Article

From Play to Performance: Cultural–Pedagogical Frictions in Transmedia Edutainment in Hong Kong Higher Education

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Abstract

Despite growing interest in transmedia edutainment, its limits—especially those experienced by students embedded in non-western educational cultural settings—remain under-examined. This article offers a theoretically grounded and empirically supported analysis of the cultural–pedagogical frictions shaping transmedia edutainment in Hong Kong higher education, focusing on students whose learning dispositions have been historically and institutionally formed by examination-oriented meritocracy and instrumentalist epistemologies. Using a mixed qualitative design combining focus-group interviews and classroom ethnographic observations, we show why implementation efforts frequently stalled and how they were ultimately absorbed by a prevailing neoliberal–Confucian educational culture that moralizes achievement and standardizes value recognition. Drawing on a Bourdieusian framework, we interrogate how students' educational illusio—animated by content instrumentalism, grade-oriented compliance, and meritocratic time-discipline—recasted multimodal engagement as instrumentalized participation optimized for legibility, security, and risk minimization. Moving beyond prevailing emphases on technological access or digital divides, we foreground habitus–field incongruence as the mechanism structuring ambivalent participation and deculturation from the intended ethos of creativity, critical inquiry, and collaborative participation. We conclude by calling for culturally responsive pedagogical shifts necessary for cultivating more genuine participatory cultures in transmedia learning environments.

Keywords: transmedia edutainment; cultural–pedagogical friction; Bourdieu; neoliberal–Confucian culture; Hong Kong higher education

1. Introduction

Transmedia education seeks to leverage interconnected narrative and media platforms to engage students in "solv[ing] problems ranging from fictional to real-world problems" (Warren et al., 2013, p. 69) through active exploration and meaning-making (Jenkins, 2010). As a thoughtful blending of story, character, and play across multimodal channels, transmedia learning often entails playful and performative forms of learning activities, such as collaborative storytelling, multimodal screen production, and participatory educational dramas (Dickinson-Delaporte et al., 2020; Kalogeras, 2013; H. Wang & Singhal, 2016). Whereas early research on transmedia pedagogy and play primarily concentrated on children and youth learners (Fleming, 2013; Pietschmann, 2014; Rodrigues & Bidarra, 2016), exploring

their digital literacy, transmedia skills, and informal learning (Rodrigues & Bidarra, 2016; Scolari et al., 2019; Taddeo & Tirocchi, 2021), recent work has extended transmedia edutainment into higher education (M. Brown et al., 2018; Dickinson-Delaporte et al., 2020; Perry, 2020; Tombleson et al., 2016). However, despite widespread enthusiasm for transmedia edutainment as a platform for enhancing creativity, transliteracy, and critical inquiry (Perry, 2020; Runchina et al., 2022; Scolari et al., 2019), critical analyses of its pedagogical tensions—particularly in non-Western contexts—remain limited. This gap is especially pronounced in Hong Kong higher education, where long-standing examination regimes (G. T. L. Brown & Wang, 2013; Z. Wang & Brown, 2014), hierarchical teacher–student relations (Pham, 2011; Pratt et al., 1999), and standardized achievement metrics continue to configure classroom microcultures that can resist or recode participatory innovation (Z. Chan & Ho, 2019; Ow Yong, 2025).

Although limited, a small but growing body of scholarship has recognized some of the pitfalls and challenges in transmedia education, including students' digital disengagement and tool–task mismatches (M. Brown et al., 2018), uneven transliteracy and differential access (Dickinson-Delaporte et al., 2020; Erta-Majó & Vaquero, 2023), and other forms of collaboration difficulties. Yet, while these studies have illuminated the technical and demographic contingencies embedded in a set of functional and psychological variables (Ma & Lee, 2019; Pörzse & Kenesei, 2025), the uptake and reception of transmedia pedagogy largely hinge on broader sociocultural and institutional configurations through which learning beliefs and practices are renegotiated (Liu et al., 2025; Pham, 2011; Shah, 2020). In particular, meritocratic cultures that moralize performance and normalize quantification can devalue exploratory processes and convert collaborative practice into efficiency calculus and rational recalibration (Lo, 2024). This article analyzes how educational culture and pedagogical innovation jointly shape students' orientations in technology-enhanced classrooms and offers a thick description of in-class microcultures, affective investments, and routine practices that mediate university students' expectations and participation in transmedia environments. By illustrating the sociocultural conditions under which transmedia learning is instrumentalized, it contributes to the growing literature on cultural friction in innovation adoption and informs future course design and implementation of transmedia learning in higher education.

Specifically, this article critically examines the cultural–pedagogical frictions of transmedia edutainment in Hong Kong higher education, focusing on students whose learning dispositions have been historically and institutionally formed by an examination-oriented meritocracy and instrumentalist epistemologies. Using a mixed qualitative design combining focus-group interviews and classroom ethnographic observations, we trace how efforts to introduce transmedia edutainment in a general-education sociology course faltered and were constrained by a neoliberal–Confucian culture that moralizes achievement and standardizes value recognition (cf. R. Chen & Bennett, 2012; Fischer, 2015). Drawing on a Bourdieusian framework, we analyze how students' educational illusio—shaped by content instrumentalism, grade-oriented compliance, and meritocratic time-discipline—translated multimodal engagement into instrumentalized participation optimized for legibility, security, and risk minimization. Moving beyond prevailing emphases on technological access or digital divides, the analysis foregrounds habitus–field incongruence as the mechanism structuring ambivalent participation and deculturation from the intended ethos of creativity, critical inquiry, and collaborative participation. The article concludes by calling for culturally responsive pedagogical shifts necessary for cultivating more genuine participatory cultures in transmedia learning environments

1.1. Understanding Cultural–Pedagogical Frictions in Transmedia Edutainment

Transmedia edutainment represents a contemporary effort to reimagine learning as interactive, playful, and participatory. It invites students to move beyond rote memorization and passive reception toward collaboration, multimodal narration, and creative problem-solving (Jenkins, 2010; Warren et al., 2013, p. 69). Yet students' lived learning experience cannot be inferred from participation counts or technical proficiency alone; it must be interpreted against inherited educational norms and moral expectations that define "good teaching and learning," "proper effort," and "legitimate achievement" (J. Chen, 2023; Pratt et al., 1999). In settings where correctness is moralized and ambiguity is coded as risk, innovation premised on exploration may be read as inefficiency or threat (Cheng, 2025). Shifting attention to the cultural–pedagogical frictions thus helps illuminate tensions that arise when design assumptions implicit in pedagogical innovation confront sedimented values and dispositions within a particular sociocultural setting (Pham, 2011).

In transmedia education, teachers often assume learner autonomy, intrinsic motivation, and comfort with open-ended exploration, building curricula around creativity, narrative co-construction, experimentation, and collective authorship (Dickinson-Delaporte et al., 2020; Fleming, 2013; Kalogeras, 2013). However, for many Hong Kong students—socialized by selective examinations and highly structured instruction—these ideals sit uneasily alongside normalized expectations of conventional assessment and hierarchical guidance. While educators may read transmedia tasks as creative learning opportunities, students may interpret them as risky exercises that jeopardize effective learning, grades, or credential accumulation, signifying exposure to error or penalty rather than opportunity for inquiry. Therefore, in the smart city of Hong Kong (Ting, 2025), what appears inert or constrained to educators is, for students, prudence and efficiency within the prevailing moral economy of learning. Friction may thus stem less from digital literacy gaps than from divergent value systems embedded in local educational culture (Pham, 2011; Shah, 2020).

This tension can be understood as a clash between pedagogical ethos and educational habits. Whereas the ethos of transmedia edutainment celebrates creative inquiry, collaborative learning, and participatory aesthetics, prevailing orientations privilege efficiency, correctness, and measurable progress. While transmedia learning seeks to evoke curiosity and enjoyment, many students may experience anxiety linked to uncertainty over grades and fairness, especially in group-based work (B. Yu & Wright, 2017). As a consequence, students navigate these contradictions through strategic adaptation—complying with the formal structure of transmedia assignments while re-coding them into familiar routines oriented toward legibility and predictability (M. Brown et al., 2018). Rather than entering the "play" dimension of transmedia edutainment, students may make participation instrumental, focused on predictability and evaluative security. In effect, pleasure in learning becomes subordinated to responsibility for performance, rendering transmedia activities ambivalently positioned between pedagogical innovation and cultural conformity.

In Hong Kong's higher-education context, where neoliberal logics of performativity intertwine with Confucian ideals of diligence and deference, cultural–pedagogical frictions produce ambivalent or partial engagement. Rather than opening new spaces for active and interactive engagement via mobile social technology (cf. Ting, 2022, 2026), students adopt new tools but retain orientations toward quantifiable achievement and authority, absorbing innovative potentials into existing structures rather than transforming them. Recognizing this dynamic reframes resistance as rational calibration and helps educators interrogate inherited rules of learning and engagement.

1.2. A Bourdieusian Approach to Neoliberal–Confucian Educational Culture

Bourdieu's sociology of education helps explain how learning dispositions arise at the intersection of structure, culture, agency, and institutional hierarchy. His ideas have been used to illuminate how Chinese students navigate elite schooling, meritocratic pressures, and transnational credentials (Au, 2024; J. Chen, 2022; Xu, 2017; J. Yu & Xie, 2025). Yet, despite this theoretical reach, the Bourdieusian lens—particularly the field–doxa–illusio triad—remains underused in studies of technology-enhanced and transmedia learning, especially in non-Western educational systems where academic hierarchies and moral discipline remain deeply entrenched.

From a Bourdieusian perspective, both Hong Kong higher education and the transmedia classroom are intersecting fields of practice—social spaces where actors compete for valued forms of capital under implicit rules (Bourdieu, 1993, 1996). Within these fields, doxa refers to shared moral assumptions that define legitimate ways of learning; illusio captures embodied belief that these stakes are worth pursuing; and habitus denotes durable dispositions that orient students toward those stakes (Bourdieu, 1984, 1998). Together, these concepts explain how learners internalize dominant norms and reproduce the very hierarchies that structure their opportunities (Davey, 2012; J. Yu & Xie, 2025).

Hong Kong's higher-education field is governed by a hybrid doxa that fuses neoliberal market rationality with Confucian moral values (Y. Y. Chan & Tang, 2025; Tsao et al., 2018). Efficiency, competitiveness, and measurable excellence coexist with deference, diligence, and respect for authority, legitimizing a neoliberal–Confucian order of worth in which achievement is moralized and compliance is valorized. Policy structures—from banded schools to performance audits and international benchmarking—further institutionalize examination-oriented meritocracy as common sense (Au, 2024; Ho et al., 2020).

Under this educational doxa, students internalize a neoliberal–Confucian illusio—a belief that disciplined self-optimization through conventional study and performance is both moral duty and rational investment. Success becomes ethically charged; failure implies personal inadequacy. Family obligation, performance metrics, and teacher surveillance reinforce this buy-in, translating external pressures into self-governance (G. T. L. Brown & Wang, 2013; Ting, 2024; Z. Wang & Brown, 2014; J. Yu & Xie, 2025). Through recursive alignment between institutional expectations and moral economies, students develop a collective habitus of compliant ambition characterized by diligence, pragmatism, and performance orientation. Their habitus-driven engagement thus tends to exhibit a high level of normative compliance and grade obsession, while regarding performance metrics as legitimate measures of ability.

Within this context, novel pedagogies such as transmedia edutainment are reinterpreted through the grammar of correctness and metrics. Even as universities promote the participatory ethos of creativity, criticality, and collaboration, these ideals are filtered through a moralized merit culture that values safe productivity over uncertainty. The transmedia classroom is, therefore, recoded into a familiar game of compliance, distinction, and credential optimization.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research Context

This article is based on a transmedia edutainment delivery experience, examining students' learning behaviors and beliefs in a transmedia classroom. The teaching team employed a transmedia design-based pedagogy to engage diverse undergraduates at a Hong Kong public university as active, interactive learners. Participants were mostly Hong Kong Chinese undergraduates enrolled in a high-enrolment general-education sociology course for non-social science majors, delivered in English across four sections of approximately

100 students each. These four sections constituted the full offering of the course in that academic year, with two sections run in each semester. The project team leader and colleagues, experienced course instructors, undertook design-based research and evaluation to develop and evaluate transmedia activities centered on multimodal narration, collaborative play, and co-creation of digital artifacts (Dickinson-Delaporte et al., 2020; Rodrigues & Bidarra, 2016; Tombleson, 2024).

The project was implemented in a common-core elective on popular culture and social change in contemporary China. Guided by the aim of using popular entertainment to scaffold disciplinary learning (Kalogeras, 2013), we adopted low-barrier activities to support playful application of sociological concepts. Essential frameworks were introduced (e.g., stratification, consumption, globalization and commercialization, social cohesion, identity politics and gender, power and resistance). Activity prompts were designed to connect these frameworks to everyday media practices, inviting students to authenticate concepts through multimodal representation.

In selected lectures, after a ten-minute introduction to activity themes (storytelling/retelling, content co-creation, scenario-based role-play) and tools, students formed small groups of 4–5 and worked for 35–40 min. We used story templates with real-world scenarios and open fields for critical engagement. Most of them used Microsoft PowerPoint's collaboration features. Its co-editing, designer, animation, and graphics tools offered accessible means for students without specialized design training to produce artifacts combining images, text, and layout. Students accessed an activity-themed PowerPoint with guidelines on their own devices. Templates scaffolded multimodal production, in-class sharing, curation, and submission. After completing each activity, small-group reflection captured process learning and informed iteration.

Table 1 outlines activities, design concepts, and aligned sociological topics. The activity suite included: social-media blogging to authenticate concepts in everyday settings with reflexive captions addressing class and consumption; collaborative poster design using role-play to map globalization and commercialization dynamics in the music domain; story-retelling tasks that extended film plots to interrogate identity politics and gender in cinema; and four-frame comic remixes translating a short TV clip into class-inflected interpretations engaging ideology and encoding/decoding.

Table 1. Transmedia learning activities and design concepts.

Activity	Design Concept	Sociological Focus	Domain
Social media blogging	Individual, scenario-based posts (images + captions) to authenticate concepts in everyday settings; emphasize self-reflexivity.	Class, status, and stratification	Consumption
Poster design	Collaborative design of a music-album poster for targeted groups; role-play and content creation to reflect on social processes.	Globalization; commercialization	Music
Story-retelling	Individual retelling after watching two trailers and brief research; rewrite/extend plots.	Identity politics; gender	Cinema
Four-frame comic	Group remix of a 10 min TV clip into a four-panel comic to illustrate class-inflected interpretation.	Ideology; encoding/decoding	Television

2.2. Data Collection and Analysis

Given the exploratory nature of the study, we adopted a qualitative design to understand how students made sense of and responded to transmedia edutainment. Our aim was to achieve an in-depth analysis of these processes rather than to estimate effect sizes or testing hypotheses, purposes for which quantitative methods are better suited (Mulisa, 2022). Our qualitative approach thus prioritizes understanding students' beliefs, perspectives, actions, and values from their own standpoints. It seeks to capture rich, contextualized dynamics which are often obscured by quantitative measures (Ma & Lee, 2019; Pandey, 2025; J. Yu & Xie, 2025).

In this study, we triangulated focus groups and ethnographic observations to enhance credibility and depth. Focus group interviews examined student experiences. Eight focus groups (two per section) were conducted using purposive, maximum-variation sampling (year, major, performance), recruited via announcements and email. Each focus group comprised 4–5 students and was held post-course. Semi-structured protocols covered experience and interest, collaboration/role-taking, and challenges/suggestions. Thirty-eight students participated; sessions lasted 45–60 min. Interviews were conducted in Cantonese by instructors; transcripts were translated into English, with Cantonese excerpts retained and back-checked. Ethical approval was obtained from the first author's institution, and all participants provided informed consent and were assigned pseudonyms. We emphasized voluntary participation, non-impact on grades, and the right to withdraw. Ethnographic observations complemented focus groups. We conducted in-class observations across all activities to document implementation, engagement, interaction patterns, and climate via fieldnotes (Katz-Buonincontro, 2023). Observer debriefs and reflexive discussions among the teaching team synthesized observations and supported calibration (Zaare, 2013).

Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis to develop an interpretive account of patterned meanings in participants' narratives (Byrne, 2022; Braun & Clarke, 2019). Consistent with this approach, we understood analytic outputs as constructed through the researcher's active engagement with the dataset, theoretical assumptions guiding the work, and the researcher's analytic skills and resources. In line with this focus, our procedures emphasized reflexivity and depth rather than coder agreement metrics or codebook standardization (Byrne, 2022; Braun & Clarke, 2019; Ting, 2019).

We tagged relevant segments, iteratively coded practices and norms shaping engagement, and compared themes across transcripts from eight focus groups and fieldnotes from four in-class observations. To mitigate instructor-researcher bias, an independent researcher uninvolved in instruction joined the analysis; double-coding of a transcript subset supported negotiated consensus. Discrepancies were addressed through collaborative, reflexive discussion. We used differences to interrogate assumptions, check interpretations, and enrich theme development. This process was supported by iterative return to the data and documented analytic decision-making. We did not pursue consensus or quantify agreement, as reflexive thematic analysis does not seek to provide a distinct or correct coding solution as the goal; rather it encourage a reflective and thoughtful engagement with both data and the analytic process of the researchers (Byrne, 2022; Braun & Clarke, 2019). Themes were refined through memoing and constant comparison (Bell, 2020; Peel, 2020). These themes illuminate obstacles to implementing transmedia pedagogy within a neoliberal–Confucian learning culture.

3. Results

3.1. Playing for Keeps

Across activities, students reframed "play" as a performance problem to be solved under meritocratic "game." Rather than entering the exploratory affordances of trans-

media edutainment, they translated open-ended tasks into familiar routines organized around format compliance, note-driven correctness, and calculative risk management. In Bourdieusian terms, their habitus—cultivated through examination-centric schooling and moralized diligence—met the transmedia classroom as an emerging field, whose intended stakes, such as creative authorship, did not align with the educational doxa. As a result, students' neoliberal–Confucian educational illusio—the embodied belief that credential optimization is both moral duty and rational investment—re-coded playful participation into prudent performance.

In social media blogging, in which students were invited to blog about everyday consumption activities while imagining themselves as consumers of various social classes, students reported frictions between playful activity and graded assignment. When play is folded into assessment, uncertainty becomes liability. In response, they structured outputs and decorate them "interestingly," yet expressed uncertainty about whether the content was simultaneously "acceptable." According to the students interviewed, the task was ranked less by "fun" than by how clearly they channeled lecture materials into answerable outputs. In effect, they treated disciplinary knowledge as authority and regarded "play" as the correct execution of taught content in "recognizable forms":

> "I felt this activity was quite new. It was like posting on IG, though we wouldn't usually post this kind of content. Another issue was not being very sure what to write; I only knew what image to put, but I wasn't clear about the content and I didn't know how much to put to meet the standard." (H)

Indeed, these accounts exemplify habitus–field incongruence. Whereas instructors read ambiguity as an invitation to invent, students read it as a threat to grade visibility. As one student noted, more freedom widened ambiguity about what counts for a high score, converting open-ended design into a risk exposure that demanded mitigation:

> "Usually assignments are very formal with complete requirements and a set format to follow. But these transmedia activities were really free—it lets you think, explore on your own, and find extra materials. I found it quite interesting, but I limited myself to the usual homework routine . . . I understand that this kind of assignment is meant to give students more space to explore these concepts, but more space can also mean more uncertainty—less clarity about what counts as a high score versus a low score." (P)

Conversely, for many students, the most "useful" activities were those that narrowed interpretive scope and mapped cleanly onto lecture notes. This preference did not signal anti-innovation per se; rather, it demonstrated the potency of the neoliberal–Confucian illusio in moralizing correctness as virtuous study. The "interesting" could sometimes coexist with the "safe," but when they conflicted, the latter prevailed:

> "I found this one [a worksheet assignment that summaries the lecture content] least interesting because it was more typical . . . But I think it helped me learn the most . . . I reviewed my notes and answered questions. There was a chance to apply what was in the notes, so I think it was the most useful. So, I prefer this one to other learning activities" (I)

As the translation of play into performance shaped what counted as "good creativity" and "worth playing," students produced content-aligned work and "legible" artifacts—well-structured, polished, and keyed to taught concepts. Rather than exploratory, process-oriented work that might be harder to evaluate, they enacted "safe creativity"—a modality of participation that optimizes rubric legibility and minimizes interpretive ambiguity. Such safe creativity is not a failure of technical skill; it is a rational adaptation to the higher-education doxa of levelling up, in which grades and moralized diligence are the dominant

currencies or legitimate tokens of market mobility. The result is inertial learning, in which transmedia forms and tools are adopted, but dispositions toward authority and correctness remain intact, thus absorbing pedagogical innovation into the familiar meritocratic game of compliant distinction.

3.2. Managed Criticality

In the context of Hong Kong higher education, whereas transmedia edutainment often promotes criticality as empowerment narratives, students' conformity-inflected dispositions toward critical inquiry are often constrained by doxic norms, which interpret rubrics as authority and prioritize the pursuit of academic stakes of points and rankings. In our transmedia classrooms, students remained loyal to the logic of academic performance and were more eager to collect badges and to "win" learning quests than to undertake knowledge authentication and reflexive inquiry. They tended to privilege demonstrative evidence of understanding—captions with the "right" tone, images aligned with taught categories, tidy narrative arcs—over critique of how disciplinary knowledge could be contested. In Bourdieusian terms, students accumulated symbolic capital by displaying fluency in the codes of the field without necessarily destabilizing those codes. They tended to "play" safely to "win" the meritocratic game, in which format mimicry and "background research" become new ways of acquiring scores:

> "I watched some videos to get their tone . . . I went on Weibo, looked at their typing patterns, and then imitated them." (Y)

> "Even just looking at existing movie posters on the Internet helped me understand the format—like the type of images or the type of text, right?" (I)

These practices of format mimicry and "background research," therefore, functioned as a protective strategy—students used perceived assignment requirements as scaffolds to reduce ambiguity, imitating tone, typing patterns, caption length, and image types to align with perceived models of legitimacy. This "managed criticality" manifested in genre mimicry, rubric-oriented phrasing that explicitly aimed to "show the concept," reliance on a narrow band of authoritative sources, and the visible truncation of disagreement during group deliberations to maintain clarity. A micro-example illustrates this dynamic. In a four-frame comic activity, one team designed a single, unequivocal character whose actions neatly mapped onto a textbook definition. The caption restated lecture phrasing, rather than posing interrogatives, in an attempt to tie narrative narrowing to anticipated assessment legibility. The dominant workflow was that first they mastered the concept via lecture notes; then they designed outputs that "show the concept" in recognizable formats:

> "You have to understand the meanings in your notes first, and then use the activities to demonstrate whether you really understand the two concepts." (L)

This tendency was especially visible in the cocreation of group artifacts. Teams converged on consensus storylines that made concepts legible to assessors, prioritizing clarity and coherence over knowledge interrogation and contestation. The point was to render the learning of lecture content visible—showing the "right" concept and content— under perceived evaluative pressure. Across activities, when theoretical positions required critical reflexion and comparison, groups sometimes truncated the very dynamics they were meant to explore to keep the narrative legible and aligned to a chosen stance during the representing process:

> "I remember this was the project I discussed the most with my groupmates . . . how to design the comic and which points to convey . . . We focused on debating about which ideas to be displayed or not so as to achieve a good score." (H)

"During the process of creating the comic, we felt a bit confused about whether the content we debated about and came up with actually matched the assignment requirements . . ." (L)

The emphasis on academic legibility produced a hidden curriculum of conformity—students learned to stage "critical" outputs in ways that were perceived to travel well across platform aesthetics and rubrics, thus converting critique into recognizable signals of mastery. Rather than interrogating whose knowledge counts, how theoretical positions are constructed, or how power travels through knowledge representation, many optimized the presentation of "legitimate" concept or content. Yet this is not mere compliance; rather, it is a rational recalibration of critical practice to the perceived stakes of the educational field. Under the neoliberal–Confucian doxa, critique becomes a technique—something one can perform effectively—yielding a narrowed critical horizon where displaying understanding supersedes questioning the terms of understanding.

3.3. Instrumental Collaboration

While the previous section demonstrated how epistemic recalibration—critical inquiry domesticated into rubric-visible signals of mastery—unfolded in the transmedia classroom, this section examines the interactional organization of work in the neoliberal–Confucian educational field. Here, students frequently reframed collaboration as an efficiency tactic, privileging division of labor and measurable outputs over co-construction and dialogue. Transmedia edutainment promises collaborative participation—shared authorship, dialogic inquiry, and communities of practice—in which learners co-construct knowledge through multimodal engagement. Ideally, group tasks scaffold interdependence, invite collective problem-solving, and render process—negotiation, feedback, and joint decision-making—as pedagogically consequential. In our setting, however, this promise was largely absorbed into an efficiency calculus:

"I would lean toward the first option—doing it by myself—because the second one [teamwork] requires communicating with others, and sometimes the efficiency isn't very high . . ." (H)

"I feel that working by myself is definitely much more efficient; maybe I can finish faster and it won't interfere with other things." (Y)

Students tended to evaluate whether and how to collaborate by weighing the transaction costs of negotiating meaning and integrating artifacts against perceived marginal gains in grades. They invoked a meritocratic time discipline—sequencing tasks to maximize throughput across courses—and framed collaboration as a latency risk—unpredictable peers could delay completion and jeopardize performance. In this temporal economy, "efficiency" becomes a moralized virtue aligned with the neoliberal–Confucian doxa of diligence and self-responsibility.

In general, individual tasks were preferred for speed, controllability, and reduced friction. In practice, many teams shifted from interdependent to pooled task structures—dividing work into independent sub-tasks stitched together at the end—reducing uncertainty but suppressing dialogue, iterative feedback, and co-construction of meaning. Collaboration was thus recoded into workflow optimization—divide, execute, assemble, submit. The interaction order was thin—little mutual monitoring, weak turn-taking, and minimal repair of misunderstandings—yielding participation without the emergence of genuine communities of practice:

"In almost every grouping most of the members were very quiet . . . Only in the last fifteen minutes did we actually do the activity together . . . People just worked

on the group task individually . . . After that, we often didn't even know who should put things to together and how to submit a single assignment." (L)

As such, group work was turned into as a series of independent sub-tasks stitched together at the end—instrumental collaboration rather than co-authorship. Privileging solitary mastery over teamwork, students interviewed often recalled extended silences, late-stage scrambling, and minimal interaction—symptoms of low-trust coordination. Peer feedback was frequently seen as non-productive, another coordination cost rather than a learning resource, especially when it carried little assessment weight. A hidden curriculum thus emerged, in which only graded, audit-visible actions counted, while interaction without summative consequences was discounted.

In line with the hidden curriculum, it was frequently reported that high-literacy and more motivated students worked hard to secure symbolic gains by themselves, while others withdrew to avoid exposure to judgment, free-riding, or blame for delays. During focus group interviews, a procedural fix—peer-assessment—was proposed by the researchers in an attempt to make collaboration more robust. However, it was immediately resisted by students interviewed, who viewed it as potentially unfair, anxiety-inducing, and vulnerable to interpersonal bias—a reminder that symbolic economies of distinction can fracture solidarity:

> "Sometimes classmates have different opinions . . . they may not grade as seriously as a teacher would, and may just grade based on personal feelings. It feels like handing your marks to others." (Y)

As instrumental collaboration became the operational logic, telemetry-like coordination and dashboard-like co-creation came to define "fair play." The broader effect was the rise of pseudo-communities, in which social formations that looked collaborative but were organized by grade optimization, comparative anxiety, and thin trust. This finding extends the argument about habitus–field incongruence. In a neoliberal–Confucian educational culture, collaboration is valued insofar as it delivers predictable gains, and learners' dispositions favor controllability and measurable contribution rather than genuine collaborative participation. As such, interaction became a means for credential accumulation rather than collective meaning-making, while knowledge co-construction was read as inefficiency.

4. Discussion

With the case of a Hong Kong university course, this article demonstrates the limits of transmedia edutainment in a non-western cultural context. Rather than sustaining creativity, cultivating agency for critical inquiry, and consolidating community, the approach was reabsorbed into the dominant logics of moralized meritocracy. Using a Bourdieusian lens, we showed how multimodal engagement remained constrained by Hong Kong's (higher-)education doxa that prioritize credentialism, performative achievement, and rubric legibility. Within a higher-education field where excellence is symbolically enforced and success is moralized, students (re)articulated their educational habitus to fit perceived rules of the game, translating open-ended tasks into risk-minimizing, assessable performances. In our setting, Confucian-derived values of hierarchical respect, disciplined effort, and pragmatic attainment intersected with neoliberal narratives of self-enterprise and optimization, forming what we term a neoliberal–Confucian illusio. This hybrid orientation reconciles striving for rank and polish with deference to perceived authority and rules, leading students to prioritize modular, rubric-legible outputs over dialogic processes with uncertain payoffs. As a consequence, transmedia edutainment's intended ethos— participatory creativity, critical inquiry, and collaborative meaning-making—was reframed through utilitarian logics learned in high-stakes examination regimes. Instead of encultur-

ation into communities of practice, students displayed a form of deculturation from the intended ethos of transmedia learning.

4.1. Recommendations

To cultivate genuine communities of practice, classrooms should shift from rubric legibility to process legibility—rewarding exploration, dialogue, and co-authorship; normalizing ambiguity; and making collective meaning-making consequential in evaluation. To address the "playing for keeps" friction, have students interpret rubrics before tasks to foreground exploratory co-production of knowledge. Educators should communicate the goals and rationales of transmedia learning early and often, co-interpret rubrics with students, and use exemplars to showcase desirable outputs. To mitigate the "managed criticality" friction, adopt process-based assessment that prioritizes process over product and explicitly rewards reflexive practice. For example, allocate 30–50% of the grade to reflective journals, iteration logs, and design rationales; use pass/fail or ungrading for transmedia components; and cap the marks available for final-product polish to reduce performance anxiety and keep the focus on learning.

Designing for inclusion and accountable collaboration also requires structuring co-authorship rather than stitched-together solo pieces, supported by shared artifacts (e.g., co-written commentaries) documenting negotiation and decisions. Peer- and self-assessment should address both group functioning and individual roles with rotating responsibilities (facilitator, archivist, ethics lead), broaden participation, and ensure fair recognition. Visible contribution statements can counter social loafing. Informal, ungraded post-activity sharing sessions inviting cross-group exchanges should foreground process narratives, surprises, failures, and pivots. Feedback ecologies should prioritize formative, dialogic feedback; any analytics used should be prompts for reflection rather than rankings. These practices may help reorient or mitigate the prevailing neoliberal–Confucian illusio toward creative exploration, critical inquiry, and community-centered participation.

4.2. Limitations

This study has several limitations. Empirically, it is a single-site case from a specific course at a Hong Kong university, constraining generalizability across institutions and cultural contexts. Because the analysis focuses on four sections of the same course, the findings may not extend to other courses, particularly those in different disciplines or with different curricular structures. In the absence of a formal control or comparison group (e.g., courses using traditional assessment, parallel classes in other regions), instructor effects and course-level assessment policies may have influenced students' responses and warrant further investigation. The temporal window was also limited, precluding robust longitudinal analysis of whether students' orientations toward creativity, criticality, and community shift as they gain transmedia experience or encounter alternative assessment regimes.

Analytically, our Bourdieusian framing foregrounds field, habitus, and doxa; this approach illuminates sociocultural and structural dynamics but may underplay micro-interactional processes, identity trajectories, and design-specific affordances that conversation-analytic or cognitive frameworks could capture more effectively. Finally, our articulation of a neoliberal–Confucian illusio, while grounded in observed practices and existing literature, risks flattening heterogeneity in student beliefs and practices. We acknowledge that our participants do not represent all Hong Kong Chinese students and that variation is likely. Students' experiences and orientations toward transmedia edutainment may vary by prior schooling, postsecondary pathways, English proficiency, academic performance, socioeconomic background, and migration status (Y. Y. Chan & Tang, 2025; Ho et al., 2020; Ting, 2017; Tsao et al., 2018; Z. Wang & Brown, 2014). Future comparative, mixed-methods, and longitudinal studies

across disciplines, socioeconomic strata, and regions are needed to assess transferability and examine equity-differentiated effects.

5. Conclusions

This article contributes to debates on edutainment by illuminating the sociocultural conditions under which transmedia learning is instrumentalized. It shows how the creative, critical, and collaborative presuppositions of transmedia pedagogy collide with norms of credentialed achievement, limiting the emergence of participatory culture. Recognizing this friction cautions against assuming that simply introducing multimodal tools or gamified tasks will democratize learning. Without engaging the habitus students embody, well-intentioned innovations risk reproducing existing hierarchies of confidence and participation. Reflexive and collaborative designs may thus be redirected toward performance-oriented compliance in contexts where neoliberal–Confucian logics are salient. Specifically, we showed that the neoliberal–Confucian illusio shaped doxic orientations and practices across three domains central to transmedia pedagogy: content remixing, where creativity was confined to safe, polished recombination; knowledge authentication, where deference to authoritative sources overshadowed self-reflexive and personal insight; and collaboration, which was recast as task division and assembly rather than co-authorship. Pedagogical transformation, therefore, requires not only digital literacy or technological access but a rearticulation of what counts as learning—making expectations explicit and scaffolding students' transitions by validating process alongside outcomes.

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