The Impact of Gamified Ethics Training on Moral Decision-Making Skills in MBA Students

Anand N. Asthana

CENTRUM Católica Graduate Business School (CCGBS), Lima, Perú; Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú (PUCP), Lima, Perú. Email aasthana@pucp.pe

Abstract. This study investigates the efficacy of gamified ethics training in enhancing moral decision-making skills among MBA students. Utilising a longitudinal design, 239 participants were randomly assigned to either gamified or traditional ethics instruction over 12 weeks. Moral decision-making skills, ethical sensitivity, and engagement were assessed at baseline, post-intervention, and six-month follow-up. Results indicate that the gamified approach led to significantly greater improvements in moral decision-making compared to traditional methods, with effects persisting at follow-up. Qualitative data revealed enhanced ethical awareness and decision-making confidence in the experimental group. These findings suggest that gamification can be an effective tool for developing durable ethical competencies in business education, potentially addressing limitations of conventional ethics instruction. The study contributes to the growing body of literature on innovative pedagogical approaches in business ethics education.

Keywords: Moral decision-making; MBA curriculum; Gamification; Ethical sensitivity; Student engagement; Experiential learning

1. Introduction

The landscape of business education has undergone significant transformations in recent years, with ethics instruction emerging as a cornerstone of modern curricula (Treviño & Nelson, 2021). Whilst the imperative of fostering ethical decision-making skills in future business leaders has long been recognised, the efficacy of traditional pedagogical approaches has often been called into question (Waples et al., 2009). As educators grapple with the challenge of imparting lasting ethical principles to students, innovative methodologies such as gamification have begun to garner attention in educational contexts (Dichev & Dicheva, 2017).

Traditional ethics training in MBA programmes typically involves lecture-based instruction, case studies, and discussions. This approach usually focuses on theoretical frameworks of ethical decision-making; analysis of real-world ethical dilemmas; discussion of corporate social responsibility; and examination of

professional codes of conduct. This method usually employs textbooks, academic papers, and case studies as primary learning materials. Students are often assessed through written assignments, exams, and class participation (Asthana, 2022, 2023; Christensen et al., 2007).

Gamified ethics training, on the other hand, incorporates game elements and mechanics into the learning process. This approach aims to increase engagement and motivation while teaching ethical concepts. Key aspects include interactive scenarios and simulations; points, badges, and leaderboards to incentivise participation; immediate feedback on decisions; progression systems that unlock new content or challenges; and collaborative or competitive elements among participants. Gamified ethics training usually utilises digital platforms or specially designed board games to create immersive learning experiences (Martinov-Bennie & Mladenovic, 2015).

Apparently there are important differences between the two approaches. Gamified training typically aims for higher engagement through interactivity and rewards, while traditional methods rely more on intrinsic motivation and academic rigor. Gamified approaches often provide immediate feedback on ethical decisions, whereas traditional methods may have delayed feedback through grading or discussions. Gamified training emphasises learning by doing through simulations and role-playing, while traditional methods focus more on analytical and theoretical understanding. Traditional training usually assesses through formal academic means, while gamified approaches may incorporate in-game metrics and performance indicators. Finally, gamified training can often be self-paced and adaptable to individual learning styles, whereas traditional methods typically follow a more structured curriculum (Seaborn & Fels, 2015).

While gamification offers promising benefits for ethics education, it is important to acknowledge the ethical concerns associated with the approach itself. A growing body of literature has critically examined the potential ethical pitfalls of gamification in educational contexts (Bogost, 2015; Kim & Werbach, 2016; Selwyn, 2015;). These critiques warrant careful consideration, particularly when gamification is applied to ethics education itself.

One significant concern is the risk of manipulation through reward mechanisms. Gamification typically employs points, badges, and leaderboards to motivate behaviour, which some scholars argue may constitute a form of behavioural control that potentially undermines student autonomy (Sicart, 2015; Deterding, 2014). This creates a paradoxical situation where educators might be using manipulative design techniques to teach ethical decision-making (Fuchs et al., 2014).

While early research suggested that extrinsic rewards might undermine intrinsic motivation (Deci et al., 2001), more recent studies have presented a more nuanced understanding of how gamification influences student motivation. Contemporary meta-analyses and systematic reviews indicate that well-designed gamification can actually enhance rather than diminish intrinsic motivation

(Sailer & Homner, 2020; Koivisto & Hamari, 2019 Li et al., 2024). The key appears to lie in the specific game elements employed and how they are implemented. Autonomy-supportive gamification designs that emphasise meaning, choice, and competence development have been shown to positively impact intrinsic motivation (Xi & Hamari, 2019; Mekler et al., 2017). For instance, a recent longitudinal study by Ahmad et al. (2020) demonstrated that gamification elements designed to support basic psychological needs significantly increased both engagement and intrinsic motivation in educational contexts over a 16-week period, with effects remaining stable over time. Similarly, Groening and Binnewies (2021) found that gamification elements that support autonomy, competence, and relatedness actually strengthened, rather than undermined, intrinsic motivation in learning environments. These findings contradict earlier concerns and suggest that thoughtfully implemented gamification can serve as a scaffold that ultimately enhances students' intrinsic interest in the subject matter, including ethics education.

Questions of inclusivity and accessibility represent another important ethical dimension. Gamified approaches may inadvertently favour certain learning styles, cultural backgrounds, or personality types (Koivisto & Hamari, 2014). Students who are less competitive, less technologically inclined, or from cultural backgrounds where competition is not emphasised may find themselves disadvantaged in gamified learning environments. This raises concerns about equity and whether gamification might create new forms of educational marginalisation (Hyrynsalmi et al., 2017).

There are also substantive concerns about whether gamification might trivialise complex ethical issues. By reducing nuanced ethical dilemmas to simplified game mechanics or binary choices, gamification risks diminishing the gravity of real-world ethical challenges (Sicart, 2015). Critics argue that this "shallow gamification" approach may teach students to view ethical decision-making as a game to be won rather than a serious responsibility with real consequences for stakeholders (Gupta, 2025).

Furthermore, the competitive elements often embedded in gamified systems may promote values that potentially contradict ethical teaching goals. Leadership boards, competitive rankings, and winner-take-all reward structures could potentially foster self-interest rather than the concern for others that ethics education aims to cultivate (Harviainen & Hassan, 2019). This creates a potential misalignment between the medium and the message in ethics education. Data privacy and informed consent represent additional ethical considerations in digital gamification systems. Many gamified platforms collect substantial user data to personalise experiences and track progress (Alomar et al., 2016). This raises questions about student privacy, data ownership, and whether students fully understand how their interaction data might be used.

Despite these important critiques, it would be premature to dismiss gamification as inherently inappropriate for ethics education. Rather, these

concerns highlight the need for thoughtful, ethically-informed design of gamified interventions (Akpan et al., 2025). They also underscore the importance of empirical research that specifically examines both the benefits and potential drawbacks of gamified approaches in ethics education contexts. This study aims to address this research gap by rigorously evaluating the effectiveness of gamified ethics training while remaining mindful of these important critiques.

In light of these considerations, this study seeks to address a fundamental research question: To what extent does gamified ethics training enhance the moral decision-making skills of undergraduate business students compared to traditional teaching methods? This overarching inquiry is further refined through two subsidiary questions: How does the impact of gamified ethics training on moral decision-making skills evolve over time? And what specific elements of gamification contribute most significantly to the development of these skills?

By leveraging the engaging and interactive elements of gamification, we posit that students may develop a more nuanced understanding of ethical dilemmas and cultivate robust decision-making frameworks (Morschheuser et al., 2017). Through a longitudinal approach, this research aims to track the development of these critical skills over time, providing valuable insights into the lasting impact of gamified ethics education. The study's design allows for a comprehensive examination of both immediate and long-term effects, addressing a gap in current literature which often focuses solely on short-term outcomes (Wouters et al., 2013). As businesses increasingly operate on a global stage, the cultivation of a universally applicable yet culturally sensitive ethical framework becomes paramount (Crane & Matten, 2021). By examining the intersection of gamification, ethics education, and moral decision-making, this research endeavours to contribute meaningfully to the broader discourse on effective business ethics pedagogy.

2. Literature Survey

Gamification, defined as the application of game-design elements and game principles in non-game contexts (Deterding et al., 2011), has emerged as a promising approach to enhance student engagement and learning outcomes. In educational settings, gamification typically involves incorporating elements such as points, badges, leaderboards, and narrative structures into the learning process (Kapp, 2012). A meta-analysis by Sailer and Homner (2020) found that gamification in education generally yields positive effects on cognitive, motivational, and behavioural learning outcomes. However, the authors noted that the effectiveness of gamification can vary depending on the context and implementation, highlighting the need for careful design and alignment with learning objectives.