MPC MAJOR RESEARCH PAPER


MORE THAN JUST A GAME:
EXPLORING THE GAMIFICATION MECHANICS AND PROCEDURAL RHETORIC OF
THE AIR MILES LOYALTY PROGRAM COMMUNITY


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# Abstract

This major research paper explores the use of gamification mechanics and procedural rhetoric to engage loyalty program communities on social media. In doing so, this study investigates the influences of online communities, the applications of gamification mechanics and procedural rhetoric, as well as the role and agency of consumers. A quantitative content analysis was used to analyze a sample of 10,000 tweets related to the Air Miles Rewards Program. The results showed that gamification mechanics and procedural rhetoric were present in the Twitter conversations. However, they were used differently to achieve various elements of community based on competing interests by authors. Findings from this study contribute to the academic and professional world of communication, and can inform digital marketing and social media strategies for community engagement.

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**Introduction**

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Gone are the days when loyalty programs were as simple as stamp cards. When ten coffees guaranteed one free cup to keep a local shop busy with daily regulars. Now, rewards programs are assumed for every airline, global brand, and gas station. There are bonus points, exclusive deals, and never ending contests to keep collectors excited. Naturally, the concept of loyalty programs has branched out into its own entity with an abundance of affiliate partners. Collectors are no longer loyal to brands but to reward programs that provide incentives that suit their needs. In the digital world of social media, consumers can connect with loyalty programs to follow, engage, and eagerly anticipate the next big thing.

The AIR MILES Rewards Program (Air Miles) turns everyday purchases into dream vacations and more (AIR MILES Reward Program, 2014a). Owned and operated by LoyaltyOne, Inc. since 1992, Air Miles allow consumers to instantly redeem "AIR MILES Cash" as currency at participating reward partners, or save for "Dream Rewards" like vacations, electronics, and other indulgences (AIR MILES Reward Program, 2014b). The three tiers of Air Miles collector levels (Regular, Gold, and Onyx) come with their own set of perks like exclusive offers, contests, and discounts (AIR MILES Reward Program, 2014b). According to Air Miles, it is the "best way to get rewards in Canada" (AIR MILES Reward Program, 2014a).

This paper will explore the digital marketing and communication of Air Miles. More specifically, this paper will focus on how Air Miles engages, motivates, and persuades a community of consumers on Twitter. To do so, an in-depth literature review of loyalty program marketing, social media communities, gamification mechanics, and procedural rhetoric will be conducted.

**Literature Review**

**Loyalty Programs**

Before delving into the literature related to gamification, social media, and rhetoric, it is important to first outline the purpose, history, and limitations of traditional loyalty program to contextualize the benefits of engaging consumers through community.

Loyalty programs are defined by Lacey, Suh, and Morgan (2007) as marketing activities designed to enhance relational attitudes and behaviours among consumers toward a particular brand. Unlike one-time promotions like instant scratch cards, loyalty programs require repeated purchases over time (Liu, 2007). Through cumulative transactions, consumers receive economic and service incentives (Lacey, Suh & Morgan, 2007). Rewards may include free goods, perks like shorter line-ups, exclusive deals, and service upgrades (Zichermann & Cunningham, 2011). Overall, Szczepanskta and Gawron (2011) believe that loyalty programs are implemented to reduce service costs, increase sales, or maximize the value of customer engagement.

According to Zichermann and Cunningham (2011), loyalty programs have been in North America since the 19th Century. Starting with stamp cards, local merchants attracted repeat customers using a 10:1 purchase to reward ratio. Then, virtual currency emerged resulting in a vague sense of value as points were earned and redeemed at various rates. For Zichermann and Cunningham (2011), these traditional loyalty program models are limiting as they attract consumers who are likely to pay regardless of external incentives. In addition, these models create an excessive dependence on free goods, resulting in the expectation of conditions upon purchase (Zichermann & Cunningham, 2011). Finally, once the material reward is attained the incentive to play is complete (Zichermann & Cunningham, 2011). For these reasons, the authors

argue that loyalty is more about social status and less about free rewards. They also assert that loyalty is no longer private with the emergence of social gaming and social media networks.

**Loyalty Programs & Communities**

As loyalty programs find new ways to engage consumers beyond material rewards, the notion of community comes to mind. The following section outlines community elements and applies them to loyalty program engagement strategies. Interestingly, concepts of exclusivity, communication, and social status appear as intrinsic motivators.

Community is defined by McMillian and Chavis (1986) as a space requiring membership, influence, integration, and shared connection. This includes the feeling of belonging, the notion of making a difference, the idea of fulfilling individual needs, and the committed belief in shared experiences (McMillian & Chavis, 1986). Together, these elements relate to Gusfield's social construction of community. For Gusfield (1978), the most important element of community is a consciousness of kind. This is the intrinsic connection between members as well as the collective sense of differences between those inside and outside of a community (Gusfield, 1978).

According to Muniz and O'Guinn (2001), Gusfield's concept of consciousness of kind reveals three components of community. This includes a shared way of thinking, knowing, and belonging that is more than shared attitudes or perceived similarities (Weber as cited in Muniz and O'Guinn, 2011). In addition, communities have shared rituals and traditions that perpetuate history, culture, and social solidarity (Durkheim as cited in Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). Finally, communities instill within each member a sense of moral responsibility, duty, and obligation towards the community as a whole (Muniz, Jr & O'Guinn, 2001).

Applying these principles to loyalty programs, Rosenbaum, Ostrom, and Kuntze (2005) claim that they can be used to create loyalty program communities. For instance, striving for

membership can translate to securing a social position through purchase (Rosenbaum et al., 2005). In the case of BMW, a hefty price tag may cause owners to feel entitled and a part of an elite group (Rosenbaum et al., 2005). Arguably, Rosenbaum et al. (2005) suggest that loyalty programs without minimum purchases or fees cannot replicate the same value of membership. Thus, loyalty programs have the capability to foster a community through exclusivity.

Another communal benefit inspired by McMillian and Chavis' (1986) Sense of Community Theory is the ability to influence through communication. Rosenbaum et al. (2005) state that influence requires members to feel empowered. To achieve this, Jeep allows members to provide consumer feedback to senior managers and corporate engineers during members-only events (Rosenbaum et al., 2005). As such, loyalty programs can leverage communication channels as a way to build community and empower its members.

In addition, Rosenbaum et al. (2005) position the communal element of integration as the attainment of social status and knowledge. Citing Neiman-Marcus' In-Circle loyalty program, Rosenbaum et al. (2005) refer to invitation-only events as a space to mingle with affluent members and learn about contemporary fashion trends. In doing so, loyalty programs can establish communities that fulfill individual needs related to social status and knowledge.

Finally, the commitment to shared connections is articulated as the public embodiment of a brand (Rosenbaum et al., 2005). For example, the members of Harley-Davidson's community acknowledge that the brand image is an extension of their self-identity (Rosenbaum et al., 2005). As such, members of the community sponsor and support the brand due to a deep connection with the brand's history, mission, and value (Rosenbaum et al., 2005). Therefore, loyalty programs can create communities that are grounded in shared emotional connections.

**Loyalty Programs & Social Media Communities**

Building on the benefits of loyalty program communities, this section elaborates on the potential of social media networks, like Twitter, to create a sense of community online. Extending the concept of community beyond physical space, Anderson's (2006) imagined community takes into account the connections between people who do not meet face-to-face. Focusing on migration and nationalism, Anderson (2006) believes that though members of an imagined community do not encounter one another, they simultaneously live in parallel and proceed along an identical trajectory. In a way, the image of community lives in the minds of each member.

Relating Anderson's work on imagined communities to the online world, Kavoura (2014) believes that social media allows for the same feeling of coherence and belonging between online community members who do not ever meet. This is especially true on Twitter, a micro-blogging service with a 140-character limit, where users do not know the make up of their addressed audience (Kavoura, 2014). As Twitter conversations are not bound within physical spaces, conversations are dispersed throughout a network of interconnected actors, resulting in many people talking about specific topics simultaneously (boyd, Golder, & Lotan, 2010).

Three Twitter conventions that promote communities and conversations include mentions, hashtags, and retweets (boyd et al., 2010). As described by boyd et al. (2010), mentions utilize the syntax "@" to address messages directly to a user. To organize tweets topically, hashtags are used through the syntax "#" (boyd et al., 2010). This method of organization allows others to follow conversations about a particular topic (boyd et al., 2010). Finally, original tweets by other users may be rebroadcasted using the retweet feature, activated by the syntax "RT" (boyd et al.,

2010). Together these practices contribute to the public interplay of voices with diverse motivations that allow for a conversational ecology of shared context (boyd et al., 2010).

Applying the communal benefits of social media to brand loyalty, Mehrabi, Islami, and Aghajani (2014) suggest that social media is an economical way to increase brand awareness, brand recognition, and brand loyalty. Due to the existence of interpersonal relationships on social networks, brands are able to disseminate content on social media to create positive attitudes toward a desired brand (Mehrabi et al., 2014). Though social media may be an effective promotional channel, McGonnigal (2010) emphasizes the need to engage in conversation. This implies a two-way conversation that requires brands to listen and respond to its customers (McGonnigal, 2010).

Researchers suggest leveraging company moderated Twitter communities that allow consumers to coproduce messages and meanings (Kozinets et al., 2010; Pai and Tasi, 2011). This enables imagined communities where members feel a sense of belonging that fulfills individual needs and shared experiences (McMillian & Chavis, 1986; Anderson, 2006; Kavoura, 2014).

**Gamification Mechanics**

In addition to community, loyalty programs also motivate consumers through gamification. The following section provides a definition of gamification, along with the common mechanics that are used in gamified experiences.

Gamification is defined as the implementation of game design elements in non-gaming contexts (Deterding, Dixon, Khaled, & Nackle, 2011). Since 2008, the digital marketing industry has applied gamification to the education, health care, e-commerce, and business management

sectors (Meder & Jain, 2014). Through elements such as rules, competition, and goals, game design can motivate users to engage with products and services (Deterding et al., 2011).

According to Huotari and Hamari (2012), gamified experiences are individual, yet social in nature. Effective gamified experiences intrinsically motivate users through enjoyment, satisfaction, and inherent interest (Kivetz, 2003). Rather than extrinsic reward, fulfilling gamified experiences must incorporate autonomy, mastery, and the purpose to serve (Pink, 2009). The experience is then evaluated by personal perceptions of pleasure, suspense, and mastery (Huotari & Hamari, 2012). In addition, social influence, network exposure, and reciprocal relations improve attitudes toward gamified experiences (Hamari & Koivisto, 2013).

To create gamified experiences, Zichermann & Cunningham (2011) identify gamification mechanics that include points, badges, levels, and challenges. Leveraging these gamification mechanics, users can be motivated to make incremental choices that work in favour of an intended goal (Zichermann & Cunningham, 2011).

**Procedural Rhetoric**

In an attempt to apply gamification mechanics to a text-based medium like social media communities, this section considers the role of language and rhetoric. More specifically, procedural rhetorical strategies will be defined with the support of examples.

For Bogost (2011) the "-ification" of gamification as described by Zichermann & Cunningham is too vague as it oversimplifies the difficult nature of game development. Though Bogost recognizes that gamification mechanics like points, badges, levels, and rewards are operational parts of game experiences, the author contests that they are "mere gestures that provide structure and measure progress within such a system". As such, Bogost (2007) develops

the concept of procedural rhetoric as a way of constructing an argument with persuasive potential in game systems.

According to Bogost (2007), procedural rhetoric is the art of persuasion through rule-based presentations and interactions. Rooted in videogame technology, Bogost (2007) argues that computational algorithms can define processes, methods, techniques, and logic that drives or disrupts attitudes, leading to social change. Applying this potential to digital rhetoric, Bogost (2007) suggests that processes and procedures articulated through language can also influence the interactions between participants and gamified systems.

Through multiple case studies, Bogost (2007) defines key rhetorical strategies through the lens of procedural rhetoric. This includes the enforcement of rules while providing a sense of choice through procedural constraints (Bogost, 2007). In marketing terms, procedural constraints translate into messages like "only valid at participating locations".  In addition, partial reinforcement is highlighted as a persuasive technique that continually motivates participants (Bogost, 2007). For example, messages such as "stay tuned for more" encourages future participation. Along the same lines, Bogost (2007) speaks of the discourse of performance as an opportunity to share goals and achievements in relation to others. Online, the discourse of performance can be achieved through public mentions or retweets, such as "@User congratulations for winning 2 tickets to the concert". Another strategy offered by Bogost (2007) is the objection of the procedures itself, allowing players to influence the rules of the game.  This is evident on Twitter when users publically criticize loyalty programs like, "I should be able to use my @AirMiles whenever and however I want". Lastly, interactivity is an important rhetorical technique that induces a response from participants, which may include the call-to-

action to listen, think, or speak (Bogost, 2007). For instance, phrases like "call us", "click to find out more", or "don't miss out" prompts participants to respond in an urgent manner.

The rhetorical strategies that Bogost (2007) outlines speak to the power of persuasion. Simons & Jones (2011) define persuasion as "human communication designed to influence the judgments and action of others" (p. 24). An act of persuasion must not be forced, pressured, or induced by material incentive (Simons & Jones, 2011). Instead, persuasive practices must effectively build credibility and appeal to audiences, especially in the language of business (Simons & Jones, 2011).

## Proposed Area of Study

The current body of literature explores how loyalty programs can influence consumer decisions through gamification mechanics. However, as Bogost (2007) points out, there are gaps in gamification research with regards to the role of language and rhetoric as a means of persuasion. In addition, scholarly work around loyalty programs predominantly focus on a unidirectional flow of communication from brands to consumers. Through this lens, the effectiveness of loyalty programs is based strictly on a change in purchasing habits and behaviours. As such, it does not acknowledge the full potential of social media communities. As boyd et al. (2010) articulate, social media communities are unique as they are composed of interconnected actors participating in conversations with shared context. Though grounded in commonalities, the varying motivations amongst the interplay of voices can result in tension (boyd et al., 2010). It is the tension in motivation that makes social media communities influential. To effectively assess the impact of loyalty program communities on social media, the conversation between various voices must be considered.

This paper will create links between gamification mechanics with procedural rhetoric to better understand how loyalty programs effectively engage consumers on social media. In doing so, various voices within social media communities will be assessed; especially those of Affiliate Brands such as sponsors or partners. Finally, the role and agency of consumers will be addressed. The research questions guiding this paper are:

- **RQ1:** How do gamification mechanics and procedural rhetoric influence the sense community for Air Miles on Twitter?

- **RQ2:** How do Air Miles and its Affiliate Brands (e.g. sponsors and partners) utilize gamification mechanics and procedural rhetoric differently?

- **RQ3:** How do consumers use gamification mechanics and procedural rhetoric to coproduce meaning within the Air Miles Twitter community?

**Methods**

**Data Collection**

The source of data for this research paper came from Twitter. More specifically, Air Miles related tweets were collected, including 1) tweets by Air Miles, 2) tweets mentioning Air miles (@Air Miles), and 3) tweets using the Air Miles hashtag (#AirMiles).

The data was collected using Netlytic, a social network and text analysis tool that collects publicly available conversations on social media networks like Twitter (Netlytic, 2015). The data was then exported into Microsoft Excel to conduct a quantitative content analysis. Through this method, specific elements of gamification mechanics, procedural rhetoric, and community were identified.

**Sample Size**

A total of 10,000 tweets were collected over a 5-month period between February to June 2015. An analysis was conducted on a sample of 1,000 tweets. Based on the total corpus size, a sample size of 624 tweets would allow for a 99% confidence level with a confidence interval of plus or minus 5% (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2015). An identical sample size of tweets was also recommended by a Survey Monkey (2015) Sample Size Calculator, a publicly available resource from an award winning survey organization. As such, the 1,000 tweet sample analyzed was far greater than the required sample size.

**Tweet Distribution**

The total corpus of 10,000 tweets was organized into the following three sub-corpora: 1) Tweets by Air Miles, 2) Tweets by Affiliate Brands, and 3) Tweets by Individual Users. The sample corpus of 1,000 tweets was then evenly comprised of 334 (33%) tweets by Air Miles, 332 (33%) tweets by Affiliate Brands, and 333 (34%) tweets by Individual Users. The selection of tweets within each sub-corpus was randomly selected using the random sort order on Microsoft Excel. The required number of records was then selected from each sub-corpus to make up the specified sample size. Table 1, as seen below, illustrates the tweet distribution.

**Table 1.** Tweet Distribution

| Sub-Corpora | Total Corpus | % | Sample Corpus | % |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Tweets by Air Miles | 1,280 | 13% | 334 | 33% |
| Affiliate Brands | 412 | 4% | 332 | 33% |
| Individual Users | 8,308 | 83% | 334 | 33% |
| Total | 10,000 | 100% | 1,000 | 100% |

Though the proportions between the total corpus and the sample corpus are not statistically sound, it was important for this study to have an equal number of tweets for analysis. This was especially relevant when comparing the use of gamification mechanics and procedural rhetoric between Air Miles and its Affiliate Brands as it allows for equivalent findings.

Affiliate Brands are defined as commercial sponsors and partners of Air Miles. Air Miles allows members to collect points across 120 in-store and 140 online sponsors (AIR MILES Reward Program, 2014c). This includes grocery stores like Metro and Sobeys, drug stores like Rexall Pharma Plus, as well as real estate firms like Century 21 (AIR MILES Reward Program, 2014c). Air Miles has also partnered with financial institutions such as the Bank of Montreal and credit card providers like American Express (AIR MILES Reward Program, 2014c).

**Data Clean Up**

To ensure accuracy, non-English tweets were removed from the total sample. Five default fields were also excluded after exporting the data from Netlytic. Table 2, as seen below, outlines each field name, action taken, and reason for the action.

**Table 2.** Data Clean Up

| Field | Action | Reason |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Guid | Removed | Duplicate of "Link" field |
| Description | Removed | Duplicate of "Title" field |
| Source | Removed | Irrelevant to research |
| Code | Removed | Irrelevant to research |
| Coords | Removed | Irrelevant to research |

**Data Analysis**

The data collected was then analyzed using a quantitative content analysis. To assess the presence of gamification mechanics, tweets were coded based on the presence of Zichermann and Cunningham's (2011) work on gamification, such as: 1) Points, 2) Badges, 3) Levels, 4) Challenges, and 5) Leaderboards.

For the procedural rhetoric coding categories, Bogost's (2007) work was adapted to identify rhetorical strategies such as: 1) Procedural Constraints, 2) Partial Reinforcement, 3) Procedural Objections, 4) Discourse of Performance, and 5) Interactivity.

Finally, elements of community were evaluated based on McMillian and Chavis' Sense of Community Theory as applied to loyalty programs by Rosenbaum, Ostrom, and Kuntze (2005). More specifically, tweets were coded based on the presence of 1) Feeling of belonging, 2) Notion of making a difference, 3) Idea of fulfilling individual needs, and 4) Committed belief in shared experiences.

**Findings**

After collecting a total of 10,000 tweets related to the Air Miles Rewards program, 1,000 tweets were analyzed for (a) social media elements, (b) gamification mechanics, (c) procedural rhetoric, and (d) elements of community. Key findings are outlined below.

**Social Media Elements**

The tweets related to the Air Miles Rewards program were assessed for various social media elements, including the author, message type, direction of replies/ mentions, and hashtag use. The identification of these elements may provide insight into how gamification mechanics and procedural rhetoric are operationalized on social media to establish elements of community.

**Author.** The author of each tweet was categorized into three groups as defined in Table 3.1. Together, these three author categories made up the 1,000 sample tweets that were analyzed. More specifically, tweets by Air Miles made up 33% of the total sample size with 334 tweets. Similarly tweets by Affiliate Brands also made up 33% of the total sample size with 332 tweets. Finally, the 334 tweets by Users completed the dataset with 33% of the sample size. See Table 3.2 for more detail.

**Table 3.1.** Definition of Authors

| Authors | Definition |
|---|---|
| Air Miles | Tweets by @AirMiles only. Excludes sub-handles like @AirMiles_ME |
| Affiliate | Tweets by official Air Miles partners and other commercial brands |
| Users | Tweets by Twitter users that are not Air Miles or Affiliates |

**Table 3.2.** Results of Authors Coding

| Authors | No. of Tweets | % |
|---|---|---|
| Air Miles | 334 | 33% |
| Affiliate | 332 | 33% |
| Users | 334 | 33% |
| Total | 1,000 | 100% |

**Message Type.** The data set was also organized into four message types as described in Table 4.1. Overall, the 1,000 sample tweets was composed of 23% of original Tweets, 16% Retweets, 30% Replies, and 31% Mentions. See Table 4.2 for more information.

**Table 4.1.** Definition of Message Type

| Message Type | Definition |
|---|---|
| Tweet | Tweets that do not use the syntax "RT" and "@" |
| Retweet | Tweets that use the syntax "RT" |
| Reply | Tweets that use the syntax "@" in the beginning of the tweet |
| Mention | Tweets that use the syntax "@" but the beginning of the tweet |

Looking at the message type by author, Air Miles replied to tweets 8 times more frequently than Affiliate Brands at 19% versus 2%. Alternatively, Affiliate Brands retweeted tweets 4 times more frequently than Air Miles at 8% versus 2%. Examining the interactions of Affiliate and User tweets that used the syntax "@" through replies and mentions, 73% were directed to Air miles, while 27% were directed to other users. Table 4.3, as seen below, highlights the direction of interactivity.

**Table 4.2.** Results of Message Type Coding

| Message Type | Air Miles Tweets | Affiliate Tweets | User Tweets | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Tweet | 58 | 106 | 62 | 226 |
| Retweet | 19 | 82 | 57 | 158 |
| Reply | 192 | 22 | 90 | 304 |
| Mention | 65 | 122 | 125 | 312 |
| Total | 334 | 332 | 334 | 1,000 |

**Table 4.3.** Direction of Replies & Mentions

| Direction | Affiliate Tweets | User Tweets | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| To Air Miles | 102 | 161 | 263 |
| To Other Users | 44 | 54 | 98 |
| Total | 332 | 334 | 361 |

Note: This only accounts for tweets that used the syntax "@" by Affiliate Brands and users

**Hashtags**. The final social media element that was taken into consideration when examining the sample data set was the use of hashtags as defined by Table 5.1.

**Table 5.1.** Definition of Hashtags

| Hashtags | Definition |
|---|---|
| #AirMiles | Tweets that include "#AirMiles" |
| Sponsored Hashtag | Tweets that include contest promotional hashtags like #Smile4miles |
| Other Hashtag | Tweets that use the syntax "#" but not "#Airmiles" or affiliate hashtags |
| None | Tweets that do not use the syntax "#" |

Overall, 21% of the tweets in the sample data set used the hashtag "#AirMiles". Alternatively, sponsored hashtags like "Smiles4Miles" and "Games4Miles" were evident in 15% of the tweet sample. In contrast, non-sponsored hashtags were used in 14% of the sample tweets, while 51% did not use hashtags at all. See Table 5.2 for hashtag use details.

Though less than half (49%) of the sample tweets used hashtags, each author utilized them differently. For instance, the #AirMiles hashtag was most often used in Affiliate Tweets (14%). In fact, Affiliate Tweets leveraged the #AirMiles hashtag 7 times more frequently than Air Miles themselves. Additionally, the use of sponsored hashtags like #Smiles4Miles or #Games4Miles was frequently used by Air Miles (13%). The frequency of this hashtag use was not reciprocated by either Affiliates (0%) or Users (2%).

**Table 5.2.** Results of Hashtag Coding

| Hashtags | Air Miles Tweets | Affiliate Tweets | User Tweets | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| #AirMiles | 16 | 139 | 52 | 207 |
| Affiliate Hashtag | 128 | 1 | 23 | 152 |
| Other Hashtag | 7 | 75 | 53 | 135 |
| None | 183 | 117 | 206 | 506 |
| Total | 334 | 332 | 334 | 1,000 |

**Gamification Mechanics**

A total of 1,000 tweets related to the Air Miles Rewards program were analyzed for the presence of gamification mechanics. The results demonstrated a high presence of gamification (as defined in Table 6.1) with 82% of the total sample using gamification mechanics. Overall, the top three gamification mechanics used included "Points" at 35%, "Badges" at 19%, and "Challenges" at 15% (see Table 6.2).

**Table 6.1.** Definitions of Gamification Mechanics

| Gamification | Definition |
|---|---|
| Points | Tweets that focus on earning or collecting points |
| Levels | Tweets that focus on membership tiers (e.g. Gold or Onyx) |
| Badges | Tweets that focus on personal gain or achievement |
| Challenges | Tweets that focus on contests or promotions |
| Leaderboards | Tweets that compare achievements between users |
| None | Tweets that do not include elements of gamification mechanics |

Further analyzing the use of gamification mechanics by author, the findings show that each author used different gamification mechanics more frequently. For instance, Air Miles heavily used the gamification mechanic of "Challenges" (12%). In comparison, the tweets by Affiliate Brands utilized the gamification mechanic of "Points" (24%). Furthermore, tweets by Users leveraged the gamification mechanic of "Badges" (18%). Finally, the use of gamification mechanics was more visible with Affiliate tweets (31%) than Air Miles (23%). In fact, gamification was seen in Affiliate tweets 8% more than it was seen in tweets by Air Miles.

**Table 6.2.** Results of Gamification Mechanics Coding

| Gamification | Air Miles Tweets | Affiliate Tweets | User Tweets | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Points | 38 | 235 | 81 | 354 |
| Levels | 13 | 15 | 15 | 43 |
| Badges | 15 | 2 | 175 | 192 |
| Challenges | 117 | 19 | 16 | 152 |
| Leaderboards | 42 | 20 | 17 | 79 |
| None | 109 | 41 | 30 | 180 |
| Total | 334 | 332 | 334 | 1,000 |

**Procedural Rhetoric**

The coding categories for Procedural Rhetoric derive from Bogost's (2007) work. Though the definitions are grounded in game systems, they can also be adapted to assess linguistic patterns. For instance, the enforcement of processes or rules in a videogame may materialize itself as a wall that players cannot climb. In the world of social media, the same constraint can be articulated through statements of policies and regulations. The adaptation of Bogost's (2007) work from videogame systems to language allows for the analysis of gamified marketing communication.

All 6 elements of procedural rhetoric were evident in the 1,000-tweet sample that was analyzed. In fact, 90% of the analyzed tweets expressed an element of procedural rhetoric as defined in Table 7.1. Table 7.2 provides examples for each procedural rhetorical strategy that was evident in the tweet sample.

**Table 7.1.** Definition of Procedural Rhetoric

| Procedural Rhetoric | Definition |
|---|---|
| Procedural Constraints | Tweets that enforce processes or rules |
| Partial Reinforcement | Tweets that implicitly motivate consumers |
| Procedural Objections | Tweets that challenge rules, processes, or systems |
| Discourse of Performance | Tweets that highlight performance or achievement |
| Interactivity | Tweets that explicitly demand an action or response |
| None | Tweets that do not include elements of procedural rhetoric |

**Table 7.2.** Examples of Procedural Rhetoric

| Procedural Rhetoric | Example |
|---|---|
| Procedural Constraints | Points can be transferred at a fee of 15 cents per mile + taxes |
| Partial Reinforcement | Your smile could win you 2 flights anywhere in North America |
| Procedural Objections | Why do bonus miles take so long to load for Metro but not Rexall? |
| Discourse of Performance | I have enough Air Miles to go to Vegas for my friend's 30th birthday |
| Interactivity | Bring your smile to a Smile Booth near you. Click for more details. |
| None | Starting a workshop on transitioning from Club Sobeys to Air Miles |

Generally, the top three rhetorical strategies that were employed included the Discourse of Performance (28%), followed by Interactivity (26%) and then Procedural Constraints (22%). Table 7.3 provides a complete list of results.

Examining the use of procedural rhetoric based on authorship, there were differences in the rhetorical strategies used between brands and consumers. For example, Air Miles heavily used Interactivity (12%) when contributing to the Twitter conversations about the Air Miles Rewards program.  This was evident in tweets that explicitly demanded consumer response, such as "Find our Smile Booth near you, bring your smile and join the fun! Click for details: http://t.co/0IU5MPpcRE #Smiles4Miles".  In addition, Air Miles enforced rules and processes through Procedural Constraints (9%), as seen in tweets like, "transfers can be done by phone at 1-888-AIR MILE (247-6453). The fee to transfer is 15 cents per miles + applicable tax".

Similarly, Affiliate Brands also reinforced rules through Procedural Constraints (12%). However, compared to the tweets by Air Miles that used direct calls-to-action through Interactivity, Affiliate Brands used implicit signs of motivation through Partial Reinforcement (9%). The use of implicit language as an act of persuasion is evident through tweets like" Today: U could win 5,000 @AIRMILES for visiting a #C21openhouse". This particular example utilizes the term "could" rather than "will" to express uncertainty while remaining positive.

Looking at User Generated tweets, there was a predominant use of Discourse of Performance (19%) to highlight personal achievements. For example, one particular user shares their new gadget that was afforded by their Air Miles: "Got a fitbit with my @AIRMILES excited to use it! Just gotta charge it when I get home!  Woot! #fitnessmotivation #tech". This was then followed by Interactivity (6%) and Procedural Objections (5%). In fact, challenging rules and processes through Procedural Objections were done exclusively by users.  For instance,

one user complained about the misleading messages of an Air miles campaign at Shell gas stations, "@Shell_Canada @AIRMILES 5x 1 base mile is 5...why not say 5 air miles since you cant earn more base miles now that its changed. Misleading".

**Table 7.3.** Results of Procedural Rhetoric Coding

| Procedural Rhetoric | Air Miles Tweets | Affiliate Tweets | User Tweets | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Procedural Constraints | 96 | 120 | 5 | 218 |
| Partial Reinforcement | 61 | 90 | 28 | 180 |
| Procedural Objections | 0 | 0 | 52 | 52 |
| Discourse of Performance | 62 | 29 | 189 | 280 |
| Interactivity | 117 | 83 | 60 | 260 |
| None | 0 | 10 | 0 | 10 |
| Total | 334 | 332 | 334 | 1,000 |

**Elements of Community**

The 1,000 sample tweets related to the Air Miles Reward program were evaluated for 4 elements of community (see Table 8.1). Specific examples of tweets related to each element of community can be found on Table 8.2. For the purposes of this study, the earning of points and perks was categorized as the Feeling of Belonging, while the redemption of points for material goods was categorized as the Fulfillment of Individual Needs.

**Table 8.1** Definitions of Elements of Community

| Elements of Community | Definition |
|---|---|
| Feeling of Belonging | Tweets that focus on membership exclusivity and perks |
| Making a Difference | Tweets that invite and acknowledge feedback |
| Fulfills Individual Needs | Tweets that highlight materiality and/or social class |
| Shared Experience | Tweets that embody shared identity and/or experiences |
| None | Tweets that do not express any elements of community |

**Table 8.2** Examples of Elements of Community

| Elements of Community | Definition |
|---|---|
| Feeling of Belonging | Hope @AirMiles gives me bonus points since I signed w/@BMO |
| Making a Difference | Thanks for your suggestion. We'll be sure to pass it on to our team. |
| Fulfills Individual Needs | Thanks @AirMiles for #PS4 bundle. I now have a happy hubby. |
| Shared Experience | Family fun finishing makes me smile #Smiles4Miles #ImACollector |
| None | Laminate vs. hardwood. Your choice #flooring #AirMiles |

Overall, every element of community was found in the tweets that were examined. In fact, 99% of the 1,000 tweets communicated an element of community. The most prominent element of community was the Feeling of Belonging (47%), followed by the Fulfillment of Individual Needs (27%), then Shared Experience (15%), and then Making a Difference (10%). Table 8.3 shows the full results. Below is an in-depth analysis of how elements of community were achieved by author, gamification mechanics, and procedural rhetoric.

**Table 8.3** Results of Elements of Community Coding

| Elements of Community | Air Miles Tweets | Affiliate Tweets | User Tweets | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Feeling of Belonging | 92 | 288 | 93 | 473 |
| Making a Difference | 68 | 3 | 29 | 100 |
| Fulfills Individual Needs | 79 | 16 | 174 | 269 |
| Shared Experience | 95 | 14 | 38 | 147 |
| None | 0 | 11 | 0 | 11 |
| Total | 334 | 32 | 334 | 1,000 |

**Author**. Taking into consideration the authorship of tweets, the tweets of Affiliate Brands mainly focused on the exclusivity and perks that achieves the Feeling of Belonging (29%). For example, Shell leverages their partnership with Air Miles by promoting exclusive deals like: "Let the road take you to amazing places. Earn 5x @AIRMILES reward miles on all grades of Shell fuel". Rarely did Affiliate Brands tweets acknowledge user feedback that lead to a Making of Difference (0%). Furthermore, 1% the Affiliate tweets did not exude any elements of community.

Looking at User tweets, an emphasis on materiality and social class was clear with 17% of the tweets Fulfilling Individual Needs. For instance, one Air Miles collector boasts about the money they saved for an upcoming vacation: "We are SUPER excited to be planning our upcoming family vacation. Thanks @AirMiles for flight, hotel and car rental. More $$ for shopping". Though this tweet may be interpreted as an expression of exclusivity that contributes

to the Feeling of Belonging, the emphasis on material reward contributes to the interpretation of a tweet that Fulfills Individual Needs. In contrast, users that expressed the exclusivity of their membership through tweets demonstrating a Feeling of Belonging made up 9% of the total sample. An example of tweets highlighting Air Miles perks include this, "Anyone heard of an ONYX #AirMiles card? Just received mine in the mail and earned over 6,000 points". This particular tweet focuses on one of three Air Miles collector levels and its related perks. Though the collection of points is evident, it has not yet been redeemed for material goods. Thus, this tweet promotes a Feeling of Belonging versus a Fulfillment of Individual Needs.

Air Miles achieved a balance of all 4-community elements. This includes the Feeling of Belonging (10%) and Shared Experience (9%), as well as the Fulfillment of Individual Needs (8%) and Making a Difference (7%). To make a difference, Air Miles acknowledged customer feedback and provided alternative solutions to issues through responses like, "@t_dunning we want to help! Please call within the first 2 hours of opening if you can or take advantage of the call-back feature".

**Gamification Mechanics.** The sample tweets were analyzed for elements of community in relation to gamification mechanics. This is interesting as it uncovers if and how gamification can be used to effectively achieve specific elements of community. Below are findings worth noting. Appendix F outlines the results in greater detail.

Generally speaking, 18% of tweets achieved an element of community without the use of gamification. More specifically, 6% of the tweets that attained the community element of Making a Difference did so without the use of gamification. For example, "@SueB24 We appreciate the commendation, and will be sure to pass it along". Note the acknowledgement and

appreciation for customer feedback without the integration of gamification mechanics like points, badges, or challenges.

Of the tweets that did use gamification mechanics to create community, 28% used Points to achieve a Feeling of Belonging. For instance, this tweet used the act of collecting Air Miles points as value added to a student credit card: "Your idea of a trip is the 5 min walk to the lib. Time to start collecting #AIRMILES w/ your @BMO SPC MasterCard!".

In addition, 14% of tweets Fulfilled Individual Needs through Badges. This is clear in tweets that used material wealth as a sign of achievement, like: "On my way home from Mumbai, India. Next stop Bangkok, Thailand next week. #AirMiles".

Finally, 8% of tweets created a sense Shared Experience through Challenges. An example of this is the #Smiles4Miles Air Miles campaign, which encouraged users to submit photos that made them smile for a chance to win a trip for two anywhere in North America. For example: "We're giving away 2 flights to anywhere in North America! Show us what makes you #Smiles4Miles". By encouraging user submissions with a sponsored hashtag, Air Miles promoted the embodiment of a shared identity, creating an emotional connection between their brand and its consumers.

**Procedural Rhetoric**. The sample tweets were analyzed for elements of community in relation to procedural rhetoric. This too is important as it reveals if and how procedural rhetoric can be used to effectively achieve specific elements of community. Below are noteworthy findings. Appendix G outlines the results in greater detail.

Unlike gamification mechanics, procedural rhetoric was integral to community building with 99% of tweets contributing to elements of community. For example, tweets that created a Feeling of Belonging utilized Procedural Constraints (13%). This relationship is evident in

tweets like, "ONYX Collectors receive the black cards. To get this status, you need to earn 6000 AIR MILES in a calendar year". In this tweet, the exclusivity of earning a black ONYX collector card is coupled with the eligibility requirements.

Interestingly, the same Feeling of Belonging was also achieved through Interactivity (14%). A tweet that exemplified this relationship included, "Your smile could win you 2 flights anywhere in NA. Where would you go?". Note the use of a question to illicit a response when promoting an exclusive contest to Air Miles members. Unlike Partial Reinforcement that uses implicit motivation, Interactivity explicitly demands action.

The same procedural rhetoric of Interactivity played a large role at creating a Shared Experience (7%). Building off of the #Smiles4Miles campaign, Air Miles leveraged an emotional connection to family as a way to encourage direct participation in tweets like, "#Calgary it's your last day 2 smile for prizes! #HappyMothersDay bring your mom to @Safeway South Trail #Smiles4Miles". Note the use of a Mother's Day hashtag to heighten emotional connections as well as the targeted call-to-action with a specific time and location.

Furthermore, Interactivity supported the community element of Making a Difference (4%). An example of this relationship was customer service response like: "Although we don't offer this, when you find one, be sure to use a credit card that earns Air Miles". In this particular situation, Air Miles is responding to a customer who is looking for a particular item by providing an alternative solution that includes a direct all to action.

Finally, the Twitter conversation around the Air Miles Reward Program revealed that Individual Needs were fulfilled through the Discourse of Performance (14%). For instance, this particular Air Miles collector highlighted their material gain as an achievement: "Thank you @AIRMILES! Booked a round-trip home in May for under $200! #YYZ #KW".

**Procedural Rhetoric & Gamification.** The dataset was examined for the use of procedural rhetoric in relation the gamification mechanics. The correlation between procedural rhetoric and gamification mechanics is significant as it creates a link between two typically opposing views of gamified marketing communication. Below are findings worth highlighting. See Appendix H for more information.

Interestingly, 15% of the tweets used a procedural rhetorical strategy without gamification mechanics. Comparatively, only 1% of the tweets utilized a gamification mechanic without employing procedural rhetoric. As such, the mechanics of gamification seems to be dependent on procedural rhetoric when it comes to loyalty programs or social media communities.

Overall, the gamification mechanic of Points was the most frequently used and was evident in 35% of the sample data. Points were often coupled with Procedural Constraints (11%) to enforce rules and policies. For instance, tweets that highlighted additional point promotions included details and limitations such as, "#Laurier get free shipping & earn 3x the AIR MILES reward miles on textbook purchases until May 15". Through this example, a clear audience and deadline is defined to enforce rules around earning more points.

Points were equally used with Interactivity (11%) to explicitly encourage consumer response through direct calls-to-actions. For example, tweets from Affiliate Brands like Sobeys created an urgency for transferring points by incentivizing the process with more points, as seen here: "March is the month to transfer Club Sobeys pts to @AIRMILES! Transfer now & earn 50 bonus reward miles #SobeysOntario". In contrast, Points were utilized with Partial Reinforcement (10%) to implicitly encourage consumer participation. An example of this relationship included tweets like, "You can celebrate #CanadaBookDay too by earning reward

miles online @Indigo.ca". Note the difference between explicit calls-to-action such as "transfer now and earn" versus implicit encouragements like "you can celebrate…by earning".

Asides from Points, Badges align with the Discourse of Performance category with 7% of the tweets using them hand in hand. As both elements relate to the expression of personal achievements, it naturally translates into tweets like: "Thanks to my LCBO purchases, I got a $50 KEG gift card #AirMiles".

Finally, Challenges as a gamification mechanic worked well with Interactivity (8%) and Partial Reinforcement (7%) to engage consumers about contests. This translates to tweets like "Join us @ThriftyFoods #NorthVancouver June 13 & activate the #SmileBooth w/ your @AIRMILES card to WIN prizes! #YVR", with strong directives, as well as tweets like, "In #Toronto our team is on site @RONAinc ready to give away some great prizes! #AIRMILES #Smiles4Miles", that are more implicit through notifications and awareness.

**Analysis**

Based on key findings, the following section analyses how gamification mechanics and procedural rhetoric contribute to various elements of community. In doing so, the complex interplay of voices within a social media community will be discussed.

**Air Miles: Shared Experiences & Making a Difference**

Air Miles attempted to establish a community of Shared Experiences. This element values the expression of collective identity and experiences (McMillian & Chavis, 1986). Rosenbaum et al. (2005) apply this idea to loyalty programs by integrating elements of emotion. For Resenbaum et al. (2005), a collective identity includes a shared emotional connection to a brand, including positive experiences that lead to a voluntary and public embodiment of the brand identity. Offline, Rosenbaum et al. (2005) discuss the public display of a fashion catalog in a household as an act of membership pride.

To achieve the same emotional sentiment online, Air Miles leveraged holidays, referenced pop culture, and included inclusive language such as "we" or "us". By doing so, Air Miles promoted universal values of family, friendship, and adventure. Figure 1, as seen below, provides a couple of tweets attempting to achieve an emotional connection for shared experiences.

Though Air Miles attempts to create an online community through positive references, it is important to acknowledge that shared experiences can also be drawn from negative incidents. This will become evident later in the analysis when reviewing the role and agency of consumers. Figure 8 offers several tweets of negative shared experiences.

**Figure 1.** Sample Tweets By Air Miles – Positive Shared Experiences
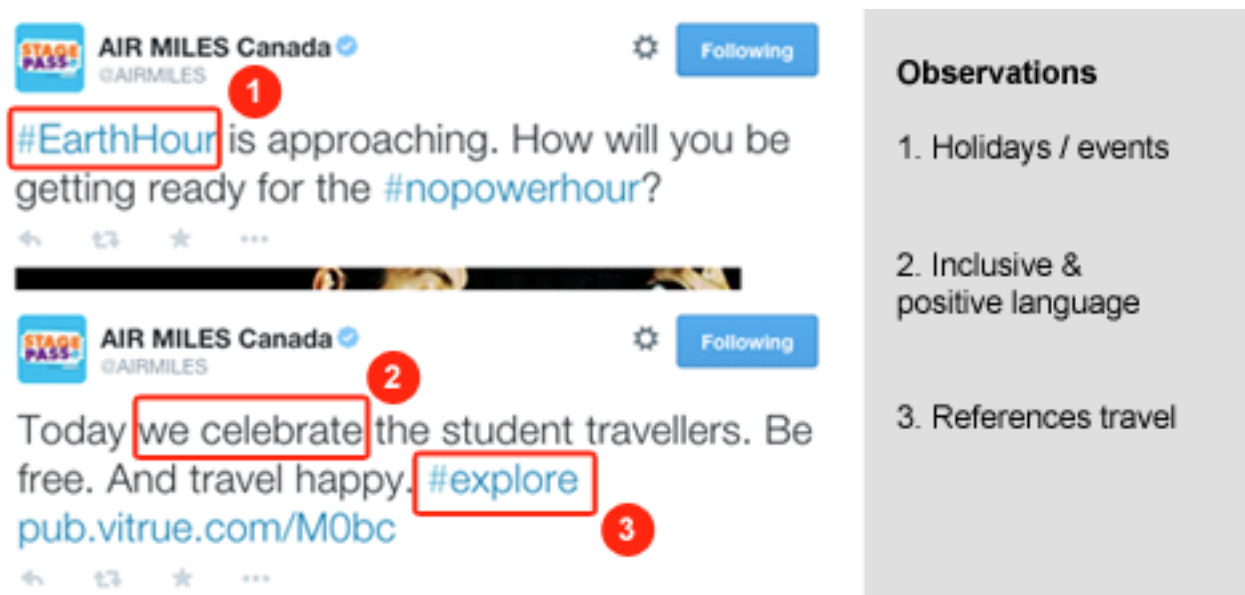


Additionally, Air Miles strived for a community of Shared Experiences through Interactivity. This procedural rhetorical strategy involves direct calls-to-action to demand consumer response (Bogost, 2007). Air Miles utilized this strategy by inviting offline participation, reminding audiences to act, and educing response through prompts. Figure 2, as seen below, is an example of the interactivity expressed by Air miles.

**Figure 2.** Sample Tweets By Air Miles – Interactivity
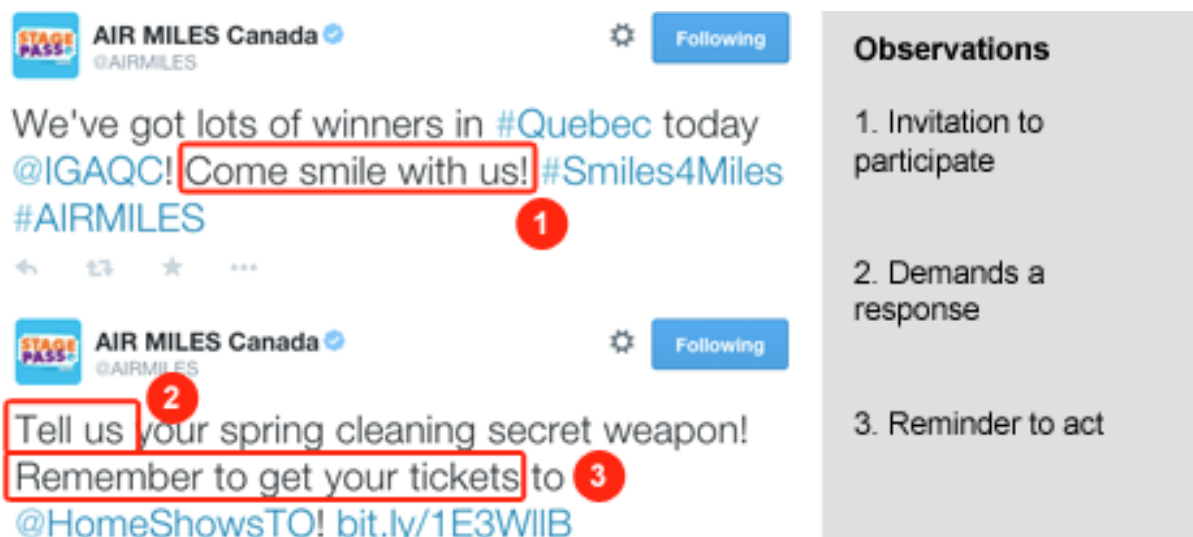
The calls-to-actions sent by Air Miles often related to the gamification mechanic of Challenges. According to Zichermann & Cunningham (2011), challenges focus on contests or promotions. An Air Miles campaign that was detected during the data collection period was the #Smiles4Miles campaign. The #Smiles4Miles campaign involved a travelling Air Miles Smile Booth that dispensed prizes to Air Miles collectors using their collector card (Loyalty One, 2015). A social media component for this campaign encouraged Canadians to take photos of moments that makes them smile for a chance to win a trip for two anywhere in North America (Loyalty One, 2015). Figure 3, as displayed below, are sample tweets related to the campaign. These tweets introduced the contest prize and outlined the eligibility criteria.

**Figure 3.** Sample Tweets By Air Miles - Challenges



In addition to developing an online community through Shared Experiences, Air Miles also integrated an element of Making a Difference. Based on McMillian and Chavis' work on community theory, Rosenbaum et al. (2005) argue that making a difference includes the empowerment of consumers through communication. When applied to loyalty programs,

Rosenbaum et al. (2005) believe that brands can make a difference by welcoming and

acknowledging consumer feedback. Offline, Rosenbaum et al. (2005), reference Jeep's loyalty

program that allows members to communicate with senior managers and design teams as a way

of empowering through influence.

Online, Air Miles recognized and responded to consumer feedback by directly replying to

tweets. When responding to customer complaints or suggestions, Air Miles did not employ

gamification mechanics. Instead, Air Miles enforced rules through Procedural Constraints,

encouraged continued participation through Partial Reinforcement, and educed a response

through Interactivity.  The multiple applications of procedural rhetoric in response to consumer

feedback demonstrate a value for customer service. Figure 4, as shown below, is an example of

Air Miles responding to consumer feedback using procedural rhetoric.

**Figure 4.** Sample Tweets By Air Miles - Making a Difference

**Affiliate Brands: Feeling of Belonging**

Compared to the community elements that Air Miles attempted to create, Affiliate Brands emphasized a Feeling of Belonging. Applying McMillian and Chavis' writings on community theory to loyalty programs, Rosenbaum et al. (2005), explain that a feeling of belonging can be achieved by focusing on exclusivity and membership perks. To ensure that messages reached the target audience of Air Miles collectors, Affiliate Brands often used the hashtag #AirMiles and mentioned @AirMiles.

Affiliate Brands like Shell, Rexall, and American Express highlighted exclusive perks through the gamification mechanics of Points. When doing so, Affiliate Brands used Partial Reinforcement to articulate rules and regulations. This often involved the eligibility requirements to earn points, such as buying a certain amount or attending a particular event. Below is an example of Affiliate Brands using Partial Reinforcement and the gamification mechanics of Points to emphasize a Feeling of Belonging (Figure 5).

**Figure 5.** Sample Tweets By Affiliate Brands - Feeling of Belonging

Overall, Affiliate Brands did not express the same value for community or customer care. The messages did not strive for an emotional connection, nor did it acknowledge consumer feedback. When communicating about the Air Miles Rewards Program, Affiliate Brands strictly emphasized external incentives and rewards.

**Users: The Fulfillment of Individual Needs & Shared Experiences**

The difference between the values expressed by Air Miles and its Affiliate Brands is seen within the user community. Twitter users who took part in conversations about the Air Miles Rewards Program predominantly expressed the Fulfillment of Individual Needs. This community element, originally defined by McMillian and Chavis, is applied to loyalty programs as the attainment of material reward or social status (Rosenbaum et al., 2005). User often displayed their material rewards by sharing the trips and prizes that were afforded by Air Miles. Figure 6, as shown below, provide examples of users promoting their material gains.

**Figure 6.** Sample Tweets By Users - Fulfillment of Individual Needs

The self-promotion seen through user tweets reflects the rhetorical strategy known as the Discourse of Performance. According to Bogost (2007), this procedural strategy highlights individual achievements. In relation to gamification, the focus on personal gain is best expressed through Badges (Zichermann & Cunningham, 2011). By sharing the material rewards afforded by Air Miles, users promote the loyalty program as one that provides social class. In a way, users express gratitude to the loyalty program by highlighting their involvement. However, by focusing on external rewards, the intrinsic communal element that Air Miles is attempting to achieve is overshadowed.

As previously discussed, a Feeling of Belonging can be achieved by both positive and negative sentiments. For many users, a strong emotional connection towards the Air Miles brand was developed through anger and frustration. Figure 7, as depicted below, highlights several user complaints about the Air Miles Rewards Program. This includes long wait times, ineffective call back services, and frustrating processes for resetting account pins. There were also strong objections to the program structure and its restrictions towards point transfers or refunds.

When articulating these complains, users employ the procedural rhetorical strategy known as Procedural Objection (Bogost, 2007). This tactic equips users with the agency to actively critique and challenge gamified systems like loyalty programs (Bogost, 2007). Thus, the public and open environment of social media communities enables users to influence systems of power by expressing their opinions. In turn, the publicity of negative comments also encourages brands to respond and take action.

**Figure 7.** Sample Tweets By Users – Negative Shared Experiences

**Discussion**

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**The Coexistence of Gamification Mechanics & Procedural Rhetoric**

The current body of gamification literature suggests a tension between two prominent theories. On one end, Zichermann & Cunningham (2011) imply that applying gamification to realms like politics, education, and marketing, requires the proper mechanics. This includes the use of points, levels, badges, challenges, and leaderboards (Zichermann & Cunningham, 2011). However, Bogost (2007) argues that gamification mechanics are oversimplifications of what makes something a game, and proposes the adoption of procedural rhetoric. These communicative strategies involve procedural constraints, partial reinforcement, procedural objections, discourse of performance, and interactivity to construct arguments with persuasive potential (Bogost, 2007).

The key findings and analysis of the Air Miles Twitter community suggests that gamification mechanics and procedural rhetoric can coexist. For instance, the use gamification badges align with the discourse of performance to highlight personal accomplishments. Together, these mechanical and rhetorical strategies were used to achieve a community element known as the Fulfillment of Individual Needs. As this community element highlights materiality and social status, the expression of achievement through badges and performance discourse supports the act of self-promotion. An example tweet that encompasses all three attributes is, "So glad I obsessively collect #AirMiles, Flight to Boston now looking to be much more pleasant". In this case, the obsessive collection of Air Miles can be interpreted as a discourse of performance. It is through the compulsive act of points collection that leads to a personal gain of a pleasant flight to Boston. Through the lens of gamification, publically sharing this achievement is considered a badge. Using the #AirMiles hashtag, the community member participates in the

conversation of shared context by highlighting the materiality and status that their membership affords them – a fulfillment of individual need. Thus, gamification and procedural rhetoric can in fact coexist to express elements of community.

In addition to the coexistence of gamification and procedural rhetoric, it is worth noting the dependence of gamification mechanics on procedural rhetoric when applied on social media. For example, gamification mechanics do not always contribute to elements of community. This is evident in service-oriented communication that acknowledges customer feedback. However, procedural rhetoric is integral to the Air Miles Twitter community. In fact, 99% of tweets that contribute to elements of community use a procedural rhetorical strategy. The dominant presence of procedural rhetoric may be due to the affordances of social media. Twitter being a medium that relies on textual interaction certainly supports the linguistic construction of argumentation with persuasive potential. As such, the assessment of gamification as a communication tool on social media requires procedural rhetoric to bridge mechanics with language.

**The Tension Within Loyalty Program Communities**

Existing literature positions loyalty programs as a form of gamified marketing that enhances consumer loyalty through positive brand-to-consumer relations (Lacey, Suh, & Morgan, 2007; Heiner et al., 2012). As mentioned in the literature review, researchers recommend fostering trust through Twitter communities as it allows consumers to participate in the coproduction of messages and meanings (Kozinets et al., 2010; Pai and Tasi, 2011). Known as "imagined communities", Twitter participants feel a sense of belonging and a deep emotional connection through shared experiences (McMillian & Chavis, 1986; Anderson, 2006; Kavoura, 2014).

With this in mind, the examined Twitter conversations around the Air Miles Reward Program demonstrate how the coproduction of meaning within imagined communities can create tension. For instance, Air Miles strived to create a community grounded in shared experiences. The tweets by Air Miles acknowledged and engaged users through interactivity. Though there were gamification elements of challenges through contests and promotions, there were also evident attempts to move beyond external rewards such as trips and prizes. By doing so, Air Miles attempted to nurture a relational community that was grounded in intrinsic methods of motivation.

In contrast, the Affiliate Brands that contributed to the Airs Miles Twitter conversation emphasized exclusivity through membership perks and points. In essence, Affiliate Brands were partaking in the conversation with the sole purpose of promoting products and services. Bogost (2011) describes this promotional strategy as "promogames". Though Bogost (2011) recognizes the value of "promogames", its alignment with brand content is noted to be crucial. According to Bogost (2011), "promogrames" and game content contributes to player expectations as it offers a bridge between gamified mechanics and visual perceptions. As such, the messages that Affiliate Brands share on Twitter must align with the values of Air Miles because users relate one brand with the other. If not, the disconnect may cause consumers to disengage.

The varied motivations that exist within the Air Miles Twitter conversations demonstrate the complexity behind social media communities. Social media scholars argue that Twitter conventions like mentions, hashtags, and retweets promote community and contribute to the interplay of voices with shared context (boyd et al., 2010). Though this may be true in terms of uniting members of similar interests, the interplay of voices may occur with different motivations resulting in tension. With this in mind, the challenge for loyalty programs like Air Miles is to

encourage community members to participate without the contingency of external reward. Though Air Miles attempted to do this, the messages of Affiliate Brands must also align.

**The Duality of Consumer Self-Promotion**

Scholarly work around loyalty programs and gamified experiences suggest that social media is an effective way to increase brand awareness, brand recognition, and brand loyalty (Menrabi et al., 2014). With the power of interpersonal relationships, social media networks afford brands the opportunity to disseminate content to create positive consumers attitudes (Menrabi et al., 2014). However, brand-to-consumer relations on social media must go beyond promotional messages (McGonnigal, 2010). Heiner (2012) finds that loyalty programs which are driven by economic incentives result in program loyalty rather than brand loyalty. It also creates an expectation that the assertion of consumer effort leads to reward (Kivetz, 2003).

Focusing on user-generated tweets about the Air Mile Rewards Program, it is clear that consumers engage with the community for individual fulfillment. Many share the prizes that are afforded by Air Miles as a symbol of achievement. When they are no longer satisfied, consumers then criticize the brand, leading to negative publicity. Relating the discourse of performance back to the literature, the duality of consumer self-promotion can be understood. On one end, the sharing of rewards positively promotes Air Miles, which increases brand awareness and recognition. On the other end, the abundance of tweets related to individual needs implies a loyalty to the program versus the brand. This results in a favorable perception for the rewards afforded by the loyalty program rather than brand itself. In essence, it creates a brand-to-consumer relationship that lacks emotional connection. This relationship is seemingly fragile and is susceptible to consumer criticism.

It is clear that consumers are engaging with the Air Miles community as a way of gaining social capital. Though this is not the value that Air Miles is attempting to project through their branded Twitter community, it does enhance gamified experiences. Hamari and Koivisto (2013) find that social influence and network exposure improve the attitudes toward gamified experiences. Thus, the act of self-promotion can fulfill intrinsic desires to compete and perform.

As a social media engagement strategy, the self-promotion of consumers appears to serve dual roles. Not only does it fulfill individualistic needs to showcase achievements, it also fuels the internal desire to compete and perform. However, this comes at a cost as it makes meaningful brand-to-consumer relationships difficult to establish beyond external incentives like perks and prizes. All in all, the relationship between brands and consumers on social media is a constant struggle for power.  In the context of loyalty programs, the presence of incentives adds another later of complexity to the nature of brand to consumer relationships.

**Towards a Framework of Gamified Marketing Communication**

Inspired by the connections between gamification mechanics, procedural rhetoric, and elements of community, this study offers a Gamified Marketing Communication (GMC) Framework for Social Media Engagement. This theoretical framework illustrates how gamification mechanics, procedural rhetoric, and elements of community can be used to develop engaging social media content. The GMC Framework shown in Figure 8 may support professionals in the operationalization of gamified marketing communication tactics.  This includes the content, style, and purpose of communication. The GMC Framework may also help scholars analyze the communication of gamified mechanics. Acknowledging the role of language and rhetoric in gamification studies would benefit future studies as it moves the exploration beyond systems, algorithm, and technology.

**Figure 8.** Gamified Marketing Communication Framework for Social Media Engagement

| GAMIFICATION MECHANICS | PROCEDURAL RHETORIC | ELEMENTS OF COMMUNITY |
|---|---|---|
| POINTS | PROCEDURAL CONTRAINTS | FEELING OF BELONGING |
| LEVELS | PARTIAL REINFORCEMENT | MAKING A DIFFERENCE |
| BADGES | PROCEDURAL OBJECTIONS | FULFILLMENT OF INDIVIDUAL NEEDS |
| CHALLENGES | DISCOURSE OF PERFORMANCE | SHARED EXPERIENCES |
| LEADERBOARDS | INTERACTIVITY | |

SOCIAL MEDIA CONTENT
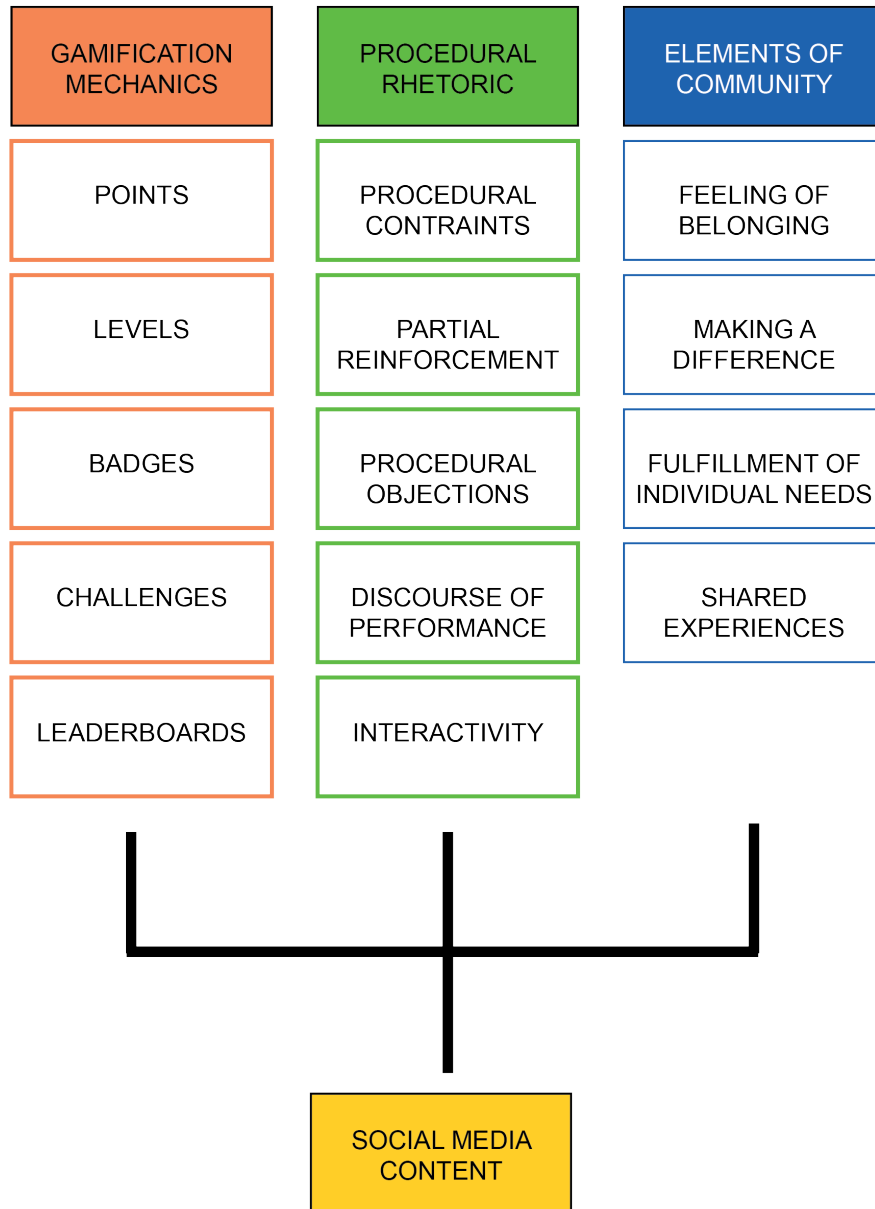
**Conclusion**

In conclusion, this study examined the Twitter conversations about the Air Miles Rewards Program. In doing so, elements of gamification, procedural rhetoric, and online communities were considered. The following section outlines the key contributions of this research, as well as the limitations and areas for future study.

**Key Contributions**

The analysis of Twitter conversations regarding the Air Miles Rewards Program leads to several key contributions to the study of communication, gamification, and online communities. First, gamification mechanics and procedural rhetoric can in fact work together to achieve elements of community. Together, gamification mechanics and procedural rhetoric can work hand-in-hand to motivate consumers through gamified marketing communication. By recognizing the differences, similarities, and relationships between gamification mechanics and procedural rhetoric, innovative ways to engage virtual communities can be developed. Furthermore, by examining gamification beyond systems and mechanics, the persuasive power of rhetoric can be acknowledged as a vital component to gamified experiences.

In addition to the connections between gamification mechanics and procedural rhetoric, this study demonstrates the complexity behind social media communities. More specifically, the Twitter conversations of the Air Miles community reveal a variation in motivation and intent. This includes intrinsically driven tweets by Air Miles; extrinsically motivated tweets by Affiliate Brands, and individualistically centered content by users. The differences in motivation are important to recognize as it may result in tension between community members. The inconsistency in values may also diminish the efforts to move beyond extrinsic elements of

communities. All in all, the intricacies of social media communities are important to consider when examining brand-to-consumer relationships.

Finally, this paper offers a theoretical framework that visualizes the associations between gamification mechanics, procedural rhetoric, and elements of community. The GMC Framework can be applied to the professional world of marketing to inform the development of social media content strategies. Academically, the GMC Framework can be used to explore gamification from a communication lens, recognizing the role of language and rhetoric that goes beyond technological systems and algorithms.

**Limitations & Areas for Future Study**

Though this research leads to several contributions to academic and professional work, it is important to recognize its limitations to inform future studies. For instance, the data collection period of this project spans over a four-month period, totalling 10,000 tweets. Conducting a longitudinal study over a greater period of time would allow for a more comprehensive data set. This is especially beneficial for loyalty program brands that host promotions year round.

In addition, though this study speaks to the tension in motivation within an open social media community, it cannot predict the true intentions behind specific communication strategies. As such, conducting qualitative interviews with loyalty program brands, affiliate partners, and consumers would clarify the motivations that inform the tweets.

Finally, this study offers a theoretical model to visualize the link between gamification mechanics, procedural rhetoric, and elements of communities. Grounded in scholarly work, this model can and should be used to analyze other brands to confirm, disprove, and develop new associations. Moving forward, this theoretical model should also be assessed using statistical methods to verify the relations between the three theoretical theories discussed in this study

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# Appendices

## Appendix A: Content Code Book – Author and Message Type

| No | Category | Category Instructions | Variable | Code | Definitions |
|----|----------|----------------------|----------|------|-------------|
| 1 | **Name of Twitter Account** | | | | Automatically exported |
| 2 | **Time Period of Sampling** | | | | Time period of sampling |
| 3 | **Date** | | | | |
| 4 | **Author** | The author can be an individual person or an organization on Twitter | AirMiles | 1 | Tweets by @AirMiles only. Excludes sub-handles like @AirMiles_ME |
| | | | Affiliated Brands | 2 | Tweets by official Air Miles partners and other commercial brands |
| | | | Individual Users | 3 | Tweets by Twitter users that are not Air Miles or Affiliates |
| | | | Other | 9 | Tweets not by @AirMiles, Affiliate Brands, or individual users. |
| 5 | **Type of Message** | NO MULTIPLE CODING POSSIBLE. | Tweet | 1 | Tweets that do not use the syntax "RT" and "@" |
| | | | Retweet | 2 | Tweets that use the syntax "RT" |
| | | | Reply | 3 | Tweets that use the syntax "@" in the beginning of the tweet |
| | | | Mention | 4 | Tweets that use the syntax "@" but the beginning of the tweet |

**Appendix B: Content Code Book – Hashtag Use**

| No | Category | Category Instructions | Variable | Code | Definitions |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 6 | **Hashtags** | A hashtag creates a community feed as it links users to topics of interest. This category is intended to determine the contribution to networked interactions of a community.<br><br>NO MULTIPLE CODING POSSIBLE.<br><br>IF MULTIPLE HASHTAGS ARE USED THAT INCLUDE #AIRMILES, CODE AS 1) #AIRMILES.<br><br>IF MULTIPLE HASHTAGS ARE USED THAT INCLUDE #SMILES4MILES, #GAMES4MILES, OR #IMACOLLECTOR, BUT NOT #AIRMILES, CODE AS 2) AFFILIATED HASHTAG.<br><br>IF MULTIPLE HASHTAGS ARE USED WITHOUT #AMILES OR #IM A COLLECTOR, CODE AS 3) OTHER HASHTAG. | #AirMiles | 1 | Tweets that include "#AirMiles" |
| | | | Affiliated Hashtag | 2 | Tweets that include sponsored hashtags like #Smile4miles |
| | | | Other Hashtag | 3 | Tweets that use the syntax "#" but not "#Airmiles" or affiliate hashtags |
| | | | No Hashtag | 9 | Tweets that do not use the syntax "#" |

**Appendix C: Content Code Book – Elements of Community**

| No | Category | Category Instructions | Variable | Code | Definitions |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 7 | **Elements of Community** | McMillian and Chavis (1986) outline 4 elements of community. Rosenbaum, Ostrom, and Kuntze (2005) apply these elements to loyalty programs engagement strategies.<br><br>NO MULTIPLE CODING POSSIBLE. | Feeling of Belonging | 1 | Tweets that focus on membership exclusivity and perks |
| | | | Making a Difference | 2 | Tweets that invite and acknowledge feedback |
| | | | Fulfills Individual Needs | 3 | Tweets that highlight materiality and/or social class |
| | | | Shared Experience | 4 | Tweets that embody shared identity and/or experiences |
| | | | Other Elements of Community | 5 | Tweets that do not express any elements of community |
| | | | No Elements of Community | 9 | Tweets that focus on membership exclusivity and perks |

**Appendix D: Content Code Book – Gamification Mechanics**

| No | Category | Category Instructions | Variable | Code | Definitions |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 8 | **Gamification Mechanics** | For Zichermann & Cunningham (2011) gamified are composed of 5 gamification mechanics.<br><br>NO MULTIPLE CODING POSSIBLE | Points | 1 | Tweets that focus on earning or collecting points |
|  |  |  | Levels | 2 | Tweets that focus on membership tiers (Gold or Onyx) |
|  |  |  | Badges | 3 | Tweets that focus on personal gain or achievement |
|  |  |  | Challenges | 4 | Tweets that focus on contests or promotions |
|  |  |  | Leaderboards | 5 | Tweets that compare achievements between users |
|  |  |  | Other Elements of Gamification | 6 | Tweets that do not include elements of gamification mechanics |
|  |  |  | No Elements of Gamification | 9 | Tweets that focus on earning or collecting points |

**Appendix E: Content Code Book – Procedural Rhetoric**

| No | Category | Category Instructions | Variable | Code | Definitions |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 9 | **Procedural Rhetoric** | Bogost (2007) explores how game mechanics are used to construct arguments with persuasive potential. In doing so, procedural rhetorical strategies are outlined.<br><br>NO MULTIPLE CODING POSSIBLE. | Procedural Constraints | 1 | Tweets that enforce processes or rules |
| | | | Partial Reinforcement | 2 | Tweets that implicitly motivate consumers |
| | | | Procedural Objections | 3 | Tweets that challenges rules, processes, or systems |
| | | | Discourse of Performance | 4 | Tweets that highlight performance or achievement |
| | | | Interactivity | 5 | Tweets that explicitly demand an action or response |
| | | | No Elements of Procedural Rhetoric | 9 | Tweets that do not include elements of procedural rhetoric |

**Appendix F: Coding Results – Gamification Mechanics & Elements of Community**

| Gamification Mechanics | Feeling of Belonging | Making a Difference | Fulfills Individual Needs | Shared Experience | None | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Points | 284 | 21 | 34 | 10 | 5 | 354 |
| Levels | 34 | 1 | 6 | 2 | 0 | 43 |
| Badges | 23 | 2 | 139 | 28 | 0 | 192 |
| Challenges | 64 | 5 | 6 | 77 | 0 | 152 |
| Leaderboards | 40 | 8 | 11 | 20 | 0 | 79 |
| None | 28 | 63 | 73 | 10 | 6 | 180 |
| Total | 473 | 100 | 269 | 147 | 11 | 1,000 |

Note: Results include gamification mechanics that do not contribute to elements of community.

This is important as it demonstrates:
1) the use of gamification outside of the context of community;
2) the existence of community without gamification; and
3) the presence of tweets that do not have elements of gamification or community.

It also ensures consistency in findings as the presence of gamification as it relates to elements of community is evaluated based on the total sample size.

**Appendix G: Coding Results – Procedural Rhetoric & Elements of Community**

| Procedural Rhetoric | Feeling of Belonging | Making a Difference | Fulfills Individual Needs | Shared Experience | None | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Procedural Constraints | 132 | 23 | 59 | 4 | 0 | 218 |
| Partial Reinforcement | 120 | 22 | 17 | 21 | 0 | 180 |
| Procedural Objections | 7 | 10 | 33 | 2 | 0 | 52 |
| Discourse of Performance | 75 | 4 | 143 | 53 | 5 | 280 |
| Interactivity | 138 | 40 | 17 | 65 | 0 | 260 |
| None | 1 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 6 | 10 |
| Total | 473 | 100 | 269 | 147 | 11 | 1,000 |

Note: Results include elements of procedural rhetoric that does not contribute to elements of community.

This is important as it demonstrates:
1) the use of procedural rhetoric outside of the context of community;
2) the existence of community without procedural rhetoric; and
3) the presence of tweets that do not have elements of procedural rhetoric or community.

It also ensures consistency in findings as the presence of procedural rhetoric as it related to elements of community is evaluated based on the total sample size.

**Appendix H: Coding Results – Procedural Rhetoric & Gamification Mechanics**

| Procedural Rhetoric | Points | Levels | Badges | Challenges | Leaderboards | None | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Procedural Constraints | 114 | 12 | 1 | 15 | 1 | 75 | 218 |
| Partial Reinforcement | 104 | 11 | 6 | 35 | 7 | 17 | 180 |
| Procedural Objections | 15 | 5 | 7 | 1 | 1 | 23 | 52 |
| Discourse of Performance | 11 | 9 | 175 | 17 | 65 | 3 | 280 |
| Interactivity | 109 | 6 | 3 | 84 | 5 | 53 | 260 |
| None | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 9 | 10 |
| Total | 354 | 43 | 192 | 152 | 79 | 180 | 1,000 |

Note: Results include elements of procedural rhetoric that does not relate to gamification mechanics.

This is important as it demonstrates:
1) the use of procedural rhetoric without gamification mechanics;
2) the use of gamification mechanics without procedural rhetoric; and
3) the presence of tweets that do not have elements of procedural rhetoric or gamification mechanics.

It also ensures consistency in findings as the presence of procedural rhetoric as it relates to gamification mechanics is evaluated based on the total sample size.