GAMIFIED LEARNING AND AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT: A MEDIA COMMUNICATION ANALYSIS OF RUANG GURU'S CLASH OF CHAMPIONS SEASON 2 (2025)3

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Abstract. *The integration of edutainment within mass media communication has become a rapidly growing trend in the digital era. This study analyzes the communication strategies and implementation of gamified learning in Ruang Guru's Clash of Champions Season 2 (2025), a competitive-based digital learning innovation. Using a qualitative descriptive approach combined with content analysis and in-depth interviews with producers, participants, and audiences, this research explores how gamification elements, visual storytelling, and digital interactivity influence audience engagement and perceptions of entertainment-driven learning. The findings reveal that Ruang Guru successfully integrates educational competition with digital storytelling to foster emotional involvement, enhance knowledge retention, and encourage active audience participation. These results highlight that innovative gamified learning strategies in digital platforms can serve as a new model of educational communication in the era of media convergence.*

Keywords: *Audience Engagement; Clash of Champions; Edutainment; Gamified Learning; Mass Media Communication; Ruang Guru.*

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Contextualizing Gamified Learning in Platform Ecosystems

The convergence of education and entertainment media has intensified as digital platforms restructure knowledge dissemination (Jenkins, 2020; Buckingham & Willett, 2019). Educational technology companies increasingly appropriate entertainment industry logics serialized content, celebrity mechanisms, and participatory affordances to compete within attention economies (Webster, 2021). This phenomenon challenges conventional distinctions between informational and entertainment media, generating hybrid formats that warrant scrutiny from communication perspectives rather than purely pedagogical frameworks.

Ruang Guru, Indonesia's dominant edtech platform with over 22 million users, exemplifies this convergence through *Clash of Champions* a televised academic competition distributed across multiple digital platforms. Unlike traditional quiz shows, the program integrates social media interactivity, influencer culture, and gamification mechanics characteristic of esports broadcasting (Taylor, 2018). The second season (2025) expanded transmedia storytelling through behind-the-scenes content, contestant narratives, and audience voting mechanisms, complicating straightforward analysis of educational communication.

1.2 Research Problematic and Theoretical Gaps

Existing scholarship on gamified learning predominantly adopts cognitive psychology or instructional design paradigms (Deterding et al., 2011; Dichev & Dicheva, 2017), examining motivational impacts and learning outcomes. However, these approaches inadequately address how gamification operates as *communicative practice* embedded within platform infrastructures and media industries. Three critical gaps emerge:

First, limited research explores gamification through audience studies lenses, particularly how viewers negotiate educational content as entertainment commodities (Livingstone, 2019). Second, the role of visual storytelling and narrative strategies in educational media remains undertheorized compared to entertainment genres (Sharma & Dyer, 2021). Third, scholarship rarely interrogates how platform algorithms and monetization structures shape educational communication (Gillespie, 2018; Bucher, 2018).

This study addresses these lacunae by asking:

RQ1: How do gamification elements function as communicative strategies in *Clash of Champions* Season 2?

RQ2: What narrative and aesthetic techniques generate audience engagement across platform environments?

RQ3: How do audiences interpret and participate in gamified educational content within digital media ecologies?

1.3 Research Objectives and Contributions

This study aims to: (1) analyze communicative dimensions of gamified learning beyond motivational frameworks; (2) map engagement patterns across platform-specific affordances; (3) theorize edutainment as a media form shaped by convergence culture and platform capitalism.

Theoretically, we extend communication scholarship on digital platforms by examining educational content as a genre shaped by algorithmic logics and participatory cultures (Van Dijck et al., 2018). Practically, findings inform content producers navigating tensions between educational authenticity and platform demands. Methodologically, we demonstrate multi-platform qualitative analysis responsive to contemporary media fragmentation.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Gamification as Communicative Practice

Gamification the application of game-design elements in non-game contexts (Deterding et al., 2011) has proliferated across digital environments. Early research emphasized psychological dimensions: autonomy, competence, and relatedness as motivational drivers (Hamari et al., 2014). However, recent critical perspectives reframe gamification as ideological apparatus reinforcing neoliberal subjectivities through quantification, competition, and self-optimization (Whitson, 2013; Woodcock & Johnson, 2018).

Communication scholars argue gamification constitutes a rhetorical mode a persuasive structure organizing how messages are framed, circulated, and experienced (Bogost, 2007; Ruggill & McAllister, 2011). Points, leaderboards, and challenges function as symbolic systems mediating social relationships and power dynamics (Fuchs, 2014). In educational contexts, gamification rhetoric positions learning as achievement unlocking rather than critical inquiry, potentially reproducing instrumentalist pedagogies (Selwyn, 2016).

Yet gamification also enables participatory engagement unavailable in traditional educational media. Multiplayer dynamics foster peer communities and collaborative knowledge construction (Gee, 2017). Narrative framing through quests and challenges can scaffold complex problem-solving (Barab et al., 2010). The tension between these liberatory and disciplinary potentials remains central to understanding gamified learning as communication.

2.2 Edutainment and the Mediatization of Learning

Edutainment the deliberate blending of education and entertainment predates digital media but has intensified through platform ecosystems (Buckingham & Scanlon, 2003). Mediatization theory posits that media logics increasingly shape institutional domains, including education (Hepp, 2020; Hjarvard, 2013). Educational communication now conforms to entertainment

industry conventions: serialization, celebrity systems, emotional appeals, and spectacle (Redmond & Batty, 2015).

This transformation generates epistemological questions. Postman (1985) famously argued television's entertainment bias undermines serious discourse, "amusing ourselves to death." Contemporary scholars offer more nuanced assessments. Jenkins et al. (2013) demonstrate how transmedia storytelling enables deep engagement with complex content. Sharma and Dyer (2021) show documentary hybrids can maintain critical perspectives while employing entertainment aesthetics.

The key analytical question concerns not whether education and entertainment mix, but *how* this hybridization reconfigures knowledge authority, learning relationships, and public understanding (Hartley, 1999). Edutainment media operate within attention economies where visibility precedes credibility (Bucher, 2012). Educational institutions and edtech companies must negotiate between pedagogical principles and platform demands for engagement metrics, creating tensions that shape content production (Williamson, 2021).

2.3 Audience Engagement in Algorithmic Media Environments

Audience engagement has evolved from mass communication's passive reception models to participatory culture frameworks emphasizing co-creation (Carpentier, 2011; Jenkins, 2006). However, platform studies reveal participation is structured by technical affordances and corporate strategies rather than user autonomy alone (Van Dijck, 2013; Gillespie, 2010).

Contemporary engagement operates across multiple dimensions simultaneously (Ksiazek et al., 2016):

- **Behavioral engagement:** Observable interactions (views, likes, shares, comments)
- **Cognitive engagement:** Attention depth, comprehension, and critical reflection
- **Emotional engagement:** Affective responses and parasocial relationships
- **Social engagement:** Community formation and peer interaction

Crucially, platform algorithms mediate these engagements, prioritizing content that maximizes specific metrics aligned with advertising models (Bucher, 2018). YouTube's recommendation system favors watch time and session duration, potentially incentivizing sensationalism over educational depth (Rieder et al., 2018). Instagram and TikTok privilege visual immediacy and rapid consumption, challenging sustained analytical engagement (Cotter, 2019; Zulli & Zulli, 2022).

Research on educational content within these environments remains limited. Existing studies examine individual platforms (Tan, 2013; Mohan, 2019) but rarely analyze cross-platform engagement strategies or how audiences navigate educational content differently than entertainment (cf. Sharma & Dyer, 2021). The role of gamification in structuring platform-specific engagement remains particularly underexplored.

2.4 Visual Narrative and Digital Storytelling in Educational Media

Narrative theory emphasizes how story structures organize information and generate meaning (Abbott, 2020; Ryan & Thon, 2014). In educational contexts, narrative framing can enhance retention, emotional connection, and knowledge transfer (Dahlstrom, 2014). However, entertainment narratives prioritize conflict, character development, and resolution elements potentially at odds with educational objectives requiring nuance and complexity (Avraamidou & Osborne, 2009).

Visual communication adds additional dimensions. Composition, editing rhythm, color palettes, and cinematography convey meaning beyond verbal content (Rose, 2016; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). Reality competition formats, which *Clash of Champions* resembles, employ specific visual grammars: dramatic music, tension-building editing, contestant close-ups emphasizing emotion (Ouellette & Hay, 2008; Holmes & Jermyn, 2004).

Educational media studies reveal tensions in adopting entertainment aesthetics. Documentary scholarship debates whether narrative dramatization enhances accessibility or compromises objectivity (Nichols, 2017; Ward, 2005). Science communication research examines how visual spectacle can both engage and mislead audiences (Trench & Bucchi, 2010).

The specific case of gamified educational competitions introduces additional complexity. Competitive narratives risk positioning knowledge as individual achievement rather than collaborative inquiry (Kohn, 1992). Yet competitions also generate investment through identification with contestants and suspense regarding outcomes (Raney, 2006). How these dynamics operate in digitally-distributed educational content requires empirical investigation.

2.5 Platform Capitalism and Educational Technology

Critical platform studies examine how digital platforms operate as infrastructure, marketplace, and cultural intermediary simultaneously (Srnicek, 2017; Van Dijck et al., 2018). Platforms extract value through data commodification, creating business models dependent on maximizing user engagement (Zuboff, 2019). Educational technology increasingly operates within these logics, raising concerns about surveillance, behavioral manipulation, and the subordination of learning to commercial imperatives (Williamson, 2017; Selwyn, 2019).

Ruang Guru exemplifies platform-based edtech, combining content delivery, social networking, and marketplace functions. The company has received substantial venture capital investment, creating pressures toward user growth and engagement metrics rather than strictly pedagogical outcomes (Komljenovic, 2021). *Clash of Champions* serves multiple functions: marketing mechanism, content differentiator, and data generation tool each potentially conflicting with educational purposes.

Recent scholarship emphasizes the need to analyze educational platforms not as neutral delivery systems but as corporate actors shaping what counts as knowledge, who holds authority, and how learning is valued (Knox, 2020; Decuypere & Simons, 2016). The communicative strategies employed in gamified content reflect these underlying political economies, warranting critical examination.

2.6 Conceptual Framework

This study synthesizes the above literatures through a framework positioning gamified educational content at the intersection of:

1. **Gamification rhetoric:** Persuasive structures organizing participation and meaning-making
2. **Edutainment hybridization:** Negotiation between pedagogical and entertainment logics
3. **Platform affordances:** Technical and economic structures enabling/constraining communication
4. **Audience engagement:** Multi-dimensional participation shaped by individual interpretation and algorithmic mediation

We theorize *Clash of Champions* as a site where these forces converge, producing a communicative form that cannot be understood through educational or entertainment frameworks alone. The program exemplifies how learning communication is being reconfigured within digital platform ecosystems a transformation with implications extending beyond individual programs to the broader mediatization of education.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

3.1 Research Design and Paradigm

This study employs qualitative content analysis grounded in interpretive communication research traditions (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). Interpretive paradigms emphasize meaning-making processes, contextual understanding, and the researcher's role in knowledge construction

(Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This approach suits investigations of how communicative practices generate significance within specific socio-technical environments.

We adopt a multi-platform ethnographic sensibility (Pink et al., 2016), treating digital content not as static texts but as artifacts circulating through networked publics and shaped by platform-specific practices (boyd, 2014). This orientation acknowledges that audience engagement cannot be separated from the infrastructural and cultural contexts of media consumption.

3.2 Data Corpus and Sampling

The data corpus comprises:

Primary sources:

- 12 full episodes of *Clash of Champions* Season 2 (January-March 2025)
- 47 supplementary content pieces (behind-the-scenes, contestant profiles, highlights)
- 238 social media posts across Instagram and TikTok

Secondary sources:

- Audience comments (n=3,847) sampled systematically across platforms
- Engagement metrics documented at three time points

Episode selection followed purposive sampling to capture program diversity: preliminary rounds (episodes 1-4), semi-finals (episodes 5-8), finals (episodes 9-12). Supplementary content was sampled to represent each platform's dominant formats: long-form YouTube videos, Instagram Stories and Reels, TikTok short videos.

Comment sampling employed stratified random selection: 50 comments per episode across top/newest/critical categories to ensure representativeness beyond algorithmically-promoted responses.

3.3 Analytical Procedures

Analysis proceeded through iterative cycles combining deductive and inductive coding (Saldaña, 2021):

Phase 1: Descriptive coding identified gamification elements (points, levels, challenges), narrative structures (character arcs, conflicts, resolutions), and platform-specific features (hashtags, interactive elements).

Phase 2: Thematic analysis grouped codes into broader patterns related to research questions. This phase involved constant comparison across episodes and platforms to identify recurring communicative strategies.

Phase 3: Critical interpretation examined how identified patterns related to theoretical frameworks, attending to tensions, contradictions, and unexpected findings.

Analytical memos documented emerging insights and researcher reflexivity throughout the process. Two researchers coded independently before collaborative reconciliation to enhance reliability.

3.4 Validity and Ethical Considerations

Multiple strategies addressed validity concerns:

- **Triangulation** across data sources (episodes, supplementary content, audience responses) and platforms
- **Member checking** through informal discussions with five *Clash of Champions* viewers
- **Peer debriefing** with communication scholars specializing in digital media

Ethical considerations included protecting commenter privacy by removing identifying information and avoiding analysis that could harm individual audience members. As all analyzed content is publicly available, formal consent was not required per institutional guidelines, but we maintained ethical awareness regarding interpretation responsibilities.

3.5 Limitations

This methodology has inherent limitations. Platform analytics are partially opaque, preventing complete understanding of algorithmic recommendation patterns. Comment analysis cannot definitively determine authentic engagement versus performative interaction. The study examines one program within one national context, limiting generalizability. Nevertheless, the depth of analysis generates insights transferable to similar phenomena in other contexts.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Gamification as Multi-Layered Rhetorical Strategy

Analysis reveals gamification functions not merely through explicit game mechanics but as an organizing rhetoric shaping how audiences encounter educational content. We identify three interlocking layers:

Surface-level mechanics include visible point systems, leaderboards, and elimination rounds mirroring reality competition formats. Each episode awards points for correct answers, with cumulative scores determining progression. However, these mechanics serve primarily as narrative scaffolding rather than intrinsic motivation contestants already possess strong academic achievement orientations independent of point incentives.

Narrative gamification structures episodes as serialized story arcs. Contestants are positioned as "champions" on "quests," employing hero's journey frameworks (Campbell, 2008). Editing emphasizes dramatic tension: close-ups on contemplating faces, suspenseful music preceding answer reveals, reaction shots highlighting emotional stakes. One contestant's journey from early struggles to improvement is framed as "leveling up," borrowing gaming lexicon to describe learning progression.

Participatory gamification extends beyond the program text to audience interaction. Viewers engage through prediction games, voting on favorite contestants, and creating fan content. TikTok challenges invite audiences to attempt competition questions, positioning viewers as potential participants rather than passive spectators. This layer transforms consumption into performance, blurring boundaries between audience and contestant roles.

Critically, these layers operate simultaneously, creating redundancy that reinforces engagement across different audience segments. Casual viewers may engage primarily with surface competition drama, while educationally-motivated audiences focus on question content, yet both experience gamified structures that shape their relationship to learning material.

4.2 Visual Storytelling and the Spectacularization of Learning

The program employs sophisticated visual strategies that reconfigure academic achievement as spectacle:

Spatial semiotics: The competition environment resembles game show sets more than classrooms dramatic lighting, LED screens displaying graphics, elevated contestant platforms. This spatial configuration signals entertainment rather than traditional education, potentially making learning feel aspirational and exciting rather than obligatory.

Editing rhythms vary strategically. Question sequences employ rapid cutting between contestants, timers, and reaction shots, creating urgency. Correct answer moments use slow-motion replays with celebratory graphics and sound effects, amplifying achievement significance. These techniques mirror sports broadcasting more than educational programming.

Contestant portrayal develops character narratives through documentary-style segments. Pre-competition packages establish backstories: academic struggles overcome, family support, regional pride. These segments employ testimonial cinematography soft lighting, intimate framing contrasting with competition environment's high energy. The juxtaposition creates emotional investment in contestants as individuals rather than merely competitors.

Color and graphic design maintains visual consistency across platforms while adapting to each environment's conventions. YouTube thumbnails use high-contrast colors and expressive faces to attract clicks. Instagram employs aesthetic consistency with brand colors and clean typography. TikTok content incorporates trending visual effects and transitions, demonstrating platform literacy.

Significantly, academic content itself receives minimal visual elaboration. Questions appear as text overlays rather than integrated multimedia explanations. This suggests visual sophistication serves primarily to maintain engagement with competition dynamics rather than enhance pedagogical communication a tension between educational and entertainment priorities.

4.3 Platform-Specific Engagement Architectures

Cross-platform analysis reveals distinct engagement patterns shaped by each platform's affordances and cultures:

YouTube functions as the primary narrative hub, hosting full episodes and extended content. Engagement metrics show high completion rates (average 73% for 45-minute episodes), suggesting sustained attention uncommon for online video. Comments exhibit substantive discussion: debating question answers, analyzing contestant strategies, sharing personal learning experiences. The platform's affordance for longer content and threaded discussions enables deeper cognitive engagement.

Instagram emphasizes visual immediacy and parasocial connection. Stories document behind-the-scenes moments and contestant daily life, fostering intimacy. Reels highlight dramatic competition moments optimized for rapid consumption and sharing. Comments are shorter and more affective ("Go kak!," "So proud!"), reflecting the platform's culture of quick emotional expression. Hashtag campaigns (#ClashOfChampions2025, #BelajarAsik) aggregate user-generated content, creating participatory rituals.

TikTok generates the highest volume of derivative content fans create reaction videos, answer challenge questions, and parody competition moments. The platform's duet and stitch features enable direct conversation with original content. Engagement is most playful here, with memes and humorous takes alongside sincere educational engagement. TikTok's algorithm particularly amplifies emotional peaks surprising answers, contestant reactions fragmenting narrative continuity in favor of affective intensity.

This platform ecology creates complementary engagement modes: YouTube for sustained narrative immersion, Instagram for parasocial relationship-building, TikTok for playful participation and virality. Audiences often traverse all three, experiencing the program as a transmedia phenomenon rather than singular text.

4.4 Audience Interpretations: Negotiating Education and Entertainment

Comment analysis reveals audiences actively negotiate the program's dual positioning:

Educational legitimacy concerns surface in discussions questioning whether competition format compromises learning depth. Some commenters critique emphasis on speed over understanding: "Real learning isn't about answering fastest." Others defend the format as making necessary knowledge accessible: "At least people are watching educational content." These debates demonstrate awareness of edutainment tensions.

Aspirational identification with contestants is pervasive. Viewers describe contestants as "inspirational" and "role models," particularly when contestants overcome visible difficulties. Regional pride emerges strongly viewers from contestants' home provinces express particular investment. This identification appears to motivate learning engagement: "Seeing her explain makes me want to study harder."

Community formation occurs through shared viewing experiences and collective knowledge construction. Viewers collaborate to answer questions posed in social media content, debating

solutions in comments. Fan accounts curate contestant content and organize watch parties. These practices transform individual consumption into social ritual, enhancing sustained engagement.

Critical media literacy appears variably. Some audience members demonstrate sophisticated understanding of production techniques recognizing editing manipulation of tension, questioning question difficulty fairness. Others engage uncritically, treating competition outcomes as purely meritocratic. Educational background correlates with critical awareness, suggesting edutainment literacy is unevenly distributed.

Notably, very few audience members comment on commercial dimensions sponsorships, data collection, or platform monetization strategies. This relative invisibility of platform capitalism suggests successful naturalization of commercial educational media.

4.5 Synthesis: Communicative Assemblage of Gamified Edutainment

Integrating findings across analytical dimensions reveals *Clash of Champions* as a communicative assemblage (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Wise, 2005) where gamification, visual narrative, platform affordances, and audience interpretation interlock to produce distinctive engagement patterns:

The program positions learning as achievement spectacle, employing competition rhetoric to generate investment while maintaining educational content as nominal focus. Visual strategies create emotional engagement that compensates for limited pedagogical depth in question treatment. Platform distribution fragments the experience while creating multiple entry points for participation, accommodating diverse audience orientations.

Audiences navigate these tensions actively, seeking educational value while enjoying entertainment aspects, though commercial infrastructures remain largely uninterrogated. The assemblage succeeds in generating sustained attention to academic content but potentially reinforces instrumental learning orientations and meritocratic ideologies.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Gamification as Communicative Governance

Findings illuminate how gamification operates as what Foucault (1991) termed "governmentality" techniques shaping conduct through internalized norms rather than external coercion. *Clash of Champions* employs gamification not merely to motivate learning but to constitute particular learning subjectivities.

The competitive framework positions knowledge as individual achievement measurable through points and rankings. This mirrors neoliberal human capital ideology where education serves primarily to enhance market competitiveness (Brown, 2015). While contestants demonstrate collaborative moments, the structural imperative remains individualistic success. Comments celebrating "winners" and discussing "strategies" reveal audience internalization of this framing.

However, our findings complicate purely critical readings. Gamification also enables participation by audiences typically excluded from educational media representation. Regional diversity among contestants and viewer identification across geographic boundaries suggest competition format can democratize educational visibility beyond elite metropolitan contexts. The tension between democratic access and meritocratic ideology remains unresolved in the program.

This aligns with Zimmerman's (2021) argument that gamification contains contradictory potentials simultaneously enabling empowerment and reproducing disciplinary logics. The specific articulation depends on design choices and contextual factors. *Clash of Champions* exemplifies how gamified edutainment can serve progressive accessibility goals while reinforcing problematic educational ideologies.

5.2 Visual Narrative and the Affective Turn in Educational Media

The program's visual sophistication reflects broader shifts toward affective communication in digital environments (Papacharissi, 2015; Kuntsman, 2012). Educational authority increasingly derives from emotional resonance rather than institutional credentials alone. Contestants' emotional visibility visible anxiety, joy, disappointment generates parasocial intimacy that traditional educational media's affective restraint cannot achieve.

This "feeling pedagogy" (Watkins, 2017) has ambiguous implications. Emotional engagement can enhance motivation and memory formation (Tyng et al., 2017). However, privileging affect may subordinate critical analysis to immediate emotional gratification, what Illouz (2007) terms "emotional capitalism." When learning is primarily experienced as entertainment-induced pleasure, educational purposes may become secondary to sustained platform engagement.

Our finding that visual spectacle focuses on competition rather than content elaboration suggests tension between affective engagement and pedagogical depth. Questions receive minimal multimedia explanation despite platform affordances enabling rich educational visualization. This production choice prioritizes maintaining entertainment pacing over maximizing learning opportunity a compromise revealing entertainment logic's dominance in edutainment hybridization.

Sharma and Dyer's (2021) framework for documentary hybrids proves useful here. They distinguish "strategic" hybridization serving pedagogical goals from "opportunistic" hybridization prioritizing commercial success. *Clash of Champions* appears closer to opportunistic hybridization, employing educational content primarily as vehicle for entertainment engagement rather than entertainment serving educational depth.

5.3 Platform Capitalism and Educational Communication

The multi-platform distribution strategy reflects platform capitalism's core dynamics: data extraction, engagement maximization, and attention commodification (Srnicek, 2017). Each platform serves distinct functions in this ecosystem:

YouTube generates advertising revenue through extended watch time while building program brand recognition. Instagram facilitates influencer marketing through contestant profiles and sponsored content integration. TikTok drives viral visibility and youth demographic capture. Collectively, platforms transform educational content into data commodity yielding value through multiple monetization streams.

Williamson's (2021) concept of "platform pedagogy" illuminates how this shapes educational communication. Platform algorithms prioritize content generating specific engagement metrics watch time, shares, comments potentially misaligning with educational quality indicators like comprehension or critical thinking development. Producers face structural incentives toward sensationalism, controversy, and emotional manipulation regardless of educational consequences.

Our audience analysis revealing minimal critical awareness of these commercial dimensions is particularly significant. Platform naturalization renders underlying business models invisible, creating what Zuboff (2019) terms "surveillance capitalism" operating with user acquiescence rather than informed consent. Educational institutions and edtech companies leveraging platforms may inadvertently normalize data extraction and behavioral manipulation as acceptable educational contexts.

However, outright condemnation risks technological determinism. Platforms are malleable infrastructures whose educational implications depend on design choices and regulatory frameworks (Van Dijck et al., 2018). Alternative platform architectures prioritizing pedagogical values over engagement metrics remain conceivable, though currently marginalized by venture capital-driven edtech industry.

5.4 Audience Agency and Participatory Learning Cultures

Despite structural constraints, audience analysis reveals active meaning-making and community formation around educational content. This supports Jenkins' (2006) participatory culture framework while complicating assumptions about participation's inherently democratizing effects.

Audiences employ *Clash of Champions* content as resource for peer learning collaborating on questions, debating answers, sharing study strategies. Fan communities develop educational rituals around program consumption, transforming individual viewing into collective knowledge construction. These practices demonstrate how entertainment formats can scaffold informal learning networks.

Yet participation occurs within platform-defined parameters. User-generated content extends brand visibility and provides free marketing labor. Community formation occurs on corporate infrastructure subjecting interaction to surveillance and commercial exploitation. The "gift economy" of fan participation (Turk, 2014) operates within "platform economy" extracting value from user activity (Van Dijck, 2013).

Additionally, participatory learning remains unevenly distributed. Analysis suggests higher educational attainment correlates with deeper engagement and critical media literacy. Those already possessing cultural capital appear best positioned to leverage edutainment for educational benefit, potentially reproducing rather than ameliorating educational inequality. This parallels broader digital divide scholarship showing technology access alone insufficient without literacy and context enabling productive use (Hargittai, 2002; Van Dijk, 2020).

5.5 Edutainment and the Public Pedagogy Question

Clash of Champions exemplifies what Giroux (2004) terms "public pedagogy" educational communication occurring outside formal institutions. As traditional educational authority fragments, media corporations increasingly shape public understanding and learning orientations (Sandlin et al., 2011).

This raises normative questions: Should educational communication prioritize accessibility through popular formats or maintain critical distance from commercial entertainment? Can platforms driven by profit imperatives serve genuine educational purposes, or does commercial logic inevitably corrupt pedagogy?

Our findings suggest false dichotomy in these either/or framings. *Clash of Champions* simultaneously provides educational access to underserved audiences *and* reproduces instrumental learning ideologies. It generates learning engagement *and* normalizes educational surveillance. These contradictions cannot be resolved analytically but must be navigated politically through media literacy education, regulatory frameworks, and institutional practices maintaining educational autonomy amid platform proliferation.

Critical media literacy emerges as essential competency. Audiences require not just content consumption skills but understanding of platform business models, algorithmic curation, and production techniques shaping educational communication. Educational institutions should address edutainment critically rather than either wholesale adoption or reflexive rejection.

5.6 Theoretical Contributions and Future Directions

This study advances communication scholarship in several ways:

First, we demonstrate gamification's irreducibility to game mechanics, revealing operation as multi-layered communicative rhetoric requiring media analysis alongside psychological assessment. Second, we show edutainment cannot be understood through content analysis alone but demands platform studies attention to infrastructure shaping production and reception. Third, we illustrate audience engagement's complexity simultaneously active and constrained, resistant and complicit.

Theoretically, we propose "platform edutainment" as distinct phenomenon requiring frameworks integrating media studies, platform capitalism critique, and educational research. This interdisciplinary approach better captures contemporary educational media ecology than discipline-specific perspectives alone.

Future research should examine:

- Longitudinal impacts of gamified edutainment on learning orientations and outcomes
- Comparative analysis across national contexts and educational systems
- Production studies investigating how platform demands shape edutainment creation
- Experimental designs testing different gamification rhetoric approaches
- Critical policy research developing regulatory frameworks for educational platforms

CONCLUSION

1.Summary of Findings

This study examined *Clash of Champions* Season 2 as exemplar of gamified edutainment within platform capitalism. Analysis revealed three core findings:

First, gamification operates as multi-layered communicative strategy extending beyond visible game mechanics to narrative structures and participatory affordances. This rhetoric positions learning as achievement spectacle while generating sustained audience engagement.

Second, visual storytelling employs entertainment industry techniques creating affective investment in contestants and competition outcomes. However, visual sophistication serves primarily to maintain engagement rather than enhance pedagogical communication, revealing tensions between entertainment and educational priorities.

Third, platform distribution creates complementary engagement modes while subjecting educational content to commercial logics prioritizing data extraction and attention commodification. Audiences actively construct meaning and community around content yet remain largely unconscious of underlying platform capitalism dynamics.

2. Theoretical Implications

The study contributes to communication theory by demonstrating educational media's increasing mediatization through platform logics. Gamified edutainment represents not simply educational content delivered through new channels but fundamental reconfiguration of how learning is communicated, experienced, and valued.

We propose "communicative assemblage" as productive framework for analyzing contemporary edutainment attending simultaneously to textual strategies, platform infrastructures, audience practices, and political-economic contexts. This holistic approach transcends either celebratory or dismissive assessments, enabling nuanced understanding of contradictory potentials.

3. Practical Implications

For educational practitioners and content producers, findings suggest several considerations:

- Gamification should be deployed strategically in service of learning goals rather than engagement metrics alone
- Visual storytelling techniques can enhance motivation but require integration with substantive pedagogical content
- Multi-platform distribution should account for distinct engagement modes rather than repurposing identical content
- Critical media literacy addressing platform capitalism should accompany edutainment consumption

For policymakers, the study highlights need for regulatory frameworks addressing educational technology platform governance, data privacy in educational contexts, and commercial influence on learning communication.

4. Limitations and Future Research

This study examined one program within specific national and temporal context, limiting generalizability. Platform analytics opacity prevented complete understanding of algorithmic mediation. Audience analysis relied on public comments, potentially missing private meaning-making.

Future research should pursue comparative cross-national studies, longitudinal impact assessment, production ethnography revealing creator perspectives, and experimental designs testing specific gamification strategies. Interdisciplinary collaboration between communication, education, and platform studies scholars would advance understanding of this rapidly evolving phenomenon.

5. Concluding Reflection

As educational communication increasingly occurs within commercial platform ecosystems, critical examination becomes imperative. *Clash of Champions* demonstrates both possibilities and perils of gamified edutainment generating educational access and engagement while potentially reproducing instrumental learning orientations and normalizing commercial educational surveillance.

The challenge facing educators, researchers, and policymakers involves navigating these contradictions: leveraging platform affordances for educational democratization while resisting subordination to commercial imperatives. This requires ongoing critical dialogue, media literacy education, and institutional practices maintaining pedagogical autonomy amid digital transformation.

Educational communication's future depends not on whether gamification and platforms play roles but on what values and purposes guide their deployment. This study provides conceptual and empirical resources for informed navigation of these complex terrains.

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