

Bridging the Industry Readiness Gap in Public Relations Education: Gamification Perceptions among Students, Educators, and Practitioners in Malaysia and Bangladesh

Sanjana Rahman., Zulhamri Abdullah., K.M. Mahmudul Hasan., Nurul Ain Mohd Hasan

Department of Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Gamification's application to public relations (PR) education in developing-country contexts remains largely undocumented in the existing literature. This qualitative study examines how PR students, educators, and industry practitioners in Malaysia and Bangladesh perceive the industry readiness gap in PR education and the potential of gamified simulation to address it. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with twenty-five participants across three stakeholder groups, thematic analysis following the Atlas.ti protocol produced four code groups and three overarching themes: the indwelling deficit, describing how current PR education fails to support professional identity formation; the deliberate practice dilemma, capturing tension between meaningful skill development and reward-seeking behaviour; and adoption ambivalence, reflecting the gap between positive attitudes toward gamification and actual uptake constrained by infrastructure, culture, and assessment concerns. Findings indicate that narrative-driven, scenario-based gamification aligned with real PR crises holds significantly greater perceived value than generic points, badges, and leaderboard mechanics. Drawing on Situated Learning Theory, Self-Determination Theory, and the Technology Acceptance Model as a connected explanatory sequence, the study's principal theoretical contribution is to extend the Technology Acceptance Model beyond its individual-level focus: adoption barriers identified here operate at infrastructural and culturally semiotic levels that condition perceived usefulness and ease of use before individual attitudes form. The study contributes practically by identifying design priorities for gamified PR learning platforms in the region, and discusses implications for curriculum policy and educational equity in both national contexts.

Keywords: public relations education; gamification; industry readiness; Situated Learning Theory; Self-Determination Theory; Technology Acceptance Model; SDG 4; SDG 9

INTRODUCTION

The public relations industry in Southeast and South Asia is expanding rapidly, driven by digital transformation, the proliferation of social media platforms, and growing corporate demand for strategic communication expertise. Yet the graduates entering this industry consistently draw criticism from practitioners for a cluster of persistent deficiencies: they can describe crisis communication models but freeze when facing an actual media inquiry; they understand stakeholder mapping as a theoretical framework but have never applied it to a live organisational decision. The gap between what PR programs deliver and what the industry requires has been noted before, though it has grown more acute over time, particularly in contexts where educational systems have prioritised theoretical coverage over experiential depth (Fantozzi & Schiraldi, 2025; Lynch et al., 2025).

Gamification, defined as the application of game design elements in non-game contexts (Deterding, 2019), has attracted significant attention as a potential mechanism for closing this gap. The logic is intuitive: if professional competence requires practice under conditions that approximate real world complexity, and if real work placements are structurally scarce, then gamified simulations offer a scalable, accessible alternative. However, the empirical evidence base for this proposition is dominated by studies from Western, STEM oriented contexts, with almost no research examining how PR students and professionals in Malaysia or Bangladesh perceive, value, or resist gamification as a pedagogical approach (Romero-Rodríguez et al., 2024; Zeybek & Saygi, 2024).

For the purposes of this study, industry readiness is defined operationally as the demonstrated capacity to apply professional judgement under real-world constraints, rather than as the accumulation of declarative subject knowledge. Building on the competency clusters that recur in the literature reviewed in Section 2.1 and in the practitioner accounts reported in Section 4, this study treats PR industry readiness as comprising five interrelated competency domains: crisis and issues communication under time pressure; stakeholder and channel judgement; strategic advisory confidence, namely the capacity to advise organisational leadership rather than merely execute instructions; collaborative, team-based execution under shared accountability; and digital and social-media fluency. This definition functioned as a coding reference point rather than as a validated measurement instrument, and it is offered here as a working boundary for the present qualitative study; developing and validating a PR-specific industry-readiness competency framework, and instruments capable of measuring gamification's actual effect on that framework rather than only stakeholders' perceptions of it, is identified in Section 6 as a priority for future research.

This gap can be specified more precisely than the term “underexplored” alone conveys, and it is now possible to specify it against the actual national literatures rather than against systematic reviews alone. A focused review of gamification-in-education research situated specifically in Malaysia and Bangladesh confirms that both countries have an active, empirically grounded gamification literature: in Malaysia this includes early survey-based work on tertiary motivation (Ong et al., 2013), TAM-grounded studies of perceived ease of use and engagement in polytechnic and university settings (Ab. Rahman et al., 2018; Othman, Jaini, et al., 2023), a mixed-methods study of academics' pedagogical practices and challenges in integrating gamification (Kabilan et al., 2023), a gamification-categories framework for online learning (Mohamad et al., 2018), and a recent extension of TAM into a dedicated Gamification Acceptance Model tested in blended business education (Othman, Daud, et al., 2026); in Bangladesh this includes a qualitative study of Kahoot's motivational effect on English grammar learning (Hossain & Younus, 2024), a large-scale quantitative study of gamified engagement under an Education 4.0 framework (Mostafa et al., 2025), and, most directly relevant to the present study, a conceptual model proposing the integration of gamification mechanics, grounded partly in Self-Determination Theory, into university internship orientation to address graduate employability (Basher & Al-Din, 2023). None of these nine studies, spanning both countries and including the closest available conceptual precedent, examines public relations, strategic communication, or corporate communication education specifically, and none combines student, educator, and practitioner perspectives within a single design; the Basher and Al-Din model, while it shares this study's interest in SDT-grounded gamification for graduate readiness, remains a conceptual proposal advanced without empirical interview or survey data and is pitched at generic graduate internship orientation rather than at a specific discipline's consequence structure. What is absent from existing PR education scholarship in both countries is therefore not incremental but categorical: an empirical literature documenting how gamified, scenario-based simulation interacts with PR's specific pedagogical objective, namely professional identity formation and judgement under public, reputationally consequential pressure, as distinct from the skill-acquisition and knowledge-retention outcomes that dominate gamification research in STEM, language, and general business education in both national contexts. Malaysia and Bangladesh are not selected here merely as instances of developing-country contexts; they constitute a most-different comparative pairing within the same region, one with comparatively mature digital infrastructure, an established private higher-education sector, and a longer-institutionalised PR industry, the other with a newer PR sector still establishing its professional identity relative to marketing and journalism, more constrained digital infrastructure, and an educational culture in which experiential and playful pedagogies are less institutionally normalised. This pairing allows the study to examine whether the perceived value and adoption barriers associated with gamified PR education are stable across two materially different developing-country settings or vary systematically with infrastructural and cultural conditions, a comparative logic that is theoretically motivated rather than a matter of convenience sampling across two available data collection sites.

Against this background, the study is organised around three research questions. RQ1: How do PR students, educators, and industry practitioners in Malaysia and Bangladesh perceive the current gap between PR education and professional practice, and what role do they attribute to authentic, consequence-bearing experience in closing that gap? RQ2: Under what conditions do gamified, scenario-based learning mechanics support or undermine genuine professional skill development in PR education, and how do participants distinguish between meaningful engagement and strategic, reward-seeking behaviour? RQ3: What structural, infrastructural, and

cultural factors shape educators' and practitioners' willingness to adopt gamified assessment in PR education in Malaysia and Bangladesh, and how do these factors interact with individual attitudes toward technology adoption? These questions are addressed through the three theoretical frameworks outlined below, which are deployed not as parallel explanatory lenses but as a connected explanatory sequence anchored in the construct of authenticity: the degree to which an activity is perceived as engaging genuine professional stakes.

This study addresses that gap directly. We report on qualitative interviews with twenty-five participants across three stakeholder groups, namely PR students, PR educators, and PR industry practitioners, in Malaysia and Bangladesh. The interviews were guided by three separate protocols grounded in the three theoretical frameworks: Situated Learning Theory informed the questions on professional identity and role inhabitation; Self-Determination Theory informed the questions on motivation, competence, and engagement quality; and the Technology Acceptance Model informed the questions on adoption attitudes, perceived usefulness, and barriers to implementation. Thematic analysis following the Atlas.ti protocol was applied to the coded transcripts, producing four code groups and three overarching themes. Frequency counts across code groups and evaluative-coding comparison across participant categories provide a quantitative dimension within the qualitative design.

The paper makes three contributions. First, it applies three theoretical frameworks, Situated Learning Theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991), Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), and the Technology Acceptance Model (Davis, 1989), consistently across all three findings themes and into a PR education context in developing countries where the conditions for gamification adoption differ substantially from those documented in existing literature. These three frameworks work together as a connected explanatory sequence rather than as parallel, independently applied lenses: Situated Learning Theory accounts for why an authentic, consequence-bearing community of practice is necessary for professional identity formation in the first place; Self-Determination Theory specifies the motivational mechanism, namely autonomy, competence, and relatedness, through which a gamified simulation can either approximate or fail to approximate that authentic participation; and the Technology Acceptance Model addresses the institutional and infrastructural conditions under which a motivationally sound design is, or is not, actually taken up. The construct that connects all three levels is authenticity, understood here as the degree to which an educational activity is perceived by participants as engaging genuine professional stakes rather than a simulated or trivialised version of them; this construct recurs across all three themes and is the paper's organising theoretical proposition, rather than a post hoc summary applied after three independently reported findings sections. Second, it provides the first triadic perspective, meaning students, educators, and practitioners simultaneously, on gamification's potential in PR education, revealing points of convergence and productive disagreement across stakeholder groups. Third, it identifies design priorities for gamified PR learning platforms that emerge directly from practitioner and student voices rather than from researcher-imposed frameworks. Fourth, and most directly responsive to the question of theoretical advancement rather than application, the study extends the Technology Acceptance Model beyond its conventional individual-level focus on perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use: the data indicate that non-adoption of gamified PR training in this sample is frequently a structural and cultural phenomenon, namely institutional confidentiality constraints that exclude novices from authentic practice, the cultural coding of play as developmentally inappropriate for adult professional learners, and labour-market reward structures that still privilege academic credentials over demonstrated competency, rather than a deficit in individual attitude toward the technology itself. This relocates the locus of explanation in TAM from the individual user to the institutional and cultural environment surrounding the user, a boundary condition the original model does not specify and that prior gamification-adoption research has not, to the authors' knowledge, documented in a professional communication education context. The study's application of Situated Learning Theory and Self-Determination Theory is best characterised as a theoretically grounded extension of these frameworks to a previously undocumented disciplinary and geographic context rather than as an independent theoretical advance in either framework on its own terms.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Industry Readiness Gap in PR Education

The theory practice gap in PR education has been documented across multiple national contexts and decades of scholarship, but its specific contours in Southeast and South Asian settings have received insufficient attention.

Practitioners in these markets consistently identify a cluster of missing competencies in new graduates: the ability to navigate a crisis under real time media pressure, the judgment to select appropriate communication channels for different stakeholder segments, and the professional confidence to advise organisational leadership rather than merely execute instructions (Abdullah et al., 2023; Capatina et al., 2024; Lynch et al., 2025). These competencies share a common characteristic: they cannot be developed through lectures, textbooks, or even case study discussion alone. They require repeated, consequential practice in conditions that approximate professional reality.

Fantozzi & Schiraldi (2025), in a study of experiential learning in operations management education, found that students who engaged with gamified industry challenges showed 2.2 fewer skill misalignments with professional role profiles compared to control groups. While this finding comes from a different disciplinary context, its mechanism, namely that consequence driven practice narrows the gap between academic competency and professional readiness, is directly relevant to PR education. Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) similarly predicts that competency development is most durable when learners experience genuine autonomy in their choices, feel their growing competence confirmed by feedback, and engage within a socially meaningful context. These are precisely the conditions that gamified crisis scenarios, when well designed, are structured to produce.

In the Malaysian context specifically, the PR industry has undergone significant digitalisation, with practitioners increasingly required to manage real time stakeholder engagement across social media platforms, navigate influencer marketing relationships, and respond to reputational threats that can escalate within hours (Abdullah et al., 2017). Sambo et al. (2025), examining gamification adoption in African higher education, found that even where awareness of gamification's benefits was high, implementation lagged due to institutional inertia and a perceived mismatch between game formats and professional seriousness. In Bangladesh specifically, rather than this pattern needing to be inferred by analogy from a different region, direct evidence is available: Hossain and Yunus (2024), in a qualitative study of Kahoot's effect on English grammar learning at a Bangladeshi university, found that students responded enthusiastically to gamified competition and reported heightened motivation, but the study also surfaced affordability and instructor-adoption barriers as the main constraints on wider uptake rather than student attitude. Mostafa et al. (2025), drawing on a large-scale quantitative survey of over 1,500 students across Bangladeshi institutions, similarly found that gamified elements significantly increased motivation, participation, and learning satisfaction under an Education 4.0 framework, with the strongest gains concentrated among students who reported struggling in conventional classrooms; the study's authors note, however, that some respondents reported limited direct academic impact, indicating that engagement gains do not automatically translate into demonstrated competency, a distinction directly relevant to the assessment-validity concerns raised by PR educators in the present study. Both studies confirm that Bangladeshi students respond positively to gamified mechanics in principle, while leaving open the institutional and disciplinary-specific questions that the present study addresses: whether this responsiveness translates into professional readiness in a field where assessment must certify reputationally consequential judgement rather than grammar accuracy or general engagement.

Situated Learning Theory and the Indwelling of Professional Identity

Situated Learning Theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991) provides the most theoretically generative framework for understanding why gamified simulation holds particular promise for PR education. The theory holds that genuine learning occurs not through the transmission of abstract knowledge but through participation in communities of practice, contexts in which learners engage with the authentic tools, language, roles, and problems of a professional domain. What conventional PR education largely fails to provide is access to such a community: students observe practice from the outside, through case studies and guest lectures, without inhabiting it from the inside.

Spanellis et al. (2022), in their analysis of gamified situated learning in organisations, introduced the concept of indwelling to describe the process by which gamified affordances enable learners to psychologically inhabit professional roles rather than merely simulate them. Their analysis of 119 corporate blog posts found that gamified organisational environments fostered identity investment and community formation in ways that conventional training did not. This indwelling process is particularly relevant to PR education because

professional identity formation, the transition from student who studies public relations to practitioner who practises it, is itself a central educational objective in the field.

Lynch et al. (2025), in a phenomenological study of eleven students in a gamified entrepreneurship course, found that participants who engaged intensively with the simulation platform began applying professional reasoning frameworks voluntarily outside of the game context, evaluating real business opportunities using the heuristics they had developed through repeated scenario engagement. This transfer of professional reasoning beyond the formal learning context is precisely what indwelling theory predicts, and it is the outcome that PR educators and practitioners consistently identify as absent in new graduates.

Self-Determination Theory, Deliberate Practice, and the Risk of Gaming the System

Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) provides the second theoretical pillar of this study. The theory holds that intrinsic motivation is fostered when three basic psychological needs are met: autonomy, the experience of genuine choice; competence, the perception of growing effectiveness; and relatedness, the sense of meaningful social connection. In gamified PR education, well-designed scenarios operationalise all three needs by giving students consequential choices, providing feedback that signals genuine reasoning development, and situating practice within a shared professional learning context (Baninajarian & Abdullah, 2009). The framework of deliberate practice by Lynch et al. (2025), drawn from expertise development research by Ericsson (2006), extends SDT's competence dimension by specifying the conditions under which skill mastery, rather than surface engagement, develops. Deliberate practice is defined by four criteria: repeated engagement with performance targeted activities, motivation to improve, availability of feedback, and gradual escalation of challenge to the current performance level. Gamified simulations, when well designed, operationalise all four criteria simultaneously: students repeat crisis scenarios, feedback is embedded in consequence structures, and difficulty can be adapted to individual progress.

However, Almeida et al. (2023), in their systematic mapping of 87 empirical studies of gamification in education, identified a persistent counter pattern: when game mechanics emphasise competitive ranking, external rewards, and visible performance metrics, students frequently shift from learning oriented engagement to metric optimising behaviour. Badges are collected rather than earned. Leaderboard positions are pursued through strategic rather than substantive effort. Quiz questions are memorised rather than reasoned through. This gaming-the-system phenomenon goes beyond neutralising gamification's educational benefits: it actively produces a learner who has practised compliance with game mechanics rather than mastery of professional competencies.

The tension between deliberate practice and gaming the system is not resolvable through design alone, though design choices significantly moderate which pattern dominates. Schöbel et al. (2023), in a randomised controlled experiment with 68 students, found that game mechanics including points and badges did not directly improve problem solving outcomes; their effects were mediated by emotional engagement, and only when that engagement was genuine rather than performative. This mediation finding is fully predicted by SDT: when game mechanics satisfy the need for genuine competence, they activate intrinsic motivation; when they replace competence feedback with external reward structures, they risk the overjustification effect, in which pre-existing intrinsic motivation is crowded out by transactional reward-seeking. The interview data in the present study illuminates this theoretical prediction from the perspectives of those closest to the learning experience.

Technology Acceptance Model and Adoption Barriers

The Technology Acceptance Model (Davis, 1989) predicts that technology adoption is determined by two primary factors: perceived usefulness (whether the technology is believed to improve performance) and perceived ease of use (whether the technology is believed to require minimal effort to operate). In educational technology research, TAM has been extended to account for additional moderating variables including social influence, institutional support, and prior experience with similar tools (Baena-Luna et al., 2025; Kashive & Mohite, 2023).

Gupta & Priyanka (2024), applying TAM and sequential mediation analysis to 570 Indian university students, found that gamification's effect on e learning adoption was fully mediated by flow state and engagement, with

perceived usefulness functioning as the primary entry point into this motivational chain. This finding is significant for the present study because it suggests that practitioners' and educators' assessment of gamification's value for PR education will largely be determined by whether they believe gamified platforms can genuinely replicate the complexity and consequentiality of real PR work, not merely by whether the platforms are easy to navigate.

Amjad et al. (2025), in their qualitative study of seven Pakistani teachers' experiences with gamification, found that even educators who expressed positive attitudes toward gamification in principle faced insurmountable barriers at the compatibility and trialability stages: the platforms available were not compatible with existing curriculum structures, and opportunities to trial the approach before committing to it institutionally were absent. This pattern is likely to be reproduced in the Bangladeshi context, where digital infrastructure is less developed than in Malaysia and institutional risk aversion around pedagogical innovation is correspondingly higher. These structural constraints extend TAM's individual-level adoption model by locating perceived ease of use within a broader institutional and infrastructural context that individual attitudes alone cannot override.

Within the Malaysian higher education literature specifically, several TAM-grounded studies of gamification provide a useful baseline against which the present study's contribution can be located precisely. Ab. Rahman et al. (2018), evaluating a gamified database design course at a Malaysian polytechnic against the standard TAM constructs, found that perceived ease of use, rather than perceived usefulness, was the stronger predictor of positive student attitude toward gamification, suggesting that in this earlier study population, usability concerns dominated value concerns. Othman, Jaini, et al. (2023), surveying Malaysian undergraduates in online learning settings, extended TAM by introducing authenticity as an external antecedent that operates through perceived ease of use, perceived usefulness, and perceived enjoyment as mediating variables, and found authenticity to be a significant positive driver of intention to use gamified tools. This is an important precedent for the present study's use of authenticity as a connecting theoretical construct, and it is acknowledged here directly: Othman, Jaini, et al. (2023) establish authenticity as a quantitatively measurable external factor within a single-stakeholder, single-theory TAM model applied to general online learning. The present study differs in three respects rather than claiming an unprecedented use of the construct: it treats authenticity qualitatively, as an interpretive category emerging from participant accounts rather than a measured external variable; it locates authenticity across three theoretical frameworks rather than within TAM alone, using it to explain why a simulation must feel professionally real before SDT's motivational mechanisms or TAM's adoption mechanisms can activate; and it examines authenticity specifically in relation to PR's reputationally consequential, publicly visible professional practice rather than general online learning content. Othman, Daud, et al. (2026), most recently, proposed a dedicated Gamification Acceptance Model extending TAM for blended business education in Malaysia, finding that perceived usefulness directly enhanced attitudinal, interactive, and skill engagement, though its hypothesised mediating role for attitude was not supported; this finding, like Ab. Rahman et al. (2018), is drawn from a single stakeholder group, namely enrolled students, surveyed quantitatively, which is precisely the gap the present qualitative, triadic, cross-national design is positioned to address by showing how educators' and practitioners' institutional and cultural judgements condition whether positive student-level adoption attitudes can be acted upon at all.

Taken together, the three theoretical frameworks adopted in this study operate at distinct but connected levels of the same explanatory problem. Situated Learning Theory defines the nature of the competency gap: PR education fails because students are excluded from the communities of practice in which professional identity is formed. Self-Determination Theory explains the motivational mechanism through which gamified simulation can address that gap: well-designed scenarios satisfy the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, activating genuine intrinsic motivation rather than the extrinsic compliance that competitive game mechanics tend to produce. The Technology Acceptance Model explains the adoption conditions that determine whether this mechanism can be activated in practice, mapping the perceived usefulness and ease of use thresholds that educators and practitioners must cross before implementation becomes feasible, and accounting for the structural and cultural factors that raise or lower those thresholds across different national contexts. Each theme in the findings is anchored to one of these three frameworks: the indwelling deficit to Situated Learning Theory, the deliberate practice dilemma to Self-Determination Theory, and adoption ambivalence to the Technology Acceptance Model.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design with an embedded quantitative component, specifically frequency analysis of coded segments and evaluative (attitude) coding across participant groups. The primary method is thematic analysis following the Atlas.ti protocol, which moves through three coding stages: open coding, in which participant responses are labelled at the level of expressed meaning; axial coding, in which codes are grouped into categories by relational logic; and selective coding, in which overarching themes are constructed to answer the research questions. This approach is consistent with the interpretivist tradition in communication research and is appropriate for a study that seeks to understand how participants make sense of a phenomenon, gamified PR education, that is novel to most of them.

The embedded quantitative component provides frequency counts of code occurrence across participant groups and countries, and an evaluative-coding (attitude-coding) comparison of educator and practitioner responses to the prospect of replacing traditional assessments with gamified alternatives. These quantitative elements do not transform the study into a mixed methods design in the formal sense; they serve to add precision and comparability to the qualitative findings without displacing the interpretive logic of the analysis.

Participants

Twenty-five participants were recruited through non-probability stratified purposive sampling across three theoretically predetermined strata: PR students, PR educators, and PR industry practitioners. Non-probability stratified sampling was selected over probability-based approaches because the study required representation from each stratum by design rather than by chance; the strata are theoretically derived from the study's analytical framework, which positions student, educator, and practitioner perspectives as analytically distinct explanatory layers rather than interchangeable respondents. Within each stratum, participants were identified through purposive selection based on the following criteria: a minimum of one year of active engagement with PR education or practice, familiarity with digital learning tools in either educational or professional settings, and willingness to discuss both strengths and limitations of current PR curricula. Snowball referral was used within strata where initial purposive recruitment yielded fewer than the target number, specifically within the practitioner stratum in Bangladesh, where the professional PR network is smaller. The final sample comprised twelve PR students (seven from Malaysian public universities and five from Bangladeshi universities), seven PR educators (four Malaysian, three Bangladeshi), and six PR industry practitioners (four Malaysian, two Bangladeshi), for a total of twenty-five participants. Table 1 provides a summary of participant characteristics. Saturation was monitored across each stratum independently rather than across the whole sample, consistent with the stratified design: no new themes emerged in the final two interviews within any stratum.

Table 1 Participant Characteristics by Group and Country

Code	Group	Role / Specialization	Country	Experience
P1	Student	PR undergraduate, Year 3	Malaysia	3 years study
P2	Student	PR undergraduate, Year 2	Malaysia	2 years study
P3	Student	Media studies, Year 4	Malaysia	4 years study
P4	Student	PR undergraduate, Year 3	Bangladesh	3 years study
P5	Student	Communication, Year 2	Bangladesh	2 years study
E1	Educator	Senior Lecturer, PR and Crisis Comm.	Malaysia	14 years
E2	Educator	Associate Prof., Strategic Comm.	Malaysia	20 years

E3	Educator	Lecturer, Media and Journalism	Bangladesh	8 years
PR1	Practitioner	Senior PR Manager, agency	Malaysia	12 years
PR2	Practitioner	Head of Corporate Comm.	Malaysia	17 years
PR3	Practitioner	PR Consultant, digital specialist	Bangladesh	9 years
P6	Student	PR undergraduate, Year 4	Malaysia	4 years study
P7	Student	Strategic Comm., Year 3	Malaysia	3 years study
P8	Student	Media studies, Year 2	Malaysia	2 years study
P9	Student	PR undergraduate, Year 4	Malaysia	4 years study
P10	Student	Journalism and PR, Year 3	Bangladesh	3 years study
P11	Student	Mass Communication, Year 2	Bangladesh	2 years study
P12	Student	PR undergraduate, Year 3	Bangladesh	3 years study
E4	Educator	Lecturer, Digital Marketing Comm.	Malaysia	6 years
E5	Educator	Senior Lecturer, Corporate Comm.	Malaysia	11 years
E6	Educator	Associate Prof., Journalism	Bangladesh	15 years
E7	Educator	Lecturer, PR and Advertising	Bangladesh	5 years
PR4	Practitioner	PR Director, corporate sector	Malaysia	22 years
PR5	Practitioner	Social Media Strategist	Malaysia	7 years
PR6	Practitioner	PR Executive, media agency	Bangladesh	4 years

Interview Protocols and Data Collection

Three separate semi structured interview guides were developed, one for each participant group. The student guide was organised around three theoretical frameworks: Situated Learning Theory informed questions on role inhabitation and professional identity; Self-Determination Theory informed questions on motivation quality, competence development, and engagement depth; and the Technology Acceptance Model informed questions on perceived usefulness, ease of use, and adoption readiness toward gamified learning platforms. The practitioner guide focused on industry expectations, skill gap diagnosis, hiring criteria, and attitudes toward game-based onboarding tools. The educator guide examined pedagogy preferences, curriculum design thinking, institutional barriers to technology adoption, and assessment philosophy. All three guides were reviewed by a communication education specialist before deployment.

The Malaysian interviews were conducted in English. The Bangladeshi interviews were conducted in Bengali with partial English switching, and were transcribed with researcher assistance before analysis. Where translation produced ambiguous passages, the analytical team flagged the uncertainty, provided an interpretive note, and did not code the passage as definitively supporting any particular theme. This conservative approach to translation uncertainty is consistent with best practice in cross linguistic qualitative research (Squires, 2009).

Ethical Clearance and Funding

Ethical clearance for this study was granted by the Institute for Communication and Gamification Research (ICOMGAM), a registered research institute based in Bangladesh, under reference number ICOMGAM/IREC/2026/PRX-021. To address the question of institutional standing directly: ICOMGAM is a formally registered research institute, and ethical review for this project was conducted by its Institutional Research Ethics Committee (IREC), which for this study comprised one full professor from a Malaysian university and two assistant professors from Bangladeshi universities, reflecting the binational composition of the research team and the two data collection sites. This committee independently reviewed the interview protocols, consent procedures, and data management plan prior to data collection, and the cross-national composition of the panel was intended to ensure that ethical review accounted for the distinct regulatory and cultural research contexts of both countries. As the body responsible for both ethical oversight and partial funding of this research, ICOMGAM oversaw adherence to rigorous ethical protocols, ensuring that participant confidentiality, data security, and informed consent procedures were strictly maintained throughout the project. The approval confirms that the study's design meets the necessary institutional benchmarks for academic integrity and the protection of human subjects in gamification research. All participants were provided with a written information sheet and signed consent forms prior to their interview. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence and were assured that their responses would be anonymised before any analysis or dissemination. Interview recordings and transcripts were stored on encrypted institutional servers accessible only to the core research team. The authors acknowledge, in the interest of transparency, that ICOMGAM's dual role as both research funder and ethics-reviewing institute is a structural feature common to dedicated research institutes operating outside conventional university-based ethics committee structures; the inclusion of reviewers from both partner countries, none of whom held a direct supervisory role over the project's data collection, was intended as a partial safeguard against this conflict, and readers should weigh the ethics approval accordingly.

Inter-Coder and Inter-Rater Reliability

Two distinct reliability tests were conducted prior to the primary data analysis phase in accordance with the ethical clearance granted by ICOMGAM under reference ICOMGAM/IREC/2026/PRX-021, and these tests address different aspects of the analytical instrument. Inter-coder reliability (ICR) assessed the consistency with which two independent coders assigned thematic categories to the same coded passages. This test addressed the qualitative thematic analysis: whether a given segment of transcript would be assigned to the same code group regardless of which researcher conducted the coding. Both coders independently applied the four code groups to a randomly selected subset of twelve transcripts, representing approximately 48 percent of the total sample. Disagreements were subsequently reconciled through structured discussion, and the coding framework was refined where ambiguity was identified. Cohen's Kappa (κ) (Cantor, 1996) was calculated for the thematic categorisation decisions, yielding a coefficient of $\kappa = 0.72$. This score represents a substantial level of agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977), indicating that the four code groups were sufficiently well-defined for consistent independent application across the transcript data. Inter-rater reliability (IRR) addressed a separate and distinct question: whether two independent raters would assign the same intensity score to the same participant response when applying the three-point evaluative coding (attitude coding) scale used in the adoption ambivalence analysis. The full coding rubric, including definitions, decision rules, coding boundary notes, and illustrative anchors for each of the three codes (Positive, Neutral, Negative), is provided in Appendix A (Table A1). Unlike ICR, which concerns categorical thematic assignment, IRR concerns ordinal judgement about the degree of positivity, neutrality, or negativity expressed in educator and practitioner responses regarding assessment reform. The same twelve-transcript subset was used for comparability, with both raters independently scoring all eligible responses before reconciling disagreements. Cohen's Kappa for the IRR test yielded a coefficient of $\kappa = 0.68$, representing moderate to substantial agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977) and confirming that the evaluative coding instrument, while requiring some interpretive judgement, produced sufficiently consistent results to support the distributional claims made in Theme Three. Taken together, the ICR coefficient of 0.72 and the IRR coefficient of 0.68 confirm that both the thematic coding framework and the evaluative-coding (attitude-rating) instrument are robust and reproducible. The separation of these two tests is methodologically important: a single composite reliability figure would obscure the distinction between categorical thematic assignment, which requires lower

inferential load and produced higher agreement, and scalar attitude judgement, which requires greater interpretive effort and produced correspondingly lower but still acceptable agreement.

Analytical Procedure

Thematic analysis proceeded through three stages following the Atlas.ti protocol. In the open coding stage, all twenty-five transcripts were coded line by line, producing 312 initial codes. In the axial coding stage, these codes were grouped into four code groups: Industry Readiness Gap (codes including missing competencies, theory practice division, crisis management deficit, digital PR unpreparedness); Gamification Mechanics (codes including leaderboards, badges, certifications, scenario driven narrative, interactive case studies); Psychological Impact (codes including flow state, performance anxiety, intrinsic motivation, gaming behaviour, engagement withdrawal); and Institutional and Cultural Barriers (codes including infrastructure access, teacher digital literacy, administrative constraints, cultural perception of play).

The three theoretical frameworks shaped the coding structure directly. The Situated Learning Theory lens informed the Industry Readiness Gap code group, directing coders to identify moments where participants described the absence of community of practice participation, role inhabitation, or professional identity formation. The Self-Determination Theory lens informed the Psychological Impact code group, directing coders to distinguish between expressions of intrinsic motivation, genuine competence development, and autonomous engagement on one hand, and expressions of extrinsic compliance, reward-seeking, and gaming behaviour on the other. The Technology Acceptance Model lens informed the Institutional and Cultural Barriers code group, directing coders to identify references to perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, social influence, and the structural conditions that moderate adoption attitudes.

In the selective coding stage, cross group analysis of the four code groups produced three overarching themes: the indwelling deficit, the deliberate practice dilemma, and adoption ambivalence. Frequency counts of coded segments by participant group and country were computed to provide the quantitative layer. Evaluative coding (attitude coding) was applied to educator and practitioner responses regarding assessment reform, scoring responses on a three-point scale (positive, neutral, negative toward replacing traditional assessments with gamified alternatives) and reporting the distribution across groups.

FINDINGS

Code Frequency Distribution

Table 2 presents the frequency distribution of coded segments across the four code groups by participant category. The most frequently coded theme across all groups was the theory practice gap, appearing across all twenty-five transcripts, followed by professional identity shift, scenario preference, and crisis skills deficit, each surfacing across the overwhelming majority of participant accounts regardless of group or country.

Table 2 Frequency of Coded Segments by Participant Group

Code / Theme	Students (n=12)	Educators (n=7)	Practitioners (n=6)	Total
Theory practice gap / curriculum inadequacy	12	7	6	25
Crisis communication skills deficit	8	6	6	20
Digital PR / social media readiness	10	5	6	21
Scenario / real world simulation preference	11	7	5	23
Leaderboards / competitive mechanics	7	2	2	11

Badges / certification motivation	9	5	4	18
Infrastructure / access barriers	5	6	3	14
Assessment concerns / gaming the system	5	7	3	15
Professional identity shift / indwelling	10	5	6	21
Perceived usefulness of gamification (TAM)	9	4	4	17
Cultural perception of play (BD vs. MY)	7	4	4	15

The frequency distribution reveals two notable patterns. First, students were the most vocal participants on questions of professional identity and simulation preference, consistent with their position as the group most directly experiencing the gap between classroom learning and the professional world they are preparing to enter. Second, educators showed the highest concern frequencies around assessment integrity and the risk of gaming behaviour, a pattern that aligns with their professional responsibility for certifying that learning has occurred. Practitioners were most consistent in their identification of crisis communication and digital PR as the critical competency deficits, providing a practitioner side validation of the student and educator accounts.

Theme One: The Indwelling Deficit — The Professional Identity Gap

The most theoretically significant theme to emerge from the analysis describes what participants across all three groups consistently identified as a fundamental absence in current PR education: the experience of inhabiting a professional role rather than studying it. This theme, named the indwelling deficit in dialogue with the concept of indwelling by Spanellis et al. (2022), captures the gap between knowing what a PR professional does and becoming one.

Student participants articulated this deficit most directly. One Malaysian student described the experience of reading crisis communication case studies as learning about a fire without ever feeling heat. What she wanted from her education was not more information about what had gone wrong in historical crises but the opportunity to be inside one, making decisions with incomplete information, under time pressure, and with visible consequences. This description maps precisely onto what Situated Learning Theory identifies as the condition of genuine competency development: participation in a community of practice rather than observation of it from the outside.

A Bangladeshi student expressed a version of the same frustration that carried an additional dimension: the anxiety of not knowing whether he would be capable of professional performance until he was already in a job and expected to perform. His coursework had given him frameworks and models, but no opportunity to discover whether he could apply them under pressure. This anticipatory anxiety about untested professional capability is a direct product of the indwelling deficit, and it has implications beyond pedagogy: it shapes the confidence, self-presentation, and early career resilience of graduates entering the industry.

Practitioner participants confirmed this reading from the hiring side. A senior PR manager in Malaysia described the pattern of recruiting new graduates who could speak fluently about stakeholder theory in interview but who required extensive hand holding on their first real client account. This discrepancy between interview performance and work performance is the industry facing manifestation of the indwelling deficit: graduates have learned to perform academic understanding of PR without developing professional capability to practise it. The practitioner's preferred solution was not more theory but more authentic simulation. She specifically described wanting graduates who had already been through a fake crisis and made the wrong call and had to deal with the consequences within a learning environment, because that is the only way to develop the judgment that the real job requires.

A Malaysian industry educator, with thirteen years of teaching experience following an earlier career in financial public relations, described the same discrepancy in terms that ground it specifically in the consequential, public-

facing nature of PR work rather than in business education generally: “the difference between [me] as an academic and [me] as an employer is heaven versus hell... we need to show them what are the expected professional behaviours in industry.” He linked this directly to students’ tendency to hold “a romanticised version” of PR as glamorous work, when in practice “it’s also serious people who want you to do a good job. And if you screw up, you screw up for us and you screw up for your colleagues.” A Bangladeshi educator who also held a part-time PR leadership role at her university made the same point in language that locates the deficit specifically in crisis competence rather than general professional readiness: “PR may seem easy, but in reality, it’s quite challenging. Even after extensive study, many people lack real-world understanding... theoretical knowledge alone isn’t enough,” adding that during an actual on-campus crisis, “no one knew actually how to handle this, even the PR director didn’t know.” This distinction matters for the disciplinary contribution of the indwelling deficit theme. The competency gap reported here is not generic to professional or business education; it is anchored in features specific to PR practice: messages are delivered in real time to a public and often adversarial audience, errors are immediately and publicly visible, and the practitioner bears reputational consequences on behalf of an organisation rather than only their own performance. A Malaysian practitioner working in regulated industry liaison made a structurally specific version of the same point: trainee practitioners are excluded from authentic crisis practice because the underlying information is “secrecy, confidential,” so that “the student, when they join the internship, they’re only doing the desk work, administrative work.” A Bangladeshi practitioner who had transitioned from PR agency work into development communication offered a directly quantified version of the same claim when asked to imagine simulation-based training prior to entering the industry: “with training at least I would have learned 10%... but with training I have an idea when the crisis comes,” a figure he offered unprompted as a rough estimate of how much faster simulated exposure would have closed his own readiness gap relative to learning entirely on the job. This is a PR-specific institutional mechanism producing the indwelling deficit, distinct from the more general theory practice gap reported in entrepreneurship or marketing education: students do not simply lack practice; the confidentiality and reputational stakes inherent to PR crisis work structurally exclude novices from the very experiences that would close the gap, making simulated, consequence bearing practice environments a disciplinary necessity rather than a convenient substitute.

Educator participants occupied a more ambivalent position in relation to this theme. The Malaysian educators acknowledged the indwelling deficit but located its source differently across the group. Several attributed it primarily to curriculum design, specifically the dominance of lecture-based delivery in course structures that had not been substantially revised to incorporate experiential components. Others located the problem in assessment architecture: as long as final examinations reward memorisation of theory, the incentive structure for both students and instructors militates against the kind of deep practice that indwelling requires. This pattern is consistent with Kabilan et al.’s (2023) mixed-methods study of Malaysian academics’ gamification practices, which found that academics’ pedagogical reasoning about gamification was shaped less by technological familiarity than by competing institutional demands on their time and by underdeveloped frameworks for translating gamification into assessable learning outcomes; the present study’s educators describe the same constraint specifically in relation to PR competency assessment. This assessment architecture argument is significant because it suggests that gamification alone cannot close the indwelling deficit; structural change in how PR competencies are assessed is also necessary. One educator with over two decades of experience added a labour market dimension, noting that employer hiring criteria still overwhelmingly weight academic grades over demonstrated practical competency, which creates a rational disincentive for students to invest time in practice-based learning activities.

The Bangladeshi educator’s account added a resource dimension to this theme. She described the challenge of running simulation activities in a context where classroom sizes are large, digital infrastructure is unreliable, and the cultural expectation that learning should be transmitted rather than discovered creates friction with experiential pedagogies. This context specific version of the indwelling deficit is important because it cautions against assuming that solutions developed for Malaysian or Western educational environments will transfer directly to the Bangladeshi context.

Across all three participant groups, the indwelling deficit theme produced the strongest convergence of the study: all twenty-five participants, across both countries and all three stakeholder roles, identified the absence of

authentic professional practice experience as the central failure of current PR education. Notably, while the source of the deficit was attributed differently across groups, with students pointing to curriculum content, educators to assessment design, and practitioners to hiring criteria, the diagnosis converged: graduates know about public relations rather than knowing how to do it. The theoretical mechanism connecting this convergence to gamification is straightforward: well-designed gamified simulations that place students inside realistic PR crises and require consequential decision making are precisely what the indwelling deficit calls for. However, the participants' accounts also reveal a critical design requirement: the simulation must be authentic enough to produce the psychological experience of professional inhabitation, not merely familiar enough to be recognised as adjacent to PR content.

Theme Two: The Deliberate Practice Dilemma — Genuine Skill Development versus Gaming the System

The second major theme captures a tension that emerged most sharply in educator and practitioner responses to the prospect of gamified assessment: the tension between gamification as a vehicle for genuine skill development through deliberate practice and gamification as a platform for strategic performance optimisation, or gaming the system. Grounded in Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), this dilemma is fundamentally a question of whether game mechanics satisfy the three psychological needs, autonomy, competence, and relatedness, or whether they substitute extrinsic reward structures for those needs, producing compliance rather than intrinsic motivation. This distinction, which Lynch et al. (2025) identify as the central unresolved question of gamification in professional education, was articulated from different angles by participants across the three groups.

Students were largely unconcerned about this tension, but their descriptions of how they would engage with gamified PR learning platforms were revealing. When asked about features they would find motivating, nine of the twelve student participants mentioned leaderboards or ranking systems as desirable elements. When pressed on what they would do if they found themselves falling behind on a leaderboard, five participants described strategies for improving their score that involved optimising game performance rather than deepening understanding, such as replaying the same scenario multiple times having memorised the correct answer sequence. These descriptions, offered without apparent awareness of their significance, illustrate exactly the gaming the system pattern that Almeida et al. (2023) identified as the most common negative outcome of competitive gamification mechanics. Students offered these accounts with little apparent awareness of their own significance, describing scoreboard optimisation as a practical tactic rather than as a departure from genuine learning.

A Malaysian educator offered an unusually direct illustration of the gaming-the-system risk, drawn from a non-academic but structurally identical gamified mechanic he had previously assigned. After a student exploited a location-based check-in game to falsely document attendance she had not completed, he reflected: “gamification in the form of checking in is supposed to be fun, correct? ... But when you put it to a nonsense use.” Although the incident did not involve a PR-specific platform, the educator drew the connection to classroom gamification explicitly, noting that any system rewarding a verifiable proxy for engagement, rather than engagement itself, creates an incentive structure that a sufficiently motivated student can satisfy without the underlying learning occurring. This anecdote substantiates, with a directly observed rather than hypothetical case, the structural vulnerability that the educator quoted above also identified: gamified assessment mechanics are exploitable precisely to the degree that they reward an observable signal rather than the professional reasoning the signal is meant to indicate.

One Malaysian educator described a scenario in which a student who had mastered the optimal decision pathway in a crisis communication simulation would score perfectly on the gamified assessment while having learned almost nothing about the underlying strategic reasoning. The concern is not hypothetical: it reflects a structural vulnerability in any assessment system that relies on predetermined correct answers. The response to this concern that the same educator proposed was scenario proliferation and adaptive difficulty, specifically, a platform that presents genuinely novel crisis scenarios that cannot be optimised through memorisation, and that escalates complexity in response to demonstrated mastery rather than mere task completion. This design requirement aligns precisely with what Lynch et al. (2025) identify as the defining feature of deliberate practice in professional education: gradual challenge escalation to the current performance boundary.

Practitioner participants offered a different perspective on the deliberate practice dilemma. One corporate communications head described the development of professional judgment in PR as an inherently iterative process: you make a call, you see what happens, you adjust your understanding. What good training should provide is as many iterations of this cycle as possible before a graduate is making calls on behalf of a real organisation. This framing is compatible with gamification's potential: if each scenario in a gamified PR platform represents one iteration of the professional judgment cycle, then the platform's value scales with the number and quality of iterations it provides. The gaming the-system risk, from the practitioner's perspective, is less about fraudulent performance and more about iteration quality: a student who games a scenario has experienced one low quality iteration rather than one genuine one.

The deliberate practice dilemma theme reveals a design implication with direct practical consequences: the effectiveness of gamified PR platforms for professional competency development depends critically on whether the game's design activates genuine reasoning or merely rewards correct answer identification. Scenario based narrative designs that present novel, contextually embedded dilemmas, where there is no single correct answer but rather a range of professionally defensible and indefensible choices with corresponding consequences, are more likely to activate genuine deliberate practice than points-based systems with predetermined optimal pathways. This finding is consistent with experimental result by Schöbel et al. (2023) that game mechanics' effects on professional outcomes are mediated by emotional engagement, and with finding by Capatina et al. (2024) that engagement mediates the relationship between gamification and knowledge retention.

Theme Three: Adoption Ambivalence — Structural and Cultural Constraints on Technology Acceptance

The third theme describes the complex gap between participants' expressed enthusiasm for gamification in principle and the practical, institutional, and cultural barriers that temper actual adoption in both national contexts. This theme, adoption ambivalence, captures a pattern that the Technology Acceptance Model predicts but that the specific cultural and structural contours of the Malaysian and Bangladeshi contexts render distinctive in ways that extend the model beyond its original individual-level scope.

Evaluative coding of educator and practitioner responses to the prospect of replacing traditional assessments with gamified alternatives revealed a clear distributional pattern. Among the seven educator participants, four expressed positive or qualified positive attitudes toward such a replacement, two expressed neutral positions conditional on further evidence of assessment validity and institutional recognition of game-based credentials, and one expressed cautious to negative attitudes grounded in concerns about infrastructure and cultural acceptability. Among the six practitioner participants, four expressed positive attitudes toward gamified training tools for junior staff onboarding and professional development, one expressed qualified enthusiasm contingent on platform quality, and one expressed ambivalence rooted in uncertainty about whether a game platform could adequately replicate the real consequences of professional decision making.

The negative pole of this distribution is worth quoting directly because it represents a substantive, theoretically grounded objection rather than mere unfamiliarity. One Bangladeshi practitioner, with several years of experience managing communications for a regulated financial services brand, rejected the premise that gamified simulation can substitute for lived professional relationship-building: "If you speak from the perspective of communication, then I don't think this place will help much... in real life, what is the place of gamification?" She illustrated the point with her own career history, describing how a chance professional relationship with a journalist, built outside any structured training context, became personally and professionally formative in a way she did not believe a simulated environment could replicate: through the game, she argued, "you cannot see it from any perspective" the kind of relationship value that accumulates through unscripted, consequential human contact. A second practitioner voiced a similarly skeptical, though less elaborated, view: that established field-based practice remains better suited to professional learning than virtual or app-based substitutes. These accounts do not reject gamification outright; instead, they reframe the adoption question, centring less on unfamiliarity or poor design than on whether gamified platforms can structurally reproduce the open-ended, relationally consequential texture of real professional practice, however sophisticated the simulation. This is a stronger and more theoretically interesting objection than infrastructural or cultural unfamiliarity alone, and it qualifies the adoption ambivalence theme: some resistance to gamification in this sample is a considered professional judgement, not solely a structural or cultural barrier to be designed around.

The Malaysian participants, both educators and practitioners, showed higher overall enthusiasm for gamification adoption, consistent with Malaysia's more developed digital infrastructure and its higher institutional familiarity with educational technology. Several Malaysian participants referenced familiarity with platforms such as Kahoot and Menti as existing reference points that made the concept of gamified PR learning more cognitively accessible.

The Bangladeshi participants' accounts of adoption ambivalence were more structurally grounded. The Bangladeshi educator described a university context in which reliable internet access for all students in a classroom cannot be assumed, in which the academic calendar allows little room for activity-based learning that falls outside the examination-oriented curriculum structure, and in which the institutional reward system for educators does not recognise innovative pedagogy in the way that research publication does. These conditions create what she termed a readiness gap of a different kind, rooted less in faculty opposition to gamified learning than in the absence of the structural conditions needed to implement it. This account resonates with Amjad et al. (2025) finding in Pakistan and finding in Egypt by Kotp et al. (2025) that institutional and infrastructural barriers to gamification adoption are the dominant constraints in developing country contexts, operating independently of educators' pedagogical attitudes.

The Bangladeshi student participants added a cultural dimension to the adoption ambivalence theme that deserves specific attention. One participant described the perception in his academic community that learning through games is not serious learning, and that a degree program that incorporated game-based assessment might be viewed with less academic credibility by employers and families. This cultural perception of play, in which playful activity is coded as incompatible with professional preparation, is a context specific barrier that Western gamification research has largely not encountered or examined. It is significant because it operates at the level of social meaning rather than technical infrastructure: even if all practical barriers to gamification were resolved, this cultural framing would continue to moderate adoption.

Across the Malaysian participants, this cultural barrier was largely absent or muted. Malaysian students described gaming for entertainment as a normal and respected leisure activity, and the connection between gaming as entertainment and gaming as learning was cognitively accessible to them in a way that it was not for all Bangladeshi participants. This cross-national difference in the cultural coding of play has direct implications for how gamified PR platforms should be positioned in each market: in Malaysia, the game framing is likely to be an asset; in Bangladesh, the educational and professional utility of the platform may need to be foregrounded more prominently to overcome the seriousness and play opposition.

The adoption ambivalence theme ultimately points toward a tiered implementation model: gamified PR learning platforms should be designed with sufficient flexibility to be deployed with full game mechanics where cultural and infrastructural conditions support them, and with a more scenario based, low game-mechanics mode for contexts where those conditions are absent. This design flexibility reflects the genuine heterogeneity of the educational environments in which PR education operates across the region, rather than representing a compromise.

DISCUSSION

The three themes produced by this analysis converge on a central finding that has both theoretical and practical significance: the barriers to gamification's adoption and effectiveness in PR education are not primarily technical but relational, in the sense that they concern the relationships between game design choices and professional learning objectives, between cultural contexts and pedagogical norms, and between different stakeholder groups' mental models of what good PR education should produce.

The indwelling deficit theme extends conceptual framework of Spanellis et al. (2022) into a disciplinary and geographic context that has not previously been examined. The convergent finding across all twenty-five participants that current PR education systematically fails to provide the experience of professional role inhabitation represents a strong endorsement of the situated learning rationale for gamified simulation. However, the participants' accounts also reveal a design requirement that existing gamification research has not adequately specified: the simulation must be authentic enough to trigger genuine professional identity engagement;

recognisability as adjacent to PR content is not sufficient on its own. A crisis scenario that presents a fictional organisation with implausible stakeholder dynamics will not produce the indwelling that practitioners describe as essential to professional readiness.

The deliberate practice dilemma theme contributes to the theoretical debate between Lynch et al. (2025) and Almeida et al. (2023) about when gamification supports and when it undermines professional skill development. The student participants' descriptions of how they would engage with leaderboard mechanics, and the educator participants' anxieties about assessment validity, together suggest that the design choice between competitive and mastery-oriented gamification mechanics carries real pedagogical consequence rather than being simply a matter of preference. Platforms that prioritise competitive ranking create the conditions for gaming the system behaviour; platforms that prioritise scenario novelty, adaptive difficulty, and narrative consequence create the conditions for deliberate practice. Self-Determination Theory provides the theoretical account of why this distinction operates as it does: leaderboard engagement satisfies none of the three psychological needs, producing neither genuine autonomy (rank is externally imposed), nor genuine competence feedback (scores reflect strategic performance rather than professional reasoning), nor meaningful relatedness (competition is adversarial rather than collaborative). Narrative consequence designs, by contrast, give students genuine choices with professionally meaningful outcomes, provide competence feedback that reflects the quality of their reasoning, and situate practice within a shared professional context that supports relatedness. The present study cannot adjudicate this design question empirically, but it provides participant grounded evidence that the distinction matters and that the stakeholders closest to the learning experience are aware of it.

The adoption ambivalence theme makes the most distinctive theoretical contribution of the three, by extending the Technology Acceptance Model into the specific cultural and structural conditions of Southeast and South Asian PR education. TAM's two-factor model of perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use captures the individual-level adoption decision, but the present study demonstrates that in the Malaysian and Bangladeshi contexts, structural and cultural factors systematically constrain whether individuals can act on positive adoption attitudes even when they hold them. Existing literature on adoption barriers in developing countries, including Amjad et al. (2025) in Pakistan, and Kotp et al. (2025) in Egypt, identifies infrastructure and institutional inertia as the primary constraints. The present study confirms these constraints but adds a dimension specific to the Bangladeshi context: the cultural coding of play as incompatible with professional seriousness, a semiotic barrier that operates below the level of individual attitudes and cannot be resolved by improving platform usability alone.

Taken together, these three themes suggest that the path from gamification's theoretical promise to its practical impact in PR education requires simultaneous attention to design quality, cultural positioning, and structural readiness. The literature's dominant focus on design quality, particularly the debate between narrative driven and points-based mechanics, is necessary but not sufficient. The present study's contribution is to demonstrate, through the voices of those closest to the educational experience, that cultural positioning and structural readiness are equally determinative in the contexts where gamification's potential impact would be greatest.

An Emergent Cross-Cutting Finding: Gendered Structural Barriers Beyond Gamification

A pattern recurred across several Bangladeshi participants that was not anticipated by the three theoretical frameworks but is too consistent to omit. Classrooms were repeatedly described as female-majority, while industry attendance, senior practitioner visibility, and journalist counterparts were described as comparatively male. One Bangladeshi educator-practitioner, drawing on direct experience supervising student PR workers, observed that despite a female-majority classroom, "we don't have a single student worker... who is a female," and linked this specifically to the relational demands of PR work rather than to ability: in traditional media relations, professionals frequently interact with journalists who are "often male and over 40," a dynamic she described as exhausting and orthodox for women to navigate, adding that "networking is exhausting" and that the late hours and informal socialising central to journalist relationship-building create a structural rather than attitudinal barrier to women's career progression in PR specifically, as distinct from communication fields more broadly. A Bangladeshi practitioner offered a different reading of the same underlying pattern, describing the industry he had observed as closer to gender-balanced or even women-favouring at the entry level, while acknowledging that broader, less personally observed segments of the industry likely remain more male-

dominated, and separately noting that marriage and family expectations divert some women out of the profession after graduation. This divergence between accounts is itself informative: it suggests the gendered barrier operates unevenly across different segments of PR practice, more acutely in media-relations-heavy, externally networked roles than in agency or client-service roles. This finding does not fit cleanly within Situated Learning Theory, Self-Determination Theory, or the Technology Acceptance Model as currently specified, and the present study did not design its protocols to investigate gender systematically; it is reported here as a finding requiring dedicated future research rather than as a fourth theme, but it carries implications for how gamified simulation is designed: a platform that fails to account for the gendered structure of professional networking risks reproducing, rather than levelling, an inequity that exists independently of the technology itself.

Theoretical, Practical, Methodological, and Policy Significance

The theoretical significance of this study lies principally in the extension of the Technology Acceptance Model beyond its individual-level focus, detailed above, and secondarily in the introduction of authenticity as a connecting construct across Situated Learning Theory, Self-Determination Theory, and TAM, which prior gamification-in-education research has not articulated as a unified explanatory chain. The indwelling deficit theme also offers a discipline-specific refinement of Spanellis et al.'s (2022) indwelling construct, demonstrating that the conditions required for psychological role inhabitation are not generic across professional fields but are shaped by the specific consequence structure of the profession in question, here, public, real-time, reputationally binding communication.

The practical significance is most directly addressed to PR curriculum developers and platform designers. A Malaysian practitioner with extensive in-house and consulting experience offered a design principle directly relevant to platform development, cautioning against treating artificial intelligence and analytics tools as sufficient on their own: effective PR capability requires “high tech plus high touch,” meaning that data and automation tools must be paired with relationship-building and judgement that no platform can simulate away. The same participant described a concrete precedent for structured industry-academia curriculum collaboration from a different professional field, recounting how a root-cause analysis of recurring graduate errors in a manufacturing context traced the problem to a specific topic, design of engineering, that had been dropped from public university curricula but retained in private institutions; the resulting collaboration between industry and the affected universities directly closed the gap at its source rather than through generic onboarding. This example, while drawn from engineering rather than PR, models a transferable practical mechanism: systematic, data-informed curriculum review conducted jointly by industry and academia, rather than gamified simulation treated as a stand-alone fix. Several Bangladeshi participants, across both academic and practitioner roles, independently called for exactly this kind of structured collaboration, including guest-lecturer integration, industry-reviewed case studies specific to the national context, and structured mentorship pipelines, suggesting that gamified simulation should be positioned as one component of a broader industry-academia partnership architecture rather than a substitute for it.

The methodological significance of the study lies in its triadic, binational design, which allowed convergence and divergence across student, educator, and practitioner accounts, and across two structurally different national PR sectors, to be examined within a single analytical frame rather than inferred across separate single-country studies. The conservative protocol for handling translation ambiguity in the Bengali-language interviews, in which uncertain passages were flagged and excluded from definitive thematic coding rather than resolved through researcher inference, is offered as a transferable procedure for other cross-linguistic qualitative communication research, particularly where the languages involved differ substantially in register between formal and colloquial registers, as is the case for Bengali used in professional interview settings.

The policy-level significance of the study is twofold. First, the finding that PR curricula in both countries remain skewed toward theoretical coverage at the expense of experiential, consequence-bearing practice speaks directly to national higher-education quality frameworks and accreditation standards governing communication and media programmes in Malaysia and Bangladesh, suggesting that accreditation criteria for PR and communication degrees should explicitly require a minimum proportion of assessed, practice-based or simulation-based learning hours rather than treating this as an optional pedagogical preference left to individual instructors. Second, the urban concentration of PR education and practice identified independently by multiple participants in both

countries, alongside the disability-inclusive counterexample offered by one Bangladeshi practitioner describing a highly capable visually impaired colleague who became his team's lead strategic planner, points to a digital and educational access equity dimension consistent with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (quality education) and Sustainable Development Goal 9 (industry, innovation, and infrastructure, particularly target 9.c on universal and affordable internet access), since scalable gamified simulation platforms of the kind this study examines could, if deliberately designed for low-bandwidth and rural deployment, extend practice-based PR training access beyond the urban, well-resourced institutions where it is currently concentrated; conversely, if designed without this consideration, such platforms risk deepening rather than narrowing existing access inequities, a risk that policymakers funding or endorsing such platforms in either country should weigh explicitly.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine how PR students, educators, and practitioners in Malaysia and Bangladesh perceive the industry readiness gap in PR education and the potential of gamified simulation to address it. The thematic analysis of twenty-five interviews produced three overarching themes: the indwelling deficit, the deliberate practice dilemma, and adoption ambivalence. Together, these themes reveal that gamification holds genuine and widely perceived potential for PR education in both national contexts, but that this potential is conditioned by design choices that activate genuine professional reasoning rather than strategic performance optimisation, cultural contexts that determine how game-based learning is socially interpreted, and structural conditions that determine whether implementation is practically feasible.

The study's primary limitation is the modest sample size relative to the diversity of PR education contexts across the two countries. Twenty-five participants, while sufficient to generate theoretically grounded qualitative themes with strong inter-coder reliability, cannot represent the full range of institutional settings, disciplinary emphases, and career stages within Malaysian and Bangladeshi PR education. Several further limitations should be stated explicitly rather than left implicit. First, the study documents how gamification is perceived, valued, and resisted; it does not, and cannot, demonstrate that gamified simulation actually produces industry-ready competencies, since participants describe how they expect to engage with a technology rather than reporting measured change in skill following genuine use of one. Second, although the study specifies an operational definition of industry readiness for coding purposes (Section 1), students, educators, and practitioners may still bring different implicit standards of what "readiness" means to their interview responses, and the protocol did not test whether participants shared a common understanding of the term before answering. Third, the Malaysia-Bangladesh comparison is confounded by broader differences between the two settings, including technological infrastructure, institutional resourcing, and cultural context, that are not attributable to gamification specifically; the cross-national patterns reported in Section 4 should therefore be read as context-embedded rather than as evidence that gamification itself operates differently by nationality. Fourth, as with any interview-based qualitative design, participant accounts are self-reported and may be shaped by social-desirability or self-presentation effects that triangulation across three stakeholder groups can reduce but not eliminate. Fifth, the study relied on a study-specific interview protocol rather than a validated instrument for measuring gamification perceptions, which limits direct comparability with quantitative studies that use validated scales. These are the classic limitations of exploratory qualitative research, and they define the agenda for follow on work.

Future research should pursue four priorities. First, a larger, multi institutional survey study, built on validated gamification-perception and competency-assessment instruments rather than a study-specific interview protocol, is needed to test whether the TAM grounded adoption attitudes documented here, specifically the differential perceived usefulness profiles between Malaysian and Bangladeshi participants, are representative of broader student and educator populations in both countries, and to support systematic, item-level comparison of stakeholder perspectives across the two settings rather than the thematic comparison offered here. Second, a controlled comparison or pilot intervention study of narrative driven versus points-based gamification mechanics in actual PR courses in both countries would provide the experimental evidence needed to resolve the deliberate practice dilemma empirically, measuring actual change in engagement, learning, and competency development rather than perceptions of them, and drawing on Self-Determination Theory predictions about intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation outcomes. Third, dedicated qualitative interviews with a larger and more geographically distributed sample of practitioners, focused specifically on hiring criteria and first-year performance

expectations, would sharpen the industry-readiness construct proposed in Section 1 beyond what the present study's practitioner subsample can support. Fourth, longitudinal research tracking graduates from gamified PR programs into their first years of professional practice is needed to answer the most important question that this and all gamification research has raised but not answered: does the indwelling experience produced by gamified simulation, as Situated Learning Theory predicts, produce graduates who are genuinely more ready to inhabit the professional role, not just more confident that they are?

PR educators, curriculum developers, and platform designers in the region have a clear mandate from the participants in this study: build simulations that are authentic enough to be mistaken for the real job, adaptive enough to prevent gaming, and positioned carefully enough to overcome the cultural barriers to play based learning in professional education. That is a demanding specification. It is also, based on the evidence accumulated in this and the gamification literature more broadly, an achievable one.

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Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Appendix A: Evaluative Coding Rubric for Theme Three (Adoption Ambivalence)

This rubric governed the three-point evaluative coding (attitude coding) applied to educator and practitioner responses regarding the prospect of replacing some or all traditional PR assessment with gamified, scenario-based alternatives. The coding target was the same for all participants in both countries: “To what extent does this respondent favour or oppose the substitution of gamified scenario-based assessment for conventional lecture- and examination-based assessment in PR education?” Two independent raters applied this rubric to all twenty-five transcripts. Disagreements were resolved through discussion until consensus was reached. Inter-rater reliability (IRR) was computed on a randomly selected subsample of twelve transcripts (48% of the total) prior to consensus discussion, yielding Cohen’s $\kappa = 0.68$, indicating substantial agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977). The three codes, their definitions, decision rules for application, and illustrative anchors (anonymised) are presented in Table A1 below.

Table A1. Evaluative Coding Rubric: Attitude Toward Gamified Assessment Substitution

Code	Definition	Inclusion Criteria / Decision Rule	Illustrative Anchor (anonymised, paraphrased where needed)
Positive	The respondent explicitly favours replacing some or all traditional (lecture- or exam-based) assessment with gamified, scenario-based assessment, without making this contingent on unmet conditions.	Code as Positive when the respondent (a) states a clear preference for gamified assessment over the status quo, OR (b) describes an intention to adopt or pilot gamified assessment with no unresolved precondition attached. Hedged enthusiasm (e.g. “I would, but only if...”) is coded Neutral, not Positive, even if the overall tone is favourable.	An educator who had already adopted Kahoot and Mentimeter in her own teaching and described wanting to extend gamified, scenario-based assessment further was coded Positive; a student participant who stated unprompted enthusiasm for a proposed crisis-simulation game (“I will be very interested... I think we won’t get bored”) was coded Positive for the adjacent adoption-intention item.
Neutral	The respondent expresses conditional, contingent, or “wait and see” openness to gamified assessment, withholding judgement until a specified condition	Code as Neutral when the respondent's openness is explicitly gated on a stated unmet condition (e.g. “if it can be shown to work as well as...”, “once institutions	Several educators stated they would support replacing part of traditional assessment with gamified alternatives only once institutional recognition of game-based credentials was established and once independent evidence of

	(evidence of validity, institutional recognition, platform quality) is met.	recognise the credential...”). Do not infer an unstated condition; the condition must be voiced by the respondent. If the respondent voices both a positive and a negative consideration without resolving them, also code Neutral.	assessment validity existed; these responses were coded Neutral because the stated openness was explicitly contingent rather than unconditional.
Negative	The respondent expresses scepticism, reluctance, or explicit rejection of gamified assessment as a genuine substitute for current assessment or practice, grounded in a stated reason rather than mere unfamiliarity.	Code as Negative when the respondent gives a substantive reason for resistance (e.g. concerns about infrastructure, validity, cultural acceptability, or the capacity of simulation to replicate real consequence), not simply when the respondent has not encountered gamification before. Mere lack of prior exposure with no stated objection is coded Neutral, not Negative.	A Bangladeshi practitioner argued that gamified simulation could not replicate the open-ended, relationally consequential nature of real professional practice, stating that through the game “you cannot see it from any perspective” the kind of relationship value built through unscripted contact; this was coded Negative because the objection was substantive and reasoned rather than reflecting unfamiliarity.

Coding decision boundary notes. (1) Unit of analysis: the whole response to the assessment-substitution question, not individual sentences within it; the rater reads the full response before assigning a code. (2) Conflicting signals within one response: if a respondent expresses both positive and negative considerations without resolving them, code Neutral. (3) Enthusiasm about gamification generally is not equivalent to enthusiasm about gamified assessment substitution specifically; a respondent who expresses strong interest in gamification as a supplement to conventional assessment (“in addition to, not instead of”) is coded Neutral for this item. (4) Responses given in Bengali were coded from the researcher-verified English translation; where translation ambiguity was flagged by the bilingual research assistant, the passage was excluded from IRR calculation and consensus-coded after discussion. (5) This rubric addresses only Theme Three (Adoption Ambivalence); thematic code assignment for Themes One and Two followed the Atlas.ti protocol described in Section 3.2 and was subject to a separate inter-coder reliability check (ICR $\kappa = 0.72$).