

How Gamification Influences Behavioral Motivation to Participate in Wellness Programs: A Phenomenological Study

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This phenomenological study examined how gamification influences why different generations choose to participate in corporate wellness programs. Although prior research shows that gamification can boost motivation in the short term, we still know little about how to keep people engaged over time, especially across different age groups and for both intrinsic and extrinsic motivators. This qualitative inquiry investigated how gamification influences behavioral intention and participation. The study included 17 participants (12 females, 5 males) representing Millennials, Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Generation Z, all possessing prior experience with gamification or group wellness programs. Findings revealed five primary themes: 1) Rewards & Incentives, 2) Personal Development & Motivation, 3) Health & Well-being Initiatives, (4) Team & Competitive Engagement, and (5) Program Effectiveness & Transparency. The findings suggest organizations should adopt a hybrid model of intrinsic and extrinsic motivators, such as combining monetary rewards for individual milestones with group competitions for social recognition, and customize wellness program designs based on generational motivational profiles.

A recent census study indicated that 87% of U.S. employees feel they would be more productive if their work were gamified (Apostolopoulos, 2019). Gamification is the application of game-based theories to support and motivate task performance that emerged as a vital tool for driving engagement (Garcia-Iruela & Hijon-Neira, 2020; Razali et al., 2020). However, the modern workforce is distinctly multi-generational, encompassing Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z. Research indicates that these generational cohorts respond differently to motivational stimuli, with varying preferences for intrinsic versus extrinsic rewards (Mahmoud et al., 2020). While younger generations often show a high affinity for gamified solutions (Caserman et al., 2023), organizations face the complex challenge of designing systems that capture and sustain engagement across the entire generational spectrum.

One critical area where this multi-generational engagement is necessary is corporate health and wellness. Sedentary lifestyles and a lack of physical activity have contributed to a steady rise in adult obesity rates, which are projected to impact nearly half of U.S. adults by 2030 without significant intervention (Fan et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2020). Workplace wellness programs, such as step-counting challenges, are frequently implemented to combat these trends, improve productivity, and reduce absenteeism (Baicker et al., 2010; Safi et al., 2022). However, sustaining employee participation remains a persistent hurdle. For instance, Rongen et al. (2014) found that participation in worksite health promotion programs varied widely, highlighting the need for more effective motivational strategies. Physical activity is associated with cognitive and behavioral outcomes. Individuals who perceive exercise as a supportive, engaging activity exhibit the intrinsic value necessary for long-term persistence (Rodrigues et al., 2020). Conversely, extrinsic motivation

relies on external monetary or non-monetary rewards to spur participation (Fink et al., 2019). Games naturally foster enjoyment and engagement; therefore, applying gamification to wellness initiatives can provide the behavioral control and self-satisfaction needed to encourage healthier lifestyles (Lehtoranta et al., 2024).

While existing literature explores the short-term impacts of gamification, a significant knowledge gap remains regarding how diverse gamification approaches influence long-term behavioral outcomes across different age demographics. Therefore, the purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand how gamified health initiatives, such as step-counting, influence intrinsic and extrinsic behavioral motivation across distinct generational cohorts in the workforce. By examining how these gaming methodologies interact with generational profiles, this study aims to provide actionable insights to inform the design of more inclusive and effective wellness programs.

Gamification and Behavioral Control

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) provides a foundational framework for understanding how gamification influences employee participation in wellness programs by interacting with an individual's attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control (Ajzen, 1991). Within this context, gamified activities such as step-counting challenges serve as behavioral interventions. By introducing competitive or collaborative gaming elements into non-gaming environments, organizations attempt to stimulate either intrinsic motivation (engaging for inherent enjoyment) or extrinsic motivation (performing for external rewards and monetary gains) to achieve positive health outcomes (Gagné et al., 2022; Malek et al., 2020; Wozniak, 2020). Understanding how these gaming mechanics modify perceived behavioral

control is critical for companies seeking to develop sustainable motivational levers within their organizations (Krath et al., 2021).

The Imperative for Corporate Wellness

Employer-sponsored health insurance is a major cost for many organizations today, with average family coverage costs approaching \$20,000 annually (KFF Carenec, 2018). Sedentary lifestyles and the associated rise in cardiovascular diseases and obesity are primary drivers of these escalating costs (Hydari et al., 2023; Virani et al., 2021). Consequently, organizations are increasingly investing in preventive wellness initiatives such as step-counting programs, which serve as cost-effective interventions to decrease mortality risk and improve workplace productivity (Saint-Maurice et al., 2020; Zhu et al., 2020).

However, a constant challenge for these programs is that many employees struggle to start and keep up regular physical activity. To counter this, employers have begun integrating gamified digital platforms and wearable technologies to track activity and foster engagement (John Dian et al., 2020; Spiegel et al., 2020). While gamification can incentivize physical activity and potentially lower insurance premiums by promoting preventive health (Greysen et al., 2021), its efficacy depends heavily on the program's design. If a gamified system feels overly mandatory or misaligned with employees' interests, it can have negative implications for job satisfaction and overall morale (Hammedi et al., 2021). Therefore, understanding the specific motivational drivers of the workforce is essential for program sustainability.

Generational Motivational Drivers and Behavioral Impulsivity

Motivating employees from different generations requires understanding both intrinsic and extrinsic drivers of behavior. Intrinsic motivation stems from an individual's internal desire to engage in an activity for its inherent satisfaction and relies heavily on self-efficacy and self-regulation (Fishbach & Woolley, 2022; Trautner & Schwinger, 2020). In the context of wellness programs, intrinsically motivated employees participate out of a genuine desire for improved health and personal development (Aljumah, 2023). Conversely, extrinsic motivation is driven by external outcomes, such as monetary incentives, insurance discounts, or public recognition through digital badges and leaderboards (Ahmad, 2021). Extrinsic rewards are very effective at getting people to join in at first and overcoming initial hesitation (Pandzic & Hadziahmetovic, 2022), but if organizations rely on them too much, their impact tends to fade as the rewards become less exciting (John et al., 2023). To achieve long-term participation, organizations must foster "organic behavioral impulsivity" a state of self-determination where employees are naturally driven to maintain engagement without constant external prompting (Ntoumanis et al., 2020). Because generational cohorts assign different values to internal satisfaction versus external recognition,

a hybrid motivational approach is often required (Kotera et al., 2021). By combining extrinsic drivers (e.g., tangible rewards for milestone achievements) with intrinsic support systems (e.g., team socialization and personal health tracking), organizations can create an ecosystem that caters to diverse behavioral needs, ultimately translating temporary participation into sustained behavioral change (Abbas et al., 2021; Kwon et al., 2023).

Participants and Themes

The study comprised 17 participants (12 females, five males) across four generational cohorts: Baby Boomers (n=1), Generation X (n=6), Millennials (n=9), and Generation Z (n=1). All participants had engaged in gamification, gaming activities, or group wellness programs within the six months prior to the study. From the qualitative interviews, five core themes emerged detailing the intersection of gamification and generational motivation.

Theme 1: Rewards and Incentives.

Extrinsic rewards serve as the critical foundation for overcoming initial behavioral inertia. Tangible incentives like gift cards, point-based streaks, and premium discounts drive immediate engagement across all cohorts. For younger cohorts like Millennials and Generation Z, the gamification of direct financial and health benefits is particularly potent. As one younger participant (P15) explicitly noted regarding step-counting, "If I did a certain amount of steps... let's say like maybe \$100 off my health insurance for that year... I probably would have been a lot more motivated to do it." However, sustaining that engagement requires blending tangible rewards with social dynamics. As a remote participant noted, "The true reward... is just the satisfaction of knowing our team beat the other ones. An added bonus will be [a] monetary gift card, but many times it's just the bragging rights" (P17).

Theme 2: Personal Development and Motivation

Beyond external rewards, gamification must tap into an individual's intrinsic need for personal growth. Participants identified attainable goal-setting as a primary driver of sustained motivation; if a gamified system presents unreachable goals, engagement drops immediately. One participant summarized this behavioral threshold: "If I know I'm not going to be able to accomplish it... then I won't go through with it" (P14). For Millennial and Gen Z workers, hitting these gamified milestones is frequently linked to broader career aspirations and upward mobility. One Millennial (P9) stated their primary motivation for hitting targets was "working toward a promotion... to put yourself in the best light."

Theme 3: Health and Well-Being Initiatives

The strongest determinant for participating in corporate wellness initiatives is a direct, transparent link to healthcare cost savings. Employer-sponsored financial incentives such as deductible reductions or cash bonuses for annual screenings successfully motivate employees to adopt healthier behaviors. For younger professionals, these initiatives are most effective when they translate

into highly tangible lifestyle advantages, such as immediate expense reduction or additional time off. One Millennial participant (P9) highlighted "decreases on healthcare expenses" as a primary driver, while another (P6) noted that completing "preventative care" tasks to maintain "discounted deductibles and premiums" heavily influenced their compliance. Beyond just financial savings, younger cohorts also heavily valued time-based rewards. One Millennial (P16) recalled a program where logging gym hours yielded "wellness days that were pretty much PTO days," noting this was a far more effective motivator than traditional health programs.

Theme 4: Team and Competitive Engagement.

Peer-to-peer competition acts as a powerful catalyst for individual motivation, often superseding the need for physical rewards. Gamified programs utilizing team dynamics create a healthy environment of accountability. Among Millennials and Generation Z, digital leaderboards and virtual competition drove high engagement. One younger participant (P10) highlighted how digital ecosystems foster this drive: "I've got a Peloton and the Peloton score. I ride and it compares my scores, my times, my speeds... It gets to a competitive cycle for me, where I compete against other people and it really drives me to do more." Furthermore, this cohort views team competition as an extension of intrinsic loyalty, with one participant (P6) noting their primary drive was "intrinsic motivation to be a good teammate to those around me." However, the structure of the competition must feature authentic stakes. "Making it a competition can improve it," noted an older participant. "A competition that is 'everybody gets a participation certificate' is definitely not it" (P12).

Theme 5: Program Effectiveness and Transparency

To maximize participation, gamified platforms must be accessible and clearly communicate how virtual points translate into real-world benefits. For digitally native Millennials and Generation Z, the focus is heavily on the user interface and administrative friction; they quickly abandon programs with clunky digital ecosystems. As one younger participant (P10) observed, "Most companies don't do a particularly good job of describing all of the benefits... in a consumable fashion." Conversely, Gen X and Baby Boomer participants framed transparency around proactive communication and human support rather than just app interfaces. Older participants emphasized the need for guided onboarding to bridge the corporate awareness gap. As one Gen X participant (P14) explained, the digital platform alone isn't enough: "They need more of a health coach... available to explain how some of the things work... I think it needs to be something that needs to be taught to people and informed to someone, so they can know that it's actually there for their benefits."

Generational Implications for Gamification

This study underscores that gamification is not a one-size-fits-all model. The data reveals distinct generational

fault lines in how motivational mechanics are perceived. Millennials and Generation Z are highly responsive to digitally integrated, high-frequency rewards (such as digital leaderboards, fast PTO accumulation, and app-based team challenges). They view gamification as an extension of their daily digital ecosystems and require frictionless, intuitive interfaces to remain engaged. In contrast, Generation X and Baby Boomers approach gamification with a more pragmatic, duty-bound lens. These older cohorts are motivated heavily by tangible family financial benefits (like premium reductions), authentic peer-to-peer competition devoid of artificial "participation trophies," and transparent human communication regarding the program's value. Ultimately, for a corporate wellness program to thrive across a multi-generational workforce, leadership must design platforms that offer both the digital agility demanded by younger workers and the authentic, high-stakes value propositions required by older professionals. The findings show that gamification can connect intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in ways that both encourage people to join and help them stay engaged.

Where earlier research sometimes treated intrinsic and extrinsic motivation as separate or competing, this study suggests that effective gamification depends on using both together (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This study reveals that effective gamification requires a symbiotic approach. Extrinsic motivators such as tangible monetary gifts, point systems, and reduced insurance premiums serve as the critical catalyst for overcoming initial behavioral inertia. These rewards are highly effective in compelling individuals to join a program. However, long-term persistence is heavily reliant on intrinsic factors. Gamification mechanics that promote personal development, mastery, and team-based competitive engagement fulfill the internal need for self-improvement and social connection. Ultimately, gamification influences positive behavioral change not by choosing between internal satisfaction and external rewards, but by designing environments where both motivators complement one another.

Theoretical Implications

This study expands upon the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) by addressing a critical limitation in existing literature: the overreliance on short-term, single-reward designs. The findings demonstrate that a hybrid approach combining intrinsic and extrinsic rewards can support more sustained behavioral change over time. Specifically, gamified mechanics directly influence TPB constructs. Game design improves attitudes toward physical exertion; team collaboration establishes positive subjective norms through social pressure and camaraderie; and interactive features such as leaderboards provide immediate feedback, heightening an individual's perceived behavioral control over their health outcomes. Ultimately, this research suggests that motivation peaks when external rewards align with existing internal commitments, transforming an initial push into lasting engagement.

Practical Implications

For organizational leaders, the success of gamification largely depends on how well the program design reflects the workforce's demographic realities. To increase adherence to corporate wellness programs, organizations should shift away from purely individualized tracking and integrate team-based dynamics. Game-like challenges, such as departmental step-counting competitions with transparent leaderboard tracking, recondition health objectives from mandatory tasks into engaging social activities. This collaborative environment fosters healthy peer relationships, builds workplace trust, and fulfills the social requirements highly valued by Millennial and Generation Z cohorts.

Organizations must directly link these gamified efforts to financial outcomes. Integrating health initiatives with tangible external drivers, such as verifiable reductions in monthly insurance premiums, provides the immediate value proposition required to capture initial participation across all age groups, appealing heavily to the pragmatic, family-oriented focus of Generation X and Baby Boomers.

Limitations

These qualitative findings come with several important limitations. First, the sample size was small (N=17) and heavily female-skewed (12 females, 5 males), limiting the generalizability of the findings to broader populations. Additionally, participants were recruited via social media and selected based on pre-existing knowledge of or participation in gamified wellness programs. This familiarity may have led to selection bias, since the study largely reflects the views of people already comfortable with gamification, rather than a random sample of workers.

Conclusion and Future Research

Gamification is a flexible, highly effective methodology that integrates internal and external motivators to drive behavioral change. To maximize the impact of corporate wellness programs, organizations must move beyond generic, top-down mandates and implement hybrid motivational models. Cultivating long-term wellness requires blending extrinsic triggers, like monetary milestones, with intrinsic sustainers, such as group recognition. Crucially, these platforms must be customized to workforce demographics, recognizing that the gamified mechanics that appeal to a Baby Boomer may not resonate with Generation Z.

Future research should explore how artificial intelligence (AI) can be leveraged to dynamically adjust gamified rewards and challenges based on real-time employee data, creating hyper-personalized wellness experiences tailored to specific team synergies or generational profiles. Additionally, further investigation is needed to assess the risk of reward dependency, specifically whether an overreliance on extrinsic incentives causes a cessation of healthy behaviors once those rewards are removed. Finally, broader quantitative cohort analyses are required

to establish the specific weight value that distinct generational demographics assign to intrinsic versus extrinsic gamification elements.

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