal and cognitive investments required by certain objects [41]. In particular, fashion apparel brands serve as vehicles for personal expression and projection of a self-identity, and therefore can elicit a heightened level of commitment from consumers in terms of time and effort expended during the brand

selection process [42]. Furthermore, research emphasizes the crucial role of brand love as a catalyst for fostering an enhanced level of engagement [15].

### 2.3. Customer Brand Engagement

When consumers encounter the touchpoints of a brand, their experience shapes how they think, feel, and act towards the brand [43,44]. These different interactions between brands and their consumers can establish meaningful connections and encourage emotional investment in a brand, leading to customer brand engagement [45]. Customer brand engagement is an important concept because when brands build active and meaningful relationships with their consumers, the positive attachment encourages these engaged consumers to become loyal advocates [46].

Customer brand engagement is considered a motivational state that arises from cognitive and affective responses to various immersive encounters associated with the pursuit of individual goals or values [47]. For instance, when customers interact with a brand in a way that aligns with their own goals and values, it can create a strong connection and motivation for them to engage with that brand [48]. Moreover, consumers are more likely to engage with a brand if they see it reflect their own self-concept, especially if they perceive a brand as enhancing their social self or reflecting their inner self [29,49]. Consequently, brands that facilitate self-expression hold great symbolic value for individuals, representing personal achievement and acting as tools for social integration [50].

Increasingly, consumers engage with brands on social media to build part of their online self-expression [51,52]. For consumers, there is considerable value in brands that can facilitate their 'public self' to others [49]. Within the fashion sector, where self-identity is an integral facet, physical retail stores often occupy a prominent position, serving as an indisputable platform to raise awareness about products, generate desire and interest in the brand, and, most importantly, drive consumer action [53].

### 2.4. Exploring the Sustainability of the Physical Retail Store

Although the importance of physical retail stores has long been recognised, the competitive environment for physical retailers is increasingly under pressure from online competitors. One way for physical stores to remain relevant to customers is to consider incorporating their interactive activities in-store, allowing customers to express themselves and ultimately enhance brand love, thereby strengthening the relationship with their customers [41–43]. According to research, customers commonly cultivate sustainable online relationships with brands when they imbue the brand's products or services with emotional significance [54,55]. Emotional engagement and communicative interactions are pivotal in forging bonds between consumers and brands [56]. This emotional investment in brands stems from the personal connection a customer feels with the brand [57]. Additional research indicates that the continuance of communication and interaction between consumers and vendors positively influences their mutual relationship [58]. While recent research has demonstrated that gamification, via online platforms and applications, affects customer brand engagement and brand love [59–61], very little is known about the impact of gamification interactions in the physical retail store.

In response, this paper explored how gamification could be used to revitalize physical retail stores and foster sustainable brand experiences. Accordingly, this study explored the level of self-expression experienced by consumers during their interactions with retail stores, taking into account the varying degrees of brand engagement among individuals, which can be influenced by their perceptions of the brand's role in self-expression. If the experiences encountered in a physical store enable consumers to express themselves in certain interactive activities, it is plausible that they would develop stronger feelings of brand love. To explore this further, we asked the following research question: How can fashion brands create engaging and sustainable experiences by incorporating gamification interactions within the physical retail environment?

### 3. Methods

This research employed a case study methodology to investigate the potential advantages that gamification could offer in reimagining the operational aspects of fashion retail stores. Case studies are particularly appropriate for emerging research domains, where the objective is to discover valuable insights in areas that lack sufficient existing theoretical frameworks [62]. Our study focused on analysing two exemplary instances, namely Canada Goose and Lily (see Table 1), that effectively integrated social activities within their retail stores. The selection of these cases was based on three key factors: (1) the cases needed to showcase a distinguished track record of accomplishment and innovation in the fashion retail industry, particularly with regards to transformative changes in their physical store environments; (2) the cases were required to represent distinct segments within the fashion retail sector, encompassing both high-end premium brands and mid-range fast fashion brands, in order to yield broader insights; and (3) the cases were chosen based on the willingness of the respective retailers to participate in our research investigation.

**Table 1.** Introduction of the selected cases.

Brand	Market	Format	Feature
Lily	Fast Fashion	Flagship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interactive art installations for taking selfies (time-lapse photography display, black mirror—future space display)</li> <li>• Technical interactive experience area (three different types of magic mirror for select products, virtual try-on, gather more information and fast buy)</li> <li>• ‘KOL live room’ (designed for internet influencers to directly sell/recommend products)</li> <li>• Co-create products lab (select style, colour, pattern, print, and/or embroider by machines)</li> </ul>
Canada Goose	Premium Fashion	Flagship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Entrance: The Crevasse (interactive floor uses to simulate the sound of cracking ice underfloor)</li> <li>• Product display: The Element Room (touch digital ‘hotspots’ on the clothes to explore more information)</li> <li>• Try-on products: The Cold Room (test the product in <math>-12\text{ }^{\circ}\text{C}</math> temperatures with real snow)</li> <li>• Purchase: (purchase on kiosks under the guideline of the staff and leave store without products)</li> </ul>

Data for this study were gathered through semi-structured interviews, conducted with experts who directly participated in the design, development, and implementation of the two selected cases. The sampling strategy employed was purposive, and a total of 17 individuals involved in the cases were interviewed, ensuring a minimum of six interviewees for each case [63]. The participants, selected based on their domain expertise, were interviewed between December 2020 and March 2021. Network analysis tools were utilized to visualize team connections and identify key project contributors. To ensure representation across various roles, the study targeted designers, planners, and technicians responsible for the development and delivery of each case. Additionally, store managers and retail staff who possessed first-hand experience with the retail experiences within the stores were included.

In accordance with regional social distancing measures implemented during the pandemic, the interviews were conducted virtually through Microsoft Teams software (version 1.6.00.27656), with a duration of approximately 60 min per interview. The interview guide was developed by drawing upon emergent themes identified in the existing literature. The focus of the guide centred on open-ended inquiries pertaining to the strategic objectives of the projects, the evaluation of the projects in the context of retail environments, and the ele-

ments contributing to the relationship between brands and customers. A semi-structured guideline was employed to ensure consistency in the questions posed for eliciting responses, which related to the core themes investigated. With the permission of participants, audio recordings were made during the interviews and comprehensive transcripts were subsequently created.

Thematic analysis was utilized to examine the data, enabling a thorough exploration of key elements within the dataset. This analysis adhered to Braun and Clarke's [64] six phases of analysis: data familiarization, initial code generation, theme identification, theme review, theme definition and naming, along with the subsequent production of the final report. By systematically identifying recurring themes and patterns of significance, these categories were succinctly summarized, and pertinent quotations were included to enhance interpretive understanding [65]. Probing techniques were employed during the analytical process, with a deliberate effort made to minimize the researchers' biases. This approach facilitated the generation of diverse viewpoints pertaining to the topic under investigation [66], thereby enhancing the robustness of the derived codes and themes.

#### 4. Findings

The study's results are portrayed through thematic analysis, encompassing the researchers' interpretations alongside direct quotations from the research participants. The findings of this study revealed four key themes: (1) the enhancement of customer brand engagement through gamification, (2) the elicitation of brand love by promoting self-expression through gamification, (3) the increase in footfall and dwell time through gamification, and (4) the creation of a sustainable brand experience through the impact of gamification.

##### 4.1. The Enhancement of Customer Brand Engagement through Gamification

The strength of gamification is that it encourages customers to actively participate rather than passively browse. This theme strongly emphasizes various types of gamifications that customers can interact with during their store visits, encompassing three categories: virtual interaction, social interaction, and immersive interaction.

Virtually interactive elements, such as virtual dressing rooms, AR/VR experiences, and touch-screen displays, enhance the engagement and memorability of the customer journey. This, in turn, encourages customers to become co-creators of their shopping experience, fostering a stronger connection to the brand. These can be seen in the next excerpts:

*"[...] it is these smart technologies that customers remember, especially when they physically interact with them."*

*"We aim to create an experience that allows customers to temporarily escape from their routine, providing motivation and encouraging initiative in their shopping journey. We believe this can lead to a more robust relationship between customers and the brand."*

Socially interactive categories include encouraging experience sharing and engaging in in-store activities. This form of gamification not only elicits aesthetic experiences but also fosters an intention among customers to become brand advocates and willingly share their experiences through their online social networks. Moreover, these activities can increase the duration of time customers spend in the store. Longer participation times suggest that gamification is effective in prolonging customer visits and keeping them engaged within the store environment. Furthermore, participation in these activities can spark ideas for constructing personal styles, self-identity, and self-expression.

*"We have created an atmosphere akin to a community that enables customers to share their thoughts, take pictures, and share their experiences, thereby making them more willing to stay longer."*

*"The lab is designed for customers to co-create clothes with us. Our staff guide customers in choosing the colour, pattern, style of clothes, and demonstrate the process of making*

*these clothes. Customers can then use the machine under the guidance of our staff, resulting in their unique clothes designed by themselves."*

The third gamification category involved creating an immersive environment that encouraged customers to explore the benefits of a product more deeply. Interacting in such an environment exposes customers to sensory stimuli, including visual, auditory, tactile, and olfactory sensations. When a brand can provide an authentic setting where customers can try on products, it enhances the appeal through superior performance and authenticity. For instance, the Canada Goose brand has introduced the 'Cold Room' in their stores, allowing customers to test their products in ultra-low temperatures with actual snow. This augmented experiential shift between the immersive environment and the real world can deliver more memorable experiences and elicit novel and epistemic feelings among customers.

The state of heightened arousal experienced in such environments is closely linked to enhanced alertness and awareness. Consequently, this heightened state of perception and experiential processing fosters a profound and vivid engagement within the moment. The following excerpts highlight these concepts:

*"Canada Goose is a function-first brand, with jackets designed for people living in the coldest places on Earth, and they are valued around \$1000–\$2000. Convincing customers in perfectly climate-controlled environments, like traditional retail stores, can be challenging. That is precisely why we have the Cold Room."*

*"In today's world, people crave real experiences. Our aim is to transport viewers directly to the Arctic, allowing our customers to genuinely feel the warmth of a Canada Goose jacket in a similar temperature as experienced in the Cold Room."*

#### 4.2. The Elicitation of Brand Love by Promoting Self-Expression through Gamification

The second theme represents findings specifically associated with gamification that can elicit brand love. The analysis of the interview data indicates that self-expression is one of the key elements of gamification that can evoke brand love. This is consistent with previous research by Carroll and Ahuvia [29], which found that a self-expressive brand positively influences brand love. Such interactive and personalized experiences empower customers to actively participate in the design process, allowing them to create unique and meaningful products that align with their individual styles and preferences. The following excerpt illustrates this finding:

*"The lab allows customers to design their own clothes, and we guide them in selecting styles, colours, and patterns. Following the instructions, they can use machines to print or embroider their designs . . . this hands-on experience gives them insight into the process of making clothes, and they enjoy the meaningful opportunity to create their own garments."*

By entrusting creative control to customers, the fashion retail store acknowledges individual tastes and preferences, cultivating a sense of being valued and understood. This empowerment fosters a positive emotional affiliation with the brand, as customers value the chance to genuinely express themselves:

*"We established this lab with the purpose of providing a space for mutual acquaintance between customers and the brand, offering a meaningful opportunity for collaborative engagement with our customers."*

The co-creation process itself unfolds as a memorable and captivating experience for customers, transcending mere acquisition of off-the-shelf products. It enables them to meticulously curate pieces that authentically mirror their individuality. This unique avenue for self-expression nurtures a profound attachment to the resultant products, as customers perceive them as extensions of their own identities. Consequently, an enduring emotional bond with the brand takes root, giving rise to brand affection, loyalty, and advocacy. Furthermore, as customers partake in the co-creation of products, a sense of ownership and

pride in their creative endeavours emerges. This emotional investment in the outcomes substantially reinforces the likelihood of purchase. Additionally, these co-created items tend to be cherished and utilized more frequently, owing to the emotional resonance intertwined in the design process. These phenomena are evident in the following excerpts:

*“Within this lab, every individual emerges as an architect of their own attire, thereby endowing unique products with the essence of their personal preferences. This engenders an indelible experience for them; numerous customers fashion multiple garments adorned with diverse colours and patterns.”*

*“The products fashioned under their own creative agency stand in stark contrast to the offerings adorning the conventional retail shelves. Such distinctiveness prompts customers to hold them in distinct regard and treat them uniquely. Upon encountering these garments, memories are rekindled, consequently eliciting a fondness for the brand.”*

#### 4.3. The Increase in Footfall and Dwell Time through Gamification

The research findings highlight the influence of gamification on the duration of time customers allocate to their in-store visits. A captivating and deeply engaging environment possesses the ability to attract a larger footfall of customers, thereby fostering prolonged stays within the establishment, and enabling connections between products and the proximate physical elements within the store. The behaviours exhibited by customers during their store visits exhibit a dynamic nature, largely owing to their inherent unpredictability with respect to temporal experiences. This phenomenon underscores the significance of adjacent decorative and engaging gamification, which contributes to the overall experiential quality by enhancing the immersive aspect of the encounter and extending the duration of the customer’s presence within the store. This phenomenon is discernible in the excerpts below:

*“We undertook a comprehensive environmental redesign. Our objective extended beyond the conventional approach of customers merely visiting [the store] to locate and purchase garments; instead, we aimed to cultivate an experience akin to a transformative ‘journey’ or an immersive voyage. This approach was orchestrated to transcend the transactional norm, engendering a heightened sense of engagement within the store environment. [...] This ambition was palpable, as evidenced by the substantial queues of patrons willing to patiently await entry for extended durations.”*

*“The central concept involved a direct transposition of our clientele into an Arctic ambience. The ingress transpired through ‘The Crevasse,’ leading patrons subsequently into ‘The Element Room,’ where they interacted with digital ‘hotspots’ to glean comprehensive information about the showcased coats. This cognitive engagement was coupled with the tactile experience of physically donning the coats within ‘The Cold Room’ [...] Intriguingly, the allure of curiosity prompted patrons to venture further and delve deeper into the nuances of the store’s offerings.”*

Gamification techniques, such as smart mirrors and interactive art installations, have the capacity to allure shoppers towards exploring diverse sections of the store and uncovering novel product offerings. These methods facilitate activities like product comparison across various series, the capturing of selfies, and virtual trials of different clothing styles, consequently fostering augmented footfall and prolonged periods of customer presence within the store. This enhanced ability for shoppers to experiment in-store is revealed in the following extracts:

*“Utilizing the smart mirrors, patrons can engage in virtual try-ons of garments without the need for physical changes. This aspect of convenience substantially enhances the capacity for customers to explore an expanded range of clothing items and experiment with diverse stylistic variations.”*



*“Incorporating two interactive art installations and designating three interactive experiential zones, we intentionally aim to motivate our patrons to pause and interact with these installations, capturing selfies, for instance.”*

#### 4.4. Creating a Sustainable Brand Experience through Gamification

The findings in this theme demonstrate that gamification can offer various benefits in creating a sustainable brand experience, including integration with online platforms, interaction with social media, and the collection of data-driven insights. The cases showed that integrating a retail fashion store’s physical presence with online platforms such as websites, mobile apps, and social media went beyond merely displaying products on digital screens in the physical store; it extended to replicating the essence of online shopping, providing an increased level of convenience for shoppers. For instance, customers can locate and select products by searching on the screen, engaging in virtual try-ons, and interacting directly with displays. These measures ensure that customers gain a comprehensive understanding of the products, can review online comments, and share pictures through social media, similar to their online shopping experience.

The integration of interactive technology enables customers to have access to more information about the clothes, a deeper understanding of the brand stories, a more engaging experience during their shopping journey, and the opportunity to physically try on the products. This approach to serving a richer level of information to the customer can reduce the return rates of purchased products, and therefore contribute to sustainable retail practices by minimizing packaging waste and shipping emissions. The next statement reveals this key consideration:

*“In this establishment, customers could seamlessly integrate with online platforms, thus ensuring a consistent experience across all interaction points. [...] we contend that the physical store has the capacity to address certain deficiencies inherent in the online channel, such as mitigating the return rate.”*

Respondents also underscored the significance of harnessing gamification as a means to inspire customers to share their encounters via social media. Contented patrons who derive enjoyment from gamified encounters are more predisposed to share their affirmative experiences within their social circles, engendering word-of-mouth promotion and heightening brand advocacy. Collaboratively crafted product showcases, augmented reality dress-up simulations, and photo opportunities can foster escalated visibility on social media and the creation of user-generated content that amplifies the visibility of the retail store and its offerings to a broader audience. This is underscored in the following extracts:

*“Memorable experiences inherently invite sharing. Customers are inclined to feature their imagery on social media, invariably arousing intrigue and fascination with the brand.”*

*“It’s fairly commonplace for millennials to share facets of their daily lives on social media—this encompasses product purchases, composing reviews, and making referrals. Integrating social media platforms within their physical store could be a prospective advantage for brands.”*

Furthermore, gamification facilitates the collection of data regarding customer preferences, behaviours, and interactions. Retailers can harness this data to curate personalized recommendations and offers for individual customers, thereby customizing the shopping experience to align with their distinct tastes and preferences, as exemplified in the subsequent extract:

*“[...] it offers insights into their preferences, providing us with the opportunity to enhance our services, designs, and more [...] Customers may not overtly notice the changes, but upon entering the store, they will discover a heightened ease in finding what they desire.”*

## 5. Discussion

This study addresses a notable gap in the existing literature: while previous studies [19–21,67] have primarily explored gamification in online retail environments, there has been a relative oversight regarding its application in physical stores. Our research aimed to fill this gap by investigating how brands integrate gamification to create engaging experiences in physical spaces to revitalize retail stores and sustain their position in an evolving sector. The findings revealed several significant insights in relation to the impact of gamification on enhancing customer brand engagement, promoting brand love through self-expression, increasing footfall and dwell time, and creating a sustainable brand experience. These themes collectively highlight the transformative potential of gamification in shaping customer behaviours, emotional connections, and overall retail sustainability. Below, we discuss the implications of these findings and their relevance to both theory and practice.

The literature on gamification emphasizes its potential to enhance user engagement and motivation by integrating game design elements into non-game contexts [25]. The suggestion is that introducing such elements would improve the customer's purchase journey, leading to enhanced satisfaction, enjoyment, brand love, and brand loyalty [28]. Our findings expand on this notion by showing the role of gamification in transitioning customers from passive observers to active participants in their retail shopping journey. By integrating technical, social, immersive, and interactive elements, brands create memorable and engaging experiences that resonate with customers. These interactions are not only memorable but also foster a sense of co-creation and ownership, deepening the emotional connection between customers and the brand. The findings also suggest that brands that invest in interactive and immersive experiences may stand to gain a competitive edge in capturing customer attention and loyalty.

The second theme unveils the significance of self-expression as a pivotal component of gamification that elicits brand love. The act of co-creating products empowers customers to express their unique identities and preferences, fostering emotional affiliations with the brand. As suggested by Albert and Merunka [30], brands that facilitate self-expression can evoke stronger emotional connections. The co-creation process not only cements a sense of personal connection but also enhances the perceived value of the products. Thus, the second implication is that brands can harness gamification to foster loyalty and advocacy by allowing customers to be involved in the creation process of the product.

The engaging and motivational qualities of gamification elements can attract users and extend their interaction time [17]. The immersive and engaging environments created through gamification attract a larger influx of customers, and the captivating experiences encourage them to spend more time exploring in-store. The incorporation of interactive elements like smart mirrors and art installations extends the customer journey and increases the chances of serendipitous discoveries. These findings suggest advocacy for the strategic integration of gamified elements to attract and retain customers within physical retail environments.

Moreover, the literature emphasizes the potential of gamification to create sustainable brand experiences by integrating physical and online platforms [24]. The study's findings support this idea by demonstrating how gamification can reduce return rates, align retail practices with sustainability goals, and enhance brand visibility through social media integration and data-driven insights. Incorporating gamification into physical retail stores offers a novel avenue for fostering sustainable brand experiences, characterised by the creation and maintenance of enduring relationships with consumers. Facilitating community events and challenges within the store fosters a sense of belonging amongst consumers. For example, personalised co-created product events, tailored to individual preferences, can cultivate loyalty, while interactive learning experiences deepen the consumer's connection with the brand. Aligned with the research [68], the integration of the magic mirror transforms shopping into an immersive adventure, enhancing customer engagement. Real-time feedback mechanisms ensure a swift adaptation to evolving consumer

trends, maintaining store relevance. Social media integration extends brand visibility, creating a ripple effect of engagement. Data-driven personalisation of marketing strategies and product recommendations further tailors the shopping experience. Seasonal and thematic gamification keep the retail experience fresh and dynamic, encouraging repeated visits. Lastly, progression-based loyalty programs offer a sense of achievement, bolstering ongoing consumer engagement. Collectively, these strategies not only enrich the immediate shopping journey but also establish a framework for sustainable, adaptive, and long-lasting customer relationships.

## 6. Conclusions

This study captured the diverse ways in which gamification can revolutionize customer-brand interactions within the fashion retail space. By encouraging active participation, fostering self-expression, extending customer presence, and contributing to sustainability, gamification has emerged as a dynamic tool for creating meaningful and sustainable brand experiences. These insights provide valuable guidance for retailers seeking to revisit their strategies and remain competitive in the evolving retail landscape. Nonetheless, it is crucial for brands to adapt these findings to their individual, specific contexts and target audiences to maximize the impact of gamification on customer engagement and brand loyalty.

One of the limitations of this study is that this research was conducted in a specific context, the fashion industry, and therefore it may not fully capture the diversity of customer behaviours and perceptions across different retail environments. A second, related limitation is that the interviews were conducted in relation to two highly unusual and unique cases, which restricts, to some extent, the generalizability of the findings. Future research that explores the long-term effects of gamification on customer behaviours and brand outcomes would be highly beneficial to the sustainability of the retail sector. Furthermore, an extended study that included a broader range of retail settings and customer demographics would expand our understanding of the variability of consumer behaviour in a retail context and potentially extend the applicability of these findings.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, M.W., J.M. and B.T.; methodology, M.W.; software, M.W.; validation, M.W.; formal analysis, M.W.; investigation, M.W.; resources, M.W.; data curation, M.W.; writing—original draft preparation, M.W.; writing—review and editing, J.M. and E.O.; visualization, M.W.; supervision, J.M.; project administration, M.W.; funding acquisition, M.W. and E.O. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The study was conducted in accordance with the Research Ethics Policies of University of Leeds, and approved by a representative of the Arts, Humanities and Cultures Faculty Research Ethics Committee (protocol code LTDESN-120, date: 18 November 2019) for studies involving humans.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** Data are contained within the article.

**Acknowledgments:** All the participants who joined in the interviews.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## References

1. British Retail Consortium. Without Rates Reform, Four in Five Retailers Will See Store Closures. 2023. Available online: <https://brc.org.uk/news/corporate-affairs/without-rates-reform-four-in-five-retailers-will-see-store-closures/> (accessed on 9 October 2023).
2. Deloitte. What Next for the High Street? 2021. Available online: <https://www2.deloitte.com/uk/en/pages/consumer-business/articles/what-next-for-the-high-street.html> (accessed on 9 October 2023).
3. Eley, J. Shop Closures in UK Hit Highest Total for Five Years. Financial Times, 2 January 2023. Available online: <https://www.ft.com/content/e10af296-000d-4544-b8d9-f45514a417dd> (accessed on 9 October 2023).

4. Tuominen, S.; Reijonen, H.; Nagy, G.; Buratti, A.; Laukkanen, T. Customer-centric strategy driving innovativeness and business growth in international markets. *Int. Mark. Rev.* **2022**. *ahead-of-print*. [[CrossRef](#)]
5. Hanner, D.; Hosken, D.; Olson, L.M.; Smith, L.K. Dynamics in a mature industry: Entry, exit, and growth of big-box grocery retailers. *J. Econ. Manag. Strategy* **2015**, *24*, 22–46. [[CrossRef](#)]
6. Pine, B.J.; Gilmore, J.H. *The Experience Economy*; Harvard Business Press: Brighton, MA, USA, 2011.
7. Bonfanti, A.; Yfantidou, G. Designing a memorable in-store customer shopping experience: Practical evidence from sports equipment retailers. *Int. J. Retail Distrib. Manag.* **2021**, *49*, 1295–1311. [[CrossRef](#)]
8. Peters, C.; Bodkin, C.D. Retail store community and its impact on store success. *Int. J. Retail Distrib. Manag.* **2021**, *49*, 735–751. [[CrossRef](#)]
9. Park, C.W.; MacInnis, D.J.; Eisingerich, A.B. *Brand Admiration: Building a Business People Love*; John Wiley & Sons: Hoboken, NJ, USA, 2016.
10. Valero, D. *Branded Entertainment: Dealmaking Strategies & Techniques for Industry Professionals*; J. Ross Publishing: Plantation, FL, USA, 2014.
11. Van Loggarenberg, M.J.; Enslin, C.; Terblanche-Smit, M. Towards a definition for branded entertainment: An exploratory study. *J. Mark. Commun.* **2021**, *27*, 322–342. [[CrossRef](#)]
12. Grewal, D.; Noble, S.M.; Roggeveen, A.L.; Nordfalt, J. The future of in-store technology. *J. Acad. Mark. Sci.* **2020**, *48*, 96–113. [[CrossRef](#)]
13. Alexander, B.; Kent, A. Change in technology-enabled omnichannel customer experiences in-store. *J. Retail. Consum. Serv.* **2022**, *65*, 102338. [[CrossRef](#)]
14. Zheng, P.; Xu, X.; Yu, S.; Liu, C. Personalized product configuration framework in an adaptable open architecture product platform. *J. Manuf. Syst.* **2017**, *43*, 422–435. [[CrossRef](#)]
15. Bergkvist, L.; Bech-Larsen, T. Two studies of consequences and actionable antecedents of brand love. *J. Brand Manag.* **2010**, *17*, 504–518. [[CrossRef](#)]
16. Han, T.-I.; Choi, D. Fashion brand love: Application of a cognition–affect–conation model. *Soc. Sci.* **2019**, *8*, 256. [[CrossRef](#)]
17. Hamari, J.; Koivisto, J.; Sarsa, H. Does gamification work?—A literature review of empirical studies on gamification. In Proceedings of the IEEE 2014 47th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences, Waikoloa, HI, USA, 6–9 January 2014.
18. Insley, V.; Nunan, D. Gamification and the online retail experience. *Int. J. Retail Distrib. Manag.* **2014**, *42*, 340–351. [[CrossRef](#)]
19. Sheetal; Tyagi, R.; Singh, G. Gamification and customer experience in online retail: A qualitative study focusing on ethical perspective. *Asian J. Bus. Ethics* **2023**, *12*, 49–69. [[CrossRef](#)]
20. Lopes, J.M.; Gomes, S.; Lopes, P.; Silva, A.; Lourenço, D.; Esteves, D.; Cardoso, M.; Redondo, V. Exploring the role of gamification in the online shopping experience in retail stores: An exploratory study. *Soc. Sci.* **2023**, *12*, 235. [[CrossRef](#)]
21. Werbach, K.; Hunter, D.; Dixon, W. *For the Win: How Game Thinking Can Revolutionize Your Business*; Wharton Digital Press: Philadelphia, PA, USA, 2012; Volume 1.
22. Domínguez, A.; Saenz-De-Navarrete, J.; De-Marcos, L.; Fernández-Sanz, L.; Pagés, C.; Martínez-Herráiz, J.-J. Gamifying learning experiences: Practical implications and outcomes. *Comput. Educ.* **2013**, *63*, 380–392. [[CrossRef](#)]
23. Seaborn, K.; Fels, D.I. Gamification in theory and action: A survey. *Int. J. Hum.-Comput. Stud.* **2015**, *74*, 14–31. [[CrossRef](#)]
24. Huotari, K.; Hamari, J. A definition for gamification: Anchoring gamification in the service marketing literature. *Electron. Mark.* **2017**, *27*, 21–31. [[CrossRef](#)]
25. Deterding, S.; Dixon, D.; Khaled, R.; Nacke, L. From game design elements to gamefulness: Defining “gamification”. In Proceedings of the 15th International Academic MindTrek Conference: Envisioning Future Media Environments, Tampere, Finland, 28–30 September 2011.
26. Koivisto, J.; Hamari, J. The rise of motivational information systems: A review of gamification research. *Int. J. Inf. Manag.* **2019**, *45*, 191–210. [[CrossRef](#)]
27. Eppmann, R.; Bekk, M.; Klein, K. Gameful experience in gamification: Construction and validation of a gameful experience scale [GAMEX]. *J. Interact. Mark.* **2018**, *43*, 98–115. [[CrossRef](#)]
28. Torres, P.; Augusto, M.; Neves, C. Value dimensions of gamification and their influence on brand loyalty and word-of-mouth: Relationships and combinations with satisfaction and brand love. *Psychol. Mark.* **2022**, *39*, 59–75. [[CrossRef](#)]
29. Carroll, B.A.; Ahuvia, A.C. Some antecedents and outcomes of brand love. *Mark. Lett.* **2006**, *17*, 79–89. [[CrossRef](#)]
30. Albert, N.; Merunka, D. The role of brand love in consumer-brand relationships. *J. Consum. Mark.* **2013**, *30*, 258–266. [[CrossRef](#)]
31. Huang, C.-C. The impacts of brand experiences on brand loyalty: Mediators of brand love and trust. *Manag. Decis.* **2017**, *55*, 915–934. [[CrossRef](#)]
32. Bairrada, C.M.; Coelho, F.; Coelho, A. Antecedents and outcomes of brand love: Utilitarian and symbolic brand qualities. *Eur. J. Mark.* **2018**, *52*, 656–682. [[CrossRef](#)]
33. Madeline, S.; Sihombing, S.O. The impacts of brand experiences on brand love, brand trust, and brand loyalty: An empirical study. *J. Bisnis Dan Manaj.* **2019**, *20*, 91–107. [[CrossRef](#)]
34. Fournier, S.; Yao, J.L. Reviving brand loyalty: A reconceptualization within the framework of consumer-brand relationships. *Int. J. Res. Mark.* **1997**, *14*, 451–472. [[CrossRef](#)]
35. Bairrada, C.M.; Coelho, A.; Lizanets, V. The impact of brand personality on consumer behavior: The role of brand love. *J. Fashion Mark. Manag. Int. J.* **2019**, *23*, 30–47. [[CrossRef](#)]

36. Karjaluoto, H.; Munnukka, J.; Kiuru, K. Brand love and positive word of mouth: The moderating effects of experience and price. *J. Prod. Brand Manag.* **2016**, *25*, 527–537. [[CrossRef](#)]
37. Rodrigues, C.; Brandão, A. Measuring the effects of retail brand experiences and brand love on word of mouth: A cross-country study of IKEA brand. *Int. Rev. Retail Distrib. Consum. Res.* **2021**, *31*, 78–105. [[CrossRef](#)]
38. Yasin, M.; Shamim, A. Brand love: Mediating role in purchase intentions and word-of-mouth. *J. Bus. Manag.* **2013**, *7*, 101–109. [[CrossRef](#)]
39. Batra, R.; Ahuvia, A.; Bagozzi, R.P. Brand love. *J. Mark.* **2012**, *76*, 1–16. [[CrossRef](#)]
40. Albert, N.; Merunka, D.; Valette-Florence, P. When consumers love their brands: Exploring the concept and its dimensions. *J. Bus. Res.* **2008**, *61*, 1062–1075. [[CrossRef](#)]
41. Ahuvia, A.C. Beyond the extended self: Loved objects and consumers' identity narratives. *J. Consum. Res.* **2005**, *32*, 171–184. [[CrossRef](#)]
42. Abrar, M.; Baig, S.A.; Hussain, I. Understanding brand love in fashion clothing online brand communities: Moderating role of social identity. *Pak. J. Soc. Sci.* **2020**, *40*, 315–325.
43. Brodie, R.J.; Hollebeek, L.D.; Jurić, B.; Ilić, A. Customer engagement: Conceptual domain, fundamental propositions, and implications for research. *J. Serv. Res.* **2011**, *14*, 252–271. [[CrossRef](#)]
44. Hollebeek, L. Exploring customer brand engagement: Definition and themes. *J. Strateg. Mark.* **2011**, *19*, 555–573. [[CrossRef](#)]
45. Hollebeek, L.D.; Glynn, M.S.; Brodie, R.J. Consumer brand engagement in social media: Conceptualization, scale development and validation. *J. Interact. Mark.* **2014**, *28*, 149–165. [[CrossRef](#)]
46. Vivek, S.D.; Beatty, S.E.; Morgan, R.M. Customer engagement: Exploring customer relationships beyond purchase. *J. Mark. Theory Pract.* **2012**, *20*, 122–146. [[CrossRef](#)]
47. Calder, B.J.; Isaac, M.S.; Malthouse, E.C. How to capture consumer experiences: A context-specific approach to measuring engagement: Predicting consumer behavior across qualitatively different experiences. *J. Advert. Res.* **2016**, *56*, 39–52. [[CrossRef](#)]
48. Leckie, C.; Nyadzayo, M.W.; Johnson, L.W. Antecedents of consumer brand engagement and brand loyalty. *J. Mark. Manag.* **2016**, *32*, 558–578. [[CrossRef](#)]
49. Loureiro, S.M.C.; Ruediger, K.H.; Demetris, V. Brand emotional connection and loyalty. *J. Brand Manag.* **2012**, *20*, 13–27. [[CrossRef](#)]
50. Schembri, S.; Merrilees, B.; Kristiansen, S. Brand consumption and narrative of the self. *Psychol. Mark.* **2010**, *27*, 623–637. [[CrossRef](#)]
51. Lipsman, A.; Mudd, G.; Rich, M.; Bruich, S. The power of “like”: How brands reach (and influence) fans through social-media marketing. *J. Advert. Res.* **2012**, *52*, 40–52. [[CrossRef](#)]
52. Wallace, E.; Buil, I.; De Chernatony, L. Consumer engagement with self-expressive brands: Brand love and WOM outcomes. *J. Prod. Brand Manag.* **2014**, *23*, 33–42. [[CrossRef](#)]
53. Grassi, A. “We Like That It Matters!”: Towards a Socially Sustainable Retail Store Brand Experience. *Sustainability* **2022**, *14*, 16310. [[CrossRef](#)]
54. Fournier, S. Consumers and their brands: Developing relationship theory in consumer research. *J. Consum. Res.* **1998**, *24*, 343–373. [[CrossRef](#)]
55. Riley, F.D.; De Chernatony, L. The service brand as relationships builder. *Br. J. Manag.* **2000**, *11*, 137–150. [[CrossRef](#)]
56. Veloutsou, C. Identifying the dimensions of the product-brand and consumer relationship. *J. Mark. Manag.* **2007**, *23*, 7–26. [[CrossRef](#)]
57. Pawle, J.; Cooper, P. Measuring emotion—Lovemarks, the future beyond brands. *J. Advert. Res.* **2006**, *46*, 38–48. [[CrossRef](#)]
58. Veloutsou, C.; Moutinho, L. Brand relationships through brand reputation and brand tribalism. *J. Bus. Res.* **2009**, *62*, 314–322. [[CrossRef](#)]
59. Lee, J.-Y.; Jin, C.-H. The role of gamification in brand app experience: The moderating effects of the 4Rs of app marketing. *Cogent Psychol.* **2019**, *6*, 1576388. [[CrossRef](#)]
60. Xi, N.; Hamari, J. Does gamification affect brand engagement and equity? A study in online brand communities. *J. Bus. Res.* **2020**, *109*, 449–460. [[CrossRef](#)]
61. Lu, H.-P.; Ho, H.-C. Exploring the impact of gamification on users' engagement for sustainable development: A case study in brand applications. *Sustainability* **2020**, *12*, 4169. [[CrossRef](#)]
62. Eisenhardt, K.M. Building theories from case study research. *Acad. Manag. Rev.* **1989**, *14*, 532–550. [[CrossRef](#)]
63. Yin, R. *Qualitative Research from Start to Finish* Guilford Publications; Guilford Press: New York, NY, USA, 2015.
64. Braun, V.; Clarke, V. Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qual. Res. Psychol.* **2006**, *3*, 77–101. [[CrossRef](#)]
65. Miles, M.; Huberman, A.; Saldaña, J. *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcehook*; Sage Publications Inc.: New York, NY, USA, 2014.
66. Selvi, A.F. *Qualitative Content Analysis, in The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in Applied Linguistics*; Routledge: London, UK, 2019; pp. 440–452.

67. Wang, M.; Marsden, J.; Thomas, B. Smart mirror fashion technology for better customer brand engagement. *Int. J. Fash. Des. Technol. Educ.* **2023**. [[CrossRef](#)]
68. Noorbehbahani, F.; Salehi, F.; Zadeh, R.J. A systematic mapping study on gamification applied to e-marketing. *J. Res. Interact. Mark.* **2019**, *13*, 392–410. [[CrossRef](#)]

**Disclaimer/Publisher’s Note:** The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.