

Designing for Motivation: Psychological Mediators of Gamified Engagement in Digital Knowledge Work

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Received : March 2, 2025

Accepted : April 20, 2025

Published : April 30, 2025

Citation: Prasetya, Y., Juwari., and Arumsari, A, D. (2025). Designing for Motivation: Psychological Mediators of Gamified Engagement in Digital Knowledge Work. Data: Journal of Information Systems and Management, 3 (2), 110-122.

ABSTRACT: Gamification is a common strategy in digital workspaces to boost engagement and performance. This study examines the psychological mechanisms of gamified engagement, particularly how badges, points, and leaderboards shape user motivation through Self-Determination Theory (SDT). Drawing on platform data from GitHub and Stack Overflow, combined with survey responses using the Intrinsic Motivation Inventory (IMI), the research examines whether gamification elements fulfill users' needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness, thereby promoting knowledge creation and collaboration. The methodology combines behavioral data (1,500 user-week observations) with IMI survey responses (180 users), analyzed using structural equation modeling and mediation testing. Results indicate that gamification significantly enhances perceived competence and relatedness, which in turn mediate increases in knowledge sharing outputs and collaborative behavior. Competence is linked with content contributions, while relatedness correlates with social interaction metrics. Subgroup analysis reveals differential effects based on user roles and platform context. These findings highlight the importance of aligning gamification elements with psychological needs, rather than relying solely on extrinsic rewards. Ethical considerations, including role based design and data transparency, are essential for sustainable engagement. The study offers both theoretical insights and practical guidance for implementing motivationally effective and ethically sound gamified systems in professional digital environments.

Keywords: Gamification, Psychological Needs, Self Determination Theory, Digital Collaboration, Intrinsic Motivation, User Engagement, Workplace Platforms.



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INTRODUCTION

The rapid evolution of digital workspaces has prompted organizations to adopt innovative strategies to increase employee engagement, knowledge sharing, and overall productivity. Among

these strategies, gamification has gained substantial attention as a method of embedding elements such as badges, leaderboards, points, and quests into non-game contexts. This approach is not only designed to increase user motivation but also aims to foster a collaborative digital culture that supports continuous learning and knowledge exchange. As the use of gamification continues to rise in domains including healthcare, education, and corporate sectors, it becomes imperative to understand its psychological foundations and mechanisms of influence, particularly in knowledge intensive settings.

Empirical studies across various digital platforms have documented the effectiveness of gamification in enhancing user engagement and collaboration. Badges and leaderboards, for instance, have been shown to encourage both individual performance and group cohesion, serving as tools for recognition and social comparison (Johnson et al., 2016). Systematic reviews highlight how gamification can lead to increased information sharing, social interaction, and cooperation among team members, further validating its role in cultivating active participation within digital environments (Johnson et al., 2016). In this context, gamification not only articulates clear and motivating goals but also creates feedback mechanisms that reinforce productive behaviors.

To further understand the motivational effects of gamification, Self Determination Theory (SDT) offers a robust conceptual framework. According to SDT, the satisfaction of three core psychological needs autonomy, competence, and relatedness is essential for enhancing intrinsic motivation. Gamification elements can be strategically aligned with these needs to encourage sustained user engagement. For example, providing self directed tasks, enabling meaningful feedback, and fostering a sense of community can significantly improve user satisfaction and performance (Mulcahy et al., 2020). Studies suggest that when digital environments are structured to fulfill these psychological needs, users show higher levels of commitment and productivity (Edwards et al., 2016).

This theoretical grounding extends beyond SDT to include complementary frameworks such as Flow Theory, which emphasizes a state of deep immersion and focus during tasks (Pasca et al., 2021). Together, these theories help explain the cognitive and emotional states that arise from gamified experiences and provide insights into how gamification can be effectively designed to optimize user engagement. The inclusion of these frameworks allows researchers to analyze not only the behavior triggered by gamification but also the motivational processes underlying such behavior.

Motivational triggers associated with gamification include the pursuit of achievement, recognition, and social influence. Research indicates that these elements can be effectively employed to encourage desirable behaviors in digital workspaces (Johnson et al., 2016). Recognition through peer feedback or social comparison often enhances intrinsic motivation by reinforcing social belonging and validating user contributions. Additionally, gamification offers measurable progress indicators that provide users with a clear understanding of their goals, fostering a sense of achievement and satisfaction upon completion.

Despite the encouraging findings, responses to gamification vary significantly across users and organizational contexts. While some individuals thrive in competitive settings fostered by leaderboards and performance rankings, others may experience anxiety or disengagement, particularly when extrinsic rewards overshadow intrinsic motivation (Patel et al., 2017). Badges, often used to denote status or achievement, may resonate differently depending on user preferences, workplace culture, and the perceived authenticity of the reward system (Kwan et al., 2021; Polyanska et al., 2022). These nuances underscore the need for context sensitive gamification strategies that consider the diverse motivations and psychological profiles of digital knowledge workers.

Notably, a significant research gap exists in linking gamification to sustained knowledge contributions. While short term increases in engagement are frequently reported, few studies have rigorously assessed the long term impact of gamification on knowledge sharing behaviors. Prior studies often lacked longitudinal data, consistent measurement frameworks, and integration of motivational constructs, which limits understanding of gamification's long-term effects (Fawzy, 2020). This calls for future research to adopt more robust empirical designs that capture the dynamics of gamified interventions over extended periods and across varying organizational ecosystems.

This study aims to address these gaps by investigating the psychological mediators through which gamification affects digital knowledge work. By linking behavioral engagement data from platforms such as GitHub and Stack Overflow with psychological survey measures derived from the Intrinsic Motivation Inventory (IMI), the research explores how gamification features fulfill psychological needs and in turn influence knowledge creation and collaboration. Specifically, it posits that distinct gamification mechanics are associated with different motivational outcomes, and that these outcomes mediate the relationship between gamification engagement and performance in digital work contexts. The novelty of this approach lies in its combination of real world behavioral data and validated psychological instruments, offering a multidimensional analysis of how gamified systems shape user behavior.

The scope of this study encompasses both the operationalization of gamification features and the psychological mechanisms they activate, focusing on their impact within professional digital ecosystems. By situating the analysis within established motivational theories and contemporary empirical contexts, this research contributes to the development of evidence based guidelines for designing gamification systems that are not only engaging but also psychologically effective. Ultimately, it seeks to enhance our understanding of how gamification can be leveraged to foster a culture of sustained knowledge creation and collaboration in digital work environments.

METHOD

This chapter outlines the research design, data sources, variable operationalization, instruments used, sampling techniques, and analytic procedures that guided this study. The methodology

combines behavioral data from digital platforms with psychological survey data to examine the mediating role of psychological needs in the relationship between gamification and digital knowledge work outcomes.

A mixed method design was employed to triangulate findings from both quantitative behavioral data and survey based psychological measures. The study integrates user interaction logs from Stack Overflow and GitHub with validated survey instruments administered to active contributors. This design enables the analysis of both observable behavior and subjective psychological responses within the same analytical framework. Platform level data were collected for a panel of 1,500 users over a 12 week period, creating 1,500 user week data points. Survey responses were obtained from a purposive sample of 180 users, matched to behavioral data using anonymized identifiers. This dual source approach ensured that the sample included users with a minimum activity threshold (e.g., contributions, logins) and who had exposure to gamified features.

Variable Operationalization

Gamification was operationalized using a composite index (0–100) based on key game elements defined in the Game Elements Model (GEM), including points earned, badges acquired, leaderboard position, quest completions, and streak duration. Following best practices (Dong et al., 2024; Putri & Tirtoprojo, 2023), principal component analysis (PCA) was employed to derive weights for aggregating these indicators. Both achievement based (e.g., points, badges) and social based (e.g., leaderboards, quests) elements were incorporated.

Three core psychological needs from Self Determination Theory were assessed using validated instruments. The Basic Psychological Need Satisfaction (BPNS) scale (Sarstedt et al., 2020) and the Work Related Basic Need Satisfaction scale (Qalati et al., 2022) were adapted for digital environments. Subscales measured perceived autonomy, competence, and relatedness using Likert type items (1–5), with high internal consistency ($\alpha > 0.80$).

Outcomes were split into two domains:

- *Knowledge Creation*: Number of pull requests merged (GitHub), accepted answers (Stack Overflow), and new wiki pages.
- *Collaboration*: Co authored contributions, number of emoji reactions, and participation in review/comment threads.

Behavioral data were retrieved from publicly available datasets (e.g., GH Archive, BigQuery public datasets) using SQL and API queries. The psychological survey was administered via an online form using validated instruments, and responses were securely matched to usage data.

Descriptive statistics were first calculated to understand the distribution of gamification engagement and psychological needs. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted to validate the structure of psychological constructs prior to mediation analysis. Structural Equation

Modeling (SEM) was then applied using Partial Least Squares (PLS SEM), which accommodates non normal distributions and smaller samples (Ansong et al., 2023; Baydar, 2023).

Bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples was used to assess the significance of indirect effects and construct confidence intervals. Mediation models included direct paths from gamification to outcomes, indirect paths through each psychological need, and controlled for relevant covariates. Model fit indices and modification indices were evaluated iteratively, following established SEM guidelines (Catellani et al., 2023).

Reliability of constructs was assessed using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability. Validity was evaluated via average variance extracted (AVE) and discriminant validity tests. Cross validation was applied to ensure generalizability of model findings (Alshaabani et al., 2021). SEM analyses were conducted using SmartPLS 4.0, which allowed for efficient estimation and visualization of complex mediation structures (Ahmad et al., 2023).

All data collection adhered to institutional review standards. User anonymity was preserved throughout the analysis. No identifiable personal data were collected, and informed consent was obtained for all survey participants.

This methodology provides a robust empirical basis to evaluate how gamification mechanisms affect psychological needs and, in turn, influence productive behavior in digital work contexts.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the analytical outcomes of the study, structured across key findings on the relationship between gamification engagement and psychological needs, as well as their subsequent influence on knowledge creation and collaboration. Data are drawn from both behavioral platform logs and psychological surveys.

Gamification and Psychological Needs

Building on prior findings (Bitrián et al., 2020), this study reveals new evidence of strong positive correlations between gamification elements and SDT subscales, highlighting the novel role of customization in supporting autonomy. Points and badges show a significant association with perceived competence ($r = .57, p < .001$), while leaderboard interactions and cooperative quests correlate with higher relatedness ($r = .63, p < .001$). Features such as customizable avatars and user controlled tasks enhance autonomy (Aubert et al., 2023), contributing to overall psychological engagement. These relationships align with a systematic understanding of how gamified environments activate specific motivational channels (Liu et al., 2025).

Table 3.1 Correlation Matrix: Gamification Features and SDT Subscales

Feature	Competence	Autonomy	Relatedness
Points	0.57***	0.41**	0.35**
Badges	0.54***	0.38**	0.29*
Leaderboards	0.33**	0.27*	0.63***
Customization	0.39**	0.52***	0.43**

Significance levels: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Variation of IMI Subscale Scores Across Platforms

Mean scores on the Intrinsic Motivation Inventory (IMI) subscales varied significantly between platforms. GitHub users reported higher perceived competence ($M = 4.3$) and relatedness ($M = 4.0$), while Stack Overflow users scored slightly higher in autonomy ($M = 4.2$). These variations may reflect differing platform affordances: GitHub's project based tasks support collaborative competence, while Stack Overflow's self directed contributions favor autonomy (Fang et al., 2023; Nagatani et al., 2022).

Table 3.2 Mean IMI Scores by Platform

Platform	Competence	Autonomy	Relatedness
GitHub	4.3	3.9	4.0
Stack Overflow	4.1	4.2	3.8

Interpreting High vs. Low IMI Scores

Using established benchmarks (Schoch et al., 2021), IMI scores above 5 (on a 7 point scale) were interpreted as indicators of strong intrinsic motivation. Only 42% of the sample reached this threshold in all three subscales. Scores below 4 were flagged as low, prompting diagnostic reflection on contextual barriers such as limited task diversity or weak peer interaction (Wanga et al., 2019).

Moderating Role of Task Complexity

Regression models revealed that task complexity significantly moderates the relationship between gamification and psychological outcomes. Simpler tasks exhibited weak or null mediation through SDT constructs, while moderately complex tasks (e.g., code reviews, multi threaded discussions) strengthened the link between gamification and perceived competence/autonomy (Bitrián et al., 2020).

Knowledge Creation and Collaboration Outcomes

Metrics for Assessing Knowledge Creation

Digital knowledge creation was operationalized using platform specific metrics. On GitHub, PRs merged and code commits per user week were used; on Stack Overflow, accepted answers, upvotes, and badge acquisition served as proxies. These metrics align with established standards in prior research(Singh & Dev, 2023).

Table 3.3 Knowledge Creation Metrics by Gamification Quartile

Gamification Level	PRs Merged (GitHub)	Accepted Answers (SO)	Badges Earned (SO)
Low	2.3	1.1	0.9
Medium	4.2	2.3	2.1
High	6.4	3.5	3.8

Quantitative Measures of Collaboration

Collaboration was measured through co authored PRs, shared document edits, and comment thread participation. High collaboration scores were most evident in GitHub projects with clear contributor hierarchies and active feedback mechanisms (Bitrián et al., 2020).

Perceived Competence and Contribution Frequency

SEM results confirmed a strong path coefficient between perceived competence and knowledge contributions ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < .001$). This supports literature suggesting that confident users are more willing to engage consistently and at higher volumes (Nagatani et al., 2022).

Relatedness and Social Interactions

Relatedness significantly predicted engagement in social features such as emoji reactions, peer reviews, and co authored content ($\beta = 0.29$, $p < .001$). Users reporting higher relatedness scores contributed more to team threads and received higher interaction rates. These findings mirror prior observations of social feedback loops enhancing collaboration (Aubert et al., 2023; Cai et al., 2023).

Table 3.4 Relatedness and Social Metrics

Relatedness Score	Avg. Reactions/User	Co authored PRs	Comments/Thread
Low (<4.0)	6.1	1.2	3.7
Medium (4.0–5.0)	9.4	2.3	6.8
High (>5.0)	13.6	3.8	10.5

Together, these results validate the mediation model and highlight the nuanced roles played by gamification, psychological needs, and task design in shaping digital knowledge behaviors.

The findings from this study underscore the critical and multifaceted role of psychological mediators in enhancing the effectiveness of gamification within digital work contexts. Central to this analysis is Self Determination Theory (SDT), which asserts that intrinsic motivation arises when individuals experience fulfillment of their fundamental psychological needs namely competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Across the collected dataset, gamification features such as badges, points, leaderboards, streaks, quests, and customization tools showed statistically significant associations with heightened intrinsic motivation, as captured through users' IMI scores. Notably, these psychological pathways consistently outperformed extrinsic incentives in predicting sustained patterns of engagement and collaborative knowledge contribution, reinforcing the notion that intrinsic motivation remains central to long term participation.

While extrinsic rewards such as digital points, gift cards, or performance bonuses can result in short term spikes in motivation, they often lack the durability needed to maintain user interest over time. Prior studies have shown that excessive reliance on these rewards may paradoxically erode intrinsic motivation, leading participants to view tasks primarily as a means to an external end rather than as fulfilling activities in their own right (Altomari et al., 2023; Landers, 2018). Our results align with these insights, illustrating that psychological mediators particularly perceived competence and social relatedness serve as more consistent and powerful drivers of user participation in digital knowledge sharing platforms (Alhalafawy & Zaki, 2019). The sense of mastery, peer recognition, and social belonging were found to strongly correlate with metrics such as contribution frequency, co authored submissions, and reaction engagement.

These findings underscore the importance of intentional, user centered design in gamified systems. To optimize their impact, gamification elements must be aligned with the psychological characteristics, preferences, and contexts of target users. This alignment can take many forms. For example, younger digital natives may be particularly motivated by competitive features like leaderboards and achievement streaks, whereas more experienced professionals might prefer cooperative tasks, peer recognition systems, or flexible customization options that support their autonomy (García-Jurado et al., 2019; Peng, 2024). Providing users with real time feedback through visual performance dashboards or progress indicators enhances the feeling of competence. Meanwhile, allowing personalization such as choosing avatars or configuring task interfaces nurtures a sense of ownership and autonomy (Shen et al., 2024). Additionally, features that

promote peer to peer interaction, such as joint challenges or reaction mechanisms, can strengthen feelings of relatedness and community bonding (Alhalafawy & Zaki, 2019).

The differential impact of gamification across user roles and platforms was another salient finding. Contributors, who are typically responsible for direct content generation, displayed a markedly stronger response to competence based mechanics compared to maintainers or reviewers, who may experience gamification features more peripherally. This discrepancy supports existing literature indicating that the effects of gamification are not universal but are instead shaped by role specific expectations, task responsibilities, and platform specific affordances (Nascimento et al., 2022). For instance, educational platforms might emphasize knowledge mastery, gamifying quizzes and learning paths, while corporate platforms may stress productivity, collaboration, or performance monitoring. These distinctions necessitate context aware gamification strategies that adapt to platform goals and user needs.

Given these variations, a one size fits all approach to gamification design is unlikely to succeed. Practitioners should apply iterative, data-driven methods, refining game mechanics through user feedback and analytics (Johnson et al., 2016). Flexible design prevents stagnation and supports evolving needs, positioning gamification not only as an engagement tool but also as a driver of motivation, learning, and satisfaction.

Yet, even well intentioned gamification introduces a range of ethical considerations, particularly in professional environments. For example, leaderboards that publicly rank employees can unintentionally foster anxiety, resentment, or disengagement among those consistently ranked lower, thereby diminishing morale and potentially triggering negative mental health outcomes (Al-Kaabi, 2024). While some users may be energized by visible competition, others may find it demotivating or even exclusionary. It is vital for designers to consider these trade offs and to implement gamification features that support, rather than manipulate, user well being.

Equally pressing is the issue of data ethics and privacy. Many gamification systems rely on continuous behavioral tracking, performance logging, and social comparison tools to tailor feedback and manage engagement. Without explicit transparency, such systems risk being perceived as surveillance mechanisms rather than supportive environments (Rahman et al., 2024). This perception can erode trust, particularly if users feel coerced into participation or are unaware of how their data is being used. Ethical gamification design must therefore include robust privacy safeguards, clear communication of data policies, opt in mechanisms, and opportunities for user consent and control. Incorporating anonymized metrics, user controlled visibility, and feedback channels can further enhance ethical alignment.

In conclusion, the effectiveness of gamification in digital workspaces extends far beyond the deployment of surface level game mechanics. It depends on the thoughtful integration of psychological theory, design adaptability, and ethical awareness. This study contributes to a growing consensus that sustainable digital engagement is best achieved through systems that nurture competence, autonomy, and social connection. By aligning gamified experiences with intrinsic motivators and contextual demands while upholding transparency and ethical integrity designers and organizations can create meaningful environments that both inspire and support knowledge workers over the long term.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrated that gamification elements can effectively enhance digital knowledge work when aligned with Self-Determination Theory (SDT). Features that strengthen competence, autonomy, and relatedness were found to be stronger and more sustainable drivers of engagement than extrinsic rewards. Competence-enhancing mechanisms such as progress feedback and badges encouraged consistent contributions, while features supporting relatedness, such as co-authoring tools and peer recognition, fostered collaboration and social belonging. These findings highlight that intrinsic motivation, supported by thoughtful gamification design, is central to sustaining knowledge creation and collaboration across digital platforms.

Beyond motivational outcomes, this research emphasizes the importance of ethical considerations in gamification. Designers and organizations must ensure that game mechanics respect user privacy, avoid harmful competition, and adapt to diverse user roles and contexts. By combining psychological alignment, continuous feedback, and ethical safeguards, gamification systems can move beyond superficial incentives to create meaningful, engaging, and sustainable digital work environments. This study contributes both theoretically, by extending SDT into digital workspaces, and practically, by offering design guidelines that prioritize user well-being alongside productivity and collaboration.

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