



Gamification Element's in Digital Rehabilitation

Patient Motivation

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Abstract

Gamification has been used more and more in healthcare settings to boost motivation, increase user engagement, and encourage treatment compliance. Game elements like badges, points, and real-time feedback have been used in digital rehabilitation to make routine rehabilitation exercises more dynamic and interesting. Finding the gamification elements that best maintain patient motivation in digital therapy settings have, however, received little attention. Examining how gamification affects patient motivation in digital rehabilitation programs was the goal.

The synthesis of qualitative and theoretical research on gamification, patient engagement, and digital health technologies was made possible by the adoption of a narrative literature review approach. Thematic analysis was used to examine peer-reviewed research that was published between 2019 and 2024.

The results showed that the most effective components for improving patient motivation and adherence were social features, competition, personalization, and progress tracking. Furthermore, real-time feedback systems and virtual reality enhanced user experiences and rehabilitation results. It was determined that gamification, particularly when interventions are customized to meet the needs of each patient, is crucial to sustaining patient engagement in digital rehabilitation.

The findings could be used to guide the creation of digital health solutions for rehabilitation settings that are more sustainable and successful.

Keywords/tags (subjects)

digital rehabilitation, gamification, patient engagement, intrinsic motivation, behavioral change

Miscellaneous (Confidential information)

This thesis does not contain any confidential material.

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1.1 Introduction

Gamification has been increasingly used in education, healthcare, business, and rehabilitation because of its ability to improve user engagement, increase motivation, and support behavior change. Although the concept originally emerged in the digital media industry, Gabe Zichermann introduced the term “Funware” in 2008 to describe the use of game-like elements in non-game environments (Sardi et al., 2017). The concept became more well-known through books such as *Reality is Broken* by Jane McGonigal and *Game-Based Marketing* by Zichermann.

Gamification is not limited to the healthcare field, but it has shown positive effects in helping patients follow their rehabilitation programs more consistently (Sardi et al., 2017). As interest in these methods has grown, the field of digital rehabilitation has developed. It uses technologies like telemedicine, wearable sensors, artificial intelligence (AI), and virtual reality (VR) to make rehabilitation more accessible, more tailored to individual needs, and more engaging for patients (Arntz et al., 2023).

From a sustainable development perspective, gamification in digital rehabilitation holds significant promise. By increasing patient motivation and adherence, gamified interventions can improve the long-term effectiveness of rehabilitation programs while optimizing the use of healthcare resources. Furthermore, digital rehabilitation technologies reduce the need for physical visits, enabling access to care in remote and underserved areas. This aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 3— “Good Health and Well-being”—by promoting equitable and inclusive health solutions that are effective, accessible, and adaptable for future needs (United Nations, 2015; Arntz et al., 2023).

1.2 Definitions and Concepts

1.2.1 Gamification

Gamification definition has been widely discussed in academia. Sebastian Deterding et al. (2011) offer one of the most commonly accepted definitions: ‘Gamification is using the elements of game-design in non-game scenarios. (Sardi et al., 2017) This definition emphasizes that gamification is different from full play games such as Serious Games and Game-Based Learning.

Gamification refers to the use of gamified elements in non-game contexts to increase user experience, engagement and motivation, as opposed to developing full-scope games (Bi Worldwide, 2022).

Gamification can be seen from a variety of theoretical perspectives. Following Schöbel et al. (2020), it is a strategic tool for reaching organisational or behavioral objectives by promoting user motivation and encouraging desired changes of behavior. This is a perspective focused on matching gamified elements to the values and requirements of the organisation. In a similar vein, Krath et al. (2021) perceive gamification as a design approach that focuses on creating engaging and motivating experiences for users. In contrast to merely adding game like features, this approach aims to integrate motivation into the design structure of the activity itself. A further perspective frames gamification as a human-centred design practice combining intrinsic and extrinsic motivation methods to increase user engagement and long-term commitment (What Is Gamification? All You Need to Know, n.d.). This framework is especially apt when used in rehabilitation, as long-term participation is essential to the success of the treatment.

1.2.2 Digital Rehabilitation

Digital rehabilitation means integration of new-age technologies into rehab practices to increase accessibility, personalization and engagement of patients in their recovery. This is done through telemedicine, wearable sensors, artificial intelligence (AI), virtual reality (VR) and the use of mobile applications to complement the traditional rehabilitation process (Arntz et al., 2023).

Digital rehabilitation is essentially a process of facilitating physical, cognitive, and psychological rehabilitation by providing remote monitoring, real-time feedback, and interactive therapeutic experiences (Muñoz-Tomás et al., 2023). This approach is handling challenges including inadequate access to rehab facilities, costs, and patient non-compliance with various therapy schedules (Tore et al., 2022).

Digital rehabilitation encompasses several interconnecting technologies to promote accessibility, customizability, and patient engagement. One major component is telerehabilitation, which is the remote provision of rehabilitation services using technologies like videoconferencing, mobile apps,

and websites. According to Muñoz-Tomás et al. (2023), telerehabilitation systems commonly utilize live video communication between the clinician and patient to permit real-time instruction, monitoring, and feedback. Other features of the systems are the provision of instructions on how to perform an exercise by email and the use of data logging sites and asynchronous monitoring tools. Nonetheless, two-way communication on the patient's exercise performance is sometimes restricted by the systems in some contexts.

Another essential element is wearable technology such as smartwatches and motion sensors, which can monitor patient movement and produce data on which to base progress monitoring. These devices promote real-time feedback and tailored recommendations, rendering rehabilitation more dynamic and quantifiable (Pratik Gosavi, 2024).

Gamification is also used more and more in digital rehabilitation to boost motivation and compliance. According to Arthi Anthony (2024), gamified systems utilize reward mechanisms, challenges, and reward systems to engage patients to maintain active participation in routine rehabilitation exercises. These elements not only reduce monotony but also allow the patient to see how much progress they are making and aid long-term commitment.

Additionally, the employment of machine learning and artificial intelligence has promoted more intelligent and adaptable rehabilitation programs. The algorithms in these technologies are able to pick out patterns from patient data, adapt the level of exercise to the patient, and recommend alternative interventions (Pratik Gosavi, 2024). This form of customization makes the therapy more efficient and appropriate.

Lastly, virtual and augmented reality (VR/AR) technologies are also used to construct immersive therapy environments. According to Raje et al. (2024), simulated real-life activities are best suited to cognitive and physical rehabilitation as they enable the patient to practice skills like balancing, memory, and motor control in an engaging virtual environment safely.

1.2.3 Gamification in Digital Rehabilitation

Gamification in Digital Rehabilitation: introducing the use of game-like elements in non-game contexts, particularly rehabilitation programs, to improve patients' motivation, engagement and adherence to therapy exercises. Exercise and rehabilitation are usually monotonous and repetitive, which can create a lack of motivation for patients when switching to rehabilitation context. Gamification takes advantage of basic psychological mechanisms like competitiveness, success achievement, and social pressures to facilitate active participation in rehabilitation activities (Tuah et al., 2021).

The main goal of gamification in digital rehabilitation is to increase the patient experience by designing environments that are therapeutic as much as they are engaging and fun. Interactive and game-like environments, as outlined by Tuah et al. (2021), make patients more engaged in their recovery process, which can substantially boost engagement in tedious or repetitive exercises. These gamified environments commonly incorporate reward schemes, progress tracking, and monitoring mechanisms like badges or feedback on performance that are used as external motivators. Al-Rayes et al. (2022) highlight that such systems not only motivate patients to perform their work but also introduce a feeling of accomplishment as well as social validation, both of which are proven to enhance intrinsic motivation. In addition to that, the sense of advancement and accomplishment is a catalyst for promoting adherence to therapy. As Tuah et al. (2021) also propose, as long as the patient feels like they are visibly advancing, they are more inclined to proceed with the therapy procedure consistently and minimize dropping out as a result. Ultimately, gamification turns rehabilitation into an active and motivating, as opposed to passive and task-oriented procedure, to the extent of better clinical outcomes.

1.3 Theoretical Framework

This dissertation draws on three key theoretical models explaining the ways in which gamification can impact motivation, engagement, and behavior of users in digital rehabilitative settings: Self-Determination Theory (SDT), Flow Theory, and Behavior Change Models, and the COM-B framework specifically. These models give the researcher a multi-dimensional insight into patient behavior and inform the design and assessment of rehabilitative gamified interventions.

Self-Determination Theory as put forth by Deci and Ryan (1985) states that autonomous motivation comes about when individuals perceive autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Features of gamification in digital rehabilitation, including avatars that can be personalized, choices based on interfaces, and monitoring of progress cater to these requirements. As found in the study by Alfieri et al. (2022), when feedback was given consistently and mastery of the task achieved, they experienced a sense of competency and were likely to proceed with the rehabilitative exercises. As seen from Al-Rayes et al. (2022), features related to socialization such as leaderboards and challenges on a team level facilitated relatedness and so increased participation.

SDT is also helpful in explaining the shift from extrinsically motivated activities (e.g., doing exercises for rewards) toward intrinsic motivation (e.g., liking rehab as a means of personal development). This shift is essential for long-term participation and healing.

Flow Theory as proposed by Csikszentmihalyi (1990) pertains to a psychological state of complete absorption in an activity. It is attained when the level of challenge posed by a task corresponds with the level of the person's skills, and hence produces concentrated attention, decreased perception of time, and enjoyment for the sake of the activity itself. Flow is enabled by gamification through features like multiple levels of difficulty, instant feedback and explicit goals. Virtual rehabilitation systems whose levels of exercises varied according to patient performance maintained patient engagement as found in Berton et al. (2020). Personalization and adaptive challenges caused enhanced patient satisfaction and less boredom as found by Jansson et al. (2022). Flow Theory provides vital insight into sustaining attention and commitment over time, a necessary component in long-term rehab regimens through the medium of gamification.

The COM-B model by Michie et al. (2011) proposes that the cause of behavior lies in a combination of Capability, Opportunity, and Motivation. Capability is enhanced by digital interfaces through tutorials, instructions, and guided feedback in gamified rehabilitation. Opportunity comes in the form of accessible platforms for remote participation and participation via easy-to-use interfaces, which is critical for mobility-limited individuals. Motivation is encouraged through rewards, goal-setting, and social comparison. Experiments such as those conducted by Ambros-Antemate et al. (2023) and by Mahmoudi et al. (2024) reveal how adherence improves through gamified systems by addressing

all aspects of the COM-B model simultaneously. The COM-B model is especially useful in developing inclusive systems that intervene on both personal and environmental aspects of patient behavior.

Other motivational theories—e.g., Goal-Setting Theory (Locke & Latham, 2002) or Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986)—were examined as well. These were not used as main theories for this thesis since they primarily aim at either outcome-motivation or at the learning processes and not at the continuous engagement procedures at the heart of gamification design. SDT, Flow, and COM-B as a set provide a broader framework for analyzing the effect of digital tools on patient experience, behavior, and performance.

All of the theories offer specific strengths. SDT emphasizes internal psychological needs fulfilled by gamification. Flow Theory focuses on the design of activities supporting continued engagement. COM-B offers a systems approach to understanding behavior change. Yet each has weaknesses: SDT doesn't take away from or add on topics of social or tech obstacles; Flow Theory might be less easy to implement in a clinical context; and COM-B is descriptive and must be complemented by pragmatic design approaches for maximum impact. Integrating them allows a better interpretation of the role of gamification on various aspects of the rehab process.

1.4 Importance of Gamification in Digital Rehabilitation

Rehabilitation programs often involve repetitive and monotonous exercises that may lead to patient disengagement. Gamification introduces elements of challenge, reward, and social recognition to foster greater engagement and consistency. Specific elements such as points, badges, leaderboards, customizable avatars, and real-time feedback help patients stay motivated, track progress, and achieve therapy goals (Tuah et al., 2021; Al-Rayes et al., 2022).

Systematic reviews have demonstrated that gamified rehabilitation interventions can improve patient outcomes, including motor and cognitive functions, adherence to therapy, and overall motivation (Huang et al., 2023). In particular, virtual reality-based gamification has shown promising results in stroke rehabilitation by offering immersive simulations of daily activities (Sardi et al., 2017).

1.5 Challenges and Future Directions

Although gamification has numerous advantages for digital rehabilitation, several practical, as well as ethical, concerns are to be taken into account in this practice. A primary challenge is accessibility and digital literacy, especially among elderly populations or individuals in low-resource environments. As Al-Rayes et al. (2022) mention, many individuals lack the devices, internet connection, or experience with technology to actively participate in gamified therapies.

Another challenge is that of over-gamification, wherein overuse of game elements can erode the gravity of the recovery process. As Tuah et al. (2021) point out, too abrupt an implementation of gamified aspects without careful design can have the potential to distract the patients or have them focus more on the reward of points, not the goal of recovery, negatively affecting engagement instead of improving it.

A third is the personalization challenge. It is an area that is still under development to design adaptive gamified systems that suit the requirements of various users based on varying parameters like age, medical condition, cultural background, or motivation profile. According to Gajardo et al. (2023), most solutions that are available are not dynamic enough to adapt to the progress or preferences of the individual, making them less effective or even frustrating or inducing disengagement.

Finally, data privacy and security are matters of particular importance in the case of digital health. As Sardi et al. (2017) point out, gamified technologies tend to demand the collection of sensitive health information, including behavioral data, performance metrics, and personal identifiers. With insufficient data protection in place, individuals may become vulnerable to misuse or breaches of their data, which may undermine the trust in the intervention and discourage long-term adoption.

In the future, developing technologies hold the potential to promote enhanced gamified rehabilitation. Artificial intelligence and machine learning can dynamically tailor the therapy plans. Virtual reality and augmented reality can further enrich immersion and interactivity. Wearable devices can give immediate feedback, and long-term research is required to clarify the long-term influence of gamification on the outcomes of rehabilitation (Huang et al., 2023).

1.6 Research Gap and Aim of the Thesis

Although the literature supports the use of gamification in digital rehabilitation, gaps remain in understanding which specific game elements are most effective in sustaining patient motivation over time. There is also limited research addressing the personalization of gamified interventions for diverse patient populations.

The aim of this thesis is to explore the elements of gamification that contribute to patient motivation in digital rehabilitation. By identifying the most impactful gamification components, this study seeks to inform the design of more engaging and effective digital rehabilitation programs.

1.7 Practical Significance

As previous studies have shown that motivation is a key factor in rehabilitation adherence (Sardi et al., 2017; Alfieri et al., 2022), the findings of this thesis can guide physiotherapists and occupational therapists in designing more engaging, patient-centered digital rehabilitation programs. Additionally, developers and digital health companies can use the identified gamification elements to create personalized, motivating therapy applications. Patients may also benefit from these interventions by experiencing higher motivation, improved adherence, and more satisfying rehabilitation outcomes.

1.8 Research Questions

Based on the research gap identified, this study aims to answer the following questions:

1. Which gamification elements are most effective in enhancing patient motivation in digital rehabilitation contexts?
2. How does the application of gamification affect patient adherence to rehabilitation programs delivered through digital platforms?

These questions guide the literature review and support the analysis of how gamified interventions influence engagement, motivation, and therapy consistency.

2 Study Design

2.1 Methodology

This study adopts a narrative literature review approach to explore and synthesize existing research concerning the application of gamification in digital rehabilitation. Narrative reviews draw from a broad spectrum of sources, so allowing a more flexible and comprehensive interpretation of a topic than systematic reviews, which follow a strict and predefined methodology for study selection and analysis (Ferrari, 2015). This approach allows the inclusion of diverse study types and theoretical contributions, enabling a comprehensive synthesis of gamification elements, their impact on patient motivation, and the challenges surrounding their application in rehabilitation settings. The results hope to provide a conceptual basis for both upcoming empirical studies and pragmatic uses in digital health environments.

2.2 Eligibility Criteria

Actually, defined eligibility criteria helped to ensure the relevance and quality of the included literature. Studies published between 2019 and 2024, written in English, and especially focused on the integration of gamification inside digital rehabilitation or healthcare environments were included. Peer-reviewed qualitative research studying user engagement, motivating results, or technological implementations of gamified rehabilitation took first priority. To preserve the academic integrity of the review, studies concentrated only on educational or corporate gamification, non-peer-reviewed material, or inaccessible abstracts were not included into the analysis.

2.3 Data Sources and Search Strategy

A detailed search was carried out across a selection of trustworthy academic databases, including PubMed, ScienceDirect, IEEE Xplore, JMIR Serious Games, and Google Scholar, in order to find the appropriate research. Several aspects of the subject were captured using a combination of keywords and Boolean operators, including "Gamification AND Rehabilitation," "Gamification AND Motivation AND Rehabilitation," "Gamification AND Patient Engagement," and "Serious Games AND Digital Health." This strategy created it possible to guarantee that the chosen research represented both therapeutic and technological perspectives on gamification in rehabilitation.

2.4 Articles Selection Process

The process of selecting articles adopted a systematic and clear PRISMA-style approach as presented in Figure 1. The predefined keyword search from the initial database identified 97 articles. The removal of duplicates left 74 unique documents. Following a title and abstract-screened elimination approach, 43 studies were shortlisted for examination. Out of those, 18 were found to be eligible for full-text evaluation. A total of 11 articles were finally found to fulfill all the inclusion criteria and included in the narrative synthesis.

This staged selection guaranteed that only the most pertinent and high-quality studies were included. The filtering concentrated on relevance to gamification of digital rehabilitation, methodological quality as well as availability of full texts. Table 1 illustrates the above steps in order to also guarantee methodological clarity.

Table 1: PRISMA Flow Diagram for Article Selection

Stage	Number of Articles
Initial search results	97
After removing duplicates	74
Screened by title/abstract	43
Full-text reviewed	18
Final included articles	11

2.5 Data Extraction and Synthesis

Key information from the included studies—such as the authorship, publication year, study methodology, gamification elements used, and main findings—was extracted using a structured charting form to ensure consistency across the review process. The extracted data was then examined employing thematic analysis according to the framework outlined in Braun and Clarke (2006), comprising six steps: familiarization, coding, theme development, review, definition, and reporting. To add rigour to the analysis, this process was also assisted by the criteria for trustworthiness offered in Nowell et al. (2017), that is, the documentation of the coding logic in plain language, iterative refinement of the themes, and reflective consideration of researcher bias.

Thematic analysis provided a systematic interpretation of the qualitative data across various digital rehabilitation settings. For example, in Alfieri et al. (2022), the authors noted that “patients showed improved consistency when weekly goals were combined with rewards.” This data portion was first coded at the level of weekly goals and rewards, which were understood to promote extrinsic motivation and routine compliance. By iterative matching with other related codes like performance feedback and task interactivity, this portion ended up being included under the overall theme of motivation and engagement. This theme describes how gamified systems tap the power of structured reinforcement, loops of feedback, and psychological cues to enhance patient commitment to the programme.

The concluding thematic framework had the following three substantive themes: (1) gamification elements that are utilized in virtual rehabilitation initiatives, (2) their effects on patient engagement and motivation, and (3) ethical or practical hurdles to implementation. These themes, anchored in numerous coded passages from the peer-reviewed articles included in this study, presented a coherent summary of the ways through which gamification is now being implemented in rehabilitation practice, along with the gaps in the prevailing approaches that exist.

A summary table (Table 2) below presents these details and following this, a bar chart (Figure 1), visually presents the distribution of studies across these focus areas, highlighting where research has been concentrated.

Table 2—Summary of the selected on gamification in digital rehabilitation

Reference	Research Objective	Methodology	Key Findings	Relevance to Study
Huang et al. (2023)	To explore gamification in chronic disease self-management	Scoping review	Gamification enhances autonomy and long-term adherence in chronic disease patients	Reinforces gamification’s role in long-term patient engagement
Jansson et al. (2022)	To identify gamification opportunities in digital patient journey solutions	Secondary data analysis	Gamification enhances patient experience and engagement during medical treatments	Supports the usability of gamification in patient-centered care

Reference	Research Objective	Methodology	Key Findings	Relevance to Study
Mahmoudi et al. (2024)	To evaluate mobile gamification apps for children with disabilities	Scoping review	Gamification improves engagement and accessibility in rehabilitation for children with disabilities	Demonstrates the effectiveness of gamified mobile interventions
Pimentel-Ponce et al. (2023)	To assess gamification in neurological motor rehabilitation for children	Systematic review	Gamification improves motor function and therapy adherence in pediatric patients	Reinforces the role of gamification in pediatric rehabilitation
Steiner et al. (2020)	To review gamification in musculoskeletal rehabilitation for shoulder patients	Scoping review	Identifies effective gamification strategies for enhancing musculoskeletal therapy outcomes	Provides a basis for applying gamification in targeted rehabilitation
Tosto-Mancuso et al. (2022)	To analyze gamified neurorehabilitation strategies post-stroke	Empirical study	Gamification aids motor recovery and engagement in stroke patients	Demonstrates the potential of gamification in neurorehabilitation
Alfieri et al. (2022)	To explore gamification in musculoskeletal rehabilitation	Systematic review	Gamification enhances motivation and adherence in musculoskeletal rehabilitation programs	Provides insight into the effectiveness of gamification in physical rehabilitation
Ambros-Antemate et al. (2023)	To design a conceptual framework for serious games in physical therapy	Framework design study	Identifies key gamification strategies for improving adherence to physical therapy	Supports the integration of gamification in rehabilitation design
Berton et al. (2020)	To examine the psychological impact of gamification in orthopedic rehabilitation	Empirical study	Gamification and virtual reality improve patient motivation and reduce anxiety in orthopedic rehabilitation	Highlights the psychological benefits of gamified rehabilitation

Reference	Research Objective	Methodology	Key Findings	Relevance to Study
Castellano-Tejedor & Andrés Cencerrado (2024)	To analyze the role of gamification in mental health interventions	Systematic review	Gamification is effective in improving mental health outcomes and patient engagement	Expands gamification applications to psychological rehabilitation
Damasevicius et al. (2023)	To assess gamification and serious games in healthcare	Meta-review	Identifies trends and effectiveness of gamification across various health interventions	Establishes gamification as a widely used strategy in digital health

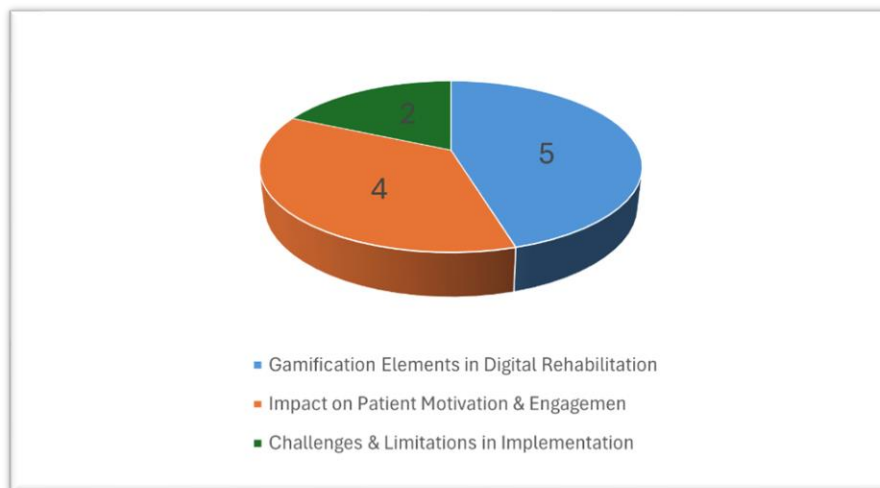


Figure 1—The distribution of studies reviewed by focus area

2.6 Ethical Considerations

This study did not require ethical approval because it was based on previously published literature. However, in terms of academic integrity, referencing, and transparency about the use of digital tools, ethical standards were closely adhered to. AI-based support was restricted to language improvement and grammar correction. To ensure that the critical synthesis and interpretation of findings remained wholly human-led, no generative or analytical work was

assigned to artificial intelligence. Throughout the study, JAMK University's rules regarding the moral use of digital tools for academic writing were strictly adhered to.

3 Findings

This chapter provides a rich synthesis of the outcome from the examined literature based on two main research questions: (1) Which gamification elements are most effective in enhancing patient motivation in digital rehabilitation contexts? and (2) How does the application of gamification affect patient adherence to rehabilitation programs delivered through digital platforms? Instead of listing the themes as independent headings, this analysis synthesizes them according to these guiding questions to respond directly to the thesis's objectives.

3.1 Enhancing Patient Motivation through Gamification

The evidence straightforwardly shows that gamification has the potential to significantly support motivation in patients and particularly when incorporating particular elements. Most prominent elements are the use of reward mechanisms, self-monitoring functionalities, and feedback mechanisms according to the patient's progress. Alfieri et al. (2022), for example, noted that goal-performance feedback and reward based on achievement considerably increased adherence in patients with musculoskeletal disorders. Ambros-Antemate et al. (2023) similarly concluded that the combination of self-monitoring and reward loops in the treatment interface enhanced motivation via evident progress monitoring.

Personalisation and interactivity also proved to be powerful motivational influences. Jansson et al. (2022) and Berton et al. (2020) noted adaptive levels of difficulty and immediate personalised feedback enhanced patients' perception of mastery and autonomy—effective elements of intrinsic motivation. Immersive environments like virtual reality simulations also helped by simulating everyday activities in the engaging, user-initiated form.

Gamification models involving narrative and animation proved to work notably well with pediatric populations. Damaševičius et al. (2023) and Pimentel-Ponce et al. (2023) pointed out the way narrative-driven tasks and visual animation helped promote continued interaction, notably in children. Mahmoudi et al. (2024) further suggested that child-centered interfaces and psychologically secure environments helped trigger motivation in children with disabilities.

Notable also were social and competitive aspects, particularly in terms of sustaining motivation over the course of time. Castellano-Tejedor and Cencerrado (2024) discovered that aspects such as leaderboards and player-versus-player challenges provoked user engagement through social comparison and common aims.

Together, they indicate that gamification boosts intrinsic motivation through mastery, autonomy, and engagement as well as extrinsic motivation through rewards and social recognition. Nevertheless, the efficacy of each relies upon its consonance with the users' personal needs and treatment aims.

3.2 Impact Gamification on Adherence to Digital Rehabilitation

Regarding the second research question, evidence in the literature indicates that gamification does not just increase initial engagement but also maintains adherence over the long term to rehabilitation programs. Gamification decreases the perception of effort and enhances willingness to continue with treatment through making rehabilitation activities more enjoyable and organized.

Game-based aspects significantly influenced motor rehabilitation outcomes. Pediatric patients' gross motor function improved according to a study conducted by Pimentel-Ponce et al. in 2023. Berton et al.'s research in 2020 correlated such progress with game-like environments replicating actual physical activity, and Steiner et al.'s research in 2020 noted improved coordination and shoulder mobility in patients based on gamified exercise platforms.

Gamification also generated cognitive and affective engagement. Damaševičius et al. (2023) documented enhanced attention and memory in cognitive rehabilitation environments. Mahmoudi et al. (2024) stressed the fact that when children received their rehabilitation through stimulating, game-like formats, they felt emotionally comfortable. Huang et al. (2023) also revealed that gamified self-management tools generated lower levels of patient stress and thereby facilitated continued engagement indirectly.

Despite all the advantages, however, long-term adherence was far from universal. Research conducted by Huang et al. (2023) and Jansson et al. (2022) indicated a different dynamic over time—a

fact explained through the “novelty effect.” Exposure to the same gamified components repeatedly without novelty or adaptation weakens motivation and causes a drop in adherence over time.

3.3 Practical and Ethical Challenges in Implementing Gamified Rehabilitation

There were a number of barriers recognized as potentially influencing motivation and adherence. Technical sophistication and the requirement for interdisciplinarity were emphasized by Tosto-Mancuso et al. (2022), who pointed out that gamified systems involve the need to integrate across engineering, design, and clinical disciplines. Damaševičius et al. (2023) further mentioned that older people are also challenged by complex interfaces, which lower their motivation to participate.

Ethics and privacy concerns also manifested. Mahmoudi et al. (2024) cautioned that the health and behavioral data gathered through gamified platforms—broadly speaking, including sensitive health and behavioral data—pose security threats if left unprotected. Steiner et al. (2020) also warned against overdependence on extrinsic motivators such as rewards or competition, which can erode intrinsic motivation and impact user well-being.

3.4 Summary of Findings

The thesis as a whole emphasizes that the efficacy of gamified digital rehabilitation relies upon the considered incorporation of motivational design based upon user needs, coupled with adaptive feedback and personalization and a focus upon ethics. Gamification boosts motivation and engagement through well-crafted elements while in need of frequent modifications to counter content fatigue and maintain user engagement. Hence, far from being a means to generate greater compliance, gamification is a comprehensive approach toward enhancing engagement in therapy, emotional stability, and health benefits within digital rehabilitation processes.

4 Discussion

In this chapter, we discuss the main results of the study, frame them among the current literature, and identify strengths, limitations, and suggestions for research and practice.

4.1 Interpretation of Findings

The findings of this literature review are consistent with the postulate that gamification, done right, has the potential to greatly promote patient motivation and engagement with digital rehabilitation. This finds strong correspondence in the form of Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), where people are more likely to endure activities that promote a sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. A number of studies demonstrated this interrelation—individualized feedback (Jansson et al., 2022), adaptive hurdles (Castellano-Tejedor & Cencerrado, 2024), and social leaderboards (Ambros-Antemate et al., 2023) were some of the gamified elements that effectively catered to these psychological needs and resulted in higher intrinsic motivation.

Also, the studies reviewed provided significant evidence in favor of Flow Theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), where the balance of challenge and skill is vital to sustain engagement. Aspects that included incrementing the level of task difficulty (Pimentel-Ponce et al., 2023) and providing real-time feedback (Alfieri et al., 2022) helped patients achieve the state of flow in which they felt focused and absorbed in the process of rehabilitation. The balance was important in helping sustain motivation post-novelly.

The third framework, the Behavioral Change Models—namely the Transtheoretical Model and the COM-B—was seen in the systematic deployment of reinforcement mechanisms. Reward systems (Mahmoudi et al., 2024), point accumulation (Damaševičius et al., 2023), and habit-forming repetition (Berton et al., 2020) enforced desired rehabilitation actions, leading the patient gradually to greater compliance and behavior change. These findings demonstrate how gamification fosters all stages of behavior change, ranging from initiation to maintenance.

4.2 Effects Outside of the Game: Rehabilitation in the Real life

Though engagement and motivation are needs, they are insufficient without translating to enhanced functioning in real life. Encouragingly, some research presented evidence that gamified rehabilitation led to clinical outcomes, specifically motor and cognitive recovery. For example, exercises based on VR were associated with enhanced motor coordination in post-stroke patients and orthopedic patients (Steiner et al., 2020; Berton et al., 2020). Likewise, children and adolescents undergoing game-based therapies exhibited quantifiable gains in gross motor function (Pimentel-Ponce et al., 2023) and attention or memory capabilities (Mahmoudi et al., 2024; Damaševičius et al., 2023).

Yet, the translation of these gains to routine function is not always linear. Research such as Huang et al. (2023) and Jansson et al. (2022) noted that patient compliance tends to reduce once the novelty has faded, so long-term sustainability of behavioral change is a continuing concern. While gamification may generate short-term intrigue, the capacity to facilitate long-term independent rehabilitation habits in the real life is a research area that is under-explored.

4.3 Facing the challenges Straightforwardly

Although gamification is useful, it also has limitations. Some threaten to over-gamify, where high or ill-matched levels of game elements decrease the gravity or sense of solemnity of the rehabilitation task or render the task unnatural (Tuah et al., 2021). Further, both digital literacy and availability limitations—especially for older or remote populations—yield exclusion, diminishing the equity of these approaches (Al-Rayes et al., 2022).

There are also technical and ethical hurdles of note. High costs associated with development and the requirement for interdisciplinarity (Tosto-Mancuso et al., 2022) were most commonly mentioned as constraining scalability. Moreover, gamified systems normally gather sensitive health information, with implications for privacy, informed consent, and secure data processing (Mahmoudi et al., 2024). These need to be overcome before gamified systems can safely be rolled out at large scale.

Overall, gamification has the potential to become a complementary therapeutic tool in the framework of evidence-informed practice, provided that it is theory-driven and aligned with patient values. To tap the full potential of gamification, future interventions should include adaptive AI technology to tailor challenge and feedback (Huang et al., 2023), hybrid models of micro-learning combining digital and face to face (Muñoz-Tomás et al., 2023), but most critically, assessing the translation of gains in the gamified activity to real-life autonomy and enhanced quality of life.

4.4 Comparison with Previous Studies

The research's conclusions are consistent with most of the literature that points to the positive effect of gamification on patient motivation and compliance with therapy. To illustrate, Berton et al. (2020) established that gamified environments for rehabilitation, sustained by virtual reality or other immersive technologies, greatly improved the sense of achievement, along with emotional engagement, of the patients. Likewise, Castellano-Tejedor and Cencerrado (2024) stressed that game-inspired design enhanced cognitive functioning, including memory, along with executive function, for the individuals with mental illness or with cognitive deficiencies.

Nonetheless, the same review also indicated inconsistencies and shortcomings in the research already available. Sustaining engagement that is encouraged through the gamification in the long term, according to Jansson et al. (2022), takes the form of continuous updating of the content and personal progression systems. Lacking the former, user motivation tends to decrease. Alongside the challenges Tosto-Mancuso et al. (2022) raised regarding ethical issues—namely, patient consent, data confidentiality, and algorithmic openness—most of the studies included herein also identify limitations that point to limitations in these aspects. These critical issues imply that even gamification is promising but that a responsible implementation thereof, at scale, needs to continue developing.

4.5 Strengths, Limitations and Recommendations

One of the main strengths of this review is that it systematically identifies and thematically analyzed elements of gamification in a wide variety of settings of rehabilitation. Synthesizing data from studies on physical and cognitive rehabilitation, this study gives an extensive overview of

how gamified systems affect patient engagement and therapeutic outcomes. The three-fold thematic framework that is based upon motivation, clinical effectiveness, and implementation issues provides an integrated framework for assessing the state of gamified tools for rehabilitation.

Yet there are several limitations to note. First, this is a narrative overview, so there is no meta-analysis or quantitative summary, which restricts the conclusions' generalizability. Second, the studies included had heterogeneous designs, methods, and measures of outcomes, so making direct comparisons is not possible. Lastly, while short-term gamification effects tended to have good documentation, little is currently known about the long-term influence of these interventions on long-term recovery outcomes and daily functioning. These gaps should be addressed in future research utilizing study designs that are both longitudinal and comparative in nature.

For extending the findings of this review and bridging gaps within the literature, some avenues for future research are proposed. One is the implementation of long-term studies to identify whether the motivational impacts of gamification carry over to long-term behavioral change and enhanced functional outcomes. Although most of the research on the subject points to immediate changes, less is understood about the stability of the effects post-therapy.

Secondly, research should study adaptive personalization methods in gamification design further. As some studies emphasize, fixed-level gamification has the tendency to cause user fatigue and disengagement. Future research should study dynamic systems that adapt in real time to the physical and cognitive progress, motivation level, and emotional state of the patient.

Third, the ethical and regulatory aspects of gamification in healthcare require further exploration. There are few systematic studies that have tackled patient consent, data privacy, and algorithmic transparency issues. Evidence is lacking on the development of evidence-based guidelines for ethical deployment, most critically so when the intervention targets vulnerable populations.

Fourth, there should be comparative effectiveness trials—such as randomized controlled trials—comparing gamified recovery to standard approaches. These trials would address not only clinical outcomes but also cost-effectiveness, preference, and usability across diagnoses and age groups.

Finally, researchers should examine theoretical grounding of gamified interventions. Studies that explicitly incorporate motivation theory (e.g., SDT), flow theory, or behavior change models may yield clearer insights into how specific game mechanics drive therapeutic success.

4.6 Ethical Considerations and Review Trustworthines

This thesis used secondary data from already published and peer-reviewed literature. No ethical approval or clearance was thus necessary. Ethical guidelines were observed nonetheless throughout the research process, and especially when utilizing AI-aided tools (for language clarity and structure) and in the citation of sources at all levels. The analysis and interpretation were also conducted independently and were a reflection of the author's critical examination of the material.

Additionally, the researcher kept in mind possible sources of bias in the literature, most notably the overrepresentation of short-term studies and positive reports. Attempts were made to incorporate studies showing both advantages and disadvantages of gamification in order to provide a balanced overview.h

For the purposes of guaranteeing the credibility of this review, the inclusion criteria were clearly defined, and a systematic article selection protocol was employed (according to PRISMA-style screening). Thematic analysis adhered to the six-stage process recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006), and decisions relating to codes were recorded in order to enhance clarity and transparency. Whilst the non-numerical nature of this review means that some inevitable subjectivity and lack of statistical corroboration persist, an attempt has been made to triangulate between findings from a variety of studies and maintain consistency in applying the same criteria in theme development.

5 Conclusion

This narrative review considered the function of gamification in digital rehabilitation with emphasis on how it can enhance patient motivation, participation, and therapeutic outcomes. Findings indicated that based on established behavioral and psychological paradigms—namely, Self-Determination Theory, Flow Theory, and Behavioral Change Models—gamification can act as a useful tool to facilitate rehabilitation procedures in both the physical and cognitive aspects

The thematic analysis revealed three main dimensions within the literature: motivational enhancement, clinical effectiveness, and implementation challenges. Game elements like goal-setting, adaptive feedback, rewards, and immersive interaction were most commonly linked to enhanced patient compliance and satisfaction. Also, research indicated that gamified therapies may facilitate substantial recovery, especially for stroke rehabilitation, musculoskeletal conditions, and neurodevelopmental disorders.

Yet the review also highlighted the need for careful, ethical deployment. Supporting long-term user engagement, promoting accessibility, preserving confidentiality, and refraining from excessive reliance on extrinsic rewards are the characteristics that are critical to the long-term viability of gamified healthcare platforms. Most interventions have promising short-term outcomes, but the translation of in-game success to real-life autonomy and long-term modification of behavior is an area for future research.

Overall, gamification offers a promising but technically challenging innovation in the area of digital rehabilitation. Implementation in clinical practice is reliant upon theory-driven design, ethical protection, and evidence based upon the results of long-term, comparative research. With appropriate development and investigation, gamification has the potential to amplify the scope, personalization, and efficiency of the provision of rehabilitation services across more digitized healthcare settings.

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