

Dissertation proposal: Habit Tracking & Gamification Applications

My dissertation will be written on the topic of habit tracking applications for the purpose of improving mental health through gamification.

Firstly, it is necessary to examine what mental health is. Government sources state that the term *mental health* refers to general well-being emotionally, psychologically and socially (CDC.gov, n.d.) (MentalHealth.gov, n.d.). Common warning signs of poor mental health include self-exclusion from social activities, low energy, feeling helpless, numb or hopeless and having thoughts of (or doing) self-harm.

An increasing amount of facets of everyday life are becoming doable by sitting alone in front of a screen, often for an extended period of time. Socialisation, goal achievement and everyday life have undergone unprecedented change in the last few years, as these are now increasingly done with video games and social media. Many popular video games hook in players with an addictive feedback loop while social media plays on the 'Fear of Missing Out' that users might feel in order to drive engagement.

Mental health across the world took a disastrous turn following the pandemic; lockdowns and work-from-home orders caused loneliness to skyrocket, unhealthy and sedentary lifestyles to become the norm and self-reported feelings of hopelessness to soar — all these being the classic warning signs of poor mental health. In addition, suicide cases jumped notably in the immediate aftermath of the pandemic, presumably as a result of poor mental health. (Kim et al., 2022).

The topic of gamification is where my dissertation proposal comes in — in short, applications which use feedback loops as a force for good to improve mental health. I will now answer the following proposal questions:

1. What do I plan to accomplish?

I plan to do critical research into life gamification applications at both a surface level and by examining the established science behind them at a deeper level. From this research, I plan to reach a conclusion as to whether these gamification applications are all that they claim to be, in addition to whether their use comes with unintended consequences for the mental health of their users.

A small amount of literature already exists on the topic of gamification apps. Many of these look into individual applications: one example is a detailed analysis into the counterproductive effects of the app Habitica which reached the conclusion that sensible, balanced utilisation of the application is the best way to use it due to some inherent downsides (Diefenbach & Muessig, 2019). Another article on the same application concluded that gamification had both positive effects and hindrances regarding learning achievement, which could be extrapolated to mental health (Zhang, 2022). This literature all used research involving groups of participants using an app for a period of time. Conclusions from each piece covered different uses for the application, which in this dissertation could be collated and expanded upon in order to extrapolate each individual conclusion to the topic of improving mental health.

2. Why do I want to do it?

My mental health declined at some points during the pandemic as I was living a very disordered life as a result of lockdowns. My road to recovery was made a lot easier when I installed a habit gamification application as this motivated me to set my own goals and improve areas of my life that I thought were inadequate.

As much as I have this application to thank for my recovery, my daily usage of it has left me wondering whether I'm reinforcing an inflexible set of routines and setting myself up for achieving mediocrity by doing so. This feeling piqued my interest as to the science behind these applications, motivating me not only to write a dissertation with my research — possibly helping others to escape the rut I was once in — but also to provide myself with a set of lessons learned by the end, with which I can modify my usage of this application to permit myself to reach my full potential.

3. How am I going to do it?

As stated before, I am going to do a combination of surface-level research and collation of other research on the topic.

Surface-level research will be primary research. I will download various gamification applications and try them out for a few days, before reporting my findings as to their functions. Different applications are expected to work in different ways, so I will evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of each and recommend changes, where possible, to each application in order to enhance the strengths — and address the weaknesses — of each. The end goal of this phase of my research is to understand, from a user's perspective, how these applications work and what each does well (or could do better).

The deeper level of research will be secondary research and will involve studying and gathering information from articles and other sources of information regarding the psychological function and impact of these applications. This will be done with an eye to gaining a deeper understanding of deep-seated benefits and weaknesses these applications possess as a whole, on a level that surface-level research would be unable to meet. Links will be formed between this and the previous surface-level research to possibly suggest changes to the entire model that these applications follow.

At the end of the dissertation, I will reach a conclusion as to whether life gamification apps really live up to the benefits that they offer in their marketing. Research from both surface-level personal findings and articles on the topic will be used to back up my conclusion in order to definitely answer whether life gamification apps are worth downloading for the sake of improving mental health and whether they should be used in a certain way to prevent certain pitfalls — fixable or inherent — in their design.

Sources:

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